The Practice of Hospitality in the Christian Academic Theater
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Though our word “hospitality,” the welcoming of strangers, is rooted in Old French and Latin, the custom can be traced to the earliest recorded history. In the Odyssey, Telemachus, Odysseus’ son, seeking the whereabouts of his father is welcomed as a stranger into the homes of the Greek kings Nestor and Menelaus. To welcome a stranger was such an important part of the Greek social code that it was said to be protected by the Father God Zeus, patron and protector of hosts and guests. For hosts to welcome guests and guests to respect their hosts was to honor the god. Conversely, for a guest to violate his host, the way the Trojan guest Paris did his Greek host Menelaus, was to invite disastrous divine retribution.

The landscape that gave birth to the three great monotheistic religions produced in their adherents a great emphasis on the virtue of hospitality. In the Koran as in the Hebrew and Christian bibles, the mistreatment of strangers is a sure way to incur divine wrath (Schulman and Barkouki). In successive stories of hospitality in Genesis 18-19, Abraham welcomes three strangers and gives them a lavish feast. The Lord God is among them, and he promises that Sarah will bear Abraham a son. When two of the three strangers go down to Sodom, Abraham’s nephew Lot urges them to stay with him in his house where he protects them from the predatory Sodomites. In response, the strangers, who are revealed as angels of the Lord, save Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom. In both of these stories, the strangers who are welcomed reciprocate with benefices and in Sodom, Lot protects his guests from harm. New Testament writers portrayed Jesus as a gracious host welcoming undesirables who were unlikely to receive welcome from others in their own towns, but Jesus was also “a vulnerable and needy stranger… a homeless infant, a child refugee, an adult with no place to lay his head, a despised convict” (Pohl 17). When the travelers on the road to Emmaus welcomed the stranger into their home for a meal, he opened their eyes and they recognized him as the Messiah (Luke 24:30-31).

In her 1999 book entitled Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, Christine Pohl writes that “hospitality to needy strangers distinguished the early church from its surrounding environment… but after the first centuries… grand hospitality became an important means for extending power and influence in the church, the monastery, and lay society. Hospitality was often deliberately connected to the host’s ambition and advantage” (Pohl 33-34). Pohl goes on to say that for a number of reasons, the ancient idea of welcoming the stranger as a normative (moral) practice “got lost” in the eighteenth century and public institutions – hospitals, inns, asylums – on the one hand, and individual homes, on the other took on the functions of hospitality, while the church became less involved.

In Pohl’s view, the term “hospitality” has, by now, lost its moral dimension, and, in the process, most Christians have lost touch with the amazingly rich and complex tradition of hospitality. When we think of hospitality, we think about welcoming friends or members of our family into our home for good food and pleasant conversation. Or we think of the “hospitality industry” of hotels and restaurants which are open to strangers if they have money or credit cards. Perhaps larger churches come to mind with their “hospitality committees” that coordinate the coffee hour, greet visitors, or help with the parking (4).

Pohl (and Ana María Pineda in Practicing Our Faith) writes in terms of recovering the practice of Christian hospitality, looking back to the early church, when hospitality to the least,
Hospitality in the Theater

Hospitality in the world of the theater is, essentially, actors welcoming people, many if not all of whom are strangers, into a place of performance. The ancient Greeks honored their god Dionysus through this practice of hospitality and, perhaps, other gods have been honored by theatrical events as well. Of course, actors also welcome strangers, because without audiences there would be no theater event. Actors, designers, technicians, and directors need audiences to complete their art. And, the artists of the theater want spectators not only to come, but they also want them to come back, again and again. Insofar as actors need audiences, perhaps we are not talking here about hospitality at all. At least we must allow that being hospitable to theater audiences is a self-interested practice.

