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From Medieval Religious Pageantry to Contemporary Social Messaging: The Medieval Cycle Plays in Honduras' Teatro La Fragua

Elena M. De Costa

Independent Researcher, New Berlin, WI 53151, USA; edecosta57@gmail.com

Abstract: Using medieval religious drama as a model, Honduras' Teatro La Fragua has developed a Gospel dramatization program that both reflects the practices of medieval theater in style and expresses the issues of a modern-day world in message. Their vernacular cycle plays are performed in public spaces by local people, written *by and for* the community, and staged in the streets and public spaces *for* ordinary people in both urban and remote rural areas. Medieval vernacular drama thus maintains an enduring stylistic presence in a modern-day counterpart as it underscores the Gospel's message of inclusion, equity, and diversity while incorporating elements of agency and native culture.

Keywords: medieval vernacular drama; cycle plays; Teatro La Fragua; Honduran drama; religious spectacle/ritual

1. Introduction: The Medieval Meets the Modern in Communal Representations

> "Go forth and reach out to all people at the margins of society". Pope Francis
>
> "For the invisible things of [God], from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made". Romans 1:20

"Art and religion spring from the same human roots", affirms the founder and artistic director of Teatro La Fragua (TLF), Fr. Jack Warner, S.J. "They spring from our need to be in touch with something beyond the littleness we feel as human beings", he concludes.[1] Teatro La Fragua, "the forge theater" (i.e., forging a national identity), shares much in common with the medieval mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries in its renditions of the Gospel (*¡El Evangelio en vivo!/The Gospel, Live!*). Yet, this Honduran theater group also holds the distinction of forging its own path in conveying a message suitable for a modern audience. TLF is a street theater with a Central American flavor rooted in both medieval and modern performance styles. It exhibits a medieval legacy that is based more on the plays performed independently of liturgical service outside of the church than in the indoor Mass celebration. During the 11th and 12th centuries, the Nativity, along with other biblical stories, were visually represented, extending from the altar to various locations throughout the church to make the key episodes of the liturgy and Bible as vivid and accessible as possible to a largely orally based congregation. By combining his own performance aesthetics with the ritual and spectacle reminiscent of medieval religious processionals, Jack Warner has created a theater that responds to the needs of his majority peasant Honduran audience. Fundamental to an understanding of Warner's rationale for conceiving medieval cycle plays within the context of a reimagined contemporary setting are audience activism and agency. TLF has the explicit purpose of a newly formulated aesthetic of audience consciousness-raising and empowerment achieved by both enlightening and entertaining its audiences. To this end, TLF turned to the historical antecedents of drama in the Mystery Cycle plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. In a similar

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vein as TLF performances, these plays were presented in public spaces by ordinary (non-professional) people and portrayed scenes from the Bible, conveyed religious teachings, and encouraged their audiences to lead Christian lives. Apart from these factors, they were very different from modern drama but did provide a framework for TLF, particularly in its *teatro ambulante* or traveling mobile outdoor theater style designed to reach out to remote rural audiences. This essay will (1) contextualize ritual, spectacle, and performance in relation to medieval devotional pageants; (2) explore TLF's eclectic combination of medieval, modern, and traditional performative methods and styles; (3) analyze the medieval and colonial Latin American borrowings in TLF's vernacular cycle plays; (4) assess TLF's goal of transforming its audience by sharing the Gospel's message of liberation from social, political, and economic oppression; and (5) detail TLF's Latin American roots of politically engaged street and community theater drawing on Liberation Theology, Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and other modern experimental theater practices, including Honduran folk celebrations.

Western theater began with Church rituals; it began with the dramatization of the Gospel stories. Using the storytelling framework of the Old Testament and Christ's teachings expressed in parable form found in the New Testament, the Church communicated Christian doctrine to its followers. The liturgy presented the life and ministry of Jesus through two principal components: The Liturgy of the Word (sermons, the recitation of prayers, and the singing of chants and hymns) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist (a ritual culminating in a reenactment of the Last Supper as part of the daily Mass). This communal act of remembrance of the breaking of bread with Jesus' disciples and the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood formed the high point of the celebration of Mass. The formulary of public religious worship in Mass became a performance act of a classical tragedy with the promise of redemption through the Passion, death, and resurrection of mankind's Savior, Jesus Christ. Commenting on the origins of medieval religious vernacular drama in his essay, "The Mass as Performance Text" in *From Page to Performance*,[2] Terry P. Dolan (1995) argues for a correlation between lay literacy and clerical approaches to Mass as a "performance text", as many priests attempted to make Mass more dramatic and thus more appealing and understandable to the common people. After all, early medieval congregations were shut out from an understanding of the liturgy by their lack of knowledge of Latin. Clear and direct vernacular language was needed to avoid the sense of separation between the action on the altar and the experience of the parishioners. While the priest silently recited prayers in Latin, his back turned, the congregation was left to its own devices of interpretation. By contrast, with the advent of dramatic performances, religious cycle plays became both a communal and participatory event. Often, players and playgoers inhabited the same performance space. In such an environment, attendees might easily find themselves in the midst of the action (participant observers), transformed into dramatic personae. The same edited volume cited above, David Mills' "The Theaters of Everyman",[3] points out that Everyman assigns a role to the audience in the manner of the cycle plays, where the literal gaze of the actor-God reconstitutes the audience as all of humanity. It is a recognizable interchange between actor and spectator who takes on an active role since the actor Death might select anyone at any time as a performance participant without regard to age or social stature.

In medieval England, holidays were actually holy days dedicated to a particular saint or religious event. On special holy days, such as Corpus Christi, entire communities celebrated with a festival and a general work-free day. On the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, people gathered in town for a festival to celebrate this feast dedicated to the Eucharist, often including a parade of pageant wagons or ox-drawn carts fashioned into portable stages. On each stage, a scene from the Old or New Testament was presented by confraternities and local trade guilds competing for civic recognition (Beckwith 1996, pp. 63–86). The official intent was to instruct an illiterate populace in the stories of the Bible with what Carol Symes identifies as the three basic components of medieval theater—sight, sound, and space (Symes 2007, p. 19). However, the reality was a sequence of plays that showcased the farcical and

very human behavior of minor characters in these stories. These mischievous individuals resembled their medieval audience more than any historical character and provided great entertainment for the holy day within the vibrant setting of the medieval public sphere of "gambling, churchgoing, socializing, charitable deeds, sport, ceremonial observances, and the fulfillment of public duties" (Symes 2007, p. 13). Ballads, music, and dance were often added. Sophisticated, organized forms of entertainment marked the larger context of the performance space devised and performed for spectators who had not gathered solely for the purpose of religious instruction or divine worship. And so, the feast of Corpus Christi included religious processions of the Host but also varieties of tableaux performances and sometimes actual performative artistry, the "affective power" of the witnessing experience close-up by the spectator (McGavin and Walker 2016, p. 11). The York Mystery Plays, more commonly referred to as the York Corpus Christi Plays, are exemplary of this form of medieval vernacular biblical storytelling in that they drew on a shared language of visual display, aural stimuli, and spatial orientation. Their pageants transformed the ways that people in a predominantly oral society communicated with one another by creating a space available for public business in medieval communities (the Greek word *theatron* means "a place for seeing") and providing engaging activities (the Greek word *drama* means "action") (Symes 2007, p. 2).

Moreover, the York Corpus Christi Plays comprise the only fully extant English play cycle recognized as specifically written for the feast of Corpus Christi. Not only did this religious feast regularly spawn processions across Catholic Europe, but it also contributed to the emergence of other performances, including processional pageants at York in the latter part of the 14th century, that "can be seen to fit into this wider European model of street performance" (Goldberg 2012, p. 250). Although such performances remained biblical in theme, they gradually were taken over by the laity and performed outdoors in the vernacular by minstrels, strolling players, storytellers, and other entertainers in processions, pageants, tournaments, and mummings or folk plays. The number of short plays thereafter multiplied and spread widely until they were organized into cycles covering the entirety of scriptures from the Creation story until the Last Judgment performed by the city's crafts. The York cycle, while not representative of a national standard for Corpus Christi drama, does represent a unique survival of medieval theater—medieval religious street theater mounted annually on wagons at stations throughout the city (Davidson 2011). Indeed, the York cycle plays represent a different vernacular way of embedding biblical teachings by blending the aforementioned civic and religious celebration in local spaces that were easily accessible to welcoming spectators. This marked a period of time when theater was open to all before the construction of playhouses restricted access to paying audiences. It was also a time when vernacular literacy was beginning to challenge the hegemony of Latin in the Church. York's extended sequence of dramatizations of salvation history presented on pageant carriages was noteworthy in their demonstration of the visual piety of the late Middle Ages. The tableaux were staged in a "perpetual present" of a perennially available salvation history rooted in the city's common iconography. Referring to the York Corpus Christi pageant cycle, Jeremy Goldberg focuses on its visual affective impact with the potential to encourage devotion, improve behavior, and establish a collective memory:

> The production imagined as a multi-episode series of tableaux—dependent on traditional iconography and gesture rather than language—would thus more perfectly achieve a kind of realism that other visual or narrative cycles could only suggest. . .biblical episodes as specific moments. . .memorable to the audience. . .shared in the spiritual benefits derived from the performance. (Goldberg 2012, p. 251)

Due to its deeply emotive visual nature, special emphasis was placed on the story of the Passion (*The York Crucifixio Christi*), which was designed to express the humanity as well as the divinity of Christ. Comprising up to fifty short plays, these Mystery Cycle performances sometimes spanned two or three days. Although the Church had attempted to suppress religious-themed street performances initially, as time passed and their popularity grew, the clergy realized that street drama was a very powerful means of communication.

Religious street performances subsequently found favor with the clergy. They could be used as a vehicle to educate people on the scriptures and, by extension, inspire their audiences to live a virtuous life based on the Christian Bible. A new and far more vigorous visual representation of the Bible gradually began to emerge. However, the notion that medieval drama originated within and later grew out of the ritual of the medieval Western Church as part of the celebration of Mass has been debated as too simplistic. The scholar Michael Norton[4] prefers to use the term "representational rites" or "religious play" as opposed to "liturgical drama", arguing that liturgical celebrations were solely rituals with dramatic potential. Although Norton uses the term "religious play", he questions whether they "were understood at the time as drama, theatre, or even spectacle"[5], suggesting that some served interpretive purposes for an educated community. Norton further goes on to state that "there was a movement among the sophisticated Parisian class towards a more theatrical expression of worship"[6], making "fertile ground" for seeing certain aspects of the medieval liturgy as dramatic. For these early scholars, the "focus was on the drama *of* the liturgy, not the drama *in* the liturgy".[7] It is worthy of mention, however, that in the Catholic Mass during the Middle Ages, Catholic priests came to rely increasingly on representational acts that bordered on enactment. Even if there can be no direct link drawn between liturgical reforms and the development of "sacred representations", the two nevertheless developed together. Although popular imagination views liturgical services as "spectacle" or "theater", the liturgy's roots and purposes were not intended to be representational; rather, they were considered to be reenactments of actual events. For example, liturgical dances (similar to liturgical actions in general) were positioned as reflecting eternal, heavenly events. Although liturgy in medieval times was inclusive of both drama and spectacle, it also went beyond it and was even antithetical to such visual displays in some ways. From the perspective of orthodox Christianity, Western sacred drama introduces a realistic spectacle designed to educate a largely peasant lay audience. While modern theater undoubtedly finds many of its origins in the medieval period, mobile or street theater conjures up an entirely different spectrum of associations. Focus on religious content from biblical scenes instead of individual and human relationships contributes to different expectations as well. In her insightful critique of liturgy, ritual, and performance, the religious studies scholar Catherine Bell clarifies her position on ritual and theater simply as *related* genres:

> The comparison of ritual to all sorts of dramatic spectacles or structured improvisation effectively demonstrates shared features and similar processes. At the same time, such comparisons often result in simply describing one unknown in terms of another, and fail to account for the way in which most cultures see important distinctions between ritual and other types of activities.[8] (Bell 2009, p. 76)

Although Christian liturgy might exhibit elements of the performative, it would be unwise to equate ceremonial actions of worship with theatrical performance. There was no "evolutionary" growth from the so-called liturgical drama to the more representational vernacular play.[9] In short, studies of "the church-*as*-theater" should not be misinterpreted as "the church *is* theater". Michal Kobialka[10] concurs with Norton and Bell, arguing that the concept of representation in the early Middle Ages was not analogous to the interpretation of Aristotle or Plato. Instead, liturgical worship was focused on the interpretation of *Hoc est corpus meum* [This is my body]—the words spoken by Christ to the Apostles at the Last Supper—and the visibility of the body of Christ. Liturgical celebrations were intended to be more commemorative than representational, sacred reenactments of rituals for the faithful and not dramatized spectacles. Yet, it should be acknowledged that the liturgy is a highly complex ritual containing many theatrical elements (action, impersonation, dialogue, setting, exposition, call-and-response chants sung between the priest and congregation) as it attempts to establish a tangible view of the invisible world. But reenactments of articles of faith (the Nativity, the Passion, and Resurrection of Christ, for example) do not constitute dramatic performance as it is understood in modern times. The York cycle plays, on the other hand, were designed to be representational from the start, initially using *tableaux*

vivants (silent, static actors arranged to represent a scene or event) to visually depict specific moments of biblical narratives without dramatic action. Their performance pageants were designed to both teach the scriptures with devotional enthusiasm *and* promote the city's image (Goldberg 2012, p. 248). The Corpus Christi procession of pageants at York in the latter part of the 14th century used both tableaux and spoken drama to attract and engage spectators akin to urban street performance—a very different model from the commemorative liturgical Church celebration.

2. Medieval Roots in TLF's Cycle Play *Navidad Nuestra:* Scripture and Performance in Honduran Contexts

> "We should know the world we live in, the better to change it". Augusto Boal
>
> "...spectators are jolted out of one role (that of viewers) back into something like their everyday selves, with a wider sense of themselves as social beings with agency in a social situation". John McGavin and Greg Walker, Imagining Spectatorship. (McGavin and Walker 2016, p. 178)

In whatever form it takes—community-based collective creation, formal dramaturgy, cultural celebration—contemporary Latin American theater has become a powerful vehicle for social change. Christian base communities in the region reflecting the concerns of Liberation Theology often express scripture and sociopolitical issues through artistic production. They do so in order to convey their frustration with vexing problems of the past, persisting in the present with an ever-present hope for a changed future. The Honduran theater collective Teatro La Fragua addresses the themes of liberation theater in its religious cycle plays using interconnections to a variety of rich sources, both native and foreign: the Spanish *auto sacramental*, the French Fleury *Play of Herod*, the York cycle drama, Nahuatl indigenous ritual practices, and the Honduran pastoral drama (*pastorelas*) of José Trinidad Reyes. TLF performs a variety of dramatic pieces, including political theater, works based on Honduran myths and folktales, dramatizations based on the Mayan *Popul-Vuh* sacred book, history plays, and medieval Mystery Cycle plays. All of these theater pieces, regardless of theme or performative format, are educational and inspirational in composition with the goal of audience engagement and empowerment. But it is the troupe's Bible-based dramatizations centered around the Christmas and Easter seasons that will be the focus here due to their roots in the varied aforementioned sources. At the same time that it draws from these foreign sources from the past, TLF maintains a uniquely Honduran national identity together with messaging that is sociopolitical and Christian, skillfully combining the tenets of Liberation Theology, Paulo Freire, and Augusto Boal.[11] TLF is a popular theater directed at uplifting its audiences to fulfill their individual and collective potential. Its historical background is rooted in the music and dance performance practices of the pre-Conquest indigenous past and adaptations/portions of 12th-century plays as its medieval inspiration for a written/spoken text.

Jack Warner, an American Jesuit priest-actor-director, founded *Teatro La Fragua* on 19 July 1979 amidst the social hardship that Central America was trapped in—guerrillas, coups, famine, hurricanes, earthquakes, criticism from opportunistic adversaries, illiteracy, and labor exploitation, among other challenges. Warner graduated with a Master of Fine Arts (with a focus on directing) degree from Chicago's Goodman School of Drama in 1978. He served as director of TLF for forty-two years and is currently director emeritus. Located in the municipality of Progreso, Yoro, Honduras, TLF exists in the midst of the country's conditions of poverty, violence, disrespect for basic human rights, and disastrous health care and education. After founding the troupe, Warner assembled and copyrighted a set of medieval religious cycle plays grounded in Mesoamerican and Spanish theatrical history as well as English influences. In his work in progress, *Navidad Nuestra* (*Our Christmas*), there is a Honduran identity ever-present in the production.[12] This cycle play invokes the memory of many traditions of the interpretation of the meaning of Christmas. It is a colorful and joyful theatrical mosaic that weaves together a multiplicity of iconic strands celebrating

this biblical event. The following structural order represents typical textual and musical sources that have been used in *Navidad Nuestra* performances:

1. *Textual Sources in Story Theater Format (Mix of Narrator and Characters)*

   The Prologue of John's Gospel

   An Angel Announces the Birth of John The Baptist (Luke 1:5–25)

   An Angel Announces the Birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26–38)

   Mary Visits Elizabeth (Luke 1:39–56)

   The Birth of John The Baptist (Luke 1:57–80)

   Joseph and the Angel (Matthew 1:18–25)

   The Wise Men's Journey (based on the Spanish *auto* and the Spanish *villancico* (Christmas Carol)

   "Ya viene la vieja"/"Here comes the old woman"

   The Birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 2:1–7)

   The Angels and the Shepherds (Luke 2:8–20)

   The Wise Men and Herod (based on the Spanish *auto, Auto de los Reyes Magos)*

   The Escape to Egypt (Matthew 2:13–15)

   Herod's Speech (original rendition)

   The Slaughter of the Innocents (Latin text from *The Play of Herod* and Matthew 2:16–18)

   The Return to Nazareth (Matthew 2:19–23)

2. *Performance Text Interludes (alternating with or included in the scenes of "Our Christmas")*

   Music by Mozart to accompany the Prologue of John's Gospel

   The Genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1–17) Music in a rap beat (music, dance, movements)

   Line dance (choreography with a repeating series of steps performed in unison) and traditional Spanish *villancico* "Fum-Fum-Fum" (Joyous Christmas Carol)

   Line dance and traditional Spanish *villancico* equivalent to "O Come All Ye Faithful"

   Line dance and a Peruvian *villancico* song

   Line dance and a Honduran lullaby ("Sleep Little One")

   Ballet-like dance to Kenny G's "Silent Night" to accompany Birth of Jesus Christ scene

   Argentinean and Chilean lullabies with accompanying dances

   The traditional Spanish *villancico* "The Bells of Bethlehem" sung

The TLF script of *Navidad Nuestra* combines adaptations/borrowings from two European 12th-century religious cycle plays, the Spanish *Auto de los Reyes Magos* (*Mystery Play of the Magi*, c. 1150),[13] an allegory of the Epiphany cycle, and the French *Play of Herod*[14], together with portions of the Gospel texts of Luke and Matthew.[15] Traditional Spanish *villancicos*[16] are added throughout the production of some twenty scenes to enrich the experience with a lively tone to both punctuate the Bible-based text and invite audience participation with familiar songs. These devotional songs in the vernacular were crucial to religious and civic festivals in the early modern Hispanic world. Additionally, a variety of songs and dances are incorporated both within scenes and as interludes to both provide celebratory entertainment and punctuate the key components of the biblical narrative. The eclectic nature of the performance is further expanded to include Nahua song and dance traditions from pre-Conquest performative rituals as well as the pastoral dialogues of the Honduran priest José Trinidad Reyes. Christian theatrical traditions present in 12th-century pieces (*Auto de los Reyes Magos* and the *Rex est natus* from musical drama, *The Play of Herod*) combine with 19th-century *pastorela* dialogues and a choreographic montage of modern-day images and dance steps (reggae and rap). The first few scenes of *Navidad Nuestra* include

a mingling of biblical text, classical music and dance, rap music and dance moves, and interludes of Spanish musical pieces. The frequent interludes interrupt the chronological narration of the story. Narrators alternate with actors in dialogic engagement to provide the audience with details and commentary, serving as textual guides for their audience and, at times, interacting with audience members. The actors speak with the accent and intonations of modern Honduran Spanish to the rhythm of reggae music as they reinvent the classic text of the *Auto de los Reyes Magos*. The purpose of the contemporary garb and vernacular language of the actors and their freeze-frame stance (reminiscent of the *tableaux vivants* in medieval pageants) and collective voices in chorus at key moments in the storyline is simple: to make these dramatic pieces and their biblical text *speak to* and *about* the lives of their contemporary Honduran audiences with a Savior who is among them in the here and now, not simply in a distant past. While maintaining some of the textual monologues opening the *Auto de los Reyes Magos* and its use of the vernacular, TLF's rendition eliminates the lyricism of verse of its medieval counterpart and instead allows for greater audience identification with the characters by using a crisp vernacular peasant (slang) language. Theirs is a self-conscious performance in the sense that the TLF characters acknowledge their awareness of the audience witnessing them and, in many instances, addressing those watching the performance. The TLF script follows the Nativity stories in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew almost verbatim while, at the same time, expanding on those scriptural sources with the aforementioned musical interludes and fragments from the earlier Nativity dramas from Spain, France, and Honduras. The dramatic framework of *Navidad Nuestra* ensues immediately after the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear a son named Jesus. The Evangelist Luke speaks (as a Honduran actor in modern-day attire):

> *In those days, María went in haste into a village in the hill country of Juda,*
> *and entered the house of Zachariah and hailed Elizabeth.*

Rather than continue with a verbal narration, there is a change in locale indicated by a scenery shift from an urban to a rural setting in the following Visitation scene. The audience is able to identify with the visual display on stage as referenced by the stage directions, a deliberate departure from biblical or other Nativity drama sources.

> *María visits her cousin who lives in a remote village in the mountains.*
> *Naturally, as in any typical Honduran village—or any remote village*
> *anywhere—the house is surrounded by animals (pigs, chickens, cats,*
> *frogs, sheep, goats, whatever) and guarded by a dog.*

The journey to Bethlehem in compliance with the decree to register for the census to pay taxes follows with a freeze-frame pose of the cast as a reimagining of the biblical story in contemporary terms. The impending event of the birth of Christ that actually occurred one and a half millennia ago is given an anachronistic setting of vignettes depicting ordinary contemporary Honduran life. And the main events of the principal characters occur in silence (pantomime and dance steps), as Mary and Joseph search for shelter and Mary gives birth. The actor/narrator frames the simple scene on a bare stage in order to prepare the audience for the dramatic moment relived, reimagined, and reenacted with the words

> *And it came to pass that while they were in Bethlehem, the time arrived that*
> *María should give birth. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped*
> *Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room*
> *for them in the inn.*

As the narration continues, the scene shifts to introduce new characters and an additional medieval borrowing with the following announcement: *There were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.*

The Play of Daniel and the music-drama *The Play of Herod* were the earliest dramas to be performed outside of the liturgy. These 12th-century dramas were meant to be

showcased in church, but they stood on their own. Just as parts of the *Auto de los Reyes Magos* were woven into the Gospel stories in *Navidad Nuestra*, so too were portions of the Herod Fleury play.[17] These medieval story texts are used to expand upon the Gospels' character development of the Magi and the shepherds, in particular. TLF incorporates the medieval text of *Rex est natus* from the Herod piece for the massacre of the Innocents, leaving it in the original Latin to center the attention of the audience on this powerful scene. The contrast with the accent and intonations of Honduran Spanish that frames the Latin recitation is striking. The *Play of Herod* consists of an *Official Stellae* or *Office of the Star* (that is, the three separate plot lines: the Play of Herod, the Magi, and the shepherds) as part of the ten plays in the Fleury playbook. Traces of the "performative-past" in TLF's *Navidad Nuestra* include the dramatic action of the shepherds' encounter with an angel who announces the Nativity, frightening them initially. They then proceed to the manger and prostrate themselves in worship of the Christ Child as they invite the members of the congregation standing nearby to do the same, thus engaging them in dramatic action. During its musical drama, TLF references present-day conflicts in its sequencing of stories. But the use of Latin is not the only spellbound element of this scene. The "Rex est natus" scene is powerfully rememorative of a recent shared past as it recounts the massacre of the Innocents, one of the most heart-wrenching moments of the piece. The scene recalls agonizing images of the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, most specifically of the Río Sumpul massacre of refugees in 1980. Salvadoran army soldiers violently tore children from their mothers' arms and impaled them on their bayonets as the river ran red with their blood. The siege lasted nine hours, leaving hundreds dead. The attention of the audience is thus focused on the song itself and the violent act, making them relive that incomprehensibly cruel historical moment of horror. The biblical narrative becomes both collective and individual memory, not just "coming to life" as a Gospel story but *becoming* life. Herod sees the Christ Child as representing a conspiracy that will "destabilize our order", "take away our power", "finish your civil rights", and "fill our beloved country with slavery". Vowing retribution, he proclaims, "*Death to anyone or anything that attempts to change our system, which is the best, and which gives us happiness and prosperity*". Herod then issues his decree to kill all children under two years of age, an action justified by his assertion that it is "for the peace of our country, for the greater good". By the end of the speech, the other performers (as his army) chant, "*Death to the subversive child!*" The Herod speech scene proceeds to the "Slaughter of the Innocents" scene. Marching in formation, the soldiers recite the Latin text from the *Play of Herod*. These soldiers are on a murderous mission as they march to a military beat set to electronic music played on a boom box, further exacerbating the scene of carnage. The accompanying electronic music is set to a military march to add to the atmosphere of carnage and chaos. An additional touch of pathos is conveyed by having the accompanying biblical text of Rachel weeping for her children (Matthew 2:16–18) read by a group of children, rendering the scene even more intense. The message is devastatingly clear that even the most minor threats perceived against the government will be met with brutal repression, leaving a subtextual message of despair, especially for Honduran youth. It is Honduran youth who are the innocents facing a social, political, and economic system that gives them a limited chance to succeed and rise above the poverty into which they were born. The biblical story of an innocent family fleeing the persecution of a repressive authoritarian government parallels many of the lived experiences of TLF's Latin American audiences, including that of dislocation due to gang-related violence. Medieval plays as well often intermingled the historical past with the historical present within a religious narrative. Both political philosophers and playwrights saw contemporary events as recurrent embodiments of biblical narratives and themes. Just as the liturgy was a continuous reenactment of acts of remembrance, significant current events became part of the providential historical process open to biblical interpretation and divine intervention. Medieval plays as well often reflected contemporary political thought by associating contemporary Church–State conflicts with the biblical conflicts depicted in scripture.[18] Liturgy and medieval religious vernacular drama invite participants to

recognize the past in the present by presenting conflicts of the age as an extension of biblical typology into the present. The canons and monks who collaboratively authored this genre of drama often referenced royal–sacerdotal conflicts and the issues surrounding them in their councils, synods, and papal letters[19] (Flanagan et al. 1985, pp. 86–87).

Despite its varied sources and ongoing adaptations, there is structure and continuity in TLF's biblical storytelling framework. The interaction of popular and learned language, oral and written linguistic forms, is in the biblical storyline (both in narration and dialogue) interspersed with the varied aforementioned interludes. Orality is used in performer–audience direct address, exhortations, "demonstrative" expressions (John the Baptist shouting "*Brood of vipers!*" at the crowd), and a variety of spontaneous rhetorical questions directed to the audience—all of which are inclusive of the spectators/participants with no "fourth wall" separating performers from their audience. The use of Honduran colloquial language and cultural references abound in the biblical scenes. For example, the John the Baptist scene taken from the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke is full of social messaging reflective of the Honduran situation. Teachings of generosity, kindness in sharing scant resources, and neighborly love are abundant with lines such as "*Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it*". In another instance of the same scene, government officials are scolded for taking advantage of the poor by overcharging for their services. In still another scene, a truckload of horses and cows guarded by half a dozen soldiers backs up to the front of the church. The soldiers get out and walk, fully armed, to the doors of the church; on the altar, two soldiers question John the Baptist with the open-ended query: "*And we, what shall we do?*" After a few moments of reflection, the confused soldiers decide to drive away with their truckload of "requisitioned" supplies. John the Baptist then looks at the remaining soldiers and replies: "*Rob no one, neither by violence nor by false accusation, and be content with your wages, instead of extorting from the people*".[20] Pausing, one of the actors looks toward the church doors, reflecting on the words of the Gospel that flagrantly condemn those who would accept military authority over Jesus' teachings. The freeze-frame pause allows for audience reflection on the subtle reference to Honduran political corruption. The scene closes with John the Baptist's arrest and imprisonment, signaling a reminder to all of the ongoing dangers faced by those who speak truth to power, a contemporary parallel to the biblical story. Such scenes demonstrate how theater is intricately connected to place.

Similar to this power of place in connectedness to one's surroundings is the everyday language used by TLF in its performances. Specific to the language of pantomime, music, song, dance, and verse of Hondurans, it is also a language spoken through gestures, glances, and pauses that reinvigorates a sensitivity to ancestral Honduran cultural identity. In each of these episodic scenes, bodily movement combines with static images, musical rhythms with poetic verse, narrators–actors–commentators with audience–participants, single-role with multiple-role actors *(personajes comodines)*, the histrionic with simple storytelling, the biblical with the secular. These are the tools of what Sarah Agnew calls "embodiment": "the physical, emotional and relational experience" in biblical performance (Agnew 2020, p. 17).

As the title suggests, *Navidad Nuestra* is an adaptation of the Gospels' two-thousand-year-old text to the living reflection of the audiences' own Honduran reality. The Honduran actors and audiences are the custodians/stewards/guardians of their cultural, spiritual, and social heritage and assist the American Jesuit director, Jack Warner, in the shaping of the performance text's content. Warner is well aware that it is the Honduran population of indigenous and mestizo people who maintain their cultural heritage of traditions, myths, rituals, wisdom, and collective memories. His role as artistic director is to give performative shape to biblical texts in consultation with the local populace, some of whom become performers in the cycle plays. The collage of twenty or more scenes and interludes of the performance text is designed to be combined, updated, stand alone, expanded, and rewritten from year to year based on these communal interactions. The script, devoid of detailed stage directions and dance instructions, invites flexibility, spontaneity, and creative

adaptations from one performance to the next. And so, it is not surprising that TLF's interpretation of the Nativity follows in the tradition begun by the *pastorelas* or Nativity plays[21] of Honduras's first playwright and first rector in 1847 of today's National University in Honduras. The Jesuit of mestizo heritage, Father José Trinidad Reyes (1797–1855), authored both text and music for his *pastorelas* (Nativity folk dramas chronicling the journey of the shepherds or "pastores" to Jesus' birth), staged in the churches of Tegucigalpa. To this day, locals in remote villages and in the city maintain the tradition of performing *posadas* (a commemoration of Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of lodging or a "posada") and *pastorelas* prior to Christmas during the rainy season in the Caribbean. This custom dates back to the theatrical tradition of medieval Europe spreading throughout all of Central America by way of colonial Mexico. The uniqueness of Padre Reyes' *pastorelas* lies in the humor and satire used by Reyes to portray politicians and city life in contrast to the idyllic countryside. The structure of these *pastorelas*, or pastoral dramas for which Reyes wrote both text and music, included a dialogue on a social topic, a peasants' festivity (wedding, family, etc.), a trip to the manger, and worship of the child Jesus. The staging and text of these 19th-century Nativity plays was a hybrid between high-culture language and popular characters. In his study of Reyes' *pastorelas*, E. Lewis Hoffman defines these pieces as "a politico-satirical pastoral drama of the Nativity in verse with songs".[22] In these early Nativity plays, European structures were used to portray local topics, such as peasant migration to urban areas, revolution and corrupt government, social discrimination against the poor, education of women, family relationships, and literacy as a means to social promotion. Social change was alluded to via humor and entertainment through music, song, and play. Honduras has the custom of presenting *pastorelas* and *posadas* or ritual reenactments of Mary and Joseph searching for lodging in Bethlehem performed just before Christmas. In the Hispanic Church calendar between December 16–24, religious festivals commemorate this biblical journey seeking refuge in the *posadas* ("the inns") that commemorate the journey that Mary and Joseph made from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of a safe location where Mary could give birth to Jesus.

Following the tradition of Padre Reyes, in TLF's Nativity renditions, originality lies in the adaptation of traditional biblical content and liturgical dramatic form to the cultural reality of Honduras. The 19th-century issues for Padre Reyes were incorporated in his dramatic pieces, and similar issues that still persist in the 21st century are featured in TLF's cycle plays. The period of Reyes' writing, for example, is noted to be a very turbulent era in Honduran history: from its Independence in 1755 to 1855, the nation suffered political instability, corruption, social discrimination against the poor and women, and illiteracy. Reyes warned peasants against migration to cities and the miseries of having to work for others instead of working on their own land. Politicians and their allies in public offices were portrayed with humor and satire. The pastoral drama as social commentary provided the framework for the development of Honduran theater. His was an era not so different from present-day Honduras in its social and political disillusionments. Notably, TLF has adapted some of Reyes' pastoral dialogues into *Navidad Nuestra* in an eclectic mix of different traditions in the context of a Honduran Christmas. Like Padre Reyes, TLF firmly believes that the arts (theater in particular) contribute to cultural affirmation and a nation's progress as a vehicle for educating the poor, especially in both matters of faith and more worldly issues of the arts and sciences, politics, history, and culture. Their artistic director reflects on the lofty power of the arts as a vehicle for conveying the human experience on a visceral level in relation to both the spiritual and the worldly:

> . . .the concept of divine inspiration of the gospels and the concept of artistic inspiration aren't really that far apart. . .any writer, any artist is reaching for something beyond himself. . .Art is always, in some way, touching deep spiritual questions of who we are, what is our place in this world and what does life mean. (Stage 1990, p. 13)

The subject matter of TLF's Nativity piece is both religious and carnivalesque, traditional in content yet unique in performance style. TLF gives their performances an

entertaining, celebratory, and modern context, which includes break dancing, rap, and line dancing, juggling for baby Jesus, cartwheels and gymnastics, and singing in unison with the audience to recorded or live music using local or improvised instruments. Individual narrators and commentators of different actors are used to provide exposition and description as the play proceeds. And choral commentaries underscore key concepts in the performance text.

3. Native Performance-Based Connections: TLF's Rootedness in Nahuatl Ritual Drama

> "'Presenting the past' will always imply bringing the past and present together. It will also imply that the past will not be replicated or repeated, but represented, shaped, staged, performed in some way other than it originally existed". (Dening 1996, p. xv)

The Nahuas were the most populous of Mesoamerica's linguistic groups at the time of the Spanish Conquest of the New World, particularly in Mexico and Central America. When the Franciscans and Jesuits adopted Nahuatl as their idiom of the Church in the New World, they did more than use an indigenous language. They performed evangelical plays that were Christian in content but largely indigenous in form. The indigenous peoples of the Americas focused on performative rituals in religious celebrations well before their colonization by the Spaniards. Consequently, the missionaries saw the importance of theatrical possibilities inherent in the rituals of indigenous society. Lacking a common spoken language, they turned to a visual and aural one with the intent to convert rather than merely entertain. And the method of communication was the theater. Baptism ceremonies for thousands would typically follow performances designed to transmit Christian teachings. Devotional songs in the vernacular, known as *villancicos*[23], were often used in religious and civic festivals in the early and modern Hispanic world. In his ethnographic research study, the Florentine Codex, the 16th-century Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún recounts his admiration for local performative customs and their parallels with Christian rituals.[24] Not surprisingly, his manuscript demonstrates the complex negotiation of culture, tradition, and identity experienced between the indigenous population and their conquerors immediately following the Spanish Conquest. Devotional songs and other lyric narratives coupled with native dance dramatized the participation of the Indian community in Christian religious rituals, exploiting the Amerindians' penchant for spectacle. Native audiences could relate to the familiar performative elements associated with their traditions. Such elements reinforced the collective memory with the unfamiliar Christian texts learned by heart and reenacted in public performance spaces, a hybrid native tradition embedded with a Spanish Christian message. Referencing Nahua culture, Jonathan Truitt reflects, "[t]he arrival of foreigners did not change people's understanding of how they engaged with religion, it just changed the religion with which they interacted" (p. 5).[25]

In the staging of its religious cycle plays, TLF hearkens back to regional theatrical beginnings in indigenous Nahua song and dance rituals. Ceremonial song and dance traditions (referenced by chroniclers of the time as *netotiliztli, macehualiztli, mitote, baile, areito*, and tocotín)[26] were the most communicative form of expression of Nahua cultures at the time of European contact, using the senses to actively engage huge audiences in the "embodied practice" of social spectacle. As the Latin American theater critic Diana Taylor asserts:

> For the Europeans, the skit or miracle plays were representations that served to illustrate and elucidate the larger biblical story for a predominantly illiterate audience. For the Amerindians, the acts were themselves presentations to the gods, one more offering in a complex and interconnected system of reciprocity.[27]

In other words, indigenous rituals were cyclic calendar events celebrated within a larger context of massive performance festivals involving a religious component. Social actors in this spectacle (priests, sacrificial victims, and participants) were actively engaged in synchronized ceremonies and observances with the aim of preserving a cosmic balance

between the forces of creation and destruction and thus ensuring the continuation of life through practices that affirmed the continuity of existence. A repertoire of gestures, oral traditions, recitation, dialogues, impersonation, acrobatic feats, movement, dancing, and singing required participation over spectatorship. León-Portillo underscores the artistic merit of sacred hymns, for example, as an "example of the beginnings of later drama", and broadens his understanding to refer to embodied practices as a framing device "which culminated in what may be called the perpetual theatre of the Nahuas with performances and sacrifices throughout the year which coincided with different religious festivals" (p. 65).[28] Catholic missionaries in the New World borrowed from this corporeal engagement to promote their Christian doctrine and to strengthen public forms of religious performance. The Nahua expressive culture of the performative (song, dance, and music) in the local native vernacular thus became a vehicle of Christian conversion within the context of religious festivals, *villancicos*, and sacred dramas. Missionaries vigorously maintained indigenous traditions of community theater, passing scripts from one town to another and preserving them over many generations. Passion plays were performed by indigenous communities in the Nahuatl language and also in Spanish when the native-language tradition faced censorship. Indigenous men played the role of the crucified Christ in these performances.[29] The Nahuatl Passion plays[30] were community theater performed during Holy Week, usually on Palm Sunday, with great festivity and numerous actors as well as musicians and singers participating.[31]

Although TLF's presentational approach is devoid of the pageantry and spectacle of Nahua drama, it is reminiscent of the indigenous incorporation of musical components as interludes. The Easter cycle performance of *El Asesinato de Jesús* is reminiscent of Nahuatl Passion plays in three key areas: scripting, troping, and the portrayal of the lead character. Each of these post-Conquest performative components is rooted in pre-Conquest indigenous sacred rituals.[32] Nahua rituals were designed to create harmony with the spirit world, a vision of the cosmos that included gifts and sacrifices, deep respect and admiration as they memorialized cyclic seasonal moments of societal conventions defined by their religious beliefs and cultural identity. As in the later Nahuatl Passion plays, such rituals were not necessarily scripted in a strictly repetitive manner. Each performance was unique, with additions, alterations, and eliminations that together reflect movement through time and space, varying conditions. Consequently, there are at least six surviving variants derived from a single unknown source of the Nahuatl Passion plays. TLF reflects this indigenous performance tradition by continuously re-thinking, re-working, and re-staging its plays so that individual scripts and performances are more responsive to their audiences and changing times. Their scripts are brought to life by a wide range of media (song, dance, music, gestures, pantomime, visual "living sculptures" blocking compositions, and freeze frames). Imitating the Medieval and Renaissance painters' visual style of situating biblical stories within the context of their own contemporary world, TLF uses a contemporary Honduran village for its biblical settings to suggest that the storyline of such events continues happening in the daily lives of its audiences. Referring to *El Asesinato de Jesús*, Jack Warner comments on his unique personal theatrical interpretation of the Passion of Christ:

> The staging of *The Assassination of Jesus*, is inspired by theatrical techniques that come from a study of the Christian artists of the European Middle Ages, when the churches were converted in popular theatres to evangelize and spread the Christian message. But *teatro la fragua* also draws on contemporary theatrical techniques. . .The visual style is inspired by the Medieval and Renaissance painters, who did not try to recreate the historical epoch of the time of Jesus, but who situated the Biblical stories within the context of their own contemporary world. . .This gives a new life to the traditional story.[33]

Just as the ritualistic enactments of biblical events were not meant to be simply pious stories retold but repeated realities relived in the present moment, such is the intent of the TLF cycle plays. *El Asesinato de Jesús* exists in several variations. A simple version is

based on the St. John Passion from the Catholic Good Friday liturgy that can be performed by village groups. But the more professional TLF's lengthier version covers Christ's journey to Jerusalem through the Resurrection. Processional salsa dancing to the sounds of the Honduran Carib drum (dating back to at least the 17th century and essential in the Caribbean bomba musical genre) is incorporated in this lengthier, more polished version performed by the troupe. In keeping with their eclectic nature, TLF has also used a choreographed piece to a Mozart Adagio. This loose textual biblical adaptation is an affirmation of TLF's view of the Bible as both a literary and religious document open to contemporary interpretation (staging and dialogue) in the retelling and reliving of the story. The interpolation of tropes of all sorts (music, song, dance, commentary, narration, and dialogic audience engagement) is TLF's hallmark of creative expressiveness. Adaptations consist of several episodes or chapters without regard to chronology and are usually performed over a period of a few hours. A notably beloved biblical story in the late Middle Ages that was often the subject of many religious dramas was Mary's visit to Jesus' tomb only to find him resurrected, part of the Passion and Easter cycle plays. The celebratory chant of the *Quem quaeritis?* ("Whom do you seek?")[34] is an exchange of a single question, answer, and command between the angels at Jesus' tomb and the three Marys (the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the sister of Lazarus). The short dialogic exchange heightens excitement and suspense at a key moment just before the discovery of the Resurrection. The dialogue gives voice to a disinherited and voiceless people by bringing together the human and the divine with the promise of a resurrected Savior. The Gospel-based story of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection has been adapted in a way that makes clear its parallels to modern-day Latin America's divisions between the powerful and the powerless, the wealthy and the impoverished. This oppositional framework (reminiscent of the Nahuatl worldview of the battle between the forces of creation and destruction that their massive ritual performances were meant to subvert) is reflected in TLF's stage blocking of two opposing factions, the peasant followers of Jesus and the corrupt local authorities. The latter invests in the bribery of informants and guards, and, of course, Judas, as they engage in deception to explain away the missing body of the Savior. Violence is portrayed alongside non-violence, oppression aside of the oppressed and repressed. The authorities decide that "*It is better to have one man die than for the whole nation to be destroyed*" in their perverse estimation designed to maintain their powerful and wealthy positions.

From a staging perspective, it is the Crucifixion scene that is the most challenging since it is a portrayal of violence. TLF has chosen to present this scene showing Jesus held aloft, his arms outstretched, hanging on a wooden pole, supported by the upraised arms of two other actors while a third actor thrusts a wooden rod at Jesus' throat. The three actors' roles rotate among different actors and/or audience members as the different scenes surrounding the Crucifixion unfold. The sacrificial role of Jesus in the Christian paradigm of the Crucifixion is thus repeated over and over again. Indigenous, dark-skinned mestizo or black Hondurans, male and female, are included as the crucified Jesus figure and those who hold the wooden cross to ensure that everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, gender or age, be included as participants in the Passion. A funeral procession reenactment carrying the body of Jesus follows. This scene portraying the crucified Christ in the persona of the marginalized parallels the Nahuatl Passion play wherein an indigenous man[35] embodies a deity (Jesus) being put to death by corrupt colonial authorities. The contemporaneity of the scene memorializes the sufferings of the colonized indigenous peoples and expands the crucified Christ beyond first-century Judea. Both the TLF and the Nahuatl crucifixion scenes are a very empowering rendering of representation, humanizing Christ as He is represented by the marginalized and suffering populace.

While Honduran Holy Week festivities typically end with Good Friday, Jack Warner prefers to end this biblical adaptation of the Passion in a celebratory fashion with the resurrected Jesus. Sadness and drab clothing give way to joyous song and colorful attire and even satire as members of the cortege banter over the burial site and the empty tomb

amidst the news of the miraculous resurrection of Jesus. As is customary with many of their plays, TLF ends the play with song, a traditionally festive Latin American hymn and the sung text from the Gospel of Mark: "*Don't be afraid. [. . .] He's resurrected*". TLF usually goes on tour with this Passion play to Honduran villages for four to six weeks, performing both indoors and outdoors, depending on the venue and weather. Religion and social justice, politics and inclusivity (diverse peoples of Honduras) thus become the pivotal points of this biblical cycle play. In staging pain and suffering, *El Asesinato de Jesús* moves through themes of injustice, dishonesty, betrayal, and violence, yet it ends on a note of hope and celebration. The TLF performative adaptation of the Passion play echoes medieval religious vernacular drama, its actors, and audiences. The performance of Christ's Passion is significant because His life was transformative for mankind and thus became the ultimate paradigm toward which other stories and lives inevitably attempted to emulate. Participating in Christ's life as a performer or audience member was always both a religious and theatrical experience. Both European medieval and Amerindian performances encouraged audience participation; spectators were highly engaged. And both stages made biblical stories meaningful to participants/observers by relating sacred history to sociopolitical issues of the day.

4. Sourcing Europe: The York Cycle Drama and TLF's *El Asesinato de Jesus*

> "Theater—like all the arts—puts the viewer inside the characters on stage". (Mike Warner 2020, p. 13)

> ". . .that affective power[of audiences]. . .(one's simultaneous awareness of being both a witness to an event with real emotional implications and consequences and a spectator of a performance, a work of craft might also vary markedly with one's location". (McGavin and Walker 2016, p. 11)

"The Pinners Play", commonly known as the York "Crucifixion",[36] dating from the 14th century of unknown authorship, is representative of early medieval religious drama in the sense that it made its audience both witnesses to and participants in the significant events of sacred biblical narratives. The medieval pageant wagons, which accommodated the mystery and miracle play cycles of the 10th through the 16th centuries, allowed audiences close proximity and even active performative involvement in these religious dramas of the most important events of sacred history. The purpose of audience engagement in the dramatization of Christian salvation history was to augment affective piety and to generate audience response. Commenting on audience response in medieval religious drama, Clifford Davidson[37] argues that the goal was to "[bring] viewers into the religious/historical scene of pain and suffering. . . Indeed, these plays were intended to reinforce the collective memory of Christ's pain and to do so as a way of promoting symbolic engagement with his suffering among a population that was accustomed to life in close proximity to disease, death, and in times of dearth, malnutrition and hunger" (p. 167). The uniqueness of the York *Crucifixion* pageant lies in its ability "not merely to show its spectators what it might have been like to have rejected and mocked Christ. . .but to cue them, to feel . . .what it *is* like in the real time of the performance. . .to identify vicariously with. . .the soldiers who are performing the Crucifixion". (McGavin and Walker 2016, pp. 8–9). By staging the violence, indifference, squabbling, and comedic antics of the soldiers crucifying Jesus set to an eclectic array of background music and dance, TLF recalls the emotive fixation of the York play. The focus on the soldiers shifts at the close of the performance to the crucified Jesus solemnly carried through the audience from the performance space designed to engage the spectators in the seriousness and presentness of what they are witnessing. The audience/participants are both victims and victimizers, suffering souls persecuted by public officials in their Honduran communities (via the crucified Jesus) and complicit actors in the death of the Savior (via the soldiers and the chorus of spectators on stage).

If the goals of TLF's performances are to educate, to entertain, and ultimately to impact audiences by heightening awareness of and responsiveness to duties of civic engagement and social justice, *El Asesinato de Jesús*[38] accomplishes its objective in its three successive

vignettes of the Passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The performative *dynamic of interaction between the image of the crucified Jesus (spotlighted three times with three different people: a male Honduran peasant, a male *mestizo*, and a female) and its viewers is crucial to this transformative process. The image of Jesus with arms outstretched attached to wooden poles held by an array of actors and audience members alike and the visual of angels giving witness to the Resurrection at the tomb in TLF's Passion play stand out as sculpted reminders of the liminality of religious drama. These visual symbols are framed within social acts that arise from rituals of transition, of crossing the *limen*, or thresholds of spiritual boundaries. For a medieval audience, what they witnessed as audience/participants was their lived reality. The audience becomes the mob during the Passion; the audience becomes Herod's soldiers slaughtering the Innocents during the Holy Family's exile; the audience becomes the crowd welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem (later, the same crowd that calls for His crucifixion), whether they do so literally or figuratively. The audiences of medieval religious performances reinforced their faith by their bodily participation in performed biblical narratives. These never-ending and continuously relived biblical narratives transitioned from the personal stage experience to the lived experiences of daily life. Medieval cycle plays were not merely past events or parables but moments relived in the present time. The present life was merely a transition, spatially and temporally liminal, to the one great drama of salvation in the afterlife. Yet, medieval drama also addressed in embodied form profound questions about humanity's place in creation and the scheme of history and did so with extraordinary emotive and affective range extending from the cerebral to the visceral, the obscene to the pious (Sponsler 1997, p. 140).

In *Stages of Belief: The Nature of Audience Response in Medieval and Early Modern Drama*, Rebecca Cepek[39] references the Christian attempt of late medieval drama to imaginatively recreate the events of sacred history as if they were present at the very places where they occurred. She refers to this emotive state as "affective piety", or the practice of emotionally charged devotion to the humanity of Jesus. Between the 11th and 15th centuries, meditation on the life of Christ focused on key moments notable for their physicality, in particular, His birth and death. While the Gospels portray Jesus' public preachings and Passion as exemplary components of both His divinity and humanity, the high and late Middle Ages underscore His emotions, sufferings, moments of doubt, and despair. Throughout the performance text, such instances are charged with emotion and fervor, allowing the audience to become active participants—real or imagined—in the presentness of the moment. Similarly, Jill Stevenson argues that the emotive impact of such religious performances does not cease at their conclusion "but continues in the body and mind of the viewer".[40] This sense of pathos beyond the production is particularly true of the gut-wrenching crucifixion scene in TLF's *El Asesinato de Jesús*. Using the visual representation of "living sculpture" (human bodies to create scenes) blocking compositions, La Fragua's Passion Play engages the audience in both the biblical story and lived current experiences. The use of the word "assassination" in the title (*El Asesinato de Jesús*) places the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection in very relatable terms, calling to mind the regional political and religious assassinations (the Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero martyred and elevated to sainthood on 14 October 2018, for example), who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for social justice. TLF's referencing of Honduran and Central American contemporary events[41] that parallel the violence in both *Navidad Nuestra* and *El Asesinato de Jesús* makes a biblical reenactment of the past a lived reality of the present. Consequently, when Latin American audiences see the cultural, sociological, and religious reality of their world represented in a performance, they are in a better position to process that reality with greater clarity. As was the case with medieval and early modern dramatists, TLF stresses the co-presence of biblical and contemporary preoccupations, conceiving of biblical drama as key to the dynamic struggle to interpret and apply the Bible to real-life circumstances. In essence, these plays are a demonstration of the reality of the sacred as omnipresent and continuous, a proof of authenticity of what Robert Edwards calls "the aesthetics of recovery".[42] Biblical events such as the Nativity and the Passion remain

in time as they are meaningfully transferred to the here and now, which is their most important function. The evidentiary nature of these cycle dramas includes witnesses of the Incarnation and Resurrection—the Three Kings and the three Marys—to testify to their validity as documented historical events. Much like the medieval York cycle plays, there is an interactive element between actors and their audiences, a unity derived from their identity as community members as they engage with their countrymen from small rural areas, bringing with them similar witnessed life experiences. Direct address to the audience in the form of admonitions, rhetorical questions, and open-ended dialogue invites attendees into the theatrical reality to play the crowd greeting Jesus in Jerusalem and the onlookers on the hill of Golgotha. Gospel and dramaturgy combine with word and action, chaos and the restoration of order, social injustice, and hope for the future in the resurrected Christ. The joyous musical refrain of lively song and dance that opens *El Asesinato de Jesús* (*Voy, Señor, Contigo voy/I am coming with you, Lord, With you I am coming)* is realized in the final scene of the Resurrection. A modern retelling of this Gospel story of Christ's Passion thus becomes a valuable tool for an understanding of systemic oppression since both TLF actors and audiences have experienced injustice firsthand. But hope is restored in the play's final rejoicing in Jesus' rising from the dead, which is foreshadowed from its opening scene.

As in the York Passion play, TLF's version underscores the humanity of Jesus in his silent suffering in contrast to the barbarity, indifference, and ignorance of the soldiers who go about their assigned task of crucifying Him. Tolerance of local traditions, delivery of Church doctrine in a visually appealing form accessible to all regardless of religious belief, and the element of entertainment coupled with religious content—these were the foundations of the street pageants from the 12th to 14th centuries (Goldberg 2012, pp. 259–61). At first, stages were arranged in a straight line or a semicircle with the audience in front. Then, in an effort to establish a closer relationship with the audience, stages were placed around the city square with the spectators in the center, making the simultaneous viewing of multiple performances possible. And later, beginning in the 14th century, mobile processional staging on pageant wagons depicting religious tableaux was created (Butterworth 2014, pp. 32–24). Theatrical presentations came *to* the people as spectators waited in place for the next mobile stage or cart to appear. The factors of entertainment and accessibility became increasingly important as biblical dramatizations moved out of the church and controlled clerical structures and into the streets (Nelson 1974, p. 11). In their street setting, religious drama became more secular, with local customs, idioms, and folk traditions woven into performances as solemnity and humor were carefully juxtaposed to attract audiences and maintain their attention and patronage. Spectator response thus helped to shape the public spectacle of plays with religious content, as ritual reenactment gradually morphed into the pageantry of outdoor performance. Medieval performances of all kinds—whether plays sponsored by guilds or confraternities, royal entries, processionals, or other sorts of public spectacle—"became tied to the economic, political, intellectual, religious, and social practices of their local sites of performance".[43] And so, medieval dramatic performances should be viewed as not just literary texts or historical documents or even theatrical events but rather as forms of social practice framed by religious content and messaging directed to a deeply engaged and receptive audience. Such is the view of Teatro La Fragua's production of its cycle plays. While commenting on their Passion play's medieval roots, the troupe also notes its contemporary context:

> In this spirit, [The Christian artists of the European Middle Ages] *teatro la fragua* places the story in the context of a contemporary Honduran village. This gives a new life to the traditional story, and emphasizes that this is not just a pious story that happened thousands of years ago, but that it deals with events that continue happening in our daily lives. Thus the work aims to instill humanistic and Christian values in the contemporary cultural context.[44]

The York Passion play represents a series of opposites—the religious and secular, the private and public, the visual and aural, the comedic and tragic, the ephemeral and enduring, the corporeal and spiritual, the biblical and social. Medieval drama engaged

audiences with its sharp and cathartic humor, its critical social observations, its religious stories and teachings, and its shared joys and pathos as it forged community in gatherings in public spaces. The call-and-response musical dialogue sung in the services of monastic churches of the Middle Ages is a case in point. These dialogues or "tropes" expanded on the written texts of scripture related to a particular day in the Church year, following the Church calendar. Indeed, the liturgy became a reenactment of the life and ministry of Jesus through a series of powerful ceremonial visuals or ritualized acts. The reenactment of the Last Supper, inviting Jesus' disciples to eat bread transformed into His own flesh while instructing them to drink wine changed into His blood, was a foreshadowing of the blood that would be shed for humankind on Good Friday. The York Corpus Christi Plays venerated the body of Christ and were performed during the summertime feast of Corpus Christi. The religious cycle plays were accessible, in part, due to the linkage between the Church calendar's biblical events with local festivals, customs, and traditions tied to the different seasons, according to British medieval historian Eleanor Parker.[45] The Church year was intertwined with seasonal change. In the Middle Ages, asserts Parker, "Everyone kept the same seasons of fasting or observed religious holidays at the same time, since these dates were not a matter of personal choice but enforced by royal decree. . .the agricultural and church calendars. . .[were] communal structures of time that were shared across society".[46] In a society where the Church was linked to many aspects of daily life, festivals such as Christmas and Easter were holidays from work and thus provided opportunities for communities to come together in celebration in public spaces during fairs, feasts, and the public spectacle of religious street pageants. In such a setting, the duality of popular theater (with mimes, acrobats, dancers, animal trainers, wrestlers, minstrels, and storytellers) and religious ritual (scripture underscoring Christian doctrine and living practices) co-existed in the same public spaces, complementing one another as varied forms of entertainment. Such opportunities for festive drama based on biblical scriptures enjoyed wide appeal in medieval society. These rites were understood to enlighten, inspire, and even entertain performers and participants alike, and, in the words of TLF's Jack Warner, the Honduran seasons also played a role in his productions:

> There is no mid-winter rest here in Honduras as in the lands to the far north, just as there is no wine and little bread: church traditions were born of European realities and overlook the fact that "summer" here is the dry season, "winter"the rainy season, and can be completely different on opposite slopes of the same mountain. . .The stories from the Gospels are marvelous sources for creating a community of theatres and dramatists. . .. . .divine inspiration and artistic inspiration are close kin—. . .[47]

From a stylistic perspective, TLF productions in general use medieval and early modern mystery and morality plays as models of ritual and spectacle while combining modern styles and performative adaptations to connect the biblical drama with the social realities of performers and audiences. Each TLF production is, in itself, a bricolage of medieval, modern, and traditional performative theatrical methods and styles designed to bring the Gospel's message to its audiences in a way that is meaningful to their lived experiences. The troupe's ultimate goal is to raise the consciousness of its spectators/participants to the social, political, and economic oppression that surround them with the added hope of their future participation in societal change through peaceful means. Parallel to the medieval stage, wherein the boundaries between the actor and the audience were not clearly defined in the public spaces of religious cycle plays, TLF is audience-oriented. TLF performers follow the distinctive features of interactivity and community with characters speaking directly to the audience, encouraging audience response, disappearing into the crowd, meeting spectators face to face, and engaging them in dialogue both during the play and post-performance. In this manner, TLF brings mobility, creativity of delivery, and the novelty of live theater to audiences who have never experienced theatrical performances due to a lack of accessibility, awareness, or affordability. Such is the hallmark of popular theater for social change. Its main objective is not solely to provide entertainment (although

satire and other forms of entertainment such as song and dance are part of its performances) but to *be* entertaining *and* spiritually inspirational. Through its style of delivery, TLF seeks to arouse social consciousness of the dignity of all and outrage against injustices against those marginalized by poverty, race, and ethnicity. The minimalism of enactment without elaborate stage effects only highlights existing social problems and messaging. Theater becomes an educational alternative in a globalized world that seems to exclude those cultures that are considered "inferior" due to economic, ethnic, racial, or other forms of marginalization. TLF is educational without being didactic, as it dramatizes biblical truths and their application to the realities of everyday life. Inspired by its medieval roots, the group's interpretation of dramatized scripture reminds audiences of their human dignity and agency as Honduran citizens created in the image and likeness of their Creator. In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook insists, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged".[48] TLF's adaptations of medieval cycle plays have been performed in the "empty spaces" of churches, halls, cloisters, hillsides, city plazas, and streetscapes in both rural and urban areas of Honduras and other Central American countries for audiences both large and small. It is a *peripatetic* theater, "a medium on the move,"[49] a traveling company whose performances aspire to be a moral compass to communities through a blending of medieval and experimental techniques with cultural content that is contemporaneous to its audiences. The anticipated audience response to these dramatic performances is to embrace them as reality in spite of any ahistorical content.

From a thematic perspective, TLF's rendition of the crucifixion of Christ underscores the paradox of the suffering Christ with the undercurrent of humor and mocking banality of the spectators and soldiers on stage. The glorious and blessed event of the Resurrection ending the piece adds to the contrast between displays of human sin and evil, hatred and cruelty, in direct juxtaposition to God's unconditional grace and love. One of the few lines uttered by the mostly silent Christ figure of the *York Corpus Christi Cycle's Crucifixion Pageant* explicitly calls upon the audience to gaze at the spectacle of His pain (*Behold mine head, mine hands, mine feet,/And fully feel now ere ye fine/If any mourning may be meet/Or mischief met unto mine)*. TLF also places emphasis on Jesus' body as a performance vehicle in *El Asesinato de Jesús* with the silent still images of the suffering Christ held aloft, stretched out on a wooden bar in the raised arms of two other actors, while a third actor thrusts a wooden rod against His throat. This violent scene is not gratuitous. While it parallels the York focus on Jesus' suffering, TLF's rendition evokes a wider communal response of repeated still shots of the Crucifixion in which the role of Jesus is shared by all the actors and the marching of the figure of Christ on the cross from stage to audience. This approach echoes the contemporary theatrical influences of Jerzy Grotowski's communal psychosocial experience and Augusto Boals's "Joker" technique (*personajes comodines*) using actors in different roles in the same performance text.

5. A Modern Approach to the Medieval in TLF's Reimagining of Medieval Cycle Plays: Theater of the Oppressed, Community Theater, and Liberation Theology

> "To me, the Gospels are great art...they're also the most subversive document ever written. . .art does not necessarily exist to entertain, but also to console the afflicted. . .Art is always in some ways touching deep spiritual questions of who we are, what is our place in this world and what does life mean. . .When people begin to be proud of who they are as persons. . .they will feel obliged to put the Gospel into practice in their own situation". Jack Warner, SJ (Stage 1990, p. 13)

> "The Resurrection of Jesus is. . .a symbol of hope. . .I can't see how you can show love. . .without being in solidarity with the victims of this world. . .The theology of the cross is the theology of love in our real world". Jon Sobrino, S.J. (Liberation Theologian)[50]

Recognizing that their audiences represent either primary or residual oral cultures,[51] both TLF and medieval cycle plays capitalize on the storytelling nature of their biblical

performances by using a repertoire of simple strategies: the repetition of phrases to emphasize points or themes; friendly interaction with the audience; music, costume, and props; idiomatic expressions; strong imagery; and onomatopoeia (especially as related to sounds found in nature). Additionally, TLF employs diglossia (a co-existence of popular peasant language and Honduran colloquialisms) and learned (biblical text and Latin) language, popular sermonizing (proverbs and formulaic expressions), a polyphony of narrative voices in dialogue, chorus, or argumentative exchanges, embedded oral narratives interspersed with dialogue, and digressions—all elements designed to keep their audiences engaged with the performance. The convergence of such oral and textual components combines primary orality (no influence from the written word), secondary orality (implicit influence by the written word), and text-centered biblical narrative often read or recited to the audience by the narrator(s). Familiarity with biblical stories as significant as the birth, Passion, and death of Jesus and focus on such oral elements help Hondurans feel that they belong to the larger community, sharing in a recognizable story. Similarly embedded in the political, social, and performative aspects of medieval and early modern biblical drama was the continuous invocation of God's active involvement in the *present* moment, as Jesus said at the Passover supper to the Apostles: "This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Jesus knew that His mission on earth would soon be over, and He wanted to teach His Apostles how to remember Him when He was no longer with them.

Just as orality was paramount to the American Jesuit and linguist Walter Ong, for the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, "... the important thing is not the words but what we do with these words, what gives life to inanimate words of the text, what transforms them into 'the Word'".[52] Going beyond the power of oral communication and post-dramatic action, Howard Clausen asserts that drama functions "to show and not to tell". He goes on to assert that if drama becomes overly didactic, it is not fulfilling its mission to portray human nature and behavior, thus allowing the viewer to make inferences on his own. Clausen explains this building of self-efficacy as follows:

> It is a tension every writer feels when he wants to communicate through drama an idea or a theme of some truth as he perceives it: to suggest the truth adequately and to have it emerge out of a dramatic situation without taking from the audience its privilege of participating in the process by which that truth comes to light and having its own joy of discovery: "Yes, It's there, I see it!... It's true... I've experienced it". or "I've learned something about people or about myself as a person that I've never understood in quite that way before.[53]

The result is Grotowski's approach to a community-based theater, wherein he wanted to eliminate the divide between audience and actor and create a bond between the two. This more "intimate" relationship between actor/audience would be achieved by closer proximity between the two in the theater space or no separate stage area at all, minimalistic costuming and scenography, and lack of professional lighting and sound effects in order to place greater focus on the text and the actors as they identified with their audience. A pedagogy of collective creation between performers/director and their audiences to generate a performance text was used to promote social connectedness, a grassroots type of theater. Following the Latin American tradition of collective creation, this process includes selecting a theme, community interviews, progression from scenario sketch to improvisation, scenario consolidation, and interactive performance (dramatized and performed by community members themselves), evolving all the time by continuously processing audience input.

Introductions to the performance by one or more of the actors are customary in medieval plays, as is the case with TLF performances. Such a technique underscored the authenticity of the actors, the central focus of Grotowski's "poor theatre" performances. A standard introduction and closing of TLF performances by these community actors are "*Fuego, aire, tierra, agua./Fire, air, earth, water./Ustedes y nosotros somos Teatro La Fragua./We and all of you are Teatro La Fragua*", as the actors point to the audience members. Acknowledging

themselves as fellow Hondurans, they proceed to identify their performative role or roles in the performance text. They engage the individual audience members with spontaneous comments and questions, as do some attendees who feel the need to interrupt the actors with dialogue or banter. *Navidad Nuestra*, for example, is interspersed with attention-getting pauses and long dramatic silences, shepherded by a narrator who explains why the familiar Christmas story is being retold. The piece dramatically closes with the response, "*so that you may know the truth of what you have been taught*". Such short dramatic prologues (*loas*) often preceded *autos sacramentales* (sacred/religious plays) in the late Middle Ages and into the 16th and 17th century Golden Age, wherein their purpose was not only laudatory but also to predispose the audience toward a favorable reception of the longer dramatic piece and its themes. Personal introductions by the community actors also create a bond with the audience, making the biblical storytelling event relational and communal, thus contributing to the meaning-making of shared experiences in the spirit of Grotowski. Consequently, performance themes are not limited to spiritual values for TLF. Instead, they are expanded to address the Honduran sociopolitical issues already referenced, explore Honduran history, teach literacy, and stimulate individual and group autonomy. These theatrical pieces, regardless of their goal—spiritual or secular—seek to empower their audiences at most and, at the very least, provide them with hope and moments of respite from their plight of social and economic despair through an entertaining medium. The audience members are invited to see themselves reflected on stage in actors from their own communities who speak their own language and live their own experiences among them, the embodiment of cultural memory and identity. The perspective of the dispossessed is given voice and agency. The actors are able to give voice to the wants and aspirations, the thoughts and beliefs of ordinary people to facilitate communication simply because they come from the surrounding communities. Performance does not take place in a vacuum, as is the case of the call-and-response litany in church services or processions, recited by the clergy and responded to in a recurring formulaic pattern by the faithful. In TLF, all the performers (and professional stage crew) come together in song and dialogue, dance, and freeze poses for a single purpose: to create an aural and visual spectacle that elicits a reaction from the audience, to give the spectators an experience that invites participation during the performance and self-reflection and dialogue post-performance. And this leads us to the fundamental mission of TLF elaborated in its Mission Statement, a focus on values communicated through the performance arts:

> To awaken the creativity of the pueblo by means of the theatre, so the people find their own solutions for their present predicament. The theatre thus becomes an educational alternative which can express to the same people and to the world the richness, the beauty and the power of Honduran and Central American values. This is an especially urgent task at this historical moment characterized by the phenomenon of economic and cultural globalization which marginalizes and excludes those cultures which are considered "inferior".[54]

In Kelly Iverson's (2021), he identifies three aspects critical to audience engagement: the emotional, the nonverbal/sensory, and the memorial experiences. Given the oral tradition of the New Testament, he argues, oral performance of the Gospel stories leads to an audience interpretation that is both shared and dynamic, stoking emotions and memories and allowing for ongoing interpretation. TLF reflects the Gospel according to Mark in his implicit motivational call to action and denunciation of poverty and his inherent sense of powerlessness. In Mark, we see Jesus the Messiah coming as a servant. His narrative focuses on Jesus' words and actions: who He is equated with what He *does*. Thus, it is fitting that Jack Warner ends his theater workshops[55] with TLF's mission and message in an emotional song sung in unison (performers and audience), ending with the deed-over-word phrase "*No basta rezar!*" (Prayer is not enough!)

Since prayerful words are deemed insufficient to Jesus' exemplary actions, TLF presents religious doctrine with a biblical backdrop and a contemporary makeover by injecting social justice issues (i.e., poverty and marginalization of peasants by the privileged

class) based on Liberation Theology.[56] Biblical dramatizations still had an educational function of teaching religious doctrine and being entertaining to largely peasant populations. But they also had the added role of a more progressive theological goal of applying the Christian faith to heighten awareness of unjust socioeconomic structures and actively participating in changing those structures. In 1971, the renowned Peruvian Jesuit scholar Gustavo Gutiérrez[57], in *A Theology of Liberation*, referred to Latin America in just such a transformative way:

> The liberation of our continent means more than overcoming economic, social, and political dependence. It means, in a deeper sense, to see the becoming of mankind as a process of the emancipation of man in history. It is to see man in search of a qualitatively different society in which he will be free from all servitude, in which he will be the artisan of his own destiny. (Gutiérrez 1971, p. 91)

This is the "new man" that the Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino describes in *Jesus the Liberator*,[58] suggesting hope for the future in the dignity of agency attained by the oppressed. In this sense, audience inclusivity is purposeful for TLF, not just for entertainment or religious edification, but for its *participatory* value, linking religious faith and the faithful (particularly the poor and oppressed) through involvement in political and civic affairs, such as peasants' rights of land ownership and a fair wage and holding public officials accountable for their actions. TLF's mission is to awaken the creativity of its audiences by means of theater so that *they* can identify and address issues of concern in their own communities and then take individual and collective action leading to viable solutions. These actions of civic engagement might be as simple as volunteerism, organizational involvement, and participation in the electoral process. Since the typical TLF audience is not expected to be passive during a performance, attendees often actively engage the actors during and after the event in dialogue with questions and comments about the performance and the themes that it explored. Indeed, many TLF audiences have never experienced a theatrical performance and thus are unaware of the normal protocols of how an audience is *expected* to respond. TLF openly invites its audiences to take on a participatory role and extend this active engagement to the decoding of the theatrical performance. Faith for the sake of adhering to Christian values alone is transformed into an active pursuit of planting the seeds of social justice in everyday life by inviting audiences to become the master of their own destiny. The spectator becomes an actor called upon to become keenly aware of and address his own poverty, injustice, and oppression, as well as the same plight of his neighbors. Questioning, debating, and discussing are incorporated into these ambulatory theater pieces of scripture. Their objective is to connect with people, especially in remote rural areas of the countryside, in order to plant the seeds of agency in communities. It is the same message that a revolutionary, liberating Jesus brought directly to the people in the New Testament. In Luke 6, for example, Jesus proclaims, "…He [God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free…"

6. Final Reflections: *The Gospel: Live!*, A Revitalization of Biblical Drama

> "We are **teatro la fragua**, a theatre that breathes and moves forward, a mission that forges and commits us, and which, in the face of political indifference, motivates us with greater strength and pride to continue awakening the creativity of the people and their spirit…the spirit of change in Honduras". Luis F. García, Administrative Director of TLF

Ritual influenced every aspect of Christian orthodox liturgy, from visual images and symbols to call-and-response chants and celebratory song and dance. Yet, iconography and ritual practices maintained a reverential tone so as not to highlight the material or the artistic over the spiritual. Theatrical modes of representation (what Catherine Bell refers to as "performance approaches" in *Performance*)—spectacle and pageantry—were consistently

avoided and even condemned. In the Middle Ages (dating back to the 10th century and flourishing in the 12th and 13th centuries), the Church began to incorporate actors, realistic settings, and special effects in the liturgy in a performative mode as they represented biblical stories. Since many of Jesus' teachings are recounted in parable form rather than in explicit laws and rules to be remembered, dramatized representation of biblical episodes was a natural and engaging mode of expression. The orthodox hierarchy of the Church, however, continued to reject these performative techniques *within* the church services. But Church officials were unable to influence or control religious street dramatizations performed by the laity. But these secular dramatizations of biblical stories did not simply teach the Bible; they "*embodied* and *enacted* the central myths of the culture", as Michael O'Connell explains, and thus drew audiences' "minds and affections" into them (O'Connell 1995, p. 82). The audiences' impulse to believe in and the ability to participate in the "reality" of such performances significantly contributed to their popularity among townspeople and peasants alike (Cepek 2014, p. 102).

Teatro La Fragua's Christmas and Easter cycle plays are based on biblical stories that are familiar to their audiences through either written text or oral transmission. TLF presents these Gospel works through the perspective of the dispossessed, their target audience, thus allowing their audiences to identify with characters and themes. And, in this sense, the troupe engages in political messaging by giving Hondurans the ability to see themselves reflected on stage and represented by fellow Hondurans. Their episodic structure allows for a collection of themed performances during a specific season in the Church calendar. In Honduras, the many feasts that make up the liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church's ritual year are valuable to the community because they provide opportunities for communal celebrations designed to enlighten, inspire, and entertain. This is the same liturgical calendar of the late medieval Church. Jack Warner modeled Teatro La Fragua on medieval mystery plays for the purpose of audience edification on the *relational* message of the Bible, bringing hope to their everyday lives. Like their medieval counterparts, the TLF players perform biblical historical stories in contemporary settings, making references to local landmarks, conflicts, and officials in order to root the play's action in the moment. In this way, both medieval and modern actors draw their audiences into the current situation of their particular locale, making biblical mysteries feel more present and accessible as they immerse their public in the divine with its implications for humanity.[59] While Warner is a native of Chicago, all the TLF performers are local Hondurans trained in his theater workshops. As in medieval religious drama, community-based participation has contributed to TLF's performance popularity. The medieval was entertaining, didactic, religious ritual, sacred and secular, individual and community-oriented, natural and supernatural, and focused on audience recipients and textual content all at the same time. Carolly Erickson describes this medieval complex portrait as "all encompassing" and "multifold. . .knit together by a commonly held perceptual design" of reality (p. 8).[60] For medieval audiences/participants, dramatic reenactments of biblical stories were, in actuality, enactments of events repeated in perpetuity and thus as "real" as the lived reality of their everyday lives. Audience response to drama may be measured by a recognizable relationship to reality that resonates with its members as both a community and as individuals, yielding a way of thinking about and processing a reality familiar to them.[61]· According to medieval scholar Dee Dyas, audiences were "vital players in this epic drama, for the mystery cycles, the miracles or saint's plays and the moralities were all designed to warn and win souls" (p. 225).[62] Following this line of thought, to some extent, such medieval performances were meant to be *transformative* rituals with participating rather than passive audiences. In discussing "social dramas", the anthropologist Victor Turner related social conflict and social dramas to ritual—those rites that "mark changes in a group's or individual's social status" with ritual as a transformative, performative act.[63] In a broader sense, performance constitutes meaning and affirms shared individual and cultural values. TLF recognizes Church rituals that unfold not only in sacred but also secular spaces, beginning with a community, but their community themes, settings, and staging have a

Honduran sociopolitical context. With such a backdrop, TLF performances embody the Greek word *drama*, meaning "performed action", and the word *theatron*, meaning "a place for seeing"; *drama* puts in motion what a community needs to enact in whatever venue is available or appropriate. Whether in scripted form or in spontaneous responses adapted to individual audiences and venues, Hondurans see fellow Hondurans engaged in the act of representation of biblical texts that reflect their reality and search for the transformation of both the soul and society.

To be sure, the vestiges of medieval biblical drama have survived in various contexts, including a rich legacy in Latin America with the Franciscan-sponsored Nahuatl dramas in sixteenth-century Mexico. What makes TLF's experimental performances of iconic Gospel stories so unique, then? The answer lies in its influences, both recent and historical, each contributing to the troupe's theatrical experiment—a collage of past Christian rituals and festivals, pageant spectacles, politically engaged street and community theater, drawing on Liberation Theology roots and the non-Aristotelian model of the theater practitioner Augusto Boals's Theater of the Oppressed. It is a collaborative enterprise of imported medieval European sources, American leadership in the figure of its founder and artistic director Jack Warner, and Honduran local performers and audiences informing biblical stories with their lived realities, giving them poignant *relevancy*. TLF performances both engage and entertain their audiences with a mosaic of song, music, and dance reminiscent of pre-Conquest indigenous ritual performances and post-Conquest missionary theater in New Spain for the evangelization of indigenous populations. Its montage approach to theatrical production makes TLF unique in a performance style that uses as its base traditional biblical stories recognized worldwide.

While it shares some elements in common with medieval cycle drama, TLF is quite different from its earlier counterpart due largely to its eclectic and experimental nature. Although TLF exhibits much of the influence of medieval religious drama, the troupe moves away from the traditional toward something in perpetual construction that invites others to get involved—community members as actors and audiences as recipients of and commentators on recognizable biblical texts in ongoing dialogue with performers. This popular theater for social change, similar to medieval mystery, miracle, and morality plays, provides an open invitation to a wider artistic intervention: the democratic proposition to make both the production and consumption of biblical narratives more accessible; the destabilization of dramatic conventions with entertaining elements of music, song, and dance; the social and political intentionality of reliving the vexing challenges of humanity; and the unexpected pathways toward reconfiguring the relationship between performer and audience. TLF invites audience input not only in the reimagining of the performance text but also in the resolution of social problems. Medieval cycle drama was intended to be a lived experience, a living performance text rather than a text relegated to a script.[64] While we might debate the meaning of the terms "theatricality", "performativity", and "performance", interactive performances of the medieval pageant type illustrate textuality's limited capacity to fully capture or even reiterate performance. Premodern texts are sociable, rife with traces of the oral cultures that helped render them legible in the only partially literate world that shaped them. Texts (i.e., scripts) cannot adequately replicate such performances but only stand in the place of voice and presence, images and interactions, providing us with words that allow us to imagine some possible ways that performances made meaning.[65] Similar to their medieval predecessors performed during festivals on pageant wagons to depict different religious stories, Teatro La Fragua performances are engaging, allowing for improvisation. TLF performances are so tied into their communities that they *evolve*, adapting to audience reception and feedback and an ever-changing daily reality. TLF identifies itself with the surroundings of poverty from which it sprung. It is a "poor theater", but, more importantly, it is a "people's theater". The cycle plays that frame the humanity of Jesus in birth and death are, by the very nature of their performance style and messaging, real-life dramas set in a country fraught with injustices. Raising consciousness of reality is the first step in making changes to that reality. For Jack Warner

and TLF, social justice is love and action: doing good for others and giving them justice. *The Gospel: Live!* dramatizations are a vehicle for spreading this message to a diverse Central American audience. The overriding motivation and drive to reach audiences in modern theater stems from the medieval theater's stylistic efforts to attract audiences to performances in public spaces. Teatro La Fragua, however, is determined to bring theater *to* the people if they cannot come to the theater in indoor or outdoor settings. While the TLF cycle plays are rooted in Christian expression, the aim of these plays is to help promote social discourse, dialogue, and potential social change. This transformative element, whether it occurs in personal lives or in the social life of the community, expects that society engage in a process of self-reflection followed by meaningful action. While spreading religious teachings centered around the Christian Bible is important in TLF's *The Gospel: Live!*, the contemporary messaging behind such plays is to teach audiences how they should be living their faith and how they should be responding to the very real challenges that their country poses to them in the modern era. Such challenges include lack of voice and personal dignity, violence, corruption, poverty, discrimination, persecution, and limited education and healthcare. *Navidad Nuestra* and *El Asesinato de Jesús*, while referencing the violence of the Slaughter of the Innocents and the crucifixion of Jesus, end on a note of hope and celebration in the birth and resurrection of the Savior. The references to violent events in Honduras and Latin America's recent history in each of these plays are thus placed in sharp contrast to their celebratory conclusion. Such is La Fragua's mode of resistance to the hopeless policies of oppression and repression in Honduras. TLF will not be silenced in spreading its message of spiritual nourishment, as the cast chimes out "*Alleluia*" while pointing to an image of a rainbow, the biblical symbol of hope and God's enduring love for all mankind. Knowing that their performance texts alone cannot overthrow the corrupt system in Honduras nor radically change its systemic inequity, they at least wish to raise awareness and offer hope for the future by highlighting the spiritually healing message of biblical scripture in their performances. TLF sees the world through the creative eyes of community artists who invite people to engage with concepts like oppression, poverty, persecution, and marginalization, even if they do not fully understand them. They argue that the past (cultural heritage, biblical stories, and the origins of theater found in medieval drama) is sacred, an essential component of their work, a kindred spirit, an expression of the living Gospel's words: "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression. . ." (Isaiah 1:17) and "Give justice to the weak. . .maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute". (Psalm 82:3)

Medieval biblical drama and its cultural contexts, the affinities between medieval and modern understandings of representation, *these* are the elements that allow this unique form of theater to live on—revived albeit in other more modern and culturally relevant formats—rather than being relegated to the dramatic dustbin of history. On the enduring nature of the practices of medieval theater, Carol Symes reflects

> Not only does medieval theatre deserve to be researched on its own terms, it offers alternative models of theatricality and agency that are directly applicable to many contemporary performing arts and which mirror the revolutionary social and cultural movements of the mid-twentieth century. (Symes 2017, p. 211)

Teatro La Fragua is cognizant of the singular contributions of medieval drama yet respectful of the cultural roots and contemporary needs of its current-day audiences while highlighting liturgical tropes in its Gospel dramatizations of timeless lessons of morality. And so we are brought back full circle to two terms related to medieval theater that have been constants in TLF's biblical plays: religious ritual and dramatic spectacle. The terms suggest the seeming incongruity of recycling the past with medieval ritual and thematic content yet reinventing spectacle with contemporary dance moves, language, and sociocultural content. Stories from the Bible are used in TLF's religious cycle plays not simply to preach the Bible as part of religious services or festivals but to convey Jesus' message of hope and social responsibility to new audiences in a manner that both teaches the Gospel's liberating message and entertains with creative, meaningful artistry. As such,

Teatro La Fragua stitches together the religious with the secular, the past with the present, and the medieval with the contemporary.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 (Burke et al. 1991). This documentary film follows Teatro La Fragua to remote villages where Hondurans are eager to view and participate in this grassroots theater group led by an American Jesuit priest.

2 In his essay, Dolan attempts to arrive at some conclusions regarding the degree of passivity or activity experienced by members of the congregation at Mass. He argues for a correlation between lay literacy and clerical approaches to Mass as a "performance text". (Alford 1995, pp. 13–24).

3 (Alford 1995, pp. 127–50). This book is a compilation of essays written by scholars in the field of medieval drama, relating to performance both past (from the 12th to 17th centuries) and present (until its publication in the early 1990s). Contributors include David Bevington, David Mills, John Alford, and John Friedman, among others.

4 In this book, *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of the Medieval Theater. Early Drama, Art, and Music*, Michael Norton explores problems with defining the term "liturgical drama". His preference is the term "represent" rather than "portray", "celebrate" rather than "perform", "in the person of" rather than "role", "vestments" rather than "costume", "movement" rather than "staging".

5 In his book *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theater*, Michael Norton references "representational rites" as opposed to the concept of the "illusion of liturgical drama" (Norton 2017, p. 123). Norton makes the distinction as follows: "On the one hand were liturgical rites. . .rites that were celebrated within specific liturgical contexts at particular churches at particular moments in time, rites that were performed year after year and century after century. On the other hand were what appeared to be Latin religious plays that had at best a tangential association with the liturgy, plays that may have been performed one or more times at some unspecified location at some usually unspecified time, if they were performed at all" (p. 1).

6 Commenting on the visual association between the "liturgy" and "drama", Norton explains, ". . .The newer churches of Paris. . .were modeled on pagan temples. . .expressing 'the idea that the liturgy was holy drama to be performed by ecclesiastical actors on a stage raised and separated from the passive audience below.'" p. 28.

7 Norton explores the role of poetry, music, and chant (hymns) in the liturgy of the Middle Ages and the expression "drame liturgique" in essays published by the church organist Félix Clément between 1847 and 1851, pp. 27–31.

8 In *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, Bell explores the many theories surrounding ritual but refuses to assign a set definition to festal ritual behaviors due to the complexity of this social medium.

9 The kinship between liturgical ritual and drama asserting that the medieval period consciously interpreted Mass and cycle of the Church year in dramatic terms was the traditional viewpoint of theater historians such as (Hardison 1965) and (Ashley 1990).

10 In *This is My Body. Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages*, Michal Kobialka focuses on the medieval concept of representation and its practices as in a constant state of flux crossed by different modes of seeing, a lack of homogeneity. Consequently, he argues that representation in the early Middle Ages had little to do with the tradition that considers representation in terms of Aristotle or Plato, See (Kobialka 1999).

11 The Theater of the Oppressed provides a safe forum for practicing the combination of "word and deed" required to imagine alternatives to moral distress. This form of participatory theater was developed by Brazilian artist and director (and later politician) Augusto Boal (1985). Like his fellow countryman, educator Paulo Freire (author of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), Augusto Boal dedicated his life to creating opportunities for people to enliven their capacity to resist oppression. As extemporaneous theater, Theater of the Oppressed has at its heart a democratic, egalitarian impulse.

12 Annually since 1984, Teatro La Fragua has staged *Navidad Nuestra* (*Our Christmas*). TLF varies which plays are performed each year (i.e., the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Nativity, including the story of the Three Wise Men, Herod, and the Slaughter of the Innocents). When there are no actresses, the Virgin Mary is depicted via a drawing,

and then the text is based more on the Matthew Gospel, which emphasizes the Three Wise Men, whereas the Luke Gospel serves as the basis for the Mary material as well as scenes involving Mary's cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. The basic text is drawn from the prologue to the Gospel of John.

13 The "Play of the Three Wise Kings", dated from the second half of the 12th century, is an incomplete play of the Epiphany cycle. It is medieval Spanish drama's only extant text. Appearing only once in the story of Jesus' birth, the wise men from the East made a lasting impression on the Christian imagination. The Gospel of Matthew (2:1–12) speaks of Magi, or wise men, who followed a star from the East to Bethlehem in search of a newborn king. His story demonstrates that the Magi were astrologers and interpreters of omens—following a star and dreaming dreams. The people of medieval times were familiar with kings, but they were unsure of the significance of the term *Magi*, except that they were pagan, followed the teachings of Balaam, and dealt in demons. That is possibly why Matthew refers to them as "wise men" or "kings". The *Auto* presents a realistic characterization of the Magi. This oldest surviving dramatic text in the medieval Castilian dialect is a liturgical drama whose fragment starts with three monologues of the respective three kings. The kings state they have seen an unknown star and interpret it as a sign of the birth of the Messiah. They then present themselves to King Herod, who recommends they continue their journey. The text breaks off with the fear aroused among the wise men at the court of the King of Judea. This Epiphany play in Castilian has been edited by Charles E. Stebbins, "The *Auto de los Reyes Magos*: An Old Spanish Mystery Play of the Twelfth Century", Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Toledo Cax-6, 8.

14 The *Play of Herod* is from Fleury (France), which includes a dialogue between Herod and his son. The lines (59–74), in both English and Latin, can be found in Drama (Bevington 1975).

15 These religious vernacular plays dramatize a narrative taken from the Bible, which is referred to as a "mystery", "pageant", biblical play", or a "miracle". Some literary critics have identified this type of drama as a "Corpus Christi play". Many cities and towns in England during the Middle Ages had a "cycle" of "mysteries" that were performed during special events, religious or secular, on an annual basis and thus the term "cycle play" evolved. Refer to Twycross (2006, pp. 455–72).

16 *Navidad Nuestra* pays homage to the custom of presenting *pastorelas* and *posadas*, originating in the theatrical tradition of medieval Europe, a religious celebration that spread throughout Central America by way of colonial Mexico. *Villancicos* were the only music genre allowed to be performed during the liturgy, where people could hear newly composed texts in the vernacular glossing the biblical narrative. The principal characters in these *villancicos* are taken from the marginalized indigenous population, who were designated as lower in social status, allowing them to identify more closely with the Christ Child, who was equally impoverished and rejected.

17 The Fleury Playbook consists of ten plays on a variety of biblical subjects: four *St. Nicholas* plays, an *Officium Stellae* (Play of Herod, the Magi, and the shepherds), an *Ordo Rachelis* (a play depicting the Slaughter of the Innocents and the lament of Rachel), a *Visitation Sepulchri* or Visit to the Sepulcher, a *Peregrinus* play, a *Conversion of St. Paul*, and a *Raising of Lazarus*. The extant text of the *Auto de los Reyes Magos*, on the other hand, begins abruptly and ends suddenly with Herod's advisors disagreeing over prophecies related to the birth of the Messiah; the Magi do not continue their journey; there is no adoration of the Child; the angel does not direct them to return home by a different route; Herod does not engage in vociferous commentary nor plan the slaughter of male children.

18 Refer to Erickson (1976) for a deeper analysis on the subject. The essays span discussions of the role of religious and civil authorities, gender roles, the forces of chaos and destruction during the period, and elements of Christian belief and practice that shaped the medieval worldview. Yet, the medievals viewed themselves as living in a world where the invisible modalities of the world (the spiritual, the supernatural) were more real than the visible. Visionary imagination superseded "reason" or "observation" in acquiring knowledge.

19 Thomas P. Augustine's Concept of the Two Cities and the Fleury Playbook. Refer to Flanagan et al. 1985.

20 All citations are from a manuscript copy version provided by Teatro La Fragua. Translations from Spanish for *Navidad Nuestra*, *El Asesinato de Jesús*, and other cycle plays performed by TLF are mine when they are not direct quotes from biblical verses. The plays evolve in wording and form from one performance to the next without a finalized single script.

21 Reyes' pastoral dramas are noteworthy in that they adapt traditional content and form to cultural reality, the sociopolitical preoccupations of everyday Hondurans residing in the city and countryside. Nine *Pastorelas* have been recovered since Reyes never intended to print his works and only circulated them in manuscript form. Included are *Noemi* (before 1838), *Micol* (1838), *Neftalia* (1840), *Zelda* (undated), *Rubenia* (undated), *Elisa* (1851), *Albano* (1851), *Olimpia* (1855), and *Floro, o sea la Pastoral del Diablo* (undated). As a poet and playwright, Reyes authored the first Spanish-language drama written in Central America.

22 (Hoffman 1963, p. 93). Hoffman contends that Reyes systematized an earlier tradition in the form of *pastorelas*, the expressionist rites of Honduran peasants in their Christmas celebrations, thus establishing the basis for the birth of theater in Honduras.

23 The musician Gaspar Fernández's manuscript consists of approximately 270 *villancicos* dated between 1609 and 1616. The *Cancionero musical de Gaspar Fernández* is analyzed in "El villancico de Gaspar Fernández" Gutiérrez Quezada (2016, pp. 26–38). This convergence of Spanish evangelizing content and Indian expressiveness of the time had already been successfully used for the conversion of Muslims and Jews after the Reconquest of Southern Spain, as noted by Soormally (2013, pp. 225–44).

24 Sahagún uses the term "mystical" to describe the powerful emotions evoked by the sound and movement of large groups of indigenous singers and dancers in highly coordinated performances (de Sahagún 1829, p. 25).

[25] Introduction to Truitt (2018). Indeed, while Spanish authority was important, it was far from omnipotent and depended, in large measure, on the assistance of the indigenous people. Before and after contact, religion was central to indigenous life and cultural expression (save for public human sacrifice).

[26] (Lockhart 1991, p. 2). Spanish words in Nahuatl did not always mean exactly the same thing as in the original language.

[27] (Taylor 2004, pp. 353–72). These Amerindian performances served not only to honor their gods but also to reinforce their network of belief systems within political, social, and religious contexts.

[28] Miguel León-Portilla refers to the "perpetual theatre of the Nahuas, with performances and sacrifices throughout the years which coincided with different religious festivals" (León-Portilla 1969, p. 65). And the author María Sten writes that "The life of the natives before the conquest was in a way nothing other than a perpetual theatre of fiestas in honor of the gods that took place throughout the year" (Sten 1982, p. 15).

[29] The Mesoamerican scholars Barry D. Sell and Louse M. Burkhart provide new insights into Nahua conceptions of Christianity and society and the performance tradition rooted in sixteenth-century collaborations between Franciscan friars and Nahua students in their edited volume (Sell and Burkhart 2009). Volume 4 includes an Epiphany drama, two morality plays, two Passion plays, and three history plays. There are six surviving variants of the Nahuatl Passion Plays to date.

[30] The Nahuatl Passion plays were typically performed in the indigenous language with native songs and dances on Palm Sunday of Holy Week. This colonial indigenous drama was more than a form of Christian evangelization. It was an empowering form of community theater performed in outdoor spaces with scripts and production collaborations between prelates and the native population and firmly rooted in the performative mode of the medieval. Furthermore, Nahuatl Passion plays showcased the sufferings of the colonized as an extension of Jesus' sufferings on the cross with a Nahua man in the role of the crucified Christ, recalling their victimization by the corrupt Spanish colonial rule. Although these Passion plays commemorated a recurring religious ritual, they were continuously re-thought and re-worked with alterations in text and performative style and shaped by indigenous agency and creativity. Only six Nahuatl Passion plays have survived, all from a single, anonymous source. These community theatricals were most likely adaptations from a Spanish-language narrative or drama based on its biblical source material. Due to the research of such theater historians as Edmund K. Chambers, Karl Young, O.B. Hardison, Fletcher Collins, Dunbar Ogden, and Donnalee Dox, such documented evidence exists to support the notion that the medieval Church was open to creative expression through the interpolation of troping into the liturgy and its biblical plays and that this form of drama was transplanted into other cultures by missionaries. For information specific to Nahuatl religious drama of the colonial period in Mexico, refer to (Sell and Burkhart 2009).

[31] In his differentiation between ritual and performance, Richard Schechner states that "[r]ituals are performative: they are acts done; performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions". (Schechner 1977, p. 613). https://ia802607.us.archive.org/6/items/pdfy-CsafpNwsgbUa0FVq/141228729-Schechner-Richard-Ritual-and-Performance.pdf (accessed on 12 May 2024).

[32] (Versényi 1993) investigates the interconnection of religion, politics, and theater from the earliest contacts between Cortés and the indigenous peoples whom he conquered.

[33] Refer to Jack Warner's Newsletter at https://www.teatrolafragua.org/obras/PASSION.HTM (accessed on 20 May 2024) (Warner 2002).

[34] The Gospel dialogue between the angel and the three Marys at the tomb of Christ was sometimes chanted by the choir in those responses called "tropes": "Whom seek ye in the sepulcher, O Christians?/Jesus of Nazareth the crucified, O angel./He is not here; he has arisen as he said. Go, announce that he has risen from the sepulcher". This three-line trope (a passage inserted into an authorized service) was first added into the Introit (the opening of the service) of Mass for Easter in the early 10th century. The genesis of the earliest traces of liturgical drama may be found in this chant.

[35] The original Nahuatl text refers to the crucified Jesus figure as a *macehualli*. This word originally referred to Nahuas of the commoner class, but in the era of these Passion play performances post-Conquest, it meant simply an indigenous person. The emotive fixation on the Passion of Christ that developed in Western European Christianity during the later Middle Ages became part of the devotional practices of Nahuas and other indigenous people in the New World.

[36] The 14th-century York plays, a cycle of 48 pageant plays, were performed during the Middle Ages by craft guilds in the northern British city of York on the summer feast day of Corpus Christi. Among these mystery plays is the York Play of the Crucifixion, preserved in a 15th-century manuscript. Its text can be referenced at https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/medievalliteratureanthology/chapter/the-york-play-of-the-crucification/ (accessed on 3 April 2024).

[37] (Davidson 2007). Organized around the rituals of the liturgical seasons in the Church calendar, Davidson clarifies the relationship between liturgical feast and dramatic celebration in this survey of medieval festival plays in Britain.

[38] To view a full-length video of a March 2022 performance of *El Asesinato de Jesús (Pasión, Muerte y Resurrección)*, go to the following YouTube link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6vs-vlbTLk (accessed on 20 May 2024).

[39] (Cepek 2014). Retrieved from https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/387 (accessed on 12 March 2024).

[40] (Stevenson 2006, p. 208). In this article, the author argues that medieval religious performances engaged the spectator's body in a unique form of visual piety that remained long after the end of the performance piece.

41 According to the *World Report 2022* of *Human Rights Watch*, Honduras is considered to be one of the most dangerous countries in Latin America. The report lists the country's challenges as follows: weak institutions, systemic corruption, pervasive poverty, food insecurity, high rates of violence, including gender-based and intra-gang violence, impunity, citizen insecurity, overcrowding, poor sanitation, a wide array of human rights violations, political interference in the judicial system, and inequitable access to economic resources. TLF references the Sampul River massacre of 1980 in El Salvador in *Navidad Nuestra*, but Honduras also experienced its own Los Horcones massacre in 1975 and, most recently, the Támara prison riot massacre in June 2023.

42 (Edwards 1977). Edwards uses other key words referring to this historical recovery of the biblical past in the present historical moment, such as *recreation*, *restitution*, *return*, and *retrieval*. He outlines this concept in the chapter "The Aesthetics of Recovery", Edwards 1977, pp. 57–85. The doctrine of Transubstantiation (celebrated by the late spring festival of Corpus Christi established in 1311), for example, maintains that the bread and wine for Communion literally *become* the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Such a doctrine is anything but symbolic or representational. This core belief about the Eucharist is "poetic faith" or the "suspension of disbelief" and asserts a fundamental change in substance while the appearance of bread and wine remains the same. Medieval Christians believed that biblical events were both ahistorical and atemporal and thus subject to ongoing repetition without limitations of time nor place. The medieval lack of historical authenticity gives all the cycle plays the setting of the authors' own times.

43 Carolly Erickson explores these issues (religious belief, the clergy, land and property, heresy, women, lawlessness, kingship) and their interrelationship. Erickson (1976) also provides an extensive listing of suggested readings of primary and secondary sources (pp. 225–42) on the topic.

44 Refer to TLF's comments on *El Asesinato de Jesús*, the most presented work in their repertory. https://www.teatrolafragua.org/obras/PASSION.HTM (accessed on 20 May 2024).

45 (Parker 2022), In the Introduction to her book, Parker asserts that the medieval vision of the world was linked to the cycles of the seasons. She demonstrates how the desire to connect nature to agricultural life and social customs is linked to Christianity and its calendar of festivities (religious cycle plays paralleling the cycle of the seasons).

46 (Parker 2022, p. 4). Parker catalogs the festivals and traditions that the Middle Ages associated with particular times of the year and considers how the changing seasons affected patterns of work and religious custom during the six centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period. In some instances, pagan festivals were incorporated into the Church's liturgical calendar, which began at Advent and climaxed at Easter. The Spring cycle of local folk traditions in rural communities focusing on fertility rituals and the rebirth of Summer, for example, was adapted to the Christian version of the death and resurrection of Christ (the Easter cycle). With the Winter cycle, the Christmas season corresponded to the celebration of the Winter solstice (Saturnalia and the Yule Fest, the Teutonic New Year celebration).

47 Quoted in Vol. ix #3 of the TLF Newsletter (December 1988) in an essay by Warner (1988) entitled "The Juggling Jungle Traveling Gospel Show", a reflection on local theater workshops conducted for Honduran youth for "learning the rudiments of acting—speech, movement, expression—. . .[and] For the members of ***teatro la fragua***, these workshops have become their laboratories as both directors and writers". Refer to online source https://www.teatrolafragua.org/tlfnews/09-3IN.HTM (accessed on 18 May 2024).

48 (Brook 1996, p. 7). Among the types of theaters discussed in this seminal work, Brook identifies *the theater of the living* that concentrates on the problems of the universe and reveals everything that escapes our senses and makes it visible on stage for the spectator. *Rough theater* creates a link between spectators and actors, looking at simple, natural things in informal settings and bringing joy to its audiences. And *immediate theater* "asserts itself in the present" with the audience reacting to the happening on the stage.

49 (Sponsler 2017, pp. 105–22). Sponsler asserts that survivals and revivals of medieval theater performances can be found in modern times across Europe, the Caribbean, the Americas and elsewhere. It is a form of theater that is lively, full of sensory experiences and nearly always on the move. As examples, she cites Passion plays, Holy Week processions, Mardi Gras, mummers' parades, Three Kings ceremonies, and the musicals *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

50 (Sobrino 1994). Sobrino focuses on Jesus' options for the poor, His confrontation with the powerful, and His persecution and death brought about by challenging the status quo. Sobrino is a Jesuit liberation theologian of Spanish origin who has lived and worked in El Salvador since 1958.

51 "Primary orality" refers to thought and its oral expression within cultures totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, as defined by Walter Ong (1982). "Residual orality", on the other hand, refers to thought and its verbal expression in cultures that have been exposed to writing and print, but have not fully "interiorized" (Marshall McLuhan's term) the use of these technologies in their daily lives. As a culture interiorizes the technologies of literacy, the "oral residue" is said to diminish.

52 (Grotowski [1969] 2002, pp. 58–59). Grotowski's "poor" theater places value on the body of the actor and its relation to the spectator and does away with costumes, decor, and music. His workshops train students to use their bodies and voices so that the entirety of a text can be relayed using just movements and nonverbal sounds. The primary element of theater to him is the relationship between actor and spectator wherein both might spiritually confront themselves through the performance text.

53 (Clausen 1977, p. 246). In his article Clausen explores the validity of using liturgical drama as a vital tool of expression to make scripture come alive toward the end of transforming lives, a goal akin to that of TLF performances.

[54] *Teatro La Fragua* Mission Statement. *Teatro La Fragua: Performing Arts Theatre*. https://www.teatrolafragua.org/ENGLISH.HTM (accessed on 20 May 2024).

[55] For more information about these workshops as well as Teatro La Fragua's history through the early 1990s, see (Fleming 1994, pp. 139–52; De Costa 1996, pp. 111–30) looks at La Fragua's workshops and folk dramas and how they involve the common people in revitalizing and re-evaluating Honduran culture; Cohen and Stone (1995) give an overview of La Fragua's work as well as an interview with Warner and excerpts from the TLF plays *Alta es la Noche* (*Advanced is the Night*) and *Sueño Nuevo* (*A New Dream*) and Inczauskis (2019) provides a more thorough and up-to-date history of the group.

[56] Liberation Theology, developed mainly by Latin American Roman Catholics in the 1960s, seeks to apply religious faith by aiding the poor and oppressed through involvement in political and civic affairs. Its Christian theological approach stresses the "liberation" from social, political, and economic oppression as anticipation of ultimate salvation. Liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino and Jack Warner seek to raise the consciousness of the oppressed to the "sinful" socioeconomic structures caused by social inequities and encourage active participation in changing such structures.

[57] Gustavo Gutiérrez is widely regarded as the founder of Liberation Theology. His book *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* is rooted in his experiences living and working among the poor of Lima, Peru. According to this philosophy, in order to understand the perspective of the poor, we must experience the real poverty that defines their life and then commit to affirming their rights.

[58] (Sobrino 1994, p. 117). In his 1965 essay "Socialism and Man in Cuba", the revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara also refers to a "new man" in a non-religious, political way. He argued that the full liberation of mankind can only be achieved when work becomes a social duty carried out with complete satisfaction, personal responsibility, and moral obligation, putting the benefit of others and society as a whole over personal gain.

[59] They were, in effect, what Eli Rozik (2002) terms "an innate method of signification" in his *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (p. 342). The motive for the production of medieval biblical plays was not simply pious, as Lawrence M. Clopper (2001) argues in his revisionist study of medieval drama, *Drama, Play and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period*. Clopper explains that in the political context between clergy and the laity, "a space was opened in cities, where civil authority held sway, for the governors to take on one of the duties formerly left to the clergy: concern for the citizens' spiritual welfare" (p. 22). Thus, the production of biblical plays became a legitimizing duty displaying urban prestige, power, and commercial opportunity. The content of the biblical plays was changed to represent the urban concerns and anxieties of the period. This holds true for both the performance texts and the versions which were printed for reading. Religious doctrine was given secular applications.

[60] Erickson's scholarly publication is a multi-layered study of the medieval vision of the cosmos bounded by its own form of reasoning, logic, and rationale. Nine interrelated essays explore the visionary imagery that informed the Middle Ages and how such attitudes influenced their ideas about natural and supernatural events.

[61] Medieval audiences typically engaged in a religious practice known as *imitatio*, wherein men and women reenacted the lives of saints and other holy figures. The practice of *imitatio* (c. 1400), from Latin, means "emulation". In Greek, it means "imitation" (though in the sense of "re-presentation" rather than "copying"). Plato and Aristotle spoke of *mimesis*. This practice existed throughout Western Europe, with the vernacular Passion plays owing a great deal to this religious form of mimesis, hence the apostle Paul's words, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ". (1 Corinthians 11:1).

[62] (Dyas 1997). This study includes a Reference Section with a short chronological history of the early Church, brief biographies of key figures of the period, and a valuable introduction to the teachings, worship, and organization of the medieval Church.

[63] (Turner 1974, p. 37). The first chapter, "Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors", explores concepts such as "social drama", "the processual view of society", "social anti-structure", "multi-vocality", and "polarization of ritual symbols". Turner considers religion as the key component of culture and ritual as the foundation of religion; he highlighted the agency of rites in effecting social change, which he considered to be their fundamental role.

[64] In "Knowledge and Transmission: Media and Memory", Carol Symes reflects on scripted and non-scripted performances in open public spaces as follows: "Anyone who studies indigenous performance cultures, street theatre, devised drama, or improvisational comedy will hardly be surprised by the absence of a textual record for these types of theatrical activity. Medieval performers—especially professionals—likewise learned their crafts from one another, and they either performed without the aid of scripts or with scripts that were so fragile that none have survived. . . The very ubiquity of theatre in a world with no purpose-built spaces to confine it means that medieval theatre, by definition, encompassed a huge range of activities closely bound up with all aspects of public life and all forms of social interaction". (Symes 2017, pp. 208–9).

[65] In the last section of (Dagenais and Machan 1991), the authors argue that the meanings of medieval texts are created from the dialogic relationship between orality and specific physical contexts.

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