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**Building Character while Developing a Character:  
An Investigation of the Integration of Faith and Theater**

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**I. A Case for Character – a definition of the objective**

At a time when the entire purpose and direction of a liberal arts education is coming under scrutiny, new focus is being placed on the importance of values education. The discussion raises the question of just what we are trying to accomplish during the relatively brief time we have with our students. Whereas as an assimilation and integration of a significant body of academic material is essential to an understanding of the world in which they must function, the development of a value system and ultimately a moral identity as a filter for this information is viewed as equally essential. It is this personal development which will assist in setting qualitative life goals and in serving as a basis for future decision making.

If we can accept the premise that one of the major purposes of a liberal arts education needs to be the transmission of values, not merely the specifics of the various discipline minutiae, then professors at faith based institutions have an even greater responsibility as they set about sifting through the details of theological systems to distill a model that will serve the student throughout her adult life. This model should lead the student to develop a set of moral values that will enable her to become a responsible agent, rather than a passive individual being acted upon and molded by the forces at work around her.

As educators at faith based institutions, we find the model clear, albeit challenging; Jesus Christ and his living example of compassion and justice certainly set a criterion against which any specific action or lifestyle can be measured. The problem arises when one begins to consider the pedagogy to be used in assisting the student to develop and embrace a sense of being that will grow with him and not be discarded later as superficial, shallow, or hopelessly out of date: a value system that will sustain him on his journey of character development.

The moral education of our students must move beyond the “whats” of required and unexplained in loco parentis rules setting behavior limitations. The student must be urged to explore the “whys” of her belief system, if she is to develop a lifestyle that will not simply be discarded as irrelevant when she leaves the parochial walls of college life.

It is our responsibility, as educators, to help students become aware adults, thinking creatively, and making informed decisions emanating from a value system which reflects the nature and model of Christ himself. This requires facing life with the fiber of truth and honesty, embracing Christ’s model of compassion and justice, and appreciating fully the working of God’s grace. Accomplishing this is certainly the true mission of a most misunderstood integration of faith and learning. This integration must be an active penetration of all the disciplines and all life’s callings with the beliefs and values that make up a Christian world view.(1)

It is my suggestion in this paper that theater affords a natural integration of these truths into the behavior patterns of the student as he begins to investigate the intentions, motivations and subsequent actions of the various characters in a play as part of the necessary preparation antecedent to the development of a believable character on stage. Hence theater can enhance a student's ability to develop virtuous character traits for life while building a believable character for production. Theater is in fact a natural laboratory for the examination of moral issues because the issues are concrete and real and moral choices are made. (2)

This laboratory experience affords the student the opportunity to ask the "whys" of her own moral principles and choices as she looks into the mirror held in front of her by the character she is investigating. The reliability of the method is directly proportional to the reality and honesty experienced in the exploration. It is this process of introspection, decision making, and ultimate action taking, that will be discussed in this paper, as it pertains to the student's development of deliberate habits of responsible action. It is deliberate choices and the developing habits of responsible action that as Aristotle has said, develop those inner dispositions of the heart called virtues.(3) Aristotle believed that character is what shows a man's disposition – the kinds of things he chooses or rejects when his choice is not obvious. (4) This Aristotelian tradition of character, has been embraced by Booth, Holmes and Hauerwas, the major sources cited in this paper. This reference to character will be used throughout the paper as a term of comparison to the dramatic character awaiting actualization through the diligent rehearsal of the honest introspective student.

## **II. The Journey towards a Moral Identity – the Process**

When Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the virtuous life is a journey, he is implying a process through which people are gradually and graciously transformed by the pilgrimage to which they have been called.(5) Character is correlative to the image of journey. Not only is one on a journey, but his very life is conceived as journey. Paul's recurring image in his epistles of "pressing on to the mark" is a constant source of encouragement to those persevering the journey. This metaphor of the journey surely should be the primary one for articulating the shape of moral existence and living.(6) The path of this journey and the events experienced along the way are influenced, and at the same time do greatly influence, the moral development of the individual. These events – the joy, the pain, the hopes, and the failures - are the stuff upon which character is built. The moral self results from constant readjustments to the nuances and ambiguities of our ethical choices and experiences on the journey.

