



BY RICH SWINGLE

*When Christians embrace the dramatic arts, dramatic things can happen.*

There were only four days to go before I performed *Alien Immigration Training*, a one-man play that I had totally reworked from my last version. I was rushing to my office in the Helen Hayes Theatre, passing slower New Yorkers left and right. As I approached Times Square I noticed Fergie as she was headed in the other direction. Her police escort stuck his hand in front of my face, and I thought it seemed a rather overzealous reaction to my simply noticing the Duchess of York. It also occurred to me that she had an awfully dour look on her face.

Then I noticed people crowded around a small TV monitor outside the *Good Morning America* studios. Everyone inside was looking up at ceiling monitors. Times Square was filled with people looking up at the Jumbotron. I finally saw what had affected everyone: smoke was pouring out of one of the Twin Towers, less than four miles away.

I forced myself to keep moving toward the theatre to get cracking on *Alien Immigration Training*.

My wife, Joyce, called. A second plane had gone into the South Tower. Joyce and I comforted each other and decided to stay put unless our buildings

were evacuated.

My mom called from Oregon. The Pentagon had been hit as well. I tried to put it out of my mind and focus on the play that needed every moment of my attention if it were going to be performed well.

Liz, a friend from church, called. She has a job in the city and stays with Joyce and me when she works late and has to be back early the next morning.

She anticipated, correctly, that she would have difficulties leaving the city that night. After accommodations were secured she said, "Isn't it awful that the towers fell?"

"Oh, they didn't fall," I corrected her. "I saw the smoke coming out, but they didn't fall."

"Rich, they fell."

It started to dawn on me that my play, in which I portray an FBI-like agent in a black suit and black tie and black shades, might not be the best choice for that weekend. I pushed those thoughts aside, because I thought that since the play dealt with themes of rage, pride and hatred, it might be just what people needed. I decided I'd end it before the alien entered the room, and it would be fine. So I worked on. When I got home I was drawn into the

### Pause for Prayer ...



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footage that many had been watching all day long and I started to realize that the comedy of my piece might not be well received that weekend.

The announcement that the Emmys were postponed (the first of two times) along with a host of other programs brought me to the grim realization that my play just wasn't going to fit no matter how many adjustments were made. I was then glad that I do one-man plays. We prayerfully exchanged the aliens with *The Revelation*. I began, "I'm John. Nineteen hundred years ago my people were attacked. It was during that horrible time that Jesus gave me The Revelation. Tonight I want to share it with you."

Why did I change my play? Why were the Emmys canceled? Why did *Variety* report days after the atrocity, "Hollywood has slipped into a production coma — the worst within memory"?

That single hour affected entertainment dramatically because entertainment affects people dramatically.

My graduate school professors all denied it. From Theatre History to Theory and Criticism to Play Analysis, professors insisted that art reflects society, never the other way around. They claimed that society will not support art that expresses ideologies that society does not hold, so art that presses beyond what society will bear will flounder and disappear. But reality suggests otherwise — we've seen how blow-by-blow cinema has knocked down the barricades of what society will accept.

I recently heard Allen Wolf, a filmmaker, give a stirring presentation called "Launching a Hollywood Renaissance." He pointed out how films have impacted society over the years. Here are some of his examples:

- In 1919 Cecil B. DeMille's *Male and Female* showed, for the first time, a bathroom. Suddenly it was OK to talk about the bathroom; plumbers could advertise, and decades later, the Farley brothers could make millions on toilet humor.
- In 1934 Clark Gable revealed that he wore no T-shirt in *It Happened One Night*. T-shirt sales plummeted.
- In 1986 *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* suddenly made the big city a popular destination for truants.

I had a screenwriting professor who demonstrated artists' propensity to make entertainment coarse. We had been assigned to write a scene in the genre of a soap opera. After writers read their

scenes to the class we had the opportunity to make comments. I pointed out that the language in one piece should be toned down for television and the professor said, "Ah, yes. Television: the last bastion of conservatism."

Larry Poland, CEO of MasterMedia, thought that cinema's incessant attack on moral fiber was a calculated plot, until he started to meet those involved in the cinema industry. At a media conference at Biola University in 1998 he said he discovered that "there was no conspiracy." He discovered that most media executives are good people with one problem: "They are lost." It is that lostness that saturates the work they produce, which affects the whole world. So with all this knowledge that art really can shape society, you would think that believers would be using it positively for all it's worth.



But that has not been our corporate response. By and large we've pulled out. When asked about the Free Methodist Church's initial response to theatre, Dr. Lloyd Arnett, chair of the faculty of Professional Studies and Performing Arts at Trinity Western University, said, "In 1850, theatre was considered taboo for all

Christians in the U.S. The Free Methodist Church was formed in this conservative period before the post-war theatre boom of the 1870s." At that time Christians believed that acting was sinful because it is lying about who you are and is far too similar to demon possession. This concept always amuses me because a pivotal inspiration in my move from journalism to theatre was the concept that journalism is about facts, and fiction is about truth.

As churches slowly began to let their congregations attend movies and plays, they were still a long way from actually encouraging their people to get involved with drama, either as a vehicle for Christ-centered messages or as a part of mainstream entertainment.

I've been a witness to God using both kinds of engagement powerfully to His glory. I've seen God use me in the secular marketplace as I've found opportunities to witness to fellow actors one on one. And turning down opportunities for projects that I knew God didn't want me to be a part of certainly speaks volumes. But I've seen God use my craft most effectively through the one-man plays I've been performing for seven years. As Jesus used parables to reach those around Him, I'm finding that redemptive drama is reaching people today.

