

1-1-2009

# Soul Purpose: Theatre Outreach Program

John Steven Paul  
*Valparaiso University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul\\_purpose](http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul_purpose)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Paul, John Steven, "Soul Purpose: Theatre Outreach Program" (2009). *Soul Purpose Liturgical Dramas and Essays*. Paper 37.  
[http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul\\_purpose/37](http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul_purpose/37)

This Liturgical Drama Introductory Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theatre at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Soul Purpose Liturgical Dramas and Essays by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

## SOUL PURPOSE

TOP [Theatre Outreach Program] is a pedagogical project through which we intend to demonstrate to students how a theatre company can operate for the primary purpose of reaching out in service to the community. The company operates independently of and parallel to the Valparaiso University Theatre. Recent Valparaiso University alumni have used this model in launching their own outreach theatres.<sup>1</sup> Another such project is Soul Purpose, a liturgical drama troupe begun in 1987. The intention of Soul Purpose is to provide students with the opportunity to follow the command of Exodus 23:19: *The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.*

Soul Purpose's first play was adapted from a sermon by the Rev. David H. Kehret, associate campus pastor at Valparaiso University, on the text Mark 12:28-34, titled *The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God*. Three subsequent plays which the troupe continues to perform are also adaptations of Pastor Kehret's homilies. In its twelve-year existence, Soul Purpose has introduced nine new plays to the liturgical drama repertoire. The liturgical drama genre is defined by its service to the liturgy and most of the troupe's performances are given at that point in a liturgical service where a homily would be offered.<sup>2</sup> The plays, like homilies, elaborate upon a Scripture reading appointed in the common lectionary to be read for a given day in the Church Year.<sup>3</sup>

One of the program objectives of Soul Purpose is to guide students through a workshop method of new play development, and all the plays in the troupe's repertoire have resulted from this process. As the director, I present a selection of possible workshop projects from which the troupe chooses one. The choice is based on the interests and concerns of members of the troupe. I advise them on the potential of each project for service to the Church. The most recent play we have completed through the workshop process is entitled *Zacchaeus: For the Lord He Wanted to See*. This play is based on Luke 19:1-10, the Gospel reading for the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost in the third year (C) of the three-year lectionary cycle, though we have performed it at various times during the church year.

All our workshop sessions begin with a prayer for guidance. We understand that when the play is finished, we will be invited to perform it as a way of preaching the Gospel to congregations. It is a solemn responsibility. We read the story carefully, aloud, and discuss its scriptural and historical context, often bringing learned commentary to our discussions. These discussions invariably bring new insights, some of which will have substantial impact on our dramatization of the story. In the *Zacchaeus* workshop, for example, we were surprised to learn how near to the end of his ministry Jesus met the tax collector. According to Luke, Jesus goes directly from Jericho to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem where, within a week, he would be crucified.

---

<sup>1</sup> Christine Teichman, the first director of *Little Bear*, now directs The Kaleidoscope Learning Theatre in Park Forest, Illinois, and Rhett Luedtke directs Small Time Outreach Productions in Auburn, Alabama.

<sup>2</sup> Wolterstorff 185. Wolterstorff offers a succinct and useful definition of liturgical art: "Liturgical art, much of it participatory in character, is the art of a community, at the service of its liturgical actions and not at the service of artistic contemplation." 188.

<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of and guide to the lectionary, see Martin Connell, *Guide to the Revised Common Lectionary* (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988).

