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**Robert J. Hubbard**

**Theatres for Shalom: Community-based Drama as Kingdom Work**

**Sketches from the Field: The Performance**

*Perhaps thirty residents of New Orleans' Holly Grove neighborhood assemble on Saturday night under a circus tent. Most of the twenty community partners that we interviewed attend. Before I can lament the smallish turnout, Sandy Brown, the volunteer coordinator for Trinity Christian Community (TCC), beams, "This is the biggest crowd we've had for an event since Katrina." The makeshift stage consists of a ten-foot-wide, eight-foot-deep edge of a concrete pad with a long industrial bench placed at the back. Illuminated by a couple of tin can clip lights, the twenty-foot banner made by the drama camp kids serves as the only backdrop. Decorations cover the banner's painted letters. It reads, "Voices of Holly Grove: A Celebration of Community."*

*Whether dogged by nerves, lack of sleep, or the unnerving accountability of literally looking into the eyes of the person whose words you are saying, the actors stumble into a rocky start. Lines are dropped, and awkward pauses abound. They look so nervous. Hiding behind the back row of chairs, I squat on my knees in the dark and suffer. But, to their credit, the young actors pull it together. Before long, the performance pushes forward with a palpable energy. Positive and affirming responses begin to dot the assembled community. A chorus of "Mmmm Hmms" follows tales of racial profiling and government bureaucracy. A hilarious story about finding a snake under a bed while evacuating to Houston inspires rolls of laughter. Encouraged, I drift to the far edge of the back row, a vantage point that permits me to look into the faces of the audience.*

*As several different students commented afterwards, Kevin Brown's response makes the*

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*week worthwhile. Kevin Brown is the Executive Director of TCC. From my side view, I watch him participate fully, effusively, in the performance. He blushes during his lines; he leans forward when his neighbors speak as if sitting with them in their living rooms; he belly-laughs at the lighter moments; and, yes, he cries. At first Kevin tries to hide these tears, wiping them quickly and discreetly onto the sides of his pants. But this unnecessary formality ends by the play's final moments. On stage, the actor playing Kevin lovingly embraces the actor playing his wife, Sandy. From his seat, the real Kevin permits tears to stream from his eyes to cheeks to neck. He is not the only one. The word "catharsis" comes to mind; a good word, if we are to trust the Greeks. [1]*

## **Introduction**

The above illustration describes a community-based drama performed in New Orleans in the spring of 2007. To date, I have facilitated seven such projects in which performance studies students partner with community members to present an original drama. [2] Several years earlier, a former colleague and faculty mentor of mine witnessed a similarly structured performance at a soup kitchen in a blighted urban neighborhood. Similar to the New Orleans project, this community-based drama was performed by college students but completely composed from oral histories gifted by members of the homeless community; many who appreciatively sat in the audience. After the event, my colleague, a well-known media scholar, searched for words. Straightening his trademark bow tie, he mused, "That was a true example of Kingdom work, Bob."

In the years since, I have appropriated the term "Kingdom work" to express an intersection between my faith and the social activism of my professional discipline. I am a theatre artist blessed to teach within the context of the Christian liberal arts. A common learning goal within this unique educational community is what we refer to as "the integration of faith and

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learning.” When teaching a regular unit in community-based drama in my performance studies course, I use the phrase “Kingdom work” to express this integration. Prior to writing this essay, however, I confess to only a surface understanding of what “Kingdom work” [3] means, or at least what I meant by it. I never really subjected the phrase to inquiry.

