
Rehearsing Justice: Theatre, Sexuality and the Sacred

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Abstract

The theatre actor's process in a rehearsal hall is reality and metaphor. It can be a rehearsal for justice, where we can live freely. In this laboratory the actor becomes all of us. Like the actor, we inhabit our bodies and our sexualities, sometimes as spiritual practice, or as sacred and creative, even as incarnations. In particular, women's bodies remember what it is like to be no-body and what it is like to be a some-body. The texts of women's bodies contain their history of pain, wellness and illness.

In creating a character, the actor creates a biography, an inner life, and the actor's imagination aligns with the character's situation. This is the creation of a character's 'living story'. Similarly, for all of us, this is akin to self knowledge. When women and sexual minorities tell their stories and listen to each others' self knowledge, they are reading their bodies as texts. And worlds split open.

Keywords

Theatre, actor, character, rehearsal, the Sacred, bodies, women, sexual minorities, incarnation, LGBT, spiritual practice

Our bodies, joyous and painful, are where we live. Held within our sinews are memories, myriads of images, the physicality of grace, stories.

Take a deep breath... let it out with a sigh...allow your hand to dance in the air; perhaps the wind blows... moving your hand from side to side... The wind slowly dies down...and your hand returns to your lap, gently.

French dramatist and visionary Antonin Artaud said a gesture is a communication, a private manifestation of loneliness...a signal through the flames (Brook, 1982: 51).

Theatre is a signal through the flames. A place to witness and to be relieved of our inner loneliness. It is a free space, a prolepsis where everything is possible, a wild space of opportunities.

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As a feminist, the theatre has been my lifeblood. It is the lens through which I see the world and interpret it. In this essay, I explore how the value of theatre, particularly acting, informs our daily lives and reveals the Sacred.

Theatre and religion are, of course, old acquaintances, having known long periods of both friendship and estrangement. Yet one underlying principle of drama has always been the discovery of one's self in the story of another. This truism is also theatre's link with religion. The knowledge of our connectedness to one another through empathy with another's feelings is simultaneously the experience of theatre and the experience of love and forgiveness.

As a laboratory, the theatre is a space to enact human experiences of love, forgiveness, anger, peacemaking. In this laboratory, theatre becomes a rehearsal for justice, for what we would like to see happen in our lives and our world. Brazilian director, Augusto Boal, names it perfectly, 'theatre is a rehearsal for revolution' (Boal, 1979: 122). I would add, the theatre can also be a rehearsal for what it means to be human. And even more, the theatre can be a laboratory for experiencing the Sacred.

Come then, let us walk into the space for rehearsal. Imagine that it's a large room with high ceilings and many arches along the walls. It's an empty space that holds promise. It also holds a great deal of history.

Acting Theorists

Some of the spirits that inhabit this rehearsal space are theorists of acting styles. Konstantin Stanislavsky's 'System' at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia addressed a stilted, formal theatre. Alternatively, he offered body-mind-feeling as one organic process. He saw in the actor the relationship between embodiment and consciousness (Magnat, 2015: 18). The theatre historian, Virginia Magnat, tells us that Hinduism and Yoga were significant influences on Stanislavsky's idea that the body and mind were inseparable (Magnat, 2015: 20). Stanislavsky's System required that an actor utilize, among other things, her emotional memory of past experiences and use them to create a character (Konstantin, 2014). Others built on Stanislavsky: Myerhold, Uta Hagen, Stella Adler, among others.

The Polish visionary, Jerzy Grotowski, took Stanislavsky's System as a point of departure. His focus was the body of the actor. He urged actors to call on every aspect of themselves: the hand, eye, ear, heart. For Grotowski, theatre's aim was sacred; it was about self study, self-exploration and had the possibility of salvation. In this holy theatre, the actor was priest. The act of performance was an act of sacrifice, opening himself up to the role and revealing/disclosing the actor's own secrets through the character. The actor invokes, lays bare what lies in every human being and what daily life covers up (Brook, 1982: 59).

