

Paul Patton (the performing arts)

Charles Strohmer Talks at Length with Actor, Playwright, and Teacher Paul Patton about Drama and the Performing Arts

One Saturday evening a few years ago I rather blithely went to see a local theater company's production of Henry Miller's *The Crucible*. Afterward, I left the theater numb. I don't whether it was the story itself or if that night's production simply fell under particularly auspicious indications that made all the actors stars, but the performance gripped me, pulled me in. A mere play? No way. I didn't know what to expect when I sat down, but it became the most moving experience I'd ever had with theater. While the actors and director were milling around chatting up the audience in the foyer after the performance, I remained seated for a long time, unable to talk. Eventually I moved to leave, nodding a quick word of amazement to one of the actors at the door as I walked quietly out.

This is [the power of a good story well told](#). Art invites you into an imaginary world and says relax, have an experience, check out this vision. It may be trivial or earth-shattering. Often it's mid-range. But because it's not propaganda or preaching, it leaves you alone in its make-believe world to make your own discoveries. For Christians who are performance artists, it becomes a means whereby others can be offered to taste something of what life under God is like.

But here's the rub. How do you do that? For this is a profession that many find has to be negotiated as if one were on a walkabout through a minefield. Award-winning playwright, actor, and director Paul Patton braved a conversation with Openings about some hazards. The founder of Trinity House Theatre in Livonia, Michigan, Dr. Patton taught the Fine and Performing Arts at Hampton University and is now Professor of Communication and Theater at Spring Arbor University, in Michigan.

Charles Strohmer: Paul, your interest in the performing arts arose in an unlikely way.

Paul Patton: Yes, as a youth pastor and associate pastor, I had been looking for an alternative means of effective discipleship. I was finding people who, though they successfully responded to traditional methods of Christian growth, they were the ones who least needed that. They needed something else. Sort of accidentally at the same time I had been invited by a friend to finish a play he'd been writing, a musical called *Gravity*, and through that project I began discovering the interpersonal and group dynamics of theater as at least potentially able to build a small group identity over a 6-8 week period.

CS: What was that early creative period like?

PP: It was an attempt to involve people whom I thought needed more than a traditional Christian way of growth. I'd get them involved in a play, and then as a pastor I had a context for admonitions, challenges, praises, teachings. We began to see, for example, how Christian or unChristian attitudes in rehearsals (kindness-unkindness; respect-disrespect) would affect the collaborative spirit of the show, the ethos of the theater, and the end product. And what would help to unify us as a group was that we had a common objective: a good show. This soon became Trinity House Theatre.

In the early days, I chose not to have us do any tried and true plays, because I did not want people comparing what we were doing with the "real" plays they'd seen. Some of the folk have gone on to become wonderful actors, technicians, and theater visionaries, but at the time we didn't have the artistic capabilities. During this period I finished *Gravity* and began writing plays, like *Junior High* and *Denial*. We had a great time with *Denial*, which was a play about dating horror stories.

CS: Trinity House Theatre must have been doing something right. You've evolved into a "proper" theater, gained good reviews for your plays from metro-Detroit area critics, and also received national recognition from a piece in *Christianity Today*.

PP: Well, it was like "let's design this bike as we ride it." We began to move into cultivating new actors, new playwrights, and also doing tried and true plays. As the years progressed, THT progressed aesthetically, technically, and in terms of membership.

CS: What resistance did you run up against in the early years?

PP: Many people, when they saw plays that, for instance, did not have a happy ending, or were not easily resolved, or someone was not getting "saved" in the end, they questioned it and asked what's the point? This well-intended question actually showed us that many Christians were never taught by their churches a theology of culture and art. So I knew that we had to start articulating a

rationale for what we were doing. This was where our English friend John Peck came in. John is one of the co-founders of the Greenbelt Arts Festival, and in 1983 we had him in Livonia for a weekend conference on the arts. He was so helpful, both theologically and philosophically, that we invited him back for a year to live in community with us, with his wife, Hanna, and two of their children. So they all came, and John that year taught about the integration of faith and the arts, education, science, and other areas of life. When he left, he encouraged all of us to get on with it. Which we did.