Most people work hard and effectively to be hospitable to the equivalent of what Christine Pohl identifies as the most common recipients of contemporary hospitality: family, friends, and influential contacts. Those of us involved with theater use the language of home and family when talking about our theaters. The theater is our home, we live here – whether we like it or not – and when we are not working on a show we feel almost homeless. The theater community is like our family. It is natural, therefore, for us to welcome people (many of them strangers) to the theater as if we were welcoming them to our home to be with our family, to entertain them, and to serve them a delightful and nourishing artistic “meal,” if you will. We seek to make friends of some of our audience members who may even help us in a time of financial need or special projects. At Valparaiso University we had, for a long time, a group called “The Friends of Theatre.” We count the university faculty, active and emeritus, as “friends,” as well. And I also will confess to being deeply gratified when an influential contact like a member of the board of directors, the mayor, or a prominent alumnus is in our audience.

The visible expressions of hospitality in our academic theater programs are numerous. They include the little things like providing a place for an audience member to hang up her coat and the big things like building a theater facility with a commodious lobby, nearby parking, ample, comfortable restrooms, and good seating for the physically disabled. They may be as simple as choosing reader friendly colors of ink and type sizes for the theater program (or season brochure) or as complicated as arranging pre-show seminars and post-show discussions. They may be as humane as friendly and competent ushers or as technical as a public address system that is loud and clear or signs that direct people to the appropriate entrance to the auditorium. They may be as non-debatable as whether or not to heat the theater in winter and air condition it in summer or as controversial as choosing plays with potentially offensive language, situations, or subject matter.

Such efforts at hospitality as these are very important and, arguably, theater people know how to do them better than others. Indeed, we are specialists, experts in the art of hospitality, and we have much to teach other event planners. But if Calvin College or Wheaton College or Valparaiso University dedicates time, energy and resources to these expressions of hospitality, so, certainly, do Western Michigan University, Northern Illinois University, and Purdue University. In other words, there is nothing particularly Christian about these expressions of hospitality.

What would it mean for us as Christian theater professors to practice, consciously and intentionally, “Christian hospitality”? Recall that Christine Pohl distinguishes that practice of
Christian hospitality as that extended to “the poor and neediest, the ones who could not return the favor” (6). I submit that to practice Christian hospitality in our theaters would 1) link our programs more closely to the missions of our Christian colleges; 2) truly distinguish our programs from state and secular private colleges and universities; and 3) open up new avenues of artistic and pedagogical programming.

It would be naïve to suggest that simply because we produce theater in Christian colleges and universities we live out the Christian practices of hospitality. Can we say with confidence that we practice Christian hospitality; i.e. that we are welcome the poor and needy to our theater homes and giving them sustenance with no thought of reciprocation? The answer to this question depends on how we define “poor and needy.” The vast majority of audiences at Valparaiso University do not qualify as poor and needy in the economic sense. About forty percent of our audiences are comprised of students who pay, depending on financial aid packages, between $15,000 and $35,000 per year to attend the university. Another thirty-five percent of our audience is university faculty and their families. They are, for the most part, not poor either, but, just in case, we give them free tickets. The remainder of the audience is made up of community folk and visitors. It is rare when any of them appear to be poor and needy.

Nevertheless, I would submit further that though Christian hospitality practiced in a church, convent, or monastery cannot be wholly appropriated and expected to function in a theater and that theater art may in some ways be anti-hospitable, there are ways of thinking about and doing theater in the spirit of Christian hospitality that accord with artistic integrity or artistic mission that will honor our God and respond to the words of Jesus: when you did it to the least of these members of my family, you did it to me.

Two Complicating Truths

Before I address the question of whether we can practice Christian hospitality in the Christian academic theater, let me introduce two truths about the theater that I know. First, acting is by definition an inhospitable art form. It has been said that theater is as much about hiding as it is about showing; that is, actors work hard to control audiences’ access to them (Goldman 35ff). Consider for a moment, the elaborate rigging systems of drops, wings, legs, grad drapes, teasers, and tormenters, all designed to protect the actor from casual visibility. Or consider the vocabulary we have for showing space and hiding space: “on stage,” “off stage,” “back stage,” “front-of-house.” At our theater we tape out the sightlines on the stage floor, we open the house only when everyone is hidden off stage, we forbid the actors to socialize with the audience while they are in costume.