Challenged with the happy task of reflecting on connections between spirituality and performance studies, I offer the following thesis. If carefully devised, ethnographic performances such as community-based drama, applied theatre, and/or theatre of the oppressed [4] conform and conflate with a theological mandate of Kingdom work. To illustrate this bond, I have divided this essay into three sections. First, I strive toward a working definition of Kingdom work. Second, I identify and examine shared goals between Kingdom work and the community-based drama. The third element of this study consists of stories that weave in and out of an otherwise traditional essay structure. These first-person ethnographic accounts appear in order to exemplify community-based drama as Kingdom work. My study operates on the premise that participation in ethnographic forms of performance empowers Christian theatre artists to engage in Kingdom work. Moreover, this Kingdom work, while valuable to distinct Christian communities, potentially addresses needs within the larger, pluralistic human family.

### **Kingdom Work as Restorative Theology**

In colloquial conversation, the phrase “Kingdom work” probably inspires a generically safe definition, something along the lines of “good work performed by faithful people.” But this surface definition only hints at a significant theological tension. For many people of faith, “kingdom” is synonymous with “heaven” (Hoekema 44). Kingdom work, therefore, implies work in or for heaven. Many who believe in an afterlife instinctively resist the notion of “work in heaven.” Isn’t heaven supposed to be a place free from the daily grind? And what kind of work needs to be done in heaven, anyway? With an omnipotent God as general contractor, one would

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assume that the work is already finished and, well, perfect. Determining heaven's characteristics far exceeds the scope of my little essay, obviously. I only humbly observe a tension between the concepts of Kingdom and work.

This tension ultimately leads to a conversation within eschatology. In his seminal work, *The Bible and the Future*, Anthony Hoekema identifies three different relevant positions held by Christians regarding the existence and definition of the Kingdom of God. While all three depend, in various ways, on the divinity of Jesus Christ, they differ substantially. One position maintains the Kingdom of God as "exclusively present" (41). In this model, Jesus has come and continues to come in order to redeem a broken creation. In support of this belief, Hoekema references Jesus' teachings such as "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15, *God's Word Translation*) and "the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20) (42). Under this school of thought, Jesus' presence makes the Kingdom of God present. Or, as Hoekema states, "In Jesus' words and deeds, miracles and parables, teaching and preaching, the Kingdom of God was dynamically active and present among men" (43).

A second view, arguably more prevalent in contemporary practice, suggests that the Kingdom exists in the future, meaning it hasn't happened yet, but presumably will take place as part of the second coming of Jesus. (Hoekema 41). While Scripture clearly attests to the present quality of the Kingdom of God, the Bible also references a future kingdom. Hoekema cites the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 8:11-12) in which Jesus portends a day in which "evil doers" will be refused admittance to the Kingdom of heaven (49). Hoekema also acknowledges Jesus' persistent use of the future tense throughout scripture when referring to the Kingdom of heaven (49). Likewise, multiple parables speak to the "close of the age" (*synteleia tou aionos*), supporting the belief that God's people have a limited time before the coming of the Kingdom (49-50).

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It should be noted that many contemporary American evangelicals most closely identify with the future kingdom. On a May 2007 edition of National Public Radio's "Speaking of Faith" self-proclaimed "ordinary radical" Shane Claiborne zeros in on this popular belief of his evangelical upbringing: "The Christianity I grew up with really sort of looked at the world and said it's falling apart, but there's life after death" (online). It follows that believers who prescribe predominantly to this "future kingdom" worry less about the world "falling apart" around them. With global destruction assured as part of the Rapture, and a future Kingdom as the ultimate goal, why bother trying to fix up the place? Rather, these Christians tend to avoid messy cultural entanglements in favor of the goal of "personal salvation." Perhaps this partially explains why so many churches have abandoned their geographical roots in blighted communities in favor of suburban mega-churches that minister primarily to the most affluent, privileged, and homogenous members of Christendom.

