Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.9 No.1 March, 2026; pg. 377 – 385; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

THE CONVERGENCE OF THE CHURCH AND THE THEATRE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper explores the similarities between Church and Theatre in their utilization of dramatic performance, communal experience, and musical accompaniment. Through a comparative analysis, this paper highlights the parallels between these two institutions, examining their shared characteristics in dramatic performance, enactment, communal engagement, musical accompaniment, and spatial arrangement. The findings suggest that both church and theatre provide spaces for individuals to gather, share experiences, and form connections with others, fostering a sense of community and social bonding.

Keywords: Convergence, Church, Theatre, Dramatic Performance, Communal Experience.

Introduction

The church and the theatre have long been revered as sacred spaces, each serving distinct purposes in the lives of individuals and communities. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that these two institutions share striking similarities in their utilization of dramatic performance, communal experience, musical accompaniment, and architectural design. This paper investigates the convergence of church and theatre, exploring the parallels between these two institutions and their role in shaping human culture and community. However, because of traditions of both, it would be a profanity, if anyone carelessly refers to the Catholic Mass as 'drama" in as much an observer watching proceedings at a Mass with theatrical lens may liken the demonstrations therein to drama. In the same circumstance, it will be laughable for a Catholic faithful who watches a dramatic performance to hastily conclude that a religious enactment is truly a sacred one. The point is, there may be striking resemblances, but these resemblances may be rooted in a long time influence one has over the years. It is therefore, these relationships that this paper seeks to bring to the fore of discussion. The ancient Greeks developed drama out of their religious observances which actually started at the Dionysian ritual festival which was in great part, a worship ritual of a Grecian god of wine and fertility. Thespis of Icaria stepped out of the worshippers and started responding to the chants addressed to the god Dionysus and according to documented history, the impersonation of Dionysus by Thespis marked the beginning of acting (impersonation). That is the reason most authors refer to Thespis as the first actor. Greek drama, like so much Greek art, in large part wrestled with the relationship of man and the gods. Because Greek theatre arose from Greek religious festivals and was concerned, to a huge degree, with the portrayal

of various tales from Greek mythology in celebration of their gods and heroes, most plays were structured to address these relationships. A good example is the play; *Oedipus Rex* which portrays the absolute control of mortals by the gods. The Greek plays were achieved with humans dressed in masks and costumes, what other cultures did via other forms of pictorial representation such as statues or painting.

In contrast, Old Testament Judaism never developed a drama, probably in part because of the prohibition against images found in the second commandment. But it did develop a liturgy in which the saving action of God in the life of the nation was rehearsed and remembered by being acted out liturgically. Such liturgy was not merely about recalling, but about making present representing the past. "Why is this night different from all other nights?" and the rest of the dialogue in the Passover Haggadah are recognizably similar to what dramatists would call a script. Indeed, it is no accident that script and scripture are related words. The liturgical tradition of Judaism was more than merely reciting lines; it was entering into the story itself. In the Passover liturgy, it is we (not merely our ancestors) who were enslaved in Egypt. According to Mark P. Shea, the same thing applies in Christian liturgy, especially during the drama of the Mass. He avers:

> The Liturgy recalls, but also makes present, the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it does so not merely in words, but physically—incarnationally—in the sacrament consecrated by a priest who dresses up in costume to act as an alter Christus. Theatre is similar. Exactly what does not happen in theatre is somebody sitting and reading. Instead, we see the story acted out for us. The timeless story is enfleshed, made present for us, and we enter into it as living participants. Watching Julius Caesar, we the audience becomes part of the mob calling for Brutus' head; during the Passion Liturgy on Palm Sunday, we become part of the mob crying "Away with him! Give us Barabbas!" (3)

Another fascinating parallel is that both theatre (as well as film) and Liturgy take the participant to the depths of the human experience precisely by showing surfaces. The materialistic age imagines the only way to know what a thing is, is by taking it apart. The notion that what is available to the senses of the ordinary person is contemptible and that only the initiate with the hidden knowledge truly knows what is going on. A play or film is meant to be received on the basis of its surface appearance. For example, one does not experience Hamlet as it was intended to be experienced by going behind the scenes, watching the rigging and pulleys, seeing behind the sets, watching the actors putting on makeup, and seeing the tech guys work the lights and sound. Similarly, in a film, the whole point of special effects is for you to forget they are special effects. When you see the wires above the stage or on the screen, you are immediately taken out of the story and the story is all. Rigging, sound effects, lighting, and stagecraft are good and necessary, but they are not the essence of the play, what Shakespeare intends us to see. What he wants us to see, as members of the audience, is the play. We go deepest into the play when we experience the surface, letting the story and the characters not our awareness of the producer, director, technicians, stagehands, and actors take us into the world of the tragedy.