My theatre muse, Martha Boesing, bridges many aspects of Stanislavsky and Grotowski. Martha is a playwright and theatre director and founded the longest running feminist theatre in the United States, 'At the Foot of the Mountain', in Minneapolis. She asserts that acting is about telling the truth, 'To fool us into believing that you are somebody else, you have to connect with the deepest parts of yourself, saying every word with conviction. Never pretend. Never lie' (Boesing, 1990).

‘To fool us into believing that you are somebody else...’ This is the quixotic task of the actor: to hold the fiction with conviction – in the truth of one’s own body. Rehearsal is a process of trans-figure-ation. The actor’s body interpreting the character changes rhythms, gesture, even appearance. How does the actor do that? Can we cross over topographies of ourselves? Is there resistance? Can we cross boundaries, to trans-form, trans-figure, trans- migrate? Can we live in another’s skin? This is the journey of the holy actor...not a sacrifice of herself (for I think we’ve had enough of that in history), but instead the actor as birth giver to a character, a metamorphosis of the body, a gestation.

Inhabiting the Body

With this brief overview of Western acting theorists, I invite you now to come to rehearsal. Enter this imagined rehearsal space, this large empty space, with a high ceiling and arch-ways along the walls.

Supported by the director, the actor begins the process of metamorphosis and birth giving by being in a constant state of astonishment – AWAKE! She engages her body and all of her senses. Awake to others in the room with her. Awake to her struggles and joys in the times in which she lives.

In the theatre, we call this inhabiting the body. One must live consciously in the body. Inhabiting the body is also theology, specifically incarnation. Christian feminist, postcolonial Asian American theologian, Kwok Pui-Lan, says it this way:

To counter the centuries old Christian misgivings about the body, I am proposing that we understand the Christian notion of incarnation not as a religious belief but as a spiritual practice. Incarnation is the divine meeting the body, so that the body can fully reveal the grace of God. Incarnation is not once and for all, but an ongoing process (Kwok, 2010: 8).

Bodies are the site of the human and divine in all their pluralities and multiplicities. Your hand dancing in the air was ‘godding’. It’s a verb. I argue that rehearsing is a form of godding. Each rehearsal begins with warming up our bodies, simple physical exercises that transform, transfigure, incarnate the Holy: the stretching of limbs or the deep intake and exhale of a breath. When entered into with awareness, breathing becomes a pathway for the Sacred, seeds for meditative practice. Walking in rhythms becomes a meditative dance. Swaying back and forth can become keening. Opening and closing the hand, and then the entire body, can become a physicalization of isolation and connectivity. Signals through the flames! Mirroring another’s actions becomes a silent blessing. Words are not needed. The movement of the body is enough to feel. At the same time, each person’s movement through time and space is experienced differently. There can be struggle, pain, discomfort, tension. Our lived experiences, held within the body, make it so. This too is godding.

I often teach theatre as theology for ministers and other spiritual leaders at seminaries. Recently I offered a course at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. If we look at the history of the Christian Church, we see a deep suspicion of the body. Most seminarians learn liturgical modes that are highly scripted – stand, sit, sing, preach. But theatre as theology breaks that constriction. I want you to see in your mind’s eye, some

21 seminarians, in warm up exercises, jumping, tip toeing through imagined environs of snow, wind, rain, scorching heat, mud – all in 10 minutes! Their awake faces and bodies told the whole story. Imagine my delight witnessing soon to be spiritual leaders jumping up to join improvisations, play with biblical texts like the story of Sarah and Hagar. They rehearsed, improvised a new church.

Korean feminist theologian, Hyung Kyung Chung, refers to our bodies as living texts in their brokenness and joy. She reminds us:

Women's bodies are the most sensitive receivers for historical reality. Their bodies record what has happened in their lives. Their bodies remember what it is like to be no-body and what it is like to be a some-body (Chung, 1990:104).