The convention of the “fourth wall,” the invisible wall separating the audience from the actors, is largely out of fashion now, but we live and work in its legacy, especially when we mount realistic plays. Playing directly to the audience, including them in the world of the play, is still thought to be wrong in productions of Ibsen, Chekhov, O’Neill and the long line of their Realistic successors. It was Constantin Stanislavski who raised conscious, unbroken communion among actors on stage to the level of cardinal principle, and thanks to the Actors Studio the idea became the rule for American actors and acting teachers. Even in the anti-illusionistic or presentation theater of the twentieth century, the principle of the ensemble reigns. Being a member of the cast, the company, the troupe brings with it the privilege of inclusion and the right to exclude. The ensemble knows, has faith in, and believes in certain “scenic” truths that the rest of us can only wonder about. As audience, we are admitted to the world of the play at the actors’ pleasure.
Actors are the opposite of good hosts. Indeed, the power of the actor lies in his strangeness. “Is it not monstrous,” asks Hamlet, “that this player here, / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion / Could force his soul so to his own conceit?” (II.ii). Michael Goldman attributes to the actor a kind of uncanniness about acting, akin to the uncanniness of the mask – a mingling of the animate and the inanimate, a projection of human energy beyond normal bounds, as in mediumship or ventriloquism” (9). David Cole compares the actor to a shaman who goes to the realm of the gods and returns possessed to play for his mesmerized audience. In the theatrical transaction, we might ask who is host and who is stranger. Is it the audience/host who lets the actor/stranger in and gives him shelter?

This question of who is guest and who is host points to the second truth that complicates our efforts to be hospitable. Sorting out the question of who is host and who is guest in the theater is hard to do. For college theater professors who produce theater, it seems obvious that the audiences are our guests. We play the role of hosts who have invited our audience – guests to our theater-home where we entertain them in as much comfort as we can muster.

But theater costs money to produce. In the commercial theater, the audience pays enough money in tickets to give the actors the wherewithal to perform. Now who is the host? In the case of resident theaters such as the Guthrie in Minneapolis or the Goodman in Chicago, the audience pays only part of the cost with the balance made up by corporations, foundations, and government entities. Who is the host and who the guest in that arrangement?

Who is the host and who the guest in college theater? The college certainly owns the theater facility and pays for the production, including the salaries of the faculty artists. Are not the audiences, then, the college’s guests? What are the college’s responsibilities regarding hospitality toward its guests?

Does the college in some sense play host to the theater, its faculty, staff, and operation? Does the college in the persons of its administrators bear the responsibility for welcoming theater artists – faculty and students – and protecting them?

And, at my university, we are often reminded that our donors ultimately make all the university’s operations possible. In this sense, are the donors hosts and all of us their guests? Until they come into the theater and then they are our guests and… well, you get an idea of how complicated this is.

The incomplete series of permutations listed above illustrate the interdependence of college constituencies: donors, faculty, guarantors, parents, students, and members of the community(ies). In this circumstance, hospitality is not a line from host to guest, but a matrix of hosts and guests with any given individual being at once guest and host. Commitment to Christian hospitality is a commitment on the part of the entire college community to welcome one another into life-giving and life-sustaining networks of relations.

Christian Hospitality in the Christian Academic Theater

Now let us address directly the question of whether the practice of Christian hospitality really fits in the context of the Christian College Theater. In Making Room, Christine Pohl lists the qualities, the requirements if you will, of Christian hospitality

When we offer hospitality to strangers, we welcome them into a place to which we are somehow connected – a space that has meaning and value to us. This is often our home, but it also includes church, community, nation, and various other institutions. In hospitality, the stranger is welcomes into a safe, personal, and comfortable place of
respect and acceptance and friendship. Even if only briefly, the stranger is included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations. Such welcome involves attentive listening and a mutual sharing of lives and life stories. It requires an openness of heart, a willingness to make one’s life visible to others, and a generosity of time and resources. (13)

Do our theaters “qualify” as one of Christine Pohl’s “other institutions” who offer Christian hospitality to strangers? If we were to abstract from this package a checklist by which we could evaluate our theaters as centers of or opportunities for Christian hospitality, certainly we could check off the box marked “welcome strangers into a place to which we are somehow connected, a space that has meaning and value to us.”

