

Playing Roles In Drama

Throughout the centuries, good people of the western world have given their children the names of their virtuous heroes. They named them for Biblical characters, popes, saints, emperors, kings, patriots, and revered ancestors. A child's very name pointed him or her to some lofty ideal for which to aim.

In our century, however, an idol has risen to supplant that tradition. To a vast segment of society, the movie or television personalities occupy the highest places of admiration and represent the ideals for which to strive. These figures are rich and famous so that news cameras and promoters search them out for us. They can flaunt their disdain for morals and traditions, push the limits of decency, and set daring trends in speech, dress and conduct. Multitudes, who also have a spirit of defiance for the standards of our culture, can fantasize with these who portray licentious freedom. Fawning crowds press to get a glimpse of them or to obtain their autographs. Stardom becomes the glamorous life for which to dream. Our children are given the names of these popular idols.

Most of those who make it to the magic screen sell their souls in attaining it, and there's no shortage of others willing to sell out in order to replace them. I know it is not considered nice to make such a blanket indictment. Don't blame that drastic assessment on my senility. For many years I have held that opinion and I have seen nothing to convince me to change it.

To you who would be actors, I would like to ask some questions. Do you wish to make a career of portraying drunkenness as funny, lying and deceit as clever, cursing as appropriate expression of feelings, vulgarity of speech and demeanor acceptable, profanity of God's name as inoffensive, irreligion as preferable, nudity as artistic expression, sexual promiscuity as wholesome, and erotic titillation as innocent pleasure?

Is it proper to portray sexual activity outside of marriage, homosexual practices, prostitution, transvestite practices, casual divorce, and bearing children out of wedlock as normal, moral, and acceptable? Is feeding the public mind the most lurid, gross, and degraded aspects of depraved humanity a praiseworthy and honorable occupation? Is it in order for a disciple to undermine the holiness of marriage and the home and the role of the man in the home as supposed entertainment? Who are you helping when you make children's defiance of parents, teachers, officers of the law, courtesy, and clean speech matters to laugh about?

"Hold it!" you may be ready to scream, "The actors are not promoting those things. They are just role playing. They depict in drama what other people do, say, and write. The actor just puts himself or herself in the role of the character being represented."

Yes, I know they are playing roles. That's what acting is. But that is a fig-leaf defense to justify portrayal of evil as good and desirable. It is not necessarily sinful to portray evil in

drama. The Bible presents some sordid scenes, but they are not described in order to make sin look appealing or appropriate. Its depictions are not close-up, full-color manipulations purposely designed by directors in order to stimulate the greatest degree of lust or desirability. Bible narratives are not designed to tempt us, but they emphasize the destructive ugliness of sin. A soap opera or sit-com with such design would have slim prospect of gaining a showing. Maybe you can name a few wholesome shows. If so, that is great. I would like to know that I am totally wrong in my indictment.

Actors want to portray realistic scenes. We recognize that. But an audience can be made fully aware of a murder, for instance, without being shown brutal, bloody, gruesome, and innovative means of torture and mutilation which would appeal to the depraved and sick mind. Since adultery is not an act committed publicly, why should realism demand that it be pictured as intimately and erotically as the "artists" of Hollywood can devise and our loose laws allow? We all know the answer to that.

A generation ago, we all loved "*I Love Lucy*." As with many shows of that time, it was considered to be a good, clean show. But the show depended upon clever lying and deceit to develop its hilarious situations. That old theme is common in dramas. Did they affect our sense of honesty? The "*Bad News Bears*" made children's arrogance, disdain for adults, crude manners, foul speech, stealing, and law-breaking look funny, acceptable, and rewarding in the end. Many more movies have followed that formula. Have they affected our children and society?

Although we cannot measure the effect of those shows, we cannot deny their influence. When we make sin funny, we make it acceptable. "Vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness" (Burke).

Watching those movies and shows is just an entertaining fascination that has no lasting effect, you may contend. Just who are you kidding? Every time you hear a Budweiser commercial, you do not run to the ice box to get a beer. But the industry has proven that the repetition of their appealing commercial will eventually motivate enough people to buy Budweiser to make the ad profitable. Each time you see an erotic sexual scene, you do not go in search of an illicit partner. But repetition breaks down the barriers and arouses the impulses so that sexual morals and inhibitions are weakened in society. Perhaps not in the stronger people, but in others.

Does a God-fearing actor work in projects to put a good face on that which destroys morals? There's an old saying that is timeless: "Modesty is a shield of virtue." By shameless intimacy and explicitness, whether in private or public, the reservations that protect our virtue are destroyed. Role playing has done its part in its destructive manipulation.

Some appropriate lines from Alexander Pope learned in high school were burned into my memory:

"Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;

Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

The fact that we may think filth is funny makes a bold statement about our compromising lack of abhorrence of evil.

Although I don't know where to find such a list, we will grant that there must be some good shows that do not present sin in a good light. I would be pleased to learn that there are many wholesome shows to enjoy.

In some unsavory dramas, there may be characters who depict clean speech and proper conduct. May an actor fill such roles? Even if one actor has clean lines, if the overall projection of the play is evil, that actor's participation helps to make it so. He becomes a supporting actor for all the cast and cannot deny his complicity.

There is need for use of the arts to make life better. An actor or entertainer can and should accomplish good by the use of his talents. However, he must have enough conviction and power to call his own shots. That may leave him out of the mainstream productions that create the idols of our generation. Can an actor gain enough notice to get a role in *Touched By An Angel* without coming up through the sleazy roles?

Rather than being only a role-playing example, why not be the real thing? Paul urges, "*Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have returned from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness*" (Rom. 6:13). In doing this, "*Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity*" (1 Tim. 4:12). The "pay" is much better; God will give everlasting glory; and perhaps your children's children may wear your name in honor.

(I have completed this piece without meddling, for it is not likely that any of you aspire to be actors. If I should want to leave a thumb-tack in your seat, however, I could include something about persons who enjoy degrading television shows, movies, and other entertainment, and I could make some reference to disciples who provide the money to produce those shows by purchasing the products advertised on them. But I am not that kind of a fellow!) (-) []

(Cecil Hook; May 2004. Formerly published as FR 16)