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John Wilson

Athens Institute for Education and Research

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John Wilson

Professor and Chair, Department of Theatre and Dance,
University of Central Missouri, USA

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ABSTRACT

The Actor As Fire And Cloud challenges artists to trust the bible as teachable knowledge, and to extrapolate from scripture principles in the craft of actor training that are applicable to all students, irrespective of any specific faith allegiance or none at all. The conflict of teaching from biblical texts and the perceived political inferences, stereotypes and intolerances they assert within academic and public circles keeps these writings from being used in theatre classrooms to the detriment of students exploring their craft—for, it is asserted—the bible is reliable knowledge and the historical stories, characters and principles contained therein have a wealth to teach all of us as active students of theatre, and life. It is the contention of The Actor As Fire And Cloud that biblical story could at least return to the theatre classroom and be taught as knowledge, giving numerous examples of how to glean its principles and coalesce them into teachable tools for the craft of acting. The Actor As Fire And Cloud exists as an academic paper and as a full textbook, teaching actor-training lessons from the bible in the areas of listening and being present, humility, will, discipline, talent, calling or purpose, stage fright, courage, brokenness, worldview, emotional fullness, voice, movement, action, love and faith.

Keywords: Bible, knowledge, listening, stage presence

Imagine that you are one of the six hundred thousand Jews escaping Egypt at the beginning of the Exodus. You are with your spouse, your children, or your friends. You have your possessions, your animals, and sparse food supplies. The congregation around you is filled with fast talk and excitement as you literally walk away from centuries of bondage and domination by the country you just yesterday called home. A pillar of cloud guides you during the day, a pillar of fire by night. The presence of God and where he is leading are unmistakable. At night, when your eyes simply cannot stave off sleep any longer, you take your last glance at a towering inferno that communicates power, life, love, and safety. It is impossible to be distracted by anything other than what is happening in that very moment in front of you. Each of your senses is alive. There is very little thought to the past. The future cannot even be conceived. Only the now reigns supreme. In the morning, you wake and the immediacy of the moment starts all over again as you realize the fire has transformed miraculously into a monolith of cloud that moves independent of the wind, guiding your tribe in detailed and traceable steps that move forward, left, and right. It is impossible not to pay attention, point, gasp, and have the awe and majesty of every moment be expressed with tears, shouts of praise, and unfettered laughter.

Compare this to a few nights earlier and the approaching first Passover. The witching hour is midnight, but the land waits not for a witch but for the Lord himself, accompanied by the Angel of Death and the promise of coming destruction upon the firstborn of all humans and animals. Moses has been sending the Passover instructions that God communicated to him throughout the Israelite territories: “Take care of [the sheep] until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every first born—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt” (Ex 12:6–7, 12–13).

Did anyone sleep that night? “Okay, fresh coat of lamb’s blood is on the door. Good night. Sleep well! See you in the morning.” What about any Egyptians who had heard the rumors of the approaching disaster, or who had Jewish friends who explicitly warned them? What was the tenor of the family dynamic inside those households? After all, they had just seen Moses deliver on the nine previous plagues. “Angel-Smangel! Moses serves a false god. Let’s get some shut-eye.”

I imagine that in both households, there was a presence and moment-to-moment living that matched the height of the life-and-death stakes before them. I can imagine every parent and grandparent staying up to that witching hour of midnight, standing in the cramped doorway where the children slept, their eyes round and their breath held as they watched the oldest son in the room,

sleeping peacefully. At 12:01, as the children of the Passover kept sleeping and the Egyptian children suddenly stopped breathing, seemingly turning to stone, there was an equal amount of wailing and praising that filled the Egyptian night. Every parent was now in touch with the immediate presence of joy or anguish. They wore it on their skin; it was palpable in their voices; and they clung to each other, either gripped with fear or ready to faint from relief.

We have lost the mystery of this kind of presence. We rarely live in the moment with another human being. We are even less present with God. The nuances of communication within a myriad of relationships are being subjugated by social media and endless distractions embedded across the Internet. For marriages, families, and friendships, this enslavement to twenty-four-hour media/entertainment/gaming/social networking causes fissures, creating an incrementally increasing distance between ourselves, and those we love. More to the point of this article, however, this diminishing presence, when between actors onstage and the audiences in the theatre, means death. Without genuine presence, without actors living fully and truthfully moment-to-moment onstage, the death of theatre as the preeminent storytelling experience is inescapable.