In the same way, the Mass and the sacramental vision call into the deepest revelation of Christ when the participants (congregation) receive the sacraments under the appearances God ordains them to have. Just as a drama is ruined if the actors are perpetually mugging for the

audience instead of remaining in character and pointing to the inner reality of the play, so a Liturgy in which the priests perpetually intrude their individual personalities is ruined. What is desired, what is supposed to be done, is to look along the Mass, not at it (as we look along a sunbeam, not at it) to see the Light. Mark continues:

> We do not want to look at the Mass, distracted by hot-dogging clergy, intrusive singers, or altar servers giving each other comic ears. For similar reasons, we also do not want to be distracted by hyper-sensitive audience members-cum-critics, continually complaining if everything is not absolutely perfect for them, whether in the play or at Mass. All the above illustrations and scenarios , are to make statements on the seeming points of convergence and divergence between the Mass and Drama (7)

The Catholic Church has a rich and complex relationship with drama, spanning centuries. In the Middle Ages, the Church utilized drama as a tool for public entertainment and teaching Christianity to the illiterate. Miracle plays, based on the lives of saints or martyrs, and later including Bible stories, were performed. Passion plays, depicting Christ's crucifixion, emerged in the 13th century, while morality plays, allegorical in nature, featured actors playing virtues and vices struggling for a single hero's soul, for example *Pilgrims Progress* and *Everyman*. Throughout history, the Church has influenced drama in various ways. Liturgical services, for instance, are a form of dramatic performance, featuring priests, choir, and servers as actors, liturgical texts as scripts, and the sanctuary and altar as stages (Bell, 1997). The Church's patronage of the arts has also been significant, with popes like Urban VIII and Leo X supporting artistic commissions, including works by renowned artists like Bernini and Raphael.

In Africa, the Church's influence on drama is evident in the works of authors like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who explores the intersection of faith, culture, and performance in his writings. Similarly, Wole Soyinka's plays often critique societal norms and challenge traditional notions of faith and morality. For example, his play titled *The Trials of Brother Jero* where religiosity is literary taken into a wild Afrrican extreme and which is probably inspired by a wrong interpretation of the liturgy. The Church's liturgical traditions have inspired various art forms, such as Gregorian chant. However, the relationship between the Church and drama has not been without tension. Some Popes have promoted traditional Catholic practices and opposed modernist theology, while others have strongly opposed modern ideologies like democracy and secularism (Eliade, 1959). Playwrights like Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw have used theatre to address social issues, sometimes challenging Church doctrine.

Despite these tensions, the Church's influence on drama remains profound. Popes like Gregory I, who reformed the Church's liturgy and inspired Gregorian chant, and Leo XIII, who issued "Rerum Novarum," a foundational document of Catholic social teaching, have shaped the Church's relationship with drama (Hall, 2011). The standardization of the Roman Missal by Pope Pius V and the enforcement of the decrees of the Council of Trent also reflect the Church's ongoing engagement with artistic expression (Flanagan, 2014). The complex and evolving relationship between the Catholic Church and drama reflects the dynamic interplay between faith, art, and culture. Through its liturgical traditions, patronage of the arts, and ongoing engagement with social issues, the Church continues to shape and be shaped by the world of drama (Schechner, 2003)

However, with all these established relationships, there were tensions between these two institutions. The early Christian Church's relationship with drama was complex. Initially, the Church criticized drama for its pagan roots, perceived immorality, and potential to distract from spiritual pursuits. However, during the Middle Ages, the Church began to utilize drama as a tool for teaching Christianity to the illiterate masses. Liturgical dramas, such as passion plays and miracle plays, emerged, using biblical stories and symbolism to convey spiritual themes (Bell 23).