### **Character Sketches from the Field: Kevin's Passion**

*Kevin Brown, the Moses-like director of TCC, dreams of constructing a multimillion-dollar youth arts complex on recently purchased land in an adjoining neighborhood. On the third day of our visit, Kevin honors me by stealing time from his frenetic schedule to drive me to the two-acre unit of overgrown grass and glass between a middle school and a row of active crack houses. His vision for the arts center includes finding a director with a grad degree who could develop a semester-long program in community-based arts. Such a program would likely attract art, music, and theatre students from the network of Christian colleges and universities. From thirteen hundred miles away in rural Iowa, I fantasized my application. Is this where God wants me next? On the ground in New Orleans, I disappoint myself with intense reservations. I feel burned out and hopeless after just a few days of drama camp. The children of this neighborhood clearly need someone with more patience, grace, and confidence. I couldn't do it. And how could I move my family here? No way.*

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*When Kevin took over leadership of TCC from his father a few years back, he thought he was answering a call to a life of youth ministry and urban evangelism. Post-Katrina, he industriously added not-for-profit banker and homebuilder to his already substantial job description. Imagine George Bailey with a Bible in the hood. On the drive back, Kevin stops to show me one of TCC's many home rebuilding sites. We stand shoulder to shoulder in a modest yet attractively refinished bathroom admiring the tiles recently laid by a polite assembly of Latino craftsmen. Stunned by guilt, I suddenly confide, "Kevin, I admire you so much. I don't know how you managed this."*

*Stroking his impressive mane of prematurely gray hair, he replies, "I struggle to get out of my bed every morning. That's the truth."*

Notably, Claiborne rejects a theology solely grounded in a future kingdom. In his *Speaking of Faith* radio interview, he rebuffs the usual response of his culturally separatist upbringing. Claiborne gently reflects, "a lot of us started asking 'is there life before death and doesn't our faith have anything to speak about the world we're living in?'" (online). In his meticulous *The Lord and His Prayer*, Anglican theologian N.T. Wright offers a more direct admonishment, reminding his readers that the Lord's Prayer is not mute on the present or "we'd have to cut out the tell-tale phrase *on earth, as it is in heaven*. Whatever Jesus' Kingdom announcement was all about, it was about something that actually happens, within the space-time world" (27).

Fortunately, Hoekema identifies a third, hybrid tradition of belief that acknowledges the scriptural support for a future Kingdom without disregarding the Gospel call to minister to the present. The Kingdom is "both present and future, present in one sense, and future in another" (41). The preponderance of scriptural support leads many theologians to agree. "To attempt to deny either aspect of this doctrine," states Hoekema, "is to tamper with the evidence" (50).

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But believers who accept this dual status of the Kingdom soon find themselves struggling with a historically perplexing existential question. If the Kingdom of God is upon us, why then is the world in such a terrible mess? On this point, Hoekema reminds, “The coming of the Kingdom did not mean an end to the conflict between good and evil” (47). Wright offers a helpful artistic analogy: “Jesus is the musical genius who wrote the greatest oratorio of all time; we are the musicians, captivated by his composition ourselves, who now perform it before a world full of muzak and cacophony” (31). Indeed, the rampant brokenness of the creation speaks *for not against* the need for what we might call Kingdom work. We reside in a shared liminal space between present and future. The presence of the Kingdom of God extols us to work towards this Kingdom for all creation. Wright describes this as a “risky, crazy prayer of submission and commission” (32).

Wright’s choice of the phrase “submission” and “commission” powerfully captures the two-pronged concept of Kingdom work that I advocate in this essay. First, Kingdom work requires *submission*. In *Educating for Shalom* Nicholas Wolterstorff reminds that “the calls of the poor, of the oppressed, and of the victimized touch God’s heart” (25). Modeled on Christ’s humility, Wright’s prayer of submission intuitively resists prideful “cultural warriors.” Rather, the prayer calls for disciples of the gentle human God who lived a servant’s life and willingly died in poverty and oppression. Kingdom workers, therefore, are the meek who serve the weak.