The millennial students that are entering pre-professional degree programs today are “digital natives.” They cannot remember a time in which a computer or smart phone wasn’t within their grasp. They are processing thousands of hits of information daily, and their brains are overwhelmed. With the pure constraints of time, and the mindless habitual need to “scroll”, these students cannot possibly go deep. They can only go wide. The emotional well that is supposed to be down-reaching is drying up and the intellectual curiosity that is supposed to drive the artist into a fathomless and immersive search, is now only skimming the surface of a very pale and shallow artistic inquiry.

If the Theatre is ultimately going to die, it will not be from a rejecting public, bored with the ever-increasing nuances of theatrical convention and storytelling. Its death will be self-inflicted, cancerous, and like ancient Rome, will be the result of a disease within its own ranks and especially in the inability of its next generation to fall in love with process, failure and frustration; the needed seeds of which we must all be good stewards if we are to see anything beautiful emerge from the weeds. As it stands, our youngest and most promising theatrical artists have an *empathy deficiency*. The theatre will only be saved by a deeply rich and empathetic body reflecting poignant truths of the human condition; the world will only be saved by deeply rich and empathetic theatre artists.

Currently however, our students thrive on having answers at their fingertips. They don’t want to be curious because they don’t need to be curious. The wells are shallow, and emotions are short-lived. What they want is the right Google site and the right answer. And this is the attitude with which they begin their artistic, theatrical journey. Students now, are only concerned with getting the scene “right”. Or they want the confirmation that they’ve done what the teacher or director wanted. Instead of falling in love with the process, they have pined only for the final result, and only want the quickest and most

convenient route to get there. How does the discipline of theatrical training have to change to meet the needs of these young artists? Does the Bible have an answer?

You might argue that the Exodus or other biblical examples invoke a necessity of presence because their life circumstances were so dangerous, but I will counter with, “Acting is dangerous!” Or, if not—it should be! Every moment on stage, you risk telling the story wrong, not communicating truth, and being emotionally dishonest or not present enough to guide your fellow actors or the audience to the heart and soul of the story. That kind of danger is real. The responsibility you have as an actor carries with it the potential to change minds and hearts. As Paul Johnson asserts in his book, *Intellectuals*, “Those who want to influence men’s minds have long recognized that the theatre is the most powerful medium through which to make the attempt.”

Listening and being present. These are essentials to the craft of acting, and they are presumed such an instinctual part of the “talent DNA” in great actors that they can often be considered too difficult to teach with concrete systems in the theatre classroom. How do you, after all, *teach* presence? But here is where combining biblical scripture with standard acting technique can awaken the imaginations of our students and inspire them to not just comprehend the *idea* of presence, but *apprehend* it as part of their artistic intuition.

Scripture is historical. Irrespective of one’s beliefs about the supernatural, the presence of a triune God in the universe, or his covenant with Abraham’s offspring, the historical facts are incontrovertible: Israel has existed as a kingdom for millennia and their various captivities by Egypt and Babylon are recorded in the histories of other peoples, not just in the Jewish texts. Contrary to the prejudices of some historians who want to write Israel’s existence off as pure myth, too many evidences exist corroborating the biblical texts. Assyrian and Egyptian archeology have offered up numerous steles and stones extinguishing the Israel myth with hieroglyphics and inscriptions identifying Israel as a nation, even identifying them as a nation under captivity and upon whom slave labor has been practiced for the advancement of the conquering kingdoms.

The Exodus is part of Israel’s history. The acting principles available to glean from God’s presence with them as a pillar of both fire and cloud, before and after the crossing of the Red Sea, can be used to inspire and teach students *about* presence regardless whether one actually believes in the supernatural details of the Exodus itself.

This is not the same as trying to teach these principles using the fantastical mythologies of ancient Greece or Rome. There are no records in history from which today’s humans actively live by the precepts of Zeus or Apollo; no worship is given based on sacred texts or resting on evidence from antiquity, yet alone reality. It has already been categorically avouched that these mythologies were superstitions and stories—belief systems nonetheless—but rooted in imagination and religion, not reality. The biblical stories, by contrast, deal with real events concerning real people in real places, and though the supernatural might be an obstacle for some, the historical movements of the

Jewish people and at least the *possibility* of the supernatural events being true provide more anchorage in the imagination of the actor than trying to extrapolate concrete acting tools from fairy tales.