CS: Let's talk about story. If it could be put in a word, theater is about story. What's the necessity of story, and why does it draw us?

PP: There are exceptions to this, of course, but it's the story that's going to linger and create the confrontative and redemptive crisis when the actors are communing with an audience; what happened to the protagonist. Audiences are won because they liked the story. It had a significant sense of beginning, middle, and end. It had an introductory exposition that built to a climax. It had a major dramatic question to which the audience was always saying, I wonder what's going to happen? And that's always answered in the climax, which has to have a satisfying sense of resolution. We don't get away from this, it seems. It's my belief that this is ultimately tied to the triadic beginning, middle, end of the story that is central to Christianity: the creation, collision, restoration story found in the Bible.

CS: Words are key in story-telling, aren't they? There's just something fundamental in human beings about words.

PP: Yes, words are significant. They help represent an authentic and truthful experience. David Mamet, a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, says that the art of the theater is action, a study of commitment, and that the spoken word is an act. To say the word in such a way so as to make it clear and understood and comprehended by everyone in the audience is a commitment. He says it's the highest form of collaborative art for an actor to stand on stage in front of a thousand of his peers and say that the words which I am speaking are the truth and not an approximation of any kind, and I am willing to stake my life on it. That's central. The necessity of narrative.

CS: I think twentieth century modernism trampled story under foot and culture often lost interest in it. This seems to be changing, though, such as through the increasing appetite for memoir.

PP: That's right. It is changing. Walter Fisher, a communication's scholar from the University of Southern California, says that the way in which people understand much of life is leaving behind the rational-world paradigm, where decisions are based upon good rational arguments. He believes we are now in the narrative paradigm, where people make decisions, even about what news to watch or what college they're going to attend or what career they will enter, based upon how that narrative contributes to or completes their life story. I try to help my students understand that we are drawn to this; it's inescapable, because we bear the image of a story-telling God. It's rooted in a biblical anthropology.

CS: When it comes to performance art, as the writer wishing to fulfill certain intentions, you can't get away with things that you cannot get away with in real life. Sometimes this makes a piece controversial because the audience misunderstands intention. Talk about this risk.

PP: I wrote a film called *Spencer & Venus* for the film school at Regent University. The story is about people who are very troubled image-bearers of God. An elderly woman in the film asked a kind of dull, normal bus boy (he was in his 30s) if he would write a postcard to her grand-daughter, feigning as though it were from the little girl's absentee father. A simple request. Not hard to imagine. I had this bus boy as a very lovable character go through a list of reasons why he shouldn't write such a letter, such as why it should be the father who should write it. Finally he realizes that the grandmother is asking him to pretend to be the dad so that he can prop up the hopes of this devastated little girl who wants to hear from her dad, but does not. It's a fairly dramatic moment. Eventually the bus boy, as a redemptive act, says that he would serve this family by trying to heal this little girl's wounds by writing the note. Well . . . several of my well-meaning friends said to me, "How can you do that? You're glorifying lies." My response to them was, "Do you have the same kind of aesthetic demands on a non-Christian writer?"

CS: How would they respond?

PP: Typically they would say, "We know we're inconsistent. But you claim to be Christian, and so we expect higher standards." This is one reason it's terribly difficult to write for this particular audience. This is a reason why, when people ask me who my audience is, as much as I love the Church, it's not the Church. In *Spencer & Venus*, I wanted the audience to trip over the possibility of being moved, of being touched, of being elevated by a simple story of humaneness, of something palpably helpful in the midst of

brokenness.

CS: What's missing then, in this view of the performing arts?

PP: That's difficult to answer. Perhaps we're missing a significant component of what it means to be a critic. A good critic has to figure out what the intended purpose of the film writer was, and did he achieve that purpose? And what were the instruments used to do that? Spencer & Venus was not an attempt at a gospel tract or a religious film, in which the only moral thing to do is to have the bus boy say, "Forget it. I'm not going to write that note." That wasn't the intention of the film.

CS: What are some of the great traps set for those in the performing arts, if not for those watching?