In an attempt to define what can be a very nebulous reference to character by many, Hauerwas suggests that the idea of character indicates what a man can decide to be as opposed to what a man is naturally.(7) Hauerwas assumes a self which has continuity within time, is a responsible agent, and for whom character, a set of virtues and qualities is formed over time. To say someone has character seems to imply that in some sense he has control over himself, is a self master, that through self-effort he can regulate his disposition and actions by rules, principles and ideals.

Inherent in most references to character is the capacity of a person to speak for herself, to determine beforehand her future conduct, and there by somehow perhaps guarantee a predictability of action beyond the present moment. This predisposition to behave in certain "moral" way is most certainly based upon those things that a person considers most important in her life, that she truly cares about. Character cannot be thought of as a kind of outer manifestation that leaves a more fundamental self hidden. It is the very reality of who we are as

self-determining agents.(8) This sense of intense motivation and purposeful intention, this disposition toward the greater good, is what Holmes refers to as virtue. It is not arrived at haphazardly or intuitively, but consciously and carefully over time. Virtue in character, as a motivation for cognitive value assessment and assimilation, as well as subsequent affective choices of behavior, remains a constant guiding force, a still small voice behind the action .

What one cares about is directly influenced by the experiences that have molded his sense of value. Response to these experiences is colored by one's beliefs and values; they also play a formidable role in developing these values. Artificial experiences designed as consciousness raising and sensitizing have been shown to be very effective in creating an atmosphere for moral growth. Developing these virtues in our students as a constant is certainly the goal of any discipline's attempt at an integration of faith and learning.

In discussing the importance of the investigation of value development with the teaching of the various disciplines, Holmes emphasizes that all of life comes value laden (laden with God given possibilities for good.) These values are objective, not relative to the individual or situation, but rooted in universal aspects of our lives in God's creation.(9) It is with the exposure to and assumption of these truths, these objective values, that the journey can become a richer and fuller experience.

Holmes and Hauerwas place clear emphasis on a sensitive awareness of the context in which we live, and, in developing this sensitivity, assuming a responsibility for our actions in that context. This responsibility puts stress on the individual as a decision maker. A moral agent is not one who wanders a predetermined course, or simply falls into life letting things happen to him. Hauerwas adds that to emphasize responsibility is to give recognition to the fact that often in our moral experience we are simply forced to fall back on ourselves in order to make a decision that takes account of the contingencies of the human situation.(10) In responding humanly to a particular situation, a person does more than shape that situation; he shapes himself. He reinforces or weakens an habitual orientation that accords (or is at odds) with the requirements of human life, and so sets up the conditions of his future moral career.(11) Our actions thereby become acts of self-determination whereby we not only reaffirm what we have been, but what we will be in the future.

Hauerwas poses an interesting question at this point. "Are we first a kind of person from which subsequent acts follow, or is the kind of person we are dependent on the kind of actions we engage in?"(12) These introspective questions of motivation and exploration of intentions are basic to any in-depth character study in theater. Without a thorough understanding of the whys of character action, no believable depiction can be attained.

Hauerwas suggests that we need to explore what forms the conscience: what centers bring life to wholeness and integrity and style, and what brings lasting dispositions into being that give order and direction to gesture, word, and deed.(13) We need to explore the significance of conscious intention, to shape a life in accord with God's good will, and to practice becoming a fitting living person conforming to God's goodness.(14)

The objective is clear. We know what we must attempt to accomplish with our integration of faith and learning in molding the very spirit of our students. Research literature eloquently supports the premise that narrative, the creation of stories of believable characters caught in the act of coping with life as they find it, and of making decisions both selfishly and for the greater good, is one of the most effective means to attain this goal.