In the autumn of 2014, I was in India and created a play, 'Come! Fly to the Dream' with young women from poor families [Dalits, the former 'untouchables']. Their school, Bandhavi, located in Kerala, is a project of the non-profit Visthar. The purpose of the play was to teach the girls that they are some-body, that their own lives are the source of their power. One evening in rehearsal, we turned off the lights, lit a candle and began a conversation about the Sacred. What is it? I asked.

'It's a search; it makes you feel better; there is no God – I am God; God is a tree; someone who helps us is God; the environment is God'. What in your imagination does the face of God look like? I asked. 'Her tongue is out and she's angry; she has wild hair and wears a sari; God has a monkey face; the face of Jesus has thorns; the face looks like ourselves'. Later, in a scene we developed, a 12 year-old, Nagama, leans on her right arm and remembers, 'In another life, I was a God'. Nagama was remembering what it was like to be a some-body.

Somatic and psychic internalization of the injuries of racism, classism and sexism are held in women's bodies. In the same play, another young woman at Bandhavi, Aishoo, looks at her hands, weeps and tells the story of her aunt's hand reaching secretly through an ajar door to feed her because the uncle who was raising her didn't want Aishoo fed, it cost too much. Her mistreatment was a memory held in her hands. The texts of our bodies contain the history of women's pain, wellness and illness.

In a workshop using Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's 'gathas' a woman's quotidian experience came alive. She chose the gatha for washing the feet: 'Peace and joy in each toe – my own peace and joy' (Hanh, 1990: 14). She sat on the floor, peeled off her shoes and socks, and began to heartily rub her toes. She repeated her gatha steadily, fully engaged with the sight of her toes, and began to cry, then laugh. All the while, the gatha floated like a water lily over her pool of emotion. The class was transfixed. Afterwards, she told us her toes were broken, sprained, and cut many times in her life. They were a source of pain. Through acting the gatha, she re-inhabited and reconciled a place of rejection in herself. And through her, we did too.

My muse, Martha Boesing, is also a Buddhist practitioner. She tells us, 'Acting is really non-acting. It is being present, in the moment with every fiber of your body and mind' (Boesing, 1990). When you allowed your hand to dance at the beginning of this essay you entered a new moment of being present. You woke up from a kind of automatic, habitual routine of reading an essay – into the attentiveness that allows us the

freedom to select and shift. Attending to our bodies gives us the power to shift our routine acts of being – the daily performance of who we are.

Character

This rehearsal space that we imagined has been our home now for a week. We've practised concentration, awareness of our selves, others, our environ. Today a new phase of our work together begins. We turn to building the characters of our play.

There are at least three steps to building a character in the Stanislavsky System:

1. the biography of the character
2. the inner life
3. acting 'as if'

First, the actor creates the biography of the character. Think of the character Olivia Evans in the film 'Boyhood'. Beyond what the script says, the actor, Patricia Arquette, must create Olivia's life story. Secondly, the actor also creates the character's inner life – what the character thinks and feels at every moment. The character might be thinking: I want him to like me, or I'm so tired, or I wish she would move her chair away from me. You and I do this all the time. We talk to ourselves: *Should I do this? Well, you could but it might not work. Yes, it will. What makes you so sure?* This is part of our inner life.

Third, the actor learns, to act *as if*. Stanislavsky said: "'As If'" acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination' (Stanislavsky, 1989: 46). Stanislavsky's System teaches that the actor does not have to believe in the truth and reality of events in the play. Instead the actor might believe in the possibility of those events by drawing upon her own experience. The actor asks: What would I do if I were in these circumstances? What would I do if I suspected my uncle of having murdered my father as is Hamlet's dilemma? Or, what would I do if I was diagnosed with cancer and going to die, as in the play 'Wit'? This magic 'as if' aligns the actor's imagination with the character's situation in the play. The technique allows an actor to reach outside her own limited experience to imagine how she might respond in another situation. This technique leads the actor to try out possible actions in pursuing what the character wants in the play.

The end result of creating a character's history, inner life and possible actions is that you have created a character's living story. The actor weaves parts of himself into the character's imagined story. This informs the play's text and adds up to why the character does what he does in the play. When an actor creates a fully realized character, she has achieved a kind of authentic self-knowledge. Her character is a living, believable story. I suggest this parallels important ideas in Christian feminist theology.

