

The Stranger

Amy Burt

In the same way that many people quit smoking, take it up again, ad infinitum, I forsake amateur theatrics: I quit them only to be drawn back in at the slightest provocation. Usually all that it takes to draw me back is a “please.” This year I broke my theatrical fast with a little Lenten production that could be called “Ten Jewish Women Sittin’ Around Talkin’.” It’s the day after the crucifixion. It’s the Sabbath. Mary, Mother of God, Mary Magdalene, and a bunch of other women, some also named Mary, are pondering their fates, mourning their Messiah, and, in long soliloquies, telling their life stories. We will tell these moving stories whilst wearing pieces of cloth tied by rope, the sort of glam costuming that characterized Sunday School pageants of my youth. (Bob Mackey, why hast thou forsaken me?) The cast, ten women who are beholden in some way to the director/narrator, have been given forty pages of a book about Biblical women twelve days before the performance. We will rehearse this production, which will run one hour and thirty minutes, twice. We will spend forty minutes discussing how to tie our ropes. I enquire about “stage business,” and suggest that my character, a loner, would knit while the other women are soliloquizing. This is completely self-serving, as I feel sure that my character and I know nothing about each other; I know that I will be less likely to roll my eyes and huff loudly in ways that will draw focus from my fellow performers if I’m given a wholesome task to perform. A debate ensues about what is and isn’t allowed on the Sabbath. I suggest that we perform our stories in Aramaic and Hebraic with some liturgical dance thrown in for art’s sake.

Over the years, I’ve been chastised by many for a variety of reasons that seem to fall under one major umbrella: I’m a buzz-kill. I sometimes see what’s in front of me, even when that’s inconvenient. I can’t jump into a narrative or artistic frame as easily as I might. I’ve thought about my affliction as being a sincerity deficit. There are times when other people see in things something that I do not, and I seem unable (or unwilling) to pretend otherwise. In the classic cinematic piece of cheese, I didn’t see Demi kissing Patrick’s ghost; I saw her kissing

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Whoopi, and I thought that was a far more interesting filmic twist. This affliction is, ultimately, an unwillingness to squander my suspension of disbelief on things like pitiful costuming as authentic period garb, or the likelihood that ten women in Israel two thousand years ago all looked European. My supply of disbelief suspension is used on other things, like my students *are* learning, my job *matters*, and *Everything Will Turn Out Okay*.

The sanctuary, where we will perform our Lenten opus, was built by German boat builders in the 1840s, and is almost completely dark except for the glow emanating from the stained glass windows and the recessed lighting over the altar. The Parish Hall, in contrast, is an A-frame inspired 60s church annex that looks like it sidled up and attached itself to the sanctuary without its permission. As I enter the Parish Hall, I'm greeted by a melee—a Cub Scout dinner is happening and it smells like fried chicken, Clearasil, and ennui. I soon make my way back to the sanctuary, noting that I've picked up disciples: three small Cub Scouts, in small blue uniforms, complete with hats and kerchiefs, are following me. They look like they're about to pose for the recruitment poster representing, as they do, a wholesome 'Small World After All' homogenous diversity. The door that I'll enter will lead directly to the altar, and I turn to see where my loyal followers are going. They look at me with a mixture of anticipation, excitement, and respectful pugnaciousness. "Where are you going?," I enquire. Their stances make it obvious that they've been questioned every day of their short lives by authority figures, and the nominal leader gives me a defiant, "We're just looking." "That's great," I say, hoping to convey that I value the spirit of adventure and a keen intellectual curiosity above all else. That accomplished, they run off. I stand in front of the door, waiting. A small Scout runs back, sees me, yelps, and runs off again. I return to sanctuary.

One of the reasons that I keep forsaking the theatrical arts is this: I don't like performers. I don't like "artistes." This is, like many prejudices, an extended form of self-hatred. (I feel, for instance, that those who despise clowns would do well to note their own long pointy shoes before plucking the red noses off the faces of others). When I'm involved in a performance, I hate the voice in my head that says, "We're spending how many hours a week for *this*?" and the warring voice that adds, "They better get a decent reviewer this time. 'Competent,' indeed." I can't make the math work any more to get a $time + resources = x$ equation that makes sense to me. I can't shake the feeling that I'm not making the world a better place, or even a briefly more interesting place, and I've come to the conclusion that amateur theatricals should be left to those who still have the *amat*: those who love it, who believe in it, who don't think in their heart of hearts that, at the end of the day, performance is nothing more than a distraction. I've made many a justification of performance. My justifications are the same arguments used to support why we shouldn't decry television, or the Internet, or any other medium: in sum, the 'well, it's not *all* crap' arguments, which aren't good

enough for me anymore. And so I've not directed a production in a few years, I've not auditioned for any, written any pieces I want to perform, hope to perform, etc.