Narrative thought presents concrete human and interpersonal situations in order to demonstrate their particular validity. It is a description of reality, and it is a way of seeing that aims at a verisimilitude. The story mode requires imagination, and understanding of human intention, and an appreciation of the particular of time and place.(15) In so doing one can see how readily narratives can focus on characters and on the causes of their actions: their intentions, goals and subjective experience. Christ certainly sensed the power of the narrative, of story telling, with his use of parables to stimulate interest and to teach valuable moral lessons. These stories allowed the listeners to access the truths being taught and to personalize them.

In his book, The Company We Keep, Wayne Booth builds a most convincing case for the proposition. Anyone who conducts honest introspection knows that “real life” is lived in images derived in part from stories. Our imitations of narrative imitations of life are so spontaneous and plentiful that we cannot draw a clear line between what we are, in some conception a natural unstoried self, and we have become, as we have first enjoyed, then imitated, and then criticized both the stories and the responses to them.(16)

More than merely involving us in a story which may help us to transcend a seemingly mundane existence, narrative can provide a microcosm of a world in which we can view ourselves making decisions and performing tasks quite different from our normal habitude. This distance allows us opportunity to gain another perspective. It is from these characters with whom we keep company for a time that Booth suggests we have much to learn. Values observed and questioned from an involvement in the thoughts and actions of these characters are of utmost value to our moral development.

...we must both open ourselves to others that look initially dangerous or worthless and yet prepare ourselves to cast them off whenever, after keeping company with them, we must conclude that they are potentially harmful. Which of these opposing practices will serve us best at a given moment will depend on who “we” are and what the “moment” is. The only fully general advice inherent in all this is that *by taking* thought about who and where we are, and about when it is, we may improve our chances of finding and dwelling with others who are in fact our true friends.(17)

Patricia Ward believes that the ethical/theological perspective may also foster the formation of character of readers who are on their way to developing a consistent basis for their choices and actions.(18) She would further prescribe, along with Booth and others, that if we are to truly integrate the spirit of the narrative into the hearts of our students, we must emphasize the ethical nature of the piece and its application, rather than merely give a textual analysis. Both authors would agree that, as students identify with the characters in their various dilemmas, they begin to bring their values into contact with those of the implied author and of the fictional world of the text. The astute reader, working her way through a text can focus on the ethical moment or moments when she can construct the import of values, choices, and actions, and make judgements about them.(19)

Experiencing literature in this way forces one to begin to scrutinize his own intentions and motivations. What are the things that matter, that are of value – those things that one cares about so deeply that they can change the immediate path of this journey? In noting the special importance of narrative for use in moral education, psychologists Robinson and Haupe insist that where practical choice and action are concerned, stories are better guides than rules and maxims. Rules and maxims state significant generalizations about experience, but stories illustrate what those summaries mean.(20)

If a student is to chart a course with some degree of security and assurance, it is essential that he be given the opportunity to investigate the whys of the system, to make the system work for him, and not have the maxims arbitrarily imposed upon him. Atmosphere must be created for introspection and exploration of his beliefs and subsequent actions. This must be encouraged. Moral reflection is often an internalized conversation among various voices of one's conscience.

This examination of self and exploration of individuality involves necessarily the risk-taking abilities so sought after but so infrequently followed. Unfortunately, in the evangelical subculture this action is often supported with lip service only. This risk requires that one fully personalize his faith and leads ultimately to a freedom in Christ and life. This can be done with assurance, knowing that we are in a context that will not fail. God's grace is made perfect in this experience. It is freedom in Christ that allows us to tackle the tough questions of character and moral development in literature and to explore it in depth in theater. Theater gives a student the opportunity to do this in a context that is more forgiving than the real world. The lonely, bravely honest battler for freedom, breaking the fetters of a hostile past, does so by seeking what is truly new – seeking finally to “learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels.” (21) Good theater is risk.

### **III. Theater: A laboratory for character**

Teaching ethics requires more than informative lectures and stimulating discussions; it must include an activity which permits the student to involve himself in the decision-making process in order to stretch his thinking out of the present mold. The mimetic nature of theater requires this involvement in the preparation of truthful and believable characterization.