Up until the early 20th century, the bible was one of the main texts, if not the only text in the American classroom. There was a time when the bible was taught *as knowledge*. To look at its dismissal from the classroom as enlightenment from Stone Age thinking, is to not pay attention to the political winners and losers since the 1960's.

The acting teacher desiring to teach artistic truths from scripture should rest secure in the bible's authority throughout academic history. That teacher, armed with the *artistic* agenda of her syllabus should quell any fear from administrative personnel who think an acting lesson from the bible is on par with proselytizing. The bible can be easily shown to offer rich and diverse acting tools that widen our students' understanding of basic performance principles. Listening and being present, for example, are only two of many biblical virtues that translate into acting cognates, and the Exodus story is only one of many that can awaken the artists' imagination, helping them actually apprehend the practice of presence and effective listening onstage.

Let's put this to the test. In the following, I will combine biblical stories, principles, and quotations with the rudimentary stage concepts of listening and presence as taught by master teacher Patsy Rodenburg. This combination will be an attempt to coalesce biblical story and teaching, with practiced acting craft, using the bible to expand our knowledge and imagination in order to more deeply apply Rodenburg's acting technique. The following, mind you, is only one example of the bible helping expand comprehension of craft.

Patsy Rodenburg, England's acclaimed voice teacher and actor coach to the stars has done a beautiful job in codifying three circles of energy that she regularly teaches at the Michael Howard Studios in New York City, which are richly detailed in her book, *The Second Circle*. These circles of energy ultimately relate to our presence, vulnerability, and allowance of transparency and intimacy within relationships.

"Circles of Energy" sounds a bit nebulous or esoteric so let me provide an example of what the phrase means. If you were to stand just inches behind "Karen," the degree of discomfort for Karen would be negligible for the simple reason that human awareness and energy almost exclusively travel forward. If Karen turns around, both you and she potentially experience extreme discomfort because there is an affront to each of your "personal bubbles." With this idea of human energy always moving forward, let's take a look at Rodenburg's three circles of energy.

First Circle

This is energy that stops just short of you. If you were to extend your arm straight out in front of you, First Circle energy would probably stop at your elbow. It's energy that falls back on itself. It's an energy that keeps you introspective and unaware of your own surroundings. When we look at a person sitting alone at a cafe daydreaming, we think to ourselves, "they are really 'lost in thought' or 'in a world of their own.'" That's what it means to be

in the First Circle. It is an energy that is completely isolated, neither inviting nor repelling intimacy but existing on a deserted island of self-inspection and private thought. First Circle energy can be an extremely positive asset for film—which is about the only time it invites you to be in relationship. Otherwise, when onstage, it's most beneficial use is in soliloquy or to show transparency of thought. First Circle energy, if used positively, is not for the benefit of the other actors onstage but for the insight it gives to the audience in regard to character psychology.

Third Circle

This is the opposite of the First Circle. This is energy forced outward. It is the energy that says, "I've arrived, here's a good joke, everyone look at me! The life of the party has come into your midst!" Third Circle energy can "put on airs" and have a false bravado about it. It can be overpowering and burst your personal bubble and make you feel uncomfortable or even in danger. Third Circle energy can be abrasive because it has the potential to knock everything down in its path. But Third Circle energy has its place on stage and in life. It is the scream for help when in danger; it is the energy of musical theatre and often of farce.

Second Circle

People in this circle fully connect with the world; they are present, alert, and available to others. The energy is focused. Second Circle energy envelops the other person, not in a penetrating or forceful way, in which the other person's bubble is compromised, but in a way that allows both bubbles to coexist. Second Circle energy is porous. It allows for an exchange and flow of energy. It is the give and take of genuine intimacy. When you are experiencing Second Circle energy in life, you describe it as "really connecting, really listening, and really being heard." When Second Circle energy exists onstage, the audience moves forward to the edge of their seats because they know "it's about to get real up in here." Second Circle energy is the intimate first kiss between Romeo and Juliet as equally as it is the last look between Stella and Blanche at opposite ends of the room before Blanche is escorted out of the apartment by the Nurse and Doctor. When experiencing and observing Second Circle energy, the participants and observers think, "Real life is happening, right now."