The Church's shift from criticism to embracing drama can be attributed to its recognition of drama's engaging nature, making it an effective tool for spreading Christian teachings. The Church's patronage of the arts and culture also led to the development of religious drama, enriching worship services and fostering a deeper connection with the faithful (Hall 210). Through its liturgical traditions and ongoing engagement with artistic expression, the Church continues to shape and be shaped by the world of drama (Schechner 200). The complex and evolving relationship between the Catholic Church and drama reflects the dynamic interplay between faith, art, and culture. By embracing drama, the Church has been able to convey spiritual messages, promote community engagement, and enrich worship services, ultimately strengthening its connection with the faithful (Flanagan 180).

Dramatic Performance in the Church

The church employs dramatic performance in various ways which according to Flanagan, the liturgy is a form of dramatic performance, involving actors (priests, choir, servers), scripts (liturgical texts), stages (sanctuary, altar), and audiences (congregation) (Flanagan, 2014). Flanagan is making a comparison of both institutions. He says the priests who feature prominently in the Catholic Mass play the same role as actors in a dramatic scene. They wear Mass Vestments in the Sacristy for the celebration of Mass. The actors in a drama wear their costumes in the Green Room before coming out to play their roles. The Mass Servers and the entire Choir do same with their perceived Vestments as costumes for actors and actresses. Flanagan also compares the Liturgical texts and scriptures with the play scripts that guide the actors actions on stage. Both also have an acting area called the stage by the dramatist and referred to as Altar by the worshipper where the action takes place and watched by the congregation but known as audience in a dramatic situation.

To Schechner, the Church reenacts the Passion of Christ during Holy Week, involving elaborate performances, costumes, and sets (Schechner, 2003). This is seen during the Easter celebration and it forms an integral part of the Holy Week activities. The history of introduction of drama in the Church is said to have been necessitated by the need to make some Latin illiterates understand some key information about their faith the need to dramatize some episodes. The Quem Queritis, which is a dramatization of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the encounter between the Angel and the three Marys is topical to understanding this relationship. This same example is given by Turner in discussing the Nativity Plays; and Christmas pageants which are a common feature of many churches, retelling the story of Jesus' birth through music, drama, and performance (Turner, 1982).

Around the time the Church was born, the theatre was nearing a low point in the Greco-Roman world. It was a great place to see porn and blasphemy, to find a prostitute or have your pocket picked. It was not such a great place for pursuing the sort of virtue the apostles

exhorted. Also, if the bawdiness of Greco-Roman theatre was not enough, the fact that it was often accompanied by barbaric displays of blood sport, gladiatorial matches, and the cruelties involved in feeding prisoners (including Christians) to the lions meant that there was no love lost between pious Christians and the theatre. So for some stretches of time, being an actor was a fine way to get excommunicated.

Tradition does recount a notable exception to Christian hostility to the theatre. The tale of St. Genesius, patron of actors, concerns an actor who, like many during the persecution of Diocletian, performed crude burlesques making fun of Christians. It was said that one day, Genesius was in a skit mocking the sacrament of baptism when, to the surprise of all, the burlesque baptism touched his conscience. Then and there, he began to depart from the script, announcing that he did, in fact, believe in Jesus and proclaiming his newborn faith. The audience slowly realized he was serious, and the mood turned from laughter to rage. He was martyred on the spot by the mob. Whether or not the story is true, it is beyond the purview of this paper.

By the Middle Ages, the Christian culture had reconciled itself to the theatrical form, adopting and transforming it just as it did many other pagan practices as a way of proclaiming the gospel to an illiterate audience. As with stained glass windows, a populace that could not read could still look at pictures. In theatre, the pictures could talk, particularly in the medieval mystery cycles, where the Old Testament stories of Creation, the Flood, and the sacrifice of Isaac were acted out, as well as allegorical morality plays like Everyman. Christian Europe saw a resurgence of drama, and England in particular gave birth to a theatrical tradition that is, in its great master, William Shakespeare, one of the jewels of the world. That is why most authors say the Church that proscribed drama turn round to resurrect drama. Perhaps this was possible that the Christian tradition should eventually baptize drama since both are deeply religious and spiritual experiences.

Similarities between the Congregation and the Theatre Audience

The congregation and the theatre audience share similarities which we shall be attempted to discuss in this paper. It may appear on the surface that both the audience and the congregation are passive recipients and consumers, they actually are active participants. The congregations and theatre audiences participate actively in the performance, responding emotionally and intellectually to the narrative (Bennett, 1997). Secondly the two have shared experiences. Both congregations and theatre audiences share a collective experience, bonding over the performance and creating a sense of community (Turner, 1982). Schechner sees an Emotional Investment in both. According to him: "both congregations and theatre audiences invest emotionally in the performance, experiencing a range of emotions from joy to sorrow" (Schechner, 2003).