Far too often the value of a theater program is based on the professionalism of the final performances and the emotional response of the audiences. While this is certainly an important part of the evaluation, one can hardly validate the time spent during the weeks of preparation, especially in the divergent and busy life of a college student, with merely an observation of several nights of performance. I am in no way attempting to minimize the value of performance, and the involvement of the audience and its emotional growth, as justifiable objectives, but prime emphasis must be placed on the growth of the students through their involvement in the character study necessary to prepare these penetrating and illuminating performances. The participation in the lives of these characters, and the students' involvement in the process of decision making and action taking, is the experience that can change their lives.

Taking the narrative example a step further and actually involving the student in the action of decision making forces her to question the intentions, the whys, of the action, in the context of the world created by the playwright. Developing this sense of moral imagination in the student helps to expand her understanding of the diversity of existence in the world in which she lives, and encourages her to consider carefully, creative and alternative problem solving.

The actor attempts to reveal human behavior through the use of himself, through an understanding of the inner motivations of the character he is portraying. (22) Uta Hagen believes that the actor trusts that a form will result from identification with the character and discovery of this character's action. To create this moment she believes that character and ethics, a point of view about the world in which the actor lives, must be developed. (23) This perspective, this sensitive consciousness and moral identity to which Holmes refers as well, is certainly the basis for the fully faceted, ethically astute student that faith-based educators would like to see as the product of their efforts.

“I am I, but what IF?” This “magic If”, developed by Stanislavski as a stimulus for character development, gives the student an opportunity to explore a character and her situation. This “what if” greatly expands the possibilities of choice, and enhances potential for the development of the moral imagination that Holmes and Hauerwas see as essential to the process of developing a moral identity. One’s journey of character is dependent upon his experience.

Remember that the character in a play is a potential always awaiting realization. The aim of the actor is to bring as much of herself as possible to the role, and to take as much of the character as possible back with her when finished. This actualization requires penetrating and, at times, painful introspection to arrive at this point of self-knowledge. Improvisational exercises must be developed sensitively in preparation for this task, to assist the student on the quest of contacting herself, and ultimately making final connection with the character. Again, emphasis must be placed on the fact that it is a process. Nothing happens suddenly but death. The characterization accepted quickly will be clichéd, glib, and easy. The essence of presentational acting, the believable and electrifying characters with whom we can identify, indicates a presentation in truth and honesty. It arises from a study that is continually developing, never stagnating, as new perspective is gained in the search for and ultimate application of truth. This model seems the perfect metaphor for a life lived in a Christian ethic: one that is lived in truth and honesty, sensitively aware, with a depth of self knowledge, fully faceted, never superficial or two-dimensional.

The more an actor develops a full sense of his own identity, the more his scope and capacity for identification with other characters than his own will be made.

If I compare myself to a large meaty, round apple, I discover that my inner and outer cliché image of myself is only a wedge of it – possibly the wedge with the rosy cheek on the skin. But I have to become aware of myself as the total apple – the firm inner flesh as well as the brown rotten spot, the stem, the seeds, the core. All of the apple is me. The more I discover, the more I realized that I have endless sources within myself to put to use in illumination of endless characters in dramatic literature; that I am compounded of endless human beings depending on the events moving in on me, my surrounding circumstances, relationships with a variety of people, what I want and what’s in my way at a given moment: all within the context of my unique identity.(24)

The potential sense of interconnectedness with these characters and their lives is fully explored by Booth as well. Interesting perspective is gained as he suggests that as creatures made in the image of God, we are hence essentially affiliated and joined to others more like us than different.

If I think of myself not as an atomic unit bumping other atoms but as a character – as someone doing my best to enact the various roles assigned to me – I discover that there are no clear boundaries between the others who are somehow both outside and inside me and the ‘me’ that the others are ‘in’...I am not bounded by my skin.(25)

One’s response may likely be “I’m not like that!” But it is more likely that it will be a recognition: “I am like that more than I know. What am I going to do about it? How will this investigation and subsequent discoveries alter the way I think about myself and my interaction with others?”