This has been a theory of Patsy Rodenburg's for the past thirty years, to which she has only recently given words, definitions, and examples. But she has been thinking on and developing these ideas for most of her adult life, and she offers us a great wealth of knowledge with this particular concept. According to Patsy, all three circles of energy are necessary and appropriate for our lives on and off the stage. But it's most often in the second circle that our greatest intimacies occur in our private lives and when our keenest acts of theatrical excellence occur on the stage. What she is ultimately describing for the benefit of us all, as both global citizens and theatrical artists, is the stripped away and most authentic meaning behind the activities of Listening and Being Present.

I have discovered that nearly any time I have witnessed arresting presence and listening onstage, it has been born out of the biblical virtue of *humility*. And though Patsy Rodenburg doesn't focus on humility in the depth and breadth of her work, she has certainly recognized it in passing, as she did when she tipped her hat to the humble in an interview with *The New York Times* in 2001. "I like actors," she said. "The good ones are not vain; they're full of humility. When they go onstage, you know immediately if they can do their job." Isn't it interesting that Ms. Rodenburg compares excellence onstage not to great listening or great presence (though obviously these are necessary) but to humility? Humility is, I believe, the fountain from which great listening and presence flow. Humility is the genesis of excellence onstage. "Whereas it had been supposed that the fullest possible enjoyment is to be found by extending our ego to infinity, the truth is that the fullest possible enjoyment is to be found by reducing our ego to zero."

This paradox creates a great tension in the actor, not because all actors are megalomaniacs, though certainly some are, but because nearly every actor is scared. Patsy Rodenburg confirms as much and adds, according to a medical study, "an actor going onstage for a press night undergoes the same tension as a victim in a major car accident." Unfortunately, the most instinctual, easiest, and most common push back against fear is to slip either into the first or third circle as a means of survival, and in so doing, killing every legitimate chance of authenticity onstage. But when humility reigns in the character of the person onstage, then the sum of her present ego is zero, and by all mathematical equations (and equally corroborated by King Lear to his daughter Cordelia), "Nothing will come of nothing." Fear, in that moment, if not at zero, will certainly be abated to its minimum. Worrying about how you're doing on opening night, worrying about how you're being perceived by the audience or even the other actors, is nothing short of a self-consciousness, *which is a by-product of pride*, that erodes your ability to exist in the *now* and be fully present and available onstage. You cannot do two things at once equally well, and you cannot give one hundred percent of your attention to both yourself and your acting partner. I always tell my students, "You will never be at your absolute best, and consequently recognized for your absolute best work, until you take the focus off of yourself and make it about the other person." This is true of your most mundane as well as your most intimate relationships in life, and it is true of every connected moment you experience in the theatre. From the actor's perspective, Sanford Meisner says it like this: "What you do doesn't depend on you. It depends on the other fellow." The antidote to the kind of crippling, self-serving pride that is natural for the actor, is the biblical virtue of humility. All throughout the Proverbs, the Psalms and the actions of Christ throughout the new testament, show countless examples of humility being translated into presence and second circled exchanges between human beings.

This is the vitality of being in the second circle—not just onstage, but in life. By putting our focus on others and off of ourselves, we are being a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Look again at how God manifested himself as such to the escaping Jews during the Exodus. His presence was

captivating, powerful, and of great comfort. The cloud was a signpost and a guide by day and the fire was warmth and a source of peace and protection at night. In the same way, we are called to be that pillar of both cloud and fire for our fellow actors. The immediacy and strength of our undistracted presence should serve not only as a moment-to-moment guide to each of our communal steps onstage but also a source of light, passion, comfort, and peace. It's in the cloud and the fire that there is trust. And there is no greater antidote to fear onstage than trusting that your fellow actor knows exactly where he's going and is going to make it all about you along the way. When we do the same for him, *emanating from a place of humility*, and bring both cloud and fire to every moment and every person onstage, the audience will follow us wherever we want to go, even if it's across the parting sea. This is another Meisner concept that reinforces a primary Christian principle: when we put our attention on another person, we *relinquish control*, and in so doing, we become unguarded and more interesting onstage because our natural impulses can be seen. This of course, relates to a larger Christian parallel of placing our cares and problems at the foot of the cross, relinquishing control to Jesus, and in so doing, experiencing freedom.