PP: Celebrity is a big one. It's the possibility of stardom and recognition as an instrument of salvation from tedium and boredom. It's the same instinct that led Jesus to say of some people that they loved to be seen in the marketplace. The mass media system and its cult of celebrity provides this on an almost omnipresent scale. If I can get known, if I can be the object of a stare, of the adoration of millions, I will know that I am somebody. And I will risk all to get it. This is a tremendous danger. One of my favorite theorists here, although he does not talk about celebrity per se, is Kenneth Burke, the grandfather of Harry Chapin. Burke says that society is divided into various kinds of hierarchies - teaching, sales, banking, whatever - and that to be human, to gain respect and recognition, we are provoked and prodded by a "spirit of hierarchy" to be like those at the top of our own hierarchical structure. So if you're a plumber, you strive to get the power to climb that hierarchy, be like those at the top.

My contention is that the most prominent, most omnipresent, and most venal hierarchy is related to mass media's celebrity. The high priests at the top of that hierarchy are the Mount Olympus dwellers we watch every night on Entertainment Tonight. The banal and lost masses get to tune in every night to see how those on Mount Olympus live. They don't think of it this way, but to me it seems like an instrument of salvation to them. If only I could get there, be like them.

CS: But most never arrive. And even the few who do are known to say, it's not the Answer. It's terribly frustrating serving a false god.

PP: The cult of celebrity is at least partly responsible for increasing discontent amongst the masses. People get inundated by the contrast between the haves and have nots. The cult gives substance to our extravagant dreams of fame and glory, and thereby allows us to identify with the lives of the "stars" while becoming increasingly discontent with the "banalities" of our everyday existence, even with our spouses, our children, our neighbors, our jobs, our churches. Christopher Lasch has some good analysis of this in *The Culture of Narcissism*.

CS: Do Christians model this in their churches?

PP: They can. Talk to someone about her church and she might say, "My pastor is pretty good. He's C+." Then ask that person, "Well, what's 'A'?" and she will tell you.

CS: What will she tell you?

PP: You will probably hear her recite the names of well-known Christian pastors with national prominence, or radio or TV personalities. The "celebrities." These are the A+ ministers in people's minds. One thing that must be understood, here, is that in terms of church history, people with that kind of oratory skill and renown were probably seen twice in a lifetime. But today, with the constant availability of Christian mass media exposure, we are fed extravagant expectations of what it means to be taught from the pulpit. This kind of thinking is rampant in our churches. And if you don't measure up...

CS: Ha! You're reminding me of a funny incident, but maybe I shouldn't...

PP: Let's hear it.

CS: Well, even as an author of several books, I still can have a hard time getting published because I'm not so well known. So one time I was so fed up with getting back from publishers what in the trade we call rejection slips, that I told my wife I was going to re-send my same query letters signed "Chuck Colson" or "Philip Yancey," rather than "Charles Strohmer."

PP: What stopped you?

CS: My wife's better judgment!

CS: Are there any solutions to the pull of the cult of celebrity?

PP: A good place to start is simply to believe the Bible and start acting on it. For instance, in First Corinthians 12-14, you find a bizarre comment about how the less comely members are to be treated with greater honor, how the less respected are to be treated with the greatest respect. Where do we see this modeled in our churches? Encouraging the less comely, you see, doesn't sell. Doesn't give me points in a market share. Doesn't scratch the "right" demographic itch. I'm cynical about this, but not, I think just because I'm a deranged idealist. We ought to start talking about this more directly, come to new insights. Why have we become respecters of persons? God isn't. Who are we imaging?

It seems that one of the great demonstrations of biblical faith is the ability to transcend this kind of superficial partiality. So there is a lot of serious discussion needed. If not, celebrity will continue to plague our churches and effect our work in the performing arts.

CS: Are there roles that Christians who are actors should not play?

PP: Christians are going to be all over the map on this. They must be sensitive to the principles of Romans 14, that whatever you believe about such matters is between your own conscience and God. A great problem, here, is that the people who are more liberal in their willingness to take on a wide variety of roles look condescendingly on the more conservative, who have a conscience that says, no, no, I can't do that kind of theater. And the conservative tend to condemn the more liberal. These kind of battles occur continually. I don't have a lot of rules on this. You've really just got to know your sticking points, and to understand that those sticking points are going to be arbitrary.