A student’s own identity and self-knowledge are the main sources for any character he may want to play. But as Booth and Hagen suggest, an understanding and respect for his connection with other potential characters, both without and within himself, as discovered on the journey, is also essential to a fully dimensional characterization.

To fully understand and appreciate the context of her life, to become truly sensitive to what gives real meaning to her life – to what she really cares deeply about – and how this will in time affect her decision-making process and subsequent actions, certainly does require a student to become a responsible agent in developing virtues and a sense of moral identity. The greater facility the actor has for bringing herself to the character, as well as finding the character in herself, the more honest and believable the final portrayal will be. The sensitivity and awareness, the sense of self-truth gained by the actor through this journey, will certainly validate the time spent, and the possible pain incurred in the process.

Developing a believable character depends on choices and the viability of these choices for an actor and his audience. Understanding why the character made the choice he did must be based on a personalization of the character, on developing an in-depth character biography. This personalization is the process through which the actor makes the dramatic situation meaningful, so he can believe in what is happening and respond with truth and sincerity. It enables him to find that essential inner connection to this character's objectives. This biography will be more helpful to the actor if it based on Stanislavski's "magic If." Creating this inner essence of a character supersedes the externals. These external traits and mannerisms will be more believable as they grow from the development of the inner soul of the character..

A student's discovery of the psychology of her character is a journey into the mind, heart, body, and soul of another being.(26) Psychology explains behavior. The psychological portrait a student designs for her character must justify her character's action and dramatic function in the world of the play. Every choice the student makes from the first time she reads the play, brings her closer to a definition of the character. Through formulating a super objective and scene objectives, and choosing and performing action within the given circumstances, the student creates a pattern of behavior that reveals character.

Answering these questions in depth gives the student the understanding necessary for the internal justification of actions to follow. During rehearsal the student is able to make the necessary adjustments. This process is greatly enhanced when the student keeps a journal of her discoveries. This journaling experience further gives the student the opportunity to pull from her own life experiences in an attempt to identify with the character and make an honest connection with that character in their dilemma of life. The student is also encouraged to apply helpful insights from her character study to the development of her own moral identity. These insights are gained by the student in his own individual preparation for each rehearsal as well as within the community of actors interacting during the rehearsal procedure itself. The rehearsal then becomes the laboratory experience necessary for the student to validate action choices as the logical extension of a developing inner dimension. Through repetition of these actions in rehearsal they become fully and truthfully integrated into the character and the play. All that the student says and does to further her through line of action and her dramatic function defines who she is. A student must never be judgmental or fearful of her character. She must penetrate the soul of the villain as she would the victim.(27) As she constantly justifies action choices, she actually begins to think as her character might.

The dramatic character is a result of the same factors that create all human psychology. It is a composite of our experiences, relationships, and environment in interaction, perhaps in conflict, with the society in which we live.(28) Norma Haan, in a study conducted on the subject of caring and personal experience, found that the best environment for moral development is one in which the person can experience moderate amounts of interpersonally based conflict.(29) Theater provides just such an arena for this confrontation by involving the student in the action of making choices and working creatively toward resolution with the consequences of those choices.

Theater is conflict.

The roles we play as we live are all rooted in our personal psychology. When a student plays a character, he creates a new psychological being whose thoughts and behavior patterns may be quite different from his own, but with whom he may have discovered some illuminating, albeit disturbing, similarities. From this company he has chosen to keep for a time, he will have gained a perspective on himself that will render him different from when he began. New perspectives on how he views himself will be gained from this relationship with this new friend. Only in this way can the essential connection be made between the moral lessons learned in the narrative and choices to be made in real life.