So why "Ten Jewish Women Sittin' Around Talkin'"? Well, unlike most projects with which I've been affiliated, it seemed to have a spiritual purpose: it's part of a Lenten retreat for Episcopal women. And believe me, if there is any group who needs to retreat . . . I kid. Last Lenten season, I sang with some frequency at an Episcopal church up the road. I have to admit to using statements that would make a Sophist blush to imply to my grandmother that, because I darken a church several times a year (only during Lent, it seems), that the state of my soul is sound. I've always liked Lent. It's dark, and contemplative. Christmas says, "Hey, it's a baby! And Looky Thar! Santa brung us stuff!" Easter says, "He is risen today! Hallelujah! Pass the Cadbury Cream eggs, put on a new frock, and follow that bunny!" Lent says, "I've got a bad feeling about this . . ." Lent doesn't come with greeting cards. Lent doesn't have an action figure sold separately. Lent has Mardi Gras as an opening act, but even Mardi Gras has a whiff of that bar time desperation. "Last call for alcohol!" is followed by furtive glances, beer goggles firmly in place, to see if there's anyone you can stand to take home who can still stand, and then Mardi Gras ends with the loneliest words ever heard in a bar: "You don't have to go home but you can't stay here!" Lent is, literally, the morning after. You feel better than you deserve to, but you have a well-earned sinking feeling. And, unlike the nerve-jangling "One Day Only!" time-sensitive nature of Thanksgiving or Valentine's Day, Lent lasts for forty days! What's not to like?

After two desultory hours of cold reading with histrionic historical characters, we leave the sanctuary. Five small boy scouts yell when they see me. "There she is! The stranger!" I blush, I have to admit. It's gratifying as one reaches a certain age to garner the attentions of younger men. "AAAAGGGGGHHHH! The Stranger!" another one scream sand runs into the Parish Hall, hoping to arm himself with a drumstick or an errant tube of Clearasil. "You have a way with children," my friend Jan says with admiration. I've still got it.

I performed a character called "The Stranger" in a production of the children's book, *Tuck Everlasting*. The Stranger was a nefarious character who seemed to have it in for the titular Tucks. You could tell that the Stranger was up to No Good because she had a walking stick that she twirled a single time; this of course is the distaff version of mustache twiddling and speaks volumes to an audience savvy in the grammar of prop manipulation. More twirling would have led to the conclusion that the Stranger was merely a majorette, a different type of menace entirely.

The morning of the performance, Mary, Mother of God, arrives thirty minutes late, and there's the usual combination of too many performers, too many props, too little space, and too little that can be done at this late hour.

What, after all, are these Episcopal women going to do? Fire us? Take back the offer of a free lunch? That's one of life's small miracles: amateur performers do so much for so little. And we have done a lot: despite having no rehearsals with the full cast; despite having the third-grade Christmas pageant—chic costumes; despite the very real possibility that, given the number of candles in the playing space, we will set fire to ourselves at any moment, the production works. The stories are poignant. As I look at my fellow performers, I don't see a nurse wearing a sheet on her head: I see a woman telling a story that she believes in. I see her pain. I see the connections being made between characters who've just met and women who barely know each other, who came together because someone asked them. Women who didn't have time to do their grocery shopping took on harrowing roles because they believed in the project. Professional women, retired women, full-time moms came together, and somehow their belief and their shared vision coupled with the audience's desire to be moved, made it work, despite missed cues, despite the running time (two hours!). My knitting sits in my basket, untouched, as I allow myself to be drawn into the piece. And this, I remember, is why I come back to performance after it's broken my heart, after I figure I have nothing left to say, nothing left to give: live theatre can still surprise me. The magic can happen, and I can suspend my disbelief without meaning to, and see beyond the real into the sublime.



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