Women's stories inform, critique and problematize biblical texts. Their stories validate their experiences. Indian Dalit feminist scholar, Surekha Nelavala, says the importance of her work with biblical texts is to make them relevant to the context of Dalit women, but also 'to enhance and bring the text alive through the real stories of Dalit women'. The biblical text is put side by side with the life situations and stories of Dalit women. Their stories otherwise 'unheard, unseen and unnoticed can counter patriarchal

and caste violence powerfully... and thus bring visibility to their voice against these unjust structures' (Nelavala, 2010: 105). An example of how this works, is the story of Sarah and Hagar found in the book of Genesis as well as the Islamic tradition. African American women, whether Christian or Muslim, identify with the story of Hagar and re-tell that story as if they were re-telling their own faith journey of survival during slavery.

Asian feminist theologians posit the importance of shared stories as an alternative view of history. They ask, can stories decolonize the internalized colonial mindset? Asian American scholar Sung Hee Chang says:

We must cross the borders of difference and create borderlands where stories of the estranged, marginalized, and silenced Asian American women can be shared and interwoven with other stories (Chang, 2008: 11).

When people tell their stories they begin to interpret their lives and environments. A lesbian's coming out story, a transgender person's story, a battered woman's story spoken in halting tones in support circles seed identity, seed character, seed empowerment. When a person speaks their story they begin to read themselves differently. This is because the narrative is held in the entire body. Whether it is your toes, hands, hips or legs, when the body is 'read' it talks to us about what we have not been able to see in ourselves, or what we have ignored or forgotten in ourselves. When a person speaks her story her body/voice/gestures can be read anew by herself and witnessed by others.

Theatre can empower people to tell their stories. And those stories can be powerful tools for organizing. I often work in communities of untrained actors to assist them in telling their stories. It has been a privilege to work with HIV-positive persons, women who have cancer, women in prisons, and high school dropouts. In each case, we begin with supportive circles to voice their stories. We then collaboratively find ways to enact those stories, threading them together slowly to create a play. One such group was my work with Vietnamese Americans who worked in the computer industry of Silicon Valley. Each of the participants worked in the dirty jobs, soldering motherboards in their homes, their bathrooms and kitchens for pennies. These toxic materials were making many families sick. As these Vietnamese Americans began to share their stories, we heard that many came to the USA thinking it would be 'like heaven' – which became the title of the play. It was a bilingual play. Their stories enacted in front of other immigrant audiences made them strong and confident in their own experiences and the shared experience of their marginalization. Their stories raised awareness in our audiences and helped to change the working environment of Silicon Valley.

To speak one's own story, to read the body of one's own text, can be an act of courage because our bodies contain pain and suffering as well as exuberance and joy. Yet, as we open ourselves in supportive circles, we become open to others. When we are fully present to ourselves we are able to read others' body texts, to meet and be permeated by others lived stories. It is from shared stories we see connectivity and what needs attention. We conceive a new and just world, and in return we receive hope and resilience to motivate us to keep on keeping on.

Sexuality

Let's return now to our imagined rehearsal space. The actors have been working all day with their characters. We sit down for a conversation.

In teaching acting, I often talk about the myth of the unitary self. We think we are one person, but in fact we have many faces many voices within us.

Stanislavsky says it this way to actors:

You cannot use everyone else's feelings, or made-up feelings. They always come from you. So you will always be playing yourself, but it will be in an infinite variety of combinations (Stanislavsky, 1989:177)

In fact, each of us is a stained glass window with multiple facets to our identities. It is the actor that embodies this idea most fluidly in his ability to enact different parts of himself and therefore diverse characters. But make no mistake about it, the actor works to develop a character that is nuanced and not built on stereotypes. In fact, the onus on the actor is to break through stereotypical choices. That's what keeps us fascinated.