This kind of understanding permits empathy. As the student's understanding of her character grows throughout the rehearsal process, empathy deepens until she can step inside her character's emotions. She begins to understand more fully why the character behaves the way she does, why she makes the choices that initially seemed so inappropriate. As long as the student stands in judgment of a character, the character can never stand inside her. In this way the character becomes a real person; without the mimesis-empathy confrontation those people often remain objects or categories.<sup>(30)</sup> The ability to justify this thought and action is at the base of any honest character portrayal, and moves the student closer to a personal moral identity that includes a perspective of her fellow man that cannot be gained by mere observation or contemplation. It is only through this bond of intimacy that she can begin to experience the liberating grace of God at work in the world, and most specifically with a sense of personal gratitude. Grace helps us keep going amid the moral conflicts we cannot resolve. It is these inequities that the student faces as she assumes these character-making choices.

Theater is a perfect laboratory to practice character traits and explore values through the lives of dramatic characters, without having to deal with consequences inherent in taking these risks in the real world. Students are allowed to try on the whys and not just contemplate the whats.

Those character traits are truest, the most honestly ours that are the most fully understood. This understanding comes through close examination and exploration, through rehearsal and repetition. The rationale of rehearsal is that repetition continues to bring a deeper understanding of the motivation and the action of the dramatic character, which if continued in truth and honesty will lead to a credible performance. The intent of the investigation and exploration leading to an honest adoption of a character trait seems to be the key. Isn't it possible that one also develops character traits (good or bad) through repetition until it becomes habitual?

The propensity to mask the inner self with a protective outer image is at the core of Moliere's comedy, Tartuffe. For Tartuffe, religion is a means to an end. Ambitious, he is using the blind naivete of Orgon as his tool. The mask of hypocrisy is almost a perfect fit, and ensures a steady increase of power to the wearer. The part he plays is of vital importance to him; it assures his well-being and his domination over his fellows. The audience is allowed to see through him, to observe the contrast between what he says and would like to say, what he does and what he thinks. To further illustrate the machination and game playing of the drama, as director of a recent production at the Arena Theater at Wheaton College, I chose to have all of the cast wear masks. It was only when speaking in honesty, without pretense, that a character dropped the mask to address the other characters on stage.

As the play deals very pointedly with religious hypocrisy, using the term to suggest practicing an attitude or action which one does not possess, surely for his own benefit, the cast learned much about spotting facades in others, particularly in the religious community. With the unmasking of revered religious leaders, Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, we are all too aware of the Tartuffes

of our day using the façade of religion to further their own selfish aims. But much more importantly, cast members were forced to deal with their own propensities to put on masks. During the rehearsal process the students were asked to design masks that would best communicate the image that they would like to have projected and behind which they would feel safe. Wearing the masks in the ensuing exercises seemed exciting, powerful, and comfortable; removing the masks became very traumatic. An acute sense of vulnerability was experienced by most. The actors found that life becomes at once much easier when we don a mask. We are not forced to deal with our own humanity or that of others when we can simply apply the desired mask to handle the rigors of the immediate situation. Journaling throughout the rehearsals gave the students an opportunity to observe the hypocrisy in many of their interactions with other students on campus and even professors. No one seemed exempt from the machinations of the mask.

Aren't we all guilty of wearing the mask of expectation designed by those around us to define our role in their lives? Is it not simply more convenient many times to wear the expected masks? What was discovered during the process of rehearsals was that, with the placement of these facades, with absence of truth and honesty, confidence in others becomes more suspicious, friendships superficial, since none can be sure that the mask is genuinely the man/woman, or what is behind it.

This no longer became just a play in preparation for performance, but a character-building experience for everyone. Through character study and improvisation the students found that there is indeed a connection between character and conduct. Actions and behavior patterns may well be indications of character, but they may also be applied to mask unacceptable inner realities, or even facades socialized onto us without inner conviction. For the responsible agent there is a oneness, an integrity of being. Investing time with the characters of Tartuffe conversely affected the actors as they became aware of and then were sensitized to the need to mean what one says and does. Inner reality must correspond to outward appearance.

