

## Devising Biblical Drama: a 'Do-it-yourself' way of Exploring and Experiencing Scripture's Possible Worlds

Background to this paper: the paper is written by Mary Witts and is adapted from her PhD thesis exploring the use of drama as a tool for Biblical interpretation. For the purposes of the BILC resources the paper focuses on field work Mary undertook in Gambella, Ethiopia. The material from which this paper was adapted has been lightly edited to make it more user friendly outside its original academic audience but it still seeks to express the rigorous study that explains and offers a framework for devising drama as a way of exploring Scripture.

*"[Scripture] displays a possible world, a reality in which my human reality can also find itself: and in inviting me into its world, the text breaks open and extends my own possibilities."*  
Rowan Williams<sup>1</sup>

Rowan Williams describes the invitation of Scripture to all Christians to enter its possible worlds through his word picture of an open, imaginative and transforming biblical engagement. Yet, the *Bible in the Life of the Church* [BILC] project has reminded us that our relationship with Scripture is often limited by stumbling blocks that get in the way of such engagement. These obstacles may be in the form of our own preconceptions with which we pre-judge the text; our lack of academic and critical tools of interpretation; our understanding of the language of the Bible; our ability to read; or even by a lack of availability of Bibles in our own, or indeed in any language.

This paper seeks to offer devised drama as a creative way of 'reading' Scripture, that not only encourages us to bypass some of our interpretative preconceptions, but that also offers an alternative pathway through some of the practical stumbling blocks that get in the way