But are our theaters,

1. Safe, personal, and comfortable places of respect and acceptance and friendship?
2. Places where our audiences are welcomed into life-giving and life-sustaining networks of relations?
3. Places where there are opportunities for attentive listening, on our parts and mutual sharing of lives and life stories?
4. Places that manifest an openness of heart, a willingness to make one’s life visible to others, and a generosity of time and resources?

Such a list should give us pause. How does what the theater offers to strangers compare with Christine Pohl’s constituents of Christian hospitality? Do the hospitable practices of the Christian college theater accord with the practice of Christian hospitality? Do such expressions of Christian hospitality fit with a theater program’s mission? Not in every case. But it would be an interesting exercise and useful heuristic device to conceive our theaters as places of Christian hospitality according to this list. If we did this, I believe we would find that each of Pohl’s assertions would have to be re-imagined in the context of the theater. Some would align comfortably with theater practice; others would exist in tension with the pedagogical and artistic commitments of our theater programs.

For example, is a theater, Christian or not, a safe, personal, and comfortable place of respect and acceptance and friendship? We could spend a day or so just unpacking the phrase safe, personal, and comfortable. If we were welcoming needy strangers to our homes – travelers whose car had broken down in the middle of the night, neighbors previously unknown to us whose house had been ravaged by storm or flood, children suddenly bereft of their parents – we would make a safe and comfortable place for them and extend them personal care. But what does it mean to be safe in a theater? We can make people physically safe, from fire, for example, but must we always make them psychically safe, intellectually and emotionally safe as well? We can invest in comfortable theater seats, but are not certain plays composed to discomfit audiences? By ensuring the safety and comfort of strangers, do we risk shutting the door against ideas that we or our friends might find strange: revolutionary political ideas, morally ambiguous ideas, anti- or non-Christian religious ideas, or the ever strange “alternative lifestyle.”

Some of us are not free to choose plays for production that are by someone’s definition “unsafe” or “uncomfortable.” Those of us who have the freedom to choose plays and who desire to make our theaters safe, personal, and comfortable places of respect and acceptance and friendship have the opportunity to respect our audience’s sensibilities, accept our audiences for
who they are, and to befriend them. We may not always choose safe and comfortable plays, but we must never underestimate the power of the theater, and what Michael Goldman calls the terrific power of actors (Goldman 7), to frighten, offend, or appall as well as charm and delight. As hospitable friends, we at least will prepare our audiences for what they are about to see and discuss what they have seen with them afterward. In this way, we will be hospitable to our art and our audience.

**The Mission of the Academic Theater**

Does the theater – commercial, not-for-profit, academic, or Christian academic – fit into Pohl’s list of “other institutions, “home… church, community, nation, and various other institutions,”that can, as part of their mission, practice hospitality and, beyond that, Christian hospitality? As institutions, theaters are fundamentally different from “homes, churches, religious communities.” We have our eyes open to the possibility that when and if we adopt practices of Christian hospitality, we could become confused about what the theater is and uncritically appropriate practices better fitted to other kinds of institutions.

At the same time, the college theater is not the same as the Goodman or the Steppenwolf Theatre or the local profit-seeking dinner theater, or, for that matter, the local community theater, all of whom are committed to artistic integrity to some degree, but whose missions are different from ours.

Before we can adopt practices of Christian hospitality, we must clarify and articulate the pedagogical and artistic missions from which our commitments, including our commitment to Christian hospitality will proceed. Many theater professionals are linked to institutions whose primary mission is the education of undergraduate students. These undergraduates, most of whom are eighteen to twenty-two years of age, act on our stages, attend our classes, studios, and laboratories, work in our craft shops, and, I earnestly hope, make up the largest portion of our theater audiences. And, it is the nature of our profession that 1) we meet them for the first time as strangers, 2) our association with the great majority of them during the time that they are at our colleges is as strangers, and, 3) again for the majority, when they move on as graduates, or transfers, or simply having changed their minds, we will never relate to them again. These young people are strangers on the road from somewhere to some place. And, they are needy. I would even say they are hungry.