The difference between productive hypocrisy, aspiring and emulating, which Booth would assert is necessary for character development, and the vice that the word is used to name above, must surely be in the motive and direction of the practice. Why are we doing what we are doing?

To have character is necessarily to engage in a pattern of discovery, for by our continuing action we discover new aspects and implications of our descriptions that we had not anticipated. Few plays have better dealt with this process of self-discovery than has Sondheim's musical, Into the Woods, based on the actions of several well-known fairy tale characters. The actors are led on a journey into the woods, faced with choices as difficult as any they will ever confront in real life. This journey forms the dramatic action of the play. It is through their quests that the characters experience growth and change, and ultimately achieve some degree of self-knowledge.

The woods, a dark tangle of branches, roots, and spidery trunks, becomes an arena for the characters to explore their secret wishes and fears, where the dark sides of personalities, the jumble of repressed desires, appetites, and suppressed passions are given free rein. The woods represent different things to different characters. The frightening characteristic is that they appear to be as enticing as they are repulsive. As designer for this production, I created a maze of ramps and platforms which completely encircled the audience with forest paths. These ever changing paths helped to support the concept of the traumas faced on life's uncertain trek. In this case the audience, as well as the actors, was ushered into an environment of growth. In Act I, searching for "happily ever after" seemed a bit of a naïve adventure, paths were fairly clear and well lit. However, once that destination was reached at the end of the act, and initial goals eventually seemed boring and inconsequential, the woods became thicker, darker and more unpredictable.

It is the role of the designer to reinforce this experience for the actor and to enhance it for the audience. In this case, the audience was also very much involved in the action.

Though the play is handled in the style of a fairy tale, in the first act the fears of the woods are the trauma of growing up, the loss of sexual innocence, money, starting a family, and the importance of image – being pretty/handsome. In the second act, the woods, which have become darker and more ominous, are filled with adult terrors and disillusionment: death, failed marriages, the recognition of personal mortality and individual responsibility. What happens when one discovers that “happily ever after” is as illusive as the mirage on the horizon? Or perhaps worse, that once attained, it simply is not enough any more. These are the questions the actor is forced to wrestle with as she becomes involved in action of the play, as she is faced with the same choices she will have to make in the real world.

In preparing for this play, actors were faced with the challenges of leaving behind all that is safe and secure, and of journeying into adulthood with all of the rights and responsibilities incumbent upon that state. Choices, frivolous and deliberate, were made, and consequences experienced. Through repetition of action in rehearsal, the truths discovered on the journey can be indelibly impressed on their moral identity. The students were given the opportunity to ask questions necessary to build character while developing their characters.

Theater interprets the human condition in both outward manifestations and its inner reality. It provides not just illustrations of moral problems, but insights into the ambiguities, tensions and complexities of moral life. In the world of Getting Out, Marsha Norman has created a gritty exposure to the world of ex-offender Arlene as she is released from prison and begins to find her way in a world that seems committed to defeating her. We come to know Arlene both from her real experience as well as through flashbacks to her as a much younger woman, Arlie, as she is first incarcerated. Selection of this play for Wheaton College was a risk, but I found Arlene’s story of grace so compelling, I knew it could be a life changing experience for our students; I was not wrong.

The experience of Getting Out, the life that Arlene was forced to live, was hard and rough. The students developing these roles were given an invaluable opportunity to understand rather than just observe the lives of the disenfranchised. To help the students explore the lives of the characters, we spent a good deal of time immersing ourselves in the realities of prison life, spending time at Cook County jail in Chicago, talking to the women inmates of their lives both inside and outside the walls of the prison. We were lucky enough to find an ex-offender to work with us on the play. It was as though Arlene had been given to us herself to help us in our task of understanding the decisions that Arlene made in her attempts to make it in the real world. Improvisational experiences developed from these interviews lead to a reality of experience for all working on the production.

