



Rich Swingle (above and left) performs his one-man show; and (above right) with his wife, Joyce.

Going

New York-based actor and Christian Rich Swingle tells **JULIA HOSKING** about his one-man plays

For many years, Rich Swingle felt that God was calling him to full-time ministry. So he enrolled at a theological seminary with the intention of becoming a pastor. But while God did have a ministry role for Rich, it turned out to be down quite a different path than the one he had envisaged.

"It wasn't until I was in seminary, when I was flat on my back sick for a week, [that] I had a very clear sense that I was called not to be a pastor, but to minister through the arts," Rich says.

"None of my seminary professors or colleagues understood that. I ended up dropping out after a year and [got] a masters in theatre."

Determined to have regular pay cheques, Rich became a professor of theatre. Again, though, God had other

plans and Rich found himself spending most of his time on the stage.

"The bookings started coming. I began developing one play after the next and now I have eight different full-length one-man plays," he says enthusiastically.

"I teach socio-drama, enacted prayer and improvisation. I also coach architectures on their presentation skills, so the Lord has really filled out the whole spectrum of using the arts in different ways to reach different people groups."

A lifelong passion

There are three main things that Rich is passionate about and they are apparent from the outset of our interview. He talks repeatedly about drama, his passion for God, and his wife, Joyce, who is an associate pastor and counsellor at the

Westchester Chapel, a Church of the Nazarene centre in New York.

"I believe [drama] is the most powerful form of communication because it's all about connecting emotionally," he says. He gestures lovingly towards Joyce as he continues. "And I'm finding out from my bride in her studies, that memory is associated with emotions."

"If you connect [a message] to story, and if they're [the audience] living it along with you, then whatever truths you plant in that, they're going to remember, they're going to hold onto. And hopefully, prayerfully, be life-transformational."

Dramatic arts and his blatant passion for it, isn't just a recent addition to Rich's life.

"I played Mr Beaver in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* in fourth grade

An international ministry

Rich recently visited Australia and was involved in 20th anniversary celebrations for The Salvation Army's Sydney Staff Songsters. As part of the celebrations, he performed *The Revelation* in which he adopts the persona of the apostle John. His trip to Australia marked the 18th country in which he has performed. En route back to the United States, he took his plays to New Zealand for the first time.

Many of the international locations Rich has visited for performance purposes, such as France, China and Scotland, have produced some of his biggest career highlights.

"We performed the Eric Liddell play *Beyond the Chariots* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland," Rich says, "and on the last day a gentleman came up to me and he said, 'did you write this from a place of faith?'. I replied that yes, I did. He responded, 'I don't have any, but your play made me want to'."

While Rich's large international ministry impacts many lives, he also has a powerful ministry in his home country. In addition to performing his plays off-Broadway and being the drama director in his home church, Westchester Chapel, Rich is part of a month-long creative arts camp called Masterworks Festival.

Masterworks is a non-denominational, annual, summer Christian camp that includes spiritual development as well as practical development of creative talent.

"We really focus on building the skills that it takes to perform professionally," Rich explains. "We treat them [campers] as professionals because we don't know where God is going to take them."

Joyce is the lead counsellor at Masterworks and at the 2009 camp, as well as preaching Joyce had the privilege

of baptising several campers. She echoes Rich's belief in the importance and value of creative arts.

"The arts are really, I think, such a picture of our God. He first reveals himself in the Bible as the Creator, so creativity is a core attribute of God," she says.

"One of the great things about artistic expression ... is that it can really introduce people to God in a way that maybe nothing else would."

Joyce assists Rich in his ministry by coordinating the technical aspects of the plays, including PowerPoint slideshows which bring their own expression to the performance.

"We have really been thinking about our work as redeeming the arts for Christ," Joyce says. "Because for so many years, when you did something creative you were doing it for the glory of God."

While Rich's loud, expressive personality may contrast his wife's quieter approach, they are equally passionate, dedicated and compelling people. Both also recognise the importance of encouraging young people at Masterworks and elsewhere, to discover God's specific calling on their life.

"You never know how God can use you because people can have such influence in the arts," Rich says.

"I don't try to tell our actors that there's one path for you ... because God will speak personally and open doors for individuals that are going to use their gifts to the utmost." □



Julia Hosking is a staff writer for Pipeline and supplements.