I believe acting can be so difficult for anyone living in this time of technological advancement partially because we have lost the ability to genuinely listen and be present with each other on a daily basis. We do not practice presence as a virtue to be increasingly fanned into flame. If we don't cultivate these virtues in our day-to-day living, we will not benefit from them as disciplines in the theatre; as they are foreign to us in both places, we will neither recognize these virtues' absence nor understand how destitute and poor we are in that absence. The digital culture is killing our ability to really understand the human condition and express empathy for human suffering. Technology is deadening our emotional response. Constant, unending information is making actors dull.

Assigning importance and value to a person, object, or cause is vital in developing the habits of listening and being present. This is why I say it is a discipline. It must be your volitional choice to listen onstage and be fully available with your presence. You must be desperate for it. When Nehemiah returned from exile at the behest of King Artaxerxes and arrived in Jerusalem around 445 BC, the temple needed to be rebuilt, as did the fortifying wall surrounding the city, which was in great disrepair. His focus and intention was absolutely dedicated to this singular project, and in fifty-two days, the entire wall was repaired and rebuilt. When Ezra the prophet arrived and the exiled began to flood the city, Ezra understood the desperation for revival among his people. He gathered them together by the Water Gate at the entrance to the city and there, every day for a week, he opened up the Book of the Law of Moses and read it aloud while the people stood for hours on end and listened. Nehemiah 8:3 says, "And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law." From this focused and desperate need to hear the Word of God, revival had its outpouring across the nation of Israel. The people had accounted themselves desperate, and esteemed God's Word so highly, that their only

choice was to be present and truly listen. It is only when you make yourself desperate for authenticity, and when you esteem the text you've been given and the other actors sharing that text, that you will ignite the fire and invite the cloud onstage. Only then will you be equipped to authentically listen and be present in every moment.

Lastly, listening and being present *in life* allows for more effective presence and genuine listening in rehearsals, which should translate, if authentic listening and presence are practiced and established in every rehearsal, to the pinnacle of these disciplines being experienced in performance. Ultimately, nobody wants to pay money to see a really polished rehearsal. The experience the audience pays for is to see the story unfolding before their eyes as if it were happening for the very first time. There can be no aspect of, "This is exactly how we've rehearsed it—enjoy!"

A polished rehearsal makes for a very stale performance. Rehearsals are the *types and shadows* of the approaching future reality. There are biblical types and shadows embedded throughout scripture. They are always signposts pointing to a greater and better reality. The Old Testament Jerusalem temple, for example, was the literal place where heaven and earth met. But the temple pointed to a greater reality when "the earth [would] be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). The Jewish temple sacrificial system was a type and shadow pointing to Christ as the be all and end all, *perfect* sacrifice that would once and for all deliver humankind from the grips of sin and death. King David was a *type* of Christ. The forty years of wandering and testing in the desert during the Exodus was a type and shadow of the forty days of testing and fasting Christ underwent after his baptism in the Jordan and his commission to act as Israel's messiah. The Passover type points to Christ and the Easter reality. The Sabbath was always a signpost of the approaching perfect rest and peace we all can enjoy in and through Jesus.

All of these traditions were purposeful and *good*, but they weren't the *best*. They always pointed to something greater. Rehearsals are good and necessary, and listening and being present within them is part of the disciplined practice needed in the theatre, but rehearsals will always be a signpost of something greater—*opening night and the full run of the show*. No matter the excellence of a discovery made in rehearsal, you are called toward more than merely repeating it in performance. You are called to rediscover that moment in its newest form, its newest reality, in the largest way possible, *for the first time*, making what happened in rehearsal a *type and shadow* of the better, future reality being lived out currently underneath the pillar of cloud and fire that consumes the stage. Using biblical types and shadows are another way to enforce the idea of listening and being present.

When the audience rises at the end of the play and the critic begins to first formulate her thoughts about your performance and the play, whether they laud your time onstage as excellent or of little note will be a judgment on how well you listened and whether you were fully present. For only through your listening and your presence onstage can the audience embark on the present

journey with you. It is your responsibility to be the pillar of cloud and fire. If you don't pick up that mantle and take that calling seriously, then expect nothing more than wispy smoke and dying embers. Regardless of all your best efforts, a performance void of authentic listening and dynamic presence will be nothing more than "a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing (*Macbeth* 5.5. 24-28).

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Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version*, NIV*.

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