The students moved slowly from a position of judgment of Arlene/Arlie and her choices and actions to one of deep compassion and understanding. The choices were difficult and complex. This movement required facing life with a fiber of truth and honesty, embracing Christ’s model of love and justice, of compassion and respect and appreciating fully the working of God’s grace. Students found that they were not so different from Arlene, just luckier. Robert Coles suggests that this kind of experience nurtures moral imagination, elicits empathy, and provides the wisdom to see things whole. As I had hoped, it was a profound experience for all involved in the production; mere observation became a reality as the students moved on the journey towards assuming a believable character. Many of these actors have continued to act on these new found convictions today as they continue to work with the seemingly unlovable.

#### **IV. The Outcome – realization of the super objective**

Through identification and consequent empathy, dramatic literature offers the self the sort of nourishment that is essential for the development of character. By exercising and strengthening our capacity to identify and feel into others, the play provides us with an ability that will allow further growth and adjustment as we encounter new realities.(31) Theater interprets the human condition in both its outward manifestations and its inner reality. It provides not just illustrations of moral problems, but insight into the ambiguities, tensions and complexities of the moral life, and a realism about moral ambiguity. Character study allows the student to experience values in conflict and thereby gain new perspective on the outcome of choices. It seems the key word here is experience, because in experiencing these ambiguities, the student is able to move past the cognitive image of the affective behavior. This then nurtures moral imagination, elicits empathy, and provides the wisdom to see things whole.(32)

This process of introspection, which is required of anyone attempting to understand and present a believable character involved in plausible action, requires that students learn to understand and accept facets of themselves that many would rather not recognize, and, in admitting them, enlarge their capacity for identification. Above all Hagen emphasizes that students who want to act must become self-observant enough not only to recognize their needs and define feelings, but to connect them to the behavior which ensues. This is the same sense of responsibility to which both Holmes and Hauerwas allude. The continuing job of learning to pinpoint her responses – and even more importantly, the myriad of consequent behaviors that result – will help an actor to fill her warehouse with sources upon which to draw for construction of character. This process forces the student to search within herself for the resources, and at the same time the experiences enriches and builds those resources, if she has been truthful and honest in the search.

By delving deeply into the hearts of the characters in the play, the student is allowed a consciousness raising and sensitizing experience as he is forced to deal with the inequities causing the dramatic conflict, and the choices made by the characters to right these injustices. By so doing the student can further activate and develop his own moral imagination as he clarifies and evaluates the values involved in the resolution of the tension. In responding as the characters in the decision making process, he is well on the road to developing the proper habit of the heart.

The super objective of the actor is to discover a through line of action for the play that will give him a reason to be. This super objective for moral education is accordingly concerned that students become consistent and responsible adults acting out of a core of compassion and respect- who care about people, treat them justly, and do something about ethical issues in society. Students must learn to analyze what is going on to understand themselves, to think through issues and to make wise decisions based on sound moral competencies; moral principles which have been made their own through the rigors of experience and empathy.

The point seems to be that the emphasis needs to be placed on the process rather than just the end product. The metaphor of the journey is and surely should be the primary one for articulating the shape of Christian existence and living. Hauerwas' emphasis on the process of becoming has been helpful in aligning the work of theater in the liberal arts context with that most important objective, the education of our students in value development and the ethics of character.

## Appendix –

The research and writing of this paper has had a dynamic effect on my approach to teaching at Wheaton. The concepts were not necessarily new to me nor profound in nature, but when considered in the context of the nature of the classes I teach, especially acting, and directing production work, it has greatly influenced my whole approach to the experience. In teaching theater as part of a liberal arts education, we are not so much about professional vocational training as we are about assisting the student on his journey toward self-discovery, of becoming a responsible agent for action and change in the world. Designing this laboratory experience has been a tremendous time of growth for myself as well.

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## Notes

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2 M. James Young, "Moral Issues in Theater," unpublished essay

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- 4 Aristotle, "The Poetics"
- 5 Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio Trinity University Press, 1975) (xxvii)
- 6 Hauerwas (xxx)
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- 31 Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher, "*Literature, Psychoanalysis and the Reformation of the Self*," 351.qtd in Booth appendix.
- 32 Holmes 76.