For what do they hunger? In his essay “The Holy Theatre,” Peter Brook reports on a tiny attic in a Dusseldorf ruined by Allied bombs where “fifty people crammed together while in the inches of remaining space a handful of the best actors resolutely continued to practice their art… in Germany that winter, as in London a few years before, the theatre was responding to a hunger” (44). In his book *The Actor’s Freedom*, Michael Goldman writes that “drama exists to satisfy a profound and largely unexplored human appetite, the appetite for acting – and to satisfy it means to make what goes beyond actor and audience deeper, more sustained, more exciting and complete. […] I see the joint activity of actor and audience as a means by which man [sic] attempts to complete his relation to the world, especially to everything in the world that strikes him as dangerous and strange” (3).

Is theater food? Are these strangers hungry? Are we in the theater feeding hungry strangers? I worry that we are in the comparatively comfortable realm of simile and analogy. Can we claim that our audiences are made up of needy strangers?

What do they need, these strangers? For what, in Peter Brook’s words, *do they hunger*? At first – you know this from your own experiences – they are in need of welcome. Despite our
various attempts at orientation, they are strangers in a strange place perhaps sharing a small room, for the first time in their life, with another stranger. Then, they are in need of opportunities to survey the world and its people; to think about what others have thought and said and written; to see what others have painted and sculpted, and acted, and danced, and played; and to try these things for themselves. They need initiation into disciplines, rituals, and practices. They, desperately, need imagination to free them from the shackles of the world as it is (so often glamorized and celebrated in popular culture) and to see the world as it could be. It is their need for welcome, opportunity, initiation, and imagination that the college theater is well-equipped to serve.

There is much more that could be said about Christian hospitality and the Christian academy. We should, for example, not always equate “place” with a building or even a location. Theater people know how to create places anywhere: on gymnasium floors, in churches, in prisons, on the street – think of the Commedia dell’ Arte! – and can extend hospitality from any of those places.

In closing, let me remind you, that we are blessed to have the Word of the Lord to command and guide our hospitable practice:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we say you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25).

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Bibliography


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1 Telemachus’ meetings with the two kings also allow Homer to explore the idea of *xenia*, or hospitality. The social code of ancient Greece demanded that one show kindness to strangers in unfamiliar regions by welcoming them into one’s home. This social expectation of hospitality was so culturally important that it was believed to be enforced by Zeus, the king of the gods. Here, both Nestor and Menelaus offer their guest a warm welcome even before they learn Telemachus’ identity. Homer also emphasizes how impressed Menelaus is with his guest’s discretion and tact (“Not even an older man could speak and do as well” [4.228]). This piety and respect for the social norms enforced by the gods contrasts sharply with the suitors’ careless plundering of Telemachus’ home in Ithaca in Books 1 and 2. While Telemachus strictly observes every divine law, the suitors carouse with wanton abandon, uninvited, in his home. While Telemachus impresses his hosts, the suitors plot to murder theirs. This exploration of the idea of hospitality thus provides a background against which the contrast between the suitors and Telemachus is sharpened, a contrast already emphasized by the frequent repetition of the story of Agamemnon.

2 [http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/odyssey/section2.rhtml](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/odyssey/section2.rhtml)

3 Much later, Macbeth would reference his responsibility to King Duncan in similar words:

   He’s here in double trust;
   First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
   Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
   *Who should against his murderer shut the door,*
   Not bear the knife myself.

4 In *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*, Richard Southern seeks the essence of the theater by “stripping the onion.” According to Southern, the most recent accretion is scenery, then the auditorium, next the stage platform, then costume and mask. “Remove these and there will probably fall apart two separate pieces, leaving nothing inside; those two pieces would be the Player and the Audience. Take these apart and you can have no theatre” (21).

5 Peter Brook wrote, “The only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience” (127).

6 This is to say nothing of the situation in the commercial theater, where the actors’ livelihood depends on paying patrons attending and returning.

7 See “Communion” in Constantin Stanislavski, *The Actor Prepares* (1936). It is interesting to compare the idea of “communion” in the theater with the idea of communion in the church. In certain church bodies there is an enforceable difference between “communicant” and “non-communicant.”

8 Cf. the mirror exercises of Viola Spolin