For the past year I have been collaborating with my friend and colleague, Horacio, by Skype. He is a Costa Rican playwright and director. We are working on a play about the fluidity of sexuality – his sexuality. He has been taking female hormones for the past year or so and now has breasts. One day I asked him, how do you identify yourself sexually? He smiled and said, 'I am Horacio sexual'. He is eschewing not only a fixed gender but any fixed notion of sexual orientation. He is affirming his multiple and shifting gender/sexual possibilities.

This is what the theologian Sallie McFague calls a "wild space" where our "failures" to fit the hegemonic image are our opportunities to criticize and revise it (McFague, 2000: 48–49).

Just as actors create characters opening up the stained glass window of their sexual/gendered selves, the Christian church and its theology of incarnation must be open to the prophetic challenge of queer lives and theologies. The Argentinian liberation theologian, Marcella Althaus Reid challenges what she refers to as 'T-Theology', that is, 'theology as ideology...a totalitarian construction of what is considered "The One and Only Theology" which does not admit discussion or challenges from different perspectives, especially in the area of sexual identity and its close relationship with political and racial issues' (Althaus Reid, 2003: 172). Marcella Althaus Reid's book *Indecent Theology* is a resistance to the Christian church's institutionalization of 'decent' or 'normal' or T-theology, otherwise known as a theology of the gender binary and heterosexism. Christianity, particularly the Catholic Church, has entrenched itself as the defender of what is erroneously called 'normative heterosexuality'. This is an attempt to 'make us forget the love which is different' (Althaus Reid, 2003: 50, 114).

The love that is different refers to sexual minorities, our LGBTQ relationships. The love that is different also refers to a Queer God of the margins. Althaus Reid reminds us of the 'keen difference between a God that visits the margins and a God that deliberately resides in the margins' (Mesner, 2013: 205).

This sense of the Sacred, the source of all love, indecent and always surprising...this sense of the Sacred residing in our bodies and all of life, this sense of the Sacred residing in each of us in different ways is itself that stained glass window of multiple colours, shapes, hues – ages and sexualities. This stained glass window of possibilities, this Queer God, is what we embrace when we embrace each other.

In 1988, while at Union Theological Seminary, I wrote a play, *The Landscape of My Body*. It offers a picture of the fusion of sexuality and the Sacred.

Ingrid: What do you see?

Margaret: I see you

A cathedral (her hand sculpts the air around her body)

Round rosetta windows (her hand sculpts the air around her breasts)

A round dome (her hand sculpts the air around her head)

Graceful arches (rib cage and arms)

A tabernacle (torso)

Ingrid: You see a church?

Margaret: A church, wholly a church

(she genuflects)

What do you see?

Ingrid: I see light and shadow

Circles within circles

Spirals of votive candles

Nooks and naves of cathedrals

Margaret: You see inside me like a church?

Beautiful woman...

Margaret: Beautiful woman... (Rue, 1988)

If human bodies are ‘church’, then their love relationships – homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, transgendered – can be the occasion to embody the Sacred in the world.

Theatre of the Oppressed

Our imagined rehearsal space is about to shift. The laboratory of theatre where actors explore their bodies, characters, sexualities and genders, shifts to ...the work of Augusto Boal. It is quite a different approach. Boal was the Brazilian theatre activist who developed *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The centre of gravity is not the play or the actor but the audience as participants. The spectator or audience becomes in Boal’s terminology, the *spect-actor*. These spect-actors, members of various kinds of communities, pick a problem, for example gang violence or poor working conditions. They analyse the problem through the lens of causation and effect, oppressor and the oppressed. Then through various exercises, spect-actors reflect on and figure out how to visualize strategies to resist the oppression. Recall his famous description of his theatre, ‘a rehearsal for revolution’ (Boal, 1979: 122).

One of Boal’s techniques in his arsenal of Theatre of the Oppressed, is Image Theatre. Image Theatre uses still images. Spect-actors work together to form still images or moving images that show oppression and offer possible solutions.