Following a discussion of the Zacchaeus story, workshopers identified salient images: a short man, his possessions, and, of course, the sycamore tree. Next, we considered the characters in the story—Jesus, Zacchaeus, the people of Jericho and Jesus’ disciples—and the relations among these characters. From these conversations we discovered that the sharpest conflict in the story was not between Jesus and Zacchaeus, but between the people of Jericho, who resented Zacchaeus’ “taxation policy,” and Jesus who went to dine with him. “All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He [Jesus] has gone to the house of one who is a sinner.” (v. 7) At the time we were developing this play, a young man, a theatre student, had just been expelled from Valparaiso University for repeated, serious harassment of younger women theatre students. There was no one whom the students resented more and whom they would have found it harder to forgive. “What would you think,” I asked, “if Jesus came to Valparaiso and invited himself to share a meal with ‘Jim’ at his apartment?” Suffice to say, the issue moved immediately from the abstract to the concrete! The neighbors would have much to say in this Zacchaeus play. And, further, I said, “could you imagine being married to Zacchaeus?” Now, in our play, there would be a new character who does not appear in Luke’s story and in whom the town’s revulsion would be crystallized. Her name would be “Sarah,” wife to this son of Abraham (v.9).

Reading forward from Luke 19:1-10 suggested to us that Jesus’ visit to Jericho was part of a longer story that could be dramatized. We were struck by the significance of the two trees, the sycamore in Zacchaeus’ story and the tree on which Jesus would be crucified. Zacchaeus had climbed a tree to see Jesus; was it stretching the imagination too far to present a reversal of the situation to show Jesus climbing the tree of the cross so that *he* could see everyone who believed in *him*? We thought not. As it is written, the play follows Zacchaeus from his stunning meeting with Jesus in Jericho to the foot of the cross where he kneels with other characters from Luke’s gospel: the centurion from Capernaum, the widow and her son from Nain, the Samaritan leper, and the blind man whose sight Jesus restored just before his meeting with Zacchaeus.

In the workshops, *Zacchaeus* went through seven drafts, each read aloud by the company, re-drafted and read again. After the fourth reading, I staged the play. We rehearsed a working draft of the script and tried it out for the folk service at our university chapel. In the following year we began performing *Zacchaeus* for churches around the country.

My job as director is to provide the company with structure and assure its continuity. I hold auditions for prospective members of the troupe, direct the rehearsal process, and arrange for the fifteen visits we make to churches every year. The logistics of traveling an average of four thousand miles a year are considerable. There is no more critical task for me than to appoint the company’s student leadership: a stage manager, a musical director, and an assistant director who will teach the blocking to new member of the troupe. Following a two-week period of intensive rehearsals at the beginning of the school year, Soul Purpose rehearses once a week on Saturday mornings. We open with devotion, song, and a prayer at 8:45 AM, and then eat breakfast. The actual rehearsal begins with vocal and physical warm-ups. The principal rehearsal objective is to prepare the play and the music we will perform the next morning.

Another of Soul Purpose’s program objectives is to provide students with opportunities for spiritual development and the benefits and support of a Christian

community. The community formed during the two weeks of rehearsal in September At least once during that period, we will break bread together and at the close of the period we will celebrate the Holy Communion. Trips to churches, though they require sacrifices of time and sleep, are times of fellowship, fun, and personal as well as spiritual growth. But the challenge of sustaining a community of eighteen busy college students over the course of a seven-month season is not an easy one. Some of the bonding work happens on Saturday mornings, but, generally, only the six or eight actors who are performing that Sunday will come to the Saturday morning rehearsal. In short, Soul Purpose actors spend much more time apart than together. This is where the student leadership becomes critical. It is the students who hold the Soul Purpose Community together. One of the songs we sing is “Here I Am, Lord,” which contains the pledge: I will go, Lord, if you lead me; I will hold your people in my heart.”

I refer to Soul Purpose as a “drama ministry,” and the order of the words is important. This ministry is distinct from the University’s chapel or counseling ministries. The student members of Soul Purpose understand that their vocation as actors distinguishes them from seminarians and social workers. What makes their Christian ministry peculiarly effective is their faithfulness to their Lord *and* to the disciplines of the theatre. In its early years, actors and director tended to think of Soul Purpose as something we did in addition to our other theatre work. After all, Saturday and Sunday came at the end of a week of work. Through its evolution, we have begun to turn that way of thinking around. On Sunday, the first day of the new week, we offer our performances as the first fruits of our labor, as the words of the Soul Purpose prayer remind us:

*Merciful God,  
We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first  
given us—  
our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your  
gracious love.  
Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself  
for us,  
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*