CS: Should a Christian who is an actor, if she's married in real life, accept very romantic scenes that involve her in, say, passionate kissing?

PP: Again, I refer to conscience and Romans 14. I know some actors who can and some who can't.

CS: But you're kissing someone you're not married to. Isn't this in some way going beyond the pale for a married Christian, violating the marriage covenant in some way?

PP: It would have to depend on the situation, the film, the director, your relationship with the other actor.

CS: Even for this? You would put this in this relative category of conscience?

PP: I would. If you're going to be a working actor, and be a particular type, you're going to take roles that have some romantic element in them. For you to be able to help the audience with a willing suspension of disbelief, as it's described, the audience has to believe there is affection here. And as an actor, obviously there's a physical dynamic then. But you're going to have drawn your line (sticking point), so you can always say this is the point beyond which I'm not going. I think a saving grace for the actor, here, is that doing the wrong thing "feeling physical or emotional stimulation" is not even on her map. By the way, this happens all the time, whether you're married or not. You'll find someone else attractive, you'll be affected, but as a result of your passionate commitment to Christ, doing the wrong thing is not an option.

CS: So a number of factors would figure in an individual's sticking point here?

PP: That's right. Even the spouse's conscience. That would be enough to say No. That could even be enough to say I quit acting, if the spouse is saying that her career is immobilizing him.

CS: How does playing a role change an actor? Is it hard for a actor to shake free in real life from a character played?

PP: A lot depends on how you're trained. American's are trained in what is typically called inside-out. So what you need to do is connect with the feeling of the character by finding some parallel feeling in your own existence. Some actors, here, do a lot of internal investigation, a lot of emotional exploration. They've taken on the character outside of the rehearsal hall. If the character needs to be depressed, they'll ponder the weeks when they were depressed as a teenage, and allow themselves to experience a depression. Actors who go through that, particularly if they're new, once that role is over, they're going to have a difficult time.

But there are other methods of training that are not so internalized. So, for instance, the externally motivated actor might say, I'm playing a character who's sad but that doesn't mean I have to be sad. I can walk across this stage sadly, and the audience will believe my sadness because of my commitment to the physicality of sadness--to the tone, movement, and intonation of that emotion--even though really I'm a very happy person by nature. It's like the biblical injunction that despite how you feel, continue to rejoice. Sometimes the effect of a role can be quite profound. We know of people, for instance, who have done Godspell who have found a rebirth experience. An actor playing a very noble character can have a very elevating experience.

CS: What is bad drama?

PP: It's drama that typically doesn't know the rules. For instance, drama is necessitated by conflict, and it typically requires a protagonist with a sufficiently large playable objective and a worthy antagonist. If these things are missing, it's usually not a good theatrical piece. Now, you can have a good theatrical piece and have bad players, or people who are not adequately prepared, who are pretentious, arrogant, or there's no on-stage communion or communion with the audience, or a naive disregard for dramatic structure.

CS: What, then, is really good drama?

PP: Well, let me answer that this way. There are cardinal sins of the playwright. One is to confuse in a sustained way the audience, to disorient them. The other is to bore them. So I would say that really good drama must hold an audience's interest and must not confuse them. I always tell students, when you have written something, ask a friend, not, did you like it, but did it hold your interest? And they're giving you a nugget of gold if they answer no, and if they tell you where they lost their interest; because that you can fix.

CS: There's a terrible irony within Western Christendom. We follow The Greatest Story Ever Told, and yet we don't know how to tell that Story in good stories ourselves. I don't mean religious stories, because that Story is not just religious.

PP: We're beginning to see signs of a renaissance here, partly because there's been a glorious revolution in Christian aesthetics that's derived from the Thomist Catholic tradition and from the Dutch Reformed theorists the past 25 years ? helping people to understand the integration of faith and art. It's been a formidable task, and it is a sign of hope. There's no comparison to what was going on 25 years ago. There's much more enthusiasm, insight, and passion for art now. There are many more Christian theater communities and Christians being artistically productive. There's a lot of hope, here, for people who come home dead from work, who are bored, and who look in the mirror and all they can say is, I'm dying. (Originally published in Openings #8, Jul-Sept, 2000. Edited for the Web.)

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