The Catholic World Report, in its article titled *The Drama of Faith: The Church and the Stage* , avers that there exists a historical relationship between the Faith and the theatre is a complicated and revealing one. According to the article:

> You enter a ritual space and take your seat in the midst of a large audience. At the front or perhaps the middle of the hall (often a vast and airy one, but sometimes a small and intimate one) is another part of the ritual space that is marked off from the

> area you and your fellow audience members occupy. In that ritual space are various pieces of furniture and props for use during the public act that is about to occur (1)

The article is describing a common experience shared by both a theatregoer and a churchgoer where both are passive participants who watch activities happen on a ritual platform. The article continues to describe the inherent similarities and shared experiences thus:

> Music sounds. A chorus and a cast of ritually costumed figures appear and begin to go through a set of carefully scripted words and physical actions. There is a place in the script for audience involvement, with call and response between the figures in the ritual space and the audience. Various cast members recite words of poetry and prose and sometimes burst into song. One player in particular portrays, in a stylized form, the central hero of the drama, the tale of a conflict in which the hero passes through all the trials of life with which we ourselves are familiar: poverty, hunger, friendship, love, betrayal, suffering and death—and comes at last to a glorious and moving triumph. It is a tale in which, after a struggle and a grand act of self-sacrifice, the hero saves his friends from the powers of evil, the humble are exalted, the bad guys get their comeuppance or are themselves so changed by the conflict that they are reconciled with the hero in friendship and love.

The illustration above has successfully given a dramatic and theatrical presentation of the Mass and a play. Although the plots and sequences may not be chronologically arranged in a logical dramatic form, the resemblance is effectively portrayed. In the end, the hero in each scenario receives his reward and the acclaim of great and small. Through participation in this drama, all involved have offered to them a chance at catharsis; purging from the ills, spiritual and physical, which burden them as human beings. The audience members become participants in mysterious realities revealed in and through words that are made flesh before their eyes, and they experience a sense of contact with something transcendent. At the conclusion, there is an *exeunt omnes* (all depart), and the stylized ritual concludes. The question that may puzzle the dual participant would be whether he is at a production of a play by Sophocles, or at Mass?

Looking at the church choir and the orchestra in a dramatic production, one would also notice some striking features of similarities. In the area of musical accompaniment, both the church choir and the orchestra provide musical accompaniment to the performance, enhancing the emotional impact and narrative (Levinson, 2013). Skill and Training of the church choirs and orchestras require skill and training to perform complex musical pieces (Hall, 2011).

Similarly, the orchestra in a dramatic scene provides a platform where plays are judged in terms of adding more interpretations and making statements of the dramatic action. Some plays need songs to heighten the mood of the characters, whether melancholic or joyous or even when danger is imminent. The Church uses music for sober reflection, communing with the supernatural (God and angels). According to Kivy, this enhances the narratives in both the church choir and the orchestra, using music to convey emotions, themes, and ideas (Kivy, 2007).

Architectural Design: Church and Proscenium Stage

The architectural design of both the church and the theatre reveals a shared concern with space, symbolism, and the orchestration of human experience, even though their functions diverge in purpose and tone. At their core, both structures are designed to gather people, direct attention, and facilitate a form of encounter which is spiritual in the case of the church, and aesthetic or performative in the theatre. According to Rudolf, "The experience of the sacred is fundamentally spatial, structured through symbols that evoke awe and transcendence" (1923).

Church architecture has historically been shaped by its liturgical and symbolic functions. The spatial arrangement often reflects theological principles, with elements such as the nave, altar, and sanctuary carefully positioned to guide worshippers toward a focal point of sacred significance. Verticality is a recurring feature, expressed through high ceilings, domes, or spires, symbolizing transcendence and the aspiration toward the divine. Light also plays a crucial role; stained glass windows and clerestory openings are not merely decorative but serve to create an atmosphere of reverence and contemplation.