I use Image Theatre along with what is called Biblical Drama. Traditional Biblical Drama has participants act out stories from the Bible. This is also a technique for teaching and reflecting on the stories and their theologies. However, when I combine Boal's Image Theatre focused on change with Biblical Drama, the combustion can de-stabilize and deconstruct the sacred text of the Bible.

At a Biblical Drama conference in Gelnhausen, Germany, I used Image Theatre to address the suffering caused by Biblical passages that deal with heterosexism and the Sacred, referred to as 'clobber passages'. These passages have historically been used to denigrate women, and LGBTQ people in particular. The passages include injunctions against homosexuality in the Book of Leviticus, and in epistles of the Christian Bible, the subordinate place of women, and the body/flesh as sinful.

At the conference, groups explored the clobber passages. They created two images: one image would express the existing clobber passage and a second image would express a rewritten version of the passage.

One group took the passage from Leviticus 20:13 which states that *if a man lies with another man, it is an abomination and both shall be put to death*. The group decided to use Christian ethicist Gary Comstock's research that notes that the Book of Leviticus was compiled by returning Babylonian exiles to establish their special privilege and power (Comstock, 1991: 128–40). The image of this group had men standing on the backs of two prone men who writhed in pain while women applauded on the sidelines. When they rewrote the clobber passage, it became: *when a woman lies with another woman, even the angels in heaven are made glad for eternity!* The image became couples of women embracing each other surrounded by several women and men who played joyous angels.

Afterwards, people said it was revolutionary to them to re-imagine and re-write a sacred text, to feel the power of re-interpreting these painful passages.

In an 'Embodiment and Social Justice Workshop' with women pastors at the non-profit Visthar in Bangalore, India, we used Image Theatre. Women created an image of a pastor being offered a bribe. They worked with the biblical story of Jesus throwing the money changers out of the temple. After much discussion, they created images of strategies to resist bribery:

- 1) a pastor sermonized on rampant bribery and corruption in church and state and had parishioners arranged in images of specific situations
- 2) small parish study groups created images of biblical stories connected to local corruption issues. Before, during and after each of these images were created, we engaged in lively, animated discussion (Visthar, 2014).

Boal's Image Theatre can be a laboratory to envision sexual justice, reformation and perhaps even the transformation of religion.

Acting As If – Prolepsis

Throughout these thoughts, I've moved back and forth between being a feminist theatre director and Religious Studies professor. Now it is time for me to address rehearsing justice as a woman priest in the theatre of the Catholic Church.

As a woman and as a lesbian priest, I am often asked why do you stay in a church that does not seem to want you? First, as the oldest of eight children and raised in a Catholic family, the church is deep within me. Second, the inspirational writings of Medieval women mystics, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg speak out, against great institutional odds, for a sensuous and passionate relationship with the Sacred. Third, there are many noted Catholic women theologians and ethicists: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Ilia Delio, Yvonne Gebara, Sr. Mary John Mananzan, Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Margaret Farley, Mary E. Hunt and many more. With these Catholic women and so many inspiring Protestant feminist women theologians, I keep on working for change in a patriarchal religion where it is very tough to persevere.

When we were in the rehearsal hall, I charted several ways that actors create their characters. One of those methods was ‘acting as if’ – what would you do *if*.

This idea has quite a surprising parallel in Christian feminist theology. Here I invoke the spirit of feminist liberation theologian Letty Russell who gave us the term ‘the proleptic mistake’. The first dictionary definition of *prolepsis* is that of a chronological mistake; a dating of an event before it actually happened. The second dictionary definition is that *prolepsis* means ‘anticipation’. For Russell that means women and LGBT people must live now, anticipating God’s future. ‘Proleptic actions’, she says, ‘can anticipate the situation for which they work by living as if the situation, at least in part, has already arrived’ (Russell, 1974: 46). Letty Russell challenges women and LGBT people to live *as if* they are free, right now. In fact, she says, it is necessary to live freely as a sign of the *already...but not yet* nature of the struggle for freedom, integrity, wholeness (Russell, 1974: 47). This means to act as if God’s future of sexual justice is right now.

So just as the actor asks: what would I do *if* I could live freely right now, so the proleptic mistake, says Russell, dares us to do the same. Live out loud – right now.