I'm finding that drama challenges people. After doing my play on Jonah in an outdoor amphitheatre in Canada, I was fielding questions in character. A

### More Light on the Issue ...



Consider the parables of Jesus as the dramas of His day. Read Matthew 13:10-17 and think about how the story drew sincere seekers to ask more questions.

man stood and told us that he had been sensing God's call to a specific ministry, but he'd been dragging his feet. "Today was the first meeting of that group," he said. "I came here instead, and heard your story, Jonah." He promised he would stop running the other direction and join that ministry.

I'm finding that drama gives people tools that can help them get along with each other. I often use an offshoot of theatre called sociodrama. This dynamic tool, developed by Jacob Moreno, allows groups to come to a better understanding of an issue by acting it out. The very nature of drama allows them to experience situations from different perspectives and gain powerful insights.

I was using sociodrama once with clients of a meal program at The Lamb's Church in New York City. The theme of the day was heart-break. Two homeless men decided to be farmers: Bob and Wilbur. They met at their adjoining fences. Bob said, "Your dog just ate some of my chickens." Wilbur retorted, "Your cows just trampled my corn." The tension escalated, and eventually they shot each other. After working with them in the context of the sociodrama, they re-enacted the scene. We started from the same place as before, but this time I told them they could not use any form of violence to solve their problems. They met at the fence and made their accusations. Chickens were still eaten and corn was still trampled, but this time Bob said, "Seems like it's time we fix that fence." Wilbur replied, "You bring the hammer and I'll bring the nails." Sociodrama enabled these men who had lived on the streets of New York City for at least a cumulative decade to learn huge lessons about human interaction by becoming farmers for a moment.

I'm finding that drama can bring healing. The thesis for my master's degree was built around work I did with about a dozen of the clients in a 200-bed drug rehabilitation facility. While I was there I had the opportunity to perform my play *A Clear Leading*, which tells the story of Quaker abolitionist John Woolman. I asked one of the men in my sociodrama group to introduce me to the larger community. I told him to be sure to communicate that I was not racist myself, but that I would be portraying people in the play who were. He got up and said, "This is Rich. He's cool," and sat back down.

The first time I portrayed one of those racists, the room became very uncomfortable. When, as Woolman, I asked characters in the play, "Would you even think of hanging a white man without a trial?" with one voice, almost 200 black men



answered, "Yes!" I finished the play, and by the end, it seemed that they understood the truth of the fiction. I donated the book *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* to the facility, and because of the relatively high illiteracy rate there, I was pleased to hear that a 15-person waiting list developed for the book. One gentleman stayed for half an hour after the play talking about what he had experienced. He said he never realized there were any white people who had stood up for slaves.

I'm also finding that drama can be used as a springboard into eternal life. I wrote a short piece in Spanish called *La Gente que Jesús Conocía* or *The People That Jesus Knew* for a trip I took to Bolivia with Compassion. In the piece I personified many of Jesus' friends and enemies. After performing it at *El Alfarero* (The Potter), a Compassion project just outside of Santa Cruz, I asked the children if they wanted to know Jesus more. Many of them leaped to their feet to indicate their desire. God's Holy Spirit used the drama to prepare their little hearts to pray for Christ to come into their lives in a personal way.

The war on terrorism itself is a prime example of how powerfully drama affects us. It's no fiction. If only Osama bin Laden were just a cheesy villain whom James Bond or Austin Powers could thwart. If only the credits would roll and show us that the pyrotechnics of 9-11 and all that has followed have been nothing but a Hollywood spectacle. No, it's not fiction. But it is drama. We know the difference between real and make-believe. Young children don't. Americans didn't when War of the Worlds hit the airwaves. And when we are drawn in by a good play or movie, we forget for a moment that it's not real. And in that moment profound things can happen to us — good and bad.

Believing artists must use this powerful medium of modern parables to produce redemptive, life-changing drama that speaks the language of the people. And the church must embrace those called to such a mission field. □

*Rich Swingle lives with his wife, Joyce, in New York City, but he performs his one-man plays all over the world. Go to [www.savidge.com/swingle](http://www.savidge.com/swingle) or call (864) 421-9500 to set up a performance in your community.*

#### More Light on the Issue ...



If you'd like to learn more about John Woolman, you can read his biography at [http://tntn.essortment.com/johnwoolmanbio\\_rwfy.htm](http://tntn.essortment.com/johnwoolmanbio_rwfy.htm).

#### More Light on the Issue ...



The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32 certainly would have encouraged healing in relationships with the Heavenly Father as well as earthly fathers.

#### Extra Info



At [www.war-of-the-worlds.org](http://www.war-of-the-worlds.org), you can find out all sorts of interesting things about Orson Welles' 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast — including books, movies, games, etc. that have been developed in the wake of the drama's spectacular impact.

#### A Call to Action...



Consider your role in redeeming the dramatic arts. If you're an artist, get training:

- Christians in Theatre Arts ([www.CITA.org](http://www.CITA.org) or [864] 271-2116) provides regional and national workshops.
- Act One ([www.ActOneProgram.com](http://www.ActOneProgram.com) or [888] 526-9287) prepares believers to write for Hollywood.

If you're not inclined toward the production of drama:

- Be prayerfully studious about the types of movies you help to make for the future with your admission ticket or video rental.
- Encourage those who are called to this difficult mission field.
- Pray daily for the entertainment industry.