Second, Kingdom work is a *commission* to all believers. Wolterstorff states, “the church is called, in its own life and community, to give evidence of the new life—not just to wait around in the promise that someday there will be a new heaven and a new earth, but to exhibit the fact that in Christ there is a new power and that the Kingdom had broken in” (7). Such Kingdom workers locate the little fragments of heaven present in this shattered world, and labor to restore them from their broken state in anticipation that the present Kingdom may one day be wholly restored. As Wright states, “The Kingdom did indeed come with Jesus; but it will fully come

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when the world is healed, when the whole creation finally joins in song” (32). Wolterstorff masterfully encapsulates Wright’s prayer for submission and commission as a “two part command: We are to pray and struggle for the release of the captives, and we are to pray and struggle for the release of the enriching potentials of God’s creation” (23).

And how do we struggle for this release? We work for it: Kingdom work.

### **Community-based Drama as Kingdom work: Theoretical Connections**

Presuppositions obviously differ, yet the above concept of Kingdom work shares many goals with the practice of ethnographic forms of performance such as community-based drama. For the purposes of this study, I divide these shared goals into three cross-fertilizing categories. First, community-based drama and Kingdom work privilege the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. Second, community-based drama and Kingdom work both strongly advocate for social justice. And third, both community-based drama and Kingdom work extol the transformative power of story. These shared goals imply a potentially a powerful and promising synergy.

### **The Marginalized, the Poor, and the Oppressed**

While forms of community-based drama may exist in any community, lineage inevitably winds back to the great Augusto Boal’s seminal *Theatre of the Oppressed* pedagogy (Kuppers 39). In *Bewilderment and Beyond*, James Thompson describes this tradition of social agency. Using his preferred term of “applied theatre,” Thompson states:

They often include the practice of theatre where it is least expected; for example, in prisons, refugee camps, forgotten estates, hospitals, museums, centres for the disabled, old people’s homes and under-served rural villages: sometimes in theatres. Applied theatre is a participatory theatre created by people who would not usually make theatre. It is, I would hope, a practice by, with and for the **excluded and marginalized**. It is, at its best, a theatre that translates and adapts

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to the unfamiliar. (15-16, emphasis mine)

Clearly, a desire to move theatre beyond its elitist-leaning confines and into under-represented communities characterizes much of the work that I categorize as community-based drama. In his preface to Michael Rohd's *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue* Boal scholar and friend Doug Paterson predicts a populist surge for the theatre; paraphrasing Mao Zedong, Paterson writes "that fundamental changes in culture and artistic expression would not occur in terms of *what* was presented, but *for whom?* And *by whom?*"(x). Community-based drama takes up this call by making a social theatre focusing on the needs of marginalized communities performed *with* and *for* these communities.

Kingdom work, I argue, champions a similar emphasis: "Whatever you did for one of my brothers or sisters, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). This Gospel clearly advocates service for the underprivileged; such acts of caring constitute an integral form of Kingdom work. In *The Presence of the Future*, George Ladd announces, "the promise was fulfilled in the action of Jesus: in his proclamation of the good news to the poor, release to captives, restoring sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. This was no new theology or new idea or new promise; it was a new event in history" (111-12). Likewise, in *Downward Mobility in an Upscale World*, Claiborne describes "the reckless love of Jesus, which teaches us to see the connections between our wealth and our neighbor's poverty." With strikingly shared emphasis on the goals of community-based drama, Kingdom work calls for humble service to the weakest among us.

### **Sketches from the Field: Post-show**

*Thirty minutes following the show, students and community members still intermingle under the colorful tent; laughing, joking, exchanging hugs, and telling new stories. The scheduled post-show staff meeting easily gives way to these precious, golden moments. Besides,*

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*someone discovered an untouched sweet potato pie hiding in the kitchen fridge. Taking it in, I lurk in the darkness just outside the edge of the tent, eat a piece of pie with my fingers, and watch students and locals savor the sweet and fleeting intimacies that theatre brings.*

## **Social Justice**

Community-based drama does not engage oppressed and marginalized communities simply to identify them. At its best, it seeks reconciliation in the form of equality and justice. This aesthetic runs through both in form and content. As a theatre artist, one of the many reasons I find myself attracted to community-based drama is because I despise traditional casting processes that systematically exclude the majority of willing participants. Conversely, community-based drama repeatedly illustrates that artistic integrity need not trump community engagement and participation, modeling Jill Dolan's call for "participatory democracy" in theatre practice (3). Indeed, what stands out the most to me from Sonja Kuflinec's various accounts of her years studying the Cornerstone Theatre Company are the dynamics of what happens when "non-actors" share the stage with "professionals." In *Staging America*, Kuflinec reflects: "theatre designed less for consumption than for provocation, with 'ordinary people' rather than professional actors, seemed to me more effective, affective, and engaging" (4). When citizens share the stage with equity actors, or when the homeless bear witness to college students in found spaces, a vibrant aesthetic integrity emerges. Of his experience directing a production for the Cornerstone Theatre Company, no less an established theatre artist than Peter Sellers concludes that community-based drama "is on the forefront of cultural democracy" (qtd. in Kuflinec 185).

Likewise, the direct connection to the setting found in community-based drama often pushes content towards advocacy. More deliberate than other class-conscious theatre movements such as Naturalism and social realism, community-based drama intentionally uses theatre to fight

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for justice by empowering communities. In *Staging America*, Kuflinec shares an uncomfortably familiar story of acting in a facile production of Brecht's *Man's a Man* for a generally bored and resentful university audience. Simultaneously on her college campus, student radicals constructed shanties on the college green to symbolically denounce apartheid, and pelted bystanders with Kool Aid stained tampons to protest the lack of attention paid to women's issues. Of the Brecht production, Kuflinec laments, "A play that in its content and theory expressed a profoundly moving analysis of war's impact on the individual and humanity landed in our theater with an unresonant thud" (3). Of the protests, she observes, "While using the signs of theatre...the real bodies of protestors asserting emotionally committed, if not always unscripted, dialogue seemed to more effectively 'awaken' and provoke the audience" (3).

I can personally attest that community-based drama offers powerful opportunities for advocacy by giving voice to people who otherwise may not be heard. If trust in the process exists, the oppressed and marginalized generally do not need to be persuaded to tell their stories of oppression and marginalization. In the format I use to facilitate community-based drama, students and I come together after completing interviews to select stories to include in the script. I typically begin the process by stating, "You are the ones who spent time with your community-partners. You interviewed them. You are their advocates. Which of their stories *need* to be told?" Invariably, this approach generates stories that highlight issues of injustice and inequality. Indeed, in the case of the New Orleans project, we eventually distilled the twenty hours of interviews into a compiled script with four topically driven scenes. The first scene earned the title "Injustice and Brokenness." This section included stories of rental discrimination, employment discrimination, usury, institutional racism, and a whole host of horrific narratives involving the ineffectual government response to the flood, as well as the resulting suffering inflicted upon powerless citizens via government agencies with acronyms such as FEMA, SBA, ICF, and LRA. These stories illustrated that justice was not served to many in New Orleans, and

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our community partners wanted their stories told.

Indeed, this recognition of the role that community-based drama plays in the pursuit of justice may explain the creation of Association of Theatre in Higher Education “Advocacy Goals”: “To establish, publish and promote education methods for theatre practice beyond the academy in community-based venues.” Or, as Thompson advocates, “It is a theatre wedded to vital issues and one that values debate” (16).

### **The Transformative Power of Story**

A similar quality of democracy and advocacy that characterizes community-based drama also nourishes theories of Kingdom work. The Biblical concept of *shalom* captures this notion of a flourishing quest for a just creation. In “Education for Shalom,” Ron Wells states, “Shalom is an ideal in which peace combines with justice; but more than that, when peace combines with delight in right relationships with God, with self, with fellow humans and with nature” (online). At its heart, shalom may be understood as the result or promise of Kingdom work.

Perhaps the most articulate spokesperson for the social advocacy contained within the concept of shalom, Nicholas Wolterstorff elaborates:

In shalom there are no blind, all see; in shalom there are no lame, all walk; there are no deaf, all hear; there are no dead, all live. And, there are no poor; all have plenty. To be impoverished is to fall short of shalom. That is what is wrong with poverty. God is committed to shalom. Jesus came to bring shalom. In shalom there is no poverty. (77)

Similar to goals of community-based drama, Kingdom work restores equality to the marginalized and justice to the oppressed. This emphasis on meek over the proud, the powerless over the powerful, the oppressed over the oppressors, is foundational to shalom. In the spirit of

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“submission” and “commission, Wolterstorff crystallizes this class-conscious focus, stating, “As the prince of Shalom, Jesus could not avoid taking the side of the poor against the rich” (77).

Finally, in addition to a shared emphasis on serving the oppressed and promoting social justice, community-based drama and Kingdom work both celebrate the transformative power of story. Theatre is story. But, at its best, community-based drama self-consciously performs stories in ways that recognize, legitimize, and empower participating communities through the telling. Of this ability, Kuftinec muses:

These community-based productions, which I have both witnessed and helped to develop, re-inspire my faith in theater’s ability to directly engage and reflect its audience, by integrating local history, concerns, stories, traditions, and/or performers. At the same time, the work raises deeply provocative questions about ethical representation and about how individuals and groups negotiate their identity. (1)

In *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*, Philip Taylor elaborates the power of performance to positively transform communities through the telling of their own stories. Taylor states, “it is the application of the theatrical art form that is being harnessed to help communities determine some aspect of who they are and what they aspire to become... theatre is a platform that empowers a transformation” (xx-xxvii).

Likewise, the telling of stories exists as a vital form of Kingdom work ideally leading towards shalom. Wells, a historian of Europe by trade, elaborates on the power story played in bringing about peace with justice within the seemingly hopeless turmoil in Northern Ireland:

My point in offering this is to suggest that while political leaders can begin a peace process, such a process will more likely succeed if there is broad support. That support can be sustained when conflicting communities can tell each other their stories, especially those who have moved on—beyond enmity. There is power in those narratives—more than just stories—that deeply move and motivate those who hear them. From my Catholic friends I have learned a way to describe those narratives of grace: they, and the people whose stories we celebrate, will

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become for us ‘icons of grace.’ The thesis argued here is this: when people hear compelling stories of grace they too will find ways to attest that ‘deep in our hearts we do believe that we shall overcome someday.’ (online)

To summarize, the telling and sharing of stories, these “icons of grace,” potentially restores the Kingdom by moving and motivating listeners toward reconciliation. Telling stories is a form of Kingdom work. The healing balm of narrative may transmit from pulpits, classrooms, and community centers. No surprise should be taken that community-based dramas most typically transform the above venues into makeshift theatres.

Kevin Brown, director of Trinity Christian Community, believes in the transformative power of stories. In an email interview conducted three months after he hosted our community-based service project at TCC, Kevin muses on the impact of stories in his work:

I tell stories everywhere I go; it is the only way that most people can relate to the point being made. There must be a way of identifying personally with the information, otherwise it is dry and impersonal. It is why Aesop’s fables continue to be told thousands of years later. It is why Christmas and Easter are so important.

Turning his thoughts specifically to the “Voices of Holly Grove” project, Kevin reflects, “You told our story back to us. It validated our pain, helped contextualize what we all experienced and allowed us to see ourselves through the eyes of others in a sensitive, caring way.”

Kingdom work occurs when people are transformed by the power of stories, often their own stories. It follows that community-based drama, an art that makes theatre out of community narratives, naturally has a distinctive role to play in positive transformation.

***Character Sketch from the Field: Brian’s song***

*An hour after the show, our group of depleted yet exhilarated college students finally convenes in a circle under the tent, the folding chairs by now neatly stowed. Literally out of the*

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*darkness, Brian appears.*

*Brian had worked multiple tours at TCC as an Americorps volunteer, but was now using the tuition assistance earned from this under-funded government program to study music education fulltime at the University of New Orleans. Brian looked like the kind of guy who would make a father nervous: scruffy, tattooed, a smoker, a rock star. On Saturday morning, he helped us set up TCC's circus tent, the theater building for the evening's culminating performance. Apparently, he was the only one around who knew how to assemble the expansive bolt of nylon, rope, and aluminum. Brian also graciously agreed to be interviewed for the show, sharing, among other stories, a moving testimony about how the Bible's Book of James transformed him from a hedonistic bar-band front man to a passionate Christian community activist. He chose to remain in the neighborhood, one of the few single white guys visible on the block. He hoped to eventually work as a public school music teacher in the area, or, as he put it, "I want to give back to the kids."*

*He asks the group if he may say a few words. I wish I had thought to capture the totality of his twenty-minute, often brilliant, delightfully meandering monologue on one of our tape recorders. For this poor reconstruction, I rely on sketchy notes written in my journal a few hours later that night.*

*"Listen, I've been here a long time; it seems like forever. I've seen dozens of work groups come through. I helped a lot of them. I've carried too many skanky refrigerators out of vacant houses. But this group, this one's different. I'm not saying the others weren't good or needed. They were, but we needed this one too. We needed it now. I think people are going to be talking about this one for a long time. I think it will have impact. It already has.*

*Hey, I'm an artist, okay. A musician. I played in bands for a long time. Since I came to this weird life I'm living—this crazy life of faith—I've been struggling with what it means to be a*

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*Christian artist. What the hey is a Christian artist, anyway? I went to this conference up at a church college in Mississippi awhile back. We debated it. Nobody agreed, really. Nobody knows. I like to think that all good art is Christian art, don't you?*

*Anyway, some of you might have noticed that I left halfway through the show. I didn't want you to think that I, you know, thought it sucked or anything. Au contraire. It was just so much. It moved me so much. I needed to be alone to remember it, to re-remember it, I guess.*

*Look, I've been telling my Katrina stories since I got back. Everybody comes through, all these groups come through, and, you know, it's expected. I must tell them my story. Well, I told these stories so many times; they kind of lost their meaning... to me, anyway. Like they didn't really happen or something. Like I was standing outside of the stories, walking around like some robot telling stories about some guy that I don't even know or connect with anymore.*

*But seeing Marly up there play me, sheesh, the meaning rushed back. The true meaning returned. The stories, all of them, not just mine, all of 'em, became...relevant and, I don't know, hopeful. The experience of seeing you all act 'em out gave me hope. Weird but kinda true. I mean, less than two years ago, a flood wrecked this whole place—muck swallowed us up—and we don't feel like the rest of the country gives a...well, cares anymore. It mattered a lot to hear these stories told. It made us—it, Katrina, the flood, whatever—important again. Yeah, like I said, relevant. So thanks.*

*Now, about the French Quarter tomorrow, I must be your guide. You needed an insider there or it's all just dumb tourism. First we gotta..."*

*Brian's monologue continues as he spins a hilarious five-minute yarn about how he helped a Northwestern College student on a spring break service trip the previous year purchase a "booby cup" in the French Quarter for her sister. His speech stands out as a highlight.*

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### **Conclusions: Theatre Artists Working for the Kingdom**

I first visited post-Katrina New Orleans in the December following the storm and its horrible aftermath. Working on a team of students and faculty from my Christian college, I gladly and humbly spent five days swinging a sledgehammer, helping to gut three different houses in the then largely untouched Hollygrove neighborhood. So much needed to be done; the immensity of the crisis overwhelmed everyone. Literally standing in the muck and devastation granted me the gift of seeing the value that trained carpenters, electricians, and builders provided this afflicted city. A possessor of none of these skills, I openly wondered if theatre artists like myself offered anything of value to this seemingly forsaken place. A city arguably on the decline for decades, New Orleans still showed the marks of the resplendent Kingdom. How could the birthplace of jazz and the muse of so many great writers remain a deserted and hopeless demolition zone? The reconstruction plainly needed skilled laborers and fundraisers, but a healthy and restored community requires more than shelter and social services, more than bread alone. Ongoing work needs to be done to visibly and spiritually restore the presence of the Kingdom. My meager experiences in New Orleans tell me that artists have a servant function to play in this transformation.

My faith tradition informs me that the first benefactors of the Kingdom work should be the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. In *Art in Action*, Wolterstorff reminds his readers: “the tragedy of modern urban life is not only that so many in our cities are oppressed and powerless, but also that so many have nothing surrounding them in which any human being could possibly take sensory delight” (82). Theatre artists attempting to merge social activism with spiritual imperatives do well to direct their efforts toward Wolterstorff’s observation. While art may serve *all* communities, the traditions and characteristics of community-based drama make it especially valuable as a form of Kingdom work in places like post-Katrina New Orleans. As Kingdom work, community-based drama ministers to the weakest among us, fights for social

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justice, and labors to transform a broken world through the simple power of story.

Through his fiery, secular language, Augusto Boal lip-syncs goals that resonate with Kingdom work. Making use of the analogy of a tree to illustrate the desired outcomes for his Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal implores, “The object of the whole tree is to bring forth fruits, seeds, and flowers: this is our desired goal, in order that the Theatre of the Oppressed may seek not only to understand reality, but to transform it to our liking” (7).

Transformation takes place in countless ways. As the stewards of the whole creation, we are commissioned Kingdom workers, called to lend our support and time to the oppressed, to gut houses, to fund social advocacy, to support unpopular causes, and to vote for officials dedicated to the pursuit of social justice. And, yes, we must also plant and tend to art projects, these metaphorical trees, in the areas most touched by brokenness and most in need of beauty. If prayerfully nurtured, these trees may flourish with the fruit of shalom, both in the present and future kingdom.

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### Endnotes

1. As illustrated by this short narrative, this essay extols the transformative power of stories. For this reason, stories are woven throughout. While a literary sensibility may appear, I relied heavily on field notes and recorded interviews to reconstruct each story. My goal is to foster an engaging mutation of creative non-fiction, auto-ethnography, and traditional scholarship. Stories taken from field experience typically appear in italics.
2. For a detailed description of two of these projects, see my 2002 essay “Performance Studies, Academically-Based Service-Learning, and the Staging of Community.”
3. My use of the term “Kingdom work” poses some problems, both in terms of definition and cultural sensitivity. Rather than abandon the term, I attempt here to expand its definition and restore its cultural collateral. Common in the discourse of Reformed theology, the term “Kingdom work” appears to change considerably based on context. Nicholas Wolterstorff implies a very limited definition of “a certain range of ‘Christian’ occupations” (11). While this definition is, in one sense, accurate, I believe that it unnecessarily restricts the creational domain of the word “Kingdom.” For this reason, I work towards a more inclusive definition discussed later in the essay. The term “Kingdom” is now avoided by some because of both its patriarchal implications (king) and the postcolonial aversion to language containing imperialistic overtones. While sensitive to these concerns, I see them as a product of abuse and misuse of a restorative theological concept that ultimately cherishes equality and diversity. For this reason, I continue to use the term.
4. Depending on the theorist, the continent and/or the practitioner, these three types of theatre may differ from one another. In the most general terms, community-based drama involves a celebration and participation of a particular community within a theatrical event; applied theatre generally relates more to cultural problem solving and drama therapy; and theatre of the oppressed focuses most on social justice and liberation. The emphasis on community engagement and participation present in all three traditions justifies a shared designation under the umbrella term “community-based drama.”