In this journey of rehearsing justice this means living our lives in a state of constant astonishment, awake to our bodies as texts, inhabiting the joys and sorrows held in our bodies and in the bodies of others. Rehearsing justice recognizes the multiple layers of being the characters we are, and in so doing subverting the normative notion of decency, and instead living indecently. Rehearsing justice is also transfiguration and transformation...of priest as male to priest as female, and yes, as lesbian.

If the methods of acting can be used as a spiritual journey, they can be applied to being a woman priest. Yes, this is a rehearsal for revolution. We are awakening the body of the Catholic Church and claiming our stories.

I am a lesbian Roman Catholic priest. All my life I have watched presumably celibate male priests stand at the altar and celebrate the Eucharist/Mass, give blessings, offer the sacraments to congregants. The actor asks what would I do *if*.

Feminist Christian theologians provide visionary texts that guide our imaginations to ask ‘what would I do *if* I was a priest’. My Protestant sisters in ordained ministry for half a century are also models (though certainly their struggle for equality continues).

In 2005, I was ordained a woman priest by three women bishops – and along with over 200 other women in the USA who have since stepped forward to be validly ordained by women bishops who are also validly ordained, we are enacting the *proleptic mistake*, acting *as if*. We are anticipating the equality of women in the Catholic Church by living as if that situation, at least in part, has already arrived. We are working with small faith communities throughout the US and Canada, presiding at Mass, offering the sacraments,

doing hospice work, counseling, teaching, spiritual direction, working with the poor, celebrating our diverse sexual identities...we are living freely as women priests as signs of the *already...but not yet* nature of the struggle for freedom, integrity, and wholeness for women. We are acting *as if* God's future of sexual and gender justice is right now.

As an anachronism, the Vatican responds that Jesus only ordained men and therefore they are powerless to change that. The fact is, Jesus did not ordain any one. But no matter to the Vatican, to them we have 'attempted ordination'. We are saddened by this approach, but wear our excommunication as a badge of honour. And frankly it makes little difference since it is the people of God who call us forward. In the USA, 59% of Catholics want women priests (Pew Research Forum, 2015).

The movement for women's ordination is also in Europe, South America, South Africa and Taiwan (RCWP, 2016). Informed by feminist Christian theologians, we know that you cannot simply 'add women and stir'. The ordination of women priests also calls for change in church theology, tradition, scripture interpretation and ritual. You cannot just 'add women and stir'. Today, as women priests with small faith communities we are living a future Catholic Church. We are living and serving the People of God as women priests *as if* the future is right now.

Conclusion

The rehearsal hall has itself become a signal through the flames shifting our loneliness to connectivity and community. In this laboratory the actor becomes all of us. We are 'birth-givers to character'. We inhabit our bodies as a spiritual practice that is sacred and creative. We know that women's bodies remember what it is like to be no-body and what it is like to be a some-body.

In creating a character, the actor creates a biography, an inner life, and the actor's imagination aligns with the character's situation, this is the creation of a character's 'living story'. For all of us, this is self-knowledge. Even when the going gets rough, it can be a process through which we lift ourselves from pain into imagination. Acting as if can open up possibility and hope. When women and sexual minorities listen to each others' self-knowledge through their stories, reading their bodies as texts, worlds split open. A new sense of the Sacred is manifested – not a God that visits the margins but a God that deliberately resides in the margins.

The rehearsal hall, as a metaphor and reality, is a rehearsal of justice, where we live freely as LGBTQ people knowing that anachronistic religions and laws must change or get out of the way. The theatre laboratory is a place to rehearse this revolution. As we rehearse justice, we become a proleptic people, living our lives freely as a sign of the *already...but not yet* nature of the struggle for freedom, integrity, and wholeness.

The prophetic voice of Indian liberation theologian Sebastian Kappen says it this way:

We must so mold our joys and sorrows, our labor and leisure, our thinking and acting, that their sum total – life – is a work of art (Kappen, 1998: 35).

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