In the Nigerian context, scholars have also emphasized how church architecture adapts to local climate, materials, and cultural expressions, blending imported ecclesiastical forms with indigenous aesthetics. Nnamdi Elleh (1997) alleges that African architecture is not a static importation but a dynamic process of cultural synthesis and environmental response

In contrast, theatre architecture is primarily concerned with visibility, audibility, and the dynamics of performance. The relationship between the stage and the audience is central, and this has given rise to various design configurations such as the proscenium, thrust, and arena stages. Each arrangement shapes the audience's experience differently, influencing intimacy, immersion, and perspective. Sightlines are meticulously calculated to ensure that every member of the audience has an unobstructed view of the performance, while acoustical design ensures clarity of speech and sound projection without necessarily relying on electronic amplification.

Nigerian theatre practitioners have also contributed significantly to spatial experimentation, particularly through the adaptation of indigenous performance environments such as village squares and open arenas into modern theatre design. Wole Soyinka says "The African stage is fluid, extending beyond constructed walls into the living space of the community" (19).

Despite these differences, there are notable intersections in the architectural logic of both spaces. Historically, early theatre evolved from ritualistic and religious performances, and as such, the theatre inherited certain spatial and symbolic qualities from sacred architecture. Both spaces employ processional movement whether it is the entrance of clergy or actors and both use architectural framing to elevate key moments, such as the altar in a church or the stage in a theatre (Oscar Brockett, 2014). In African and specifically Nigerian performance traditions, the boundaries between sacred and theatrical space are often fluid, with ritual, festival, and drama occurring within shared communal environments. Ola Rotimi avers that in traditional performance, the separation between ritual and drama dissolves into a unified communal expression (81).

Modern architectural trends have further blurred the boundaries between these two forms. Contemporary church designs sometimes adopt flexible seating and stage-like platforms to accommodate varied forms of worship, including drama and musical performances. Similarly, modern theatres may incorporate elements of ritual and communal gathering that echo ecclesiastical spaces. In both cases, there is an increasing emphasis on adaptability, inclusivity, and engagement, reflecting changing social and cultural needs (Richard Schechner, 2003). Nigerian scholars also highlight the need for culturally responsive architecture that reflects local identity while embracing modern functionality (Demas Nwoko, 2001). "True theatre architecture in Africa must arise from indigenous spatial consciousness while engaging contemporary realities" (Demas Nwoko, 2001).

Ultimately, the architectural design of the church and the theatre demonstrates how built environments can shape human perception and interaction. While one seeks to elevate the soul and the other to engage the senses and intellect, both rely on carefully crafted spatial relationships, material choices, and aesthetic considerations to fulfill their purposes effectively.

The architectural design of churches and proscenium stages share identities. Both churches and proscenium stages create a sense of sacred space, separating the performance area from the everyday world (Eliade, 1959). The altar in a church and the stage in a theatre serve as focal points, drawing the audience's attention to the performance (Bennett, 1997). Similarly, both churches and proscenium stages often feature symbolic decorations, such as stained glass windows, crucifixes, or theatrical props, which enhance the narrative and emotional impact of the performance (Hall, 2011).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have revealed striking similarities between the Church (Catholic) and the theatre in their utilization of dramatic performance, communal experience, musical accompaniment, and architectural design. Specifically, both the church and the theatre employ dramatic performance as a means of conveying narratives and engaging audiences. Secondly, that both institutions provide spaces for individuals to gather, share experiences, and form connections with others. Lastly, the church choirs and orchestras provide musical accompaniment to enhance the emotional impact and narrative.

Based on the findings of this study, we make these recommendations:

1. The Church and the theatre practitioners can benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration, sharing insights and expertise to enhance the effectiveness of their respective performances.
2. Both institutions can prioritize community engagement, fostering a sense of belonging and social bonding among participants through shared rituals and performances.

3. Lastly, both the church and the theatre can utilize performance as a tool for social change, promoting empathy, understanding, and social justice through their respective narratives and reenactments.

In essence, this study highlights the striking similarities between church and theatre in their utilization of dramatic performance, communal experience, musical accompaniment, and architectural design. This research on the convergence of church and theatre has highlighted

striking similarities between these two institutions, from dramatic performance to communal experience and musical accompaniment.

In addition, the parallels we have drawn between liturgical services and theatrical performances, as well as the roles of congregation and audience are particularly insightful. Our analysis of the church choir and orchestra's functions in enhancing emotional impact and narrative is also considered worth studying. Lastly, the conclusion that recognizing these parallels can help us appreciate the power of performance to bring people together and create a shared identity is compelling. This paper has implications for understanding the role of performance in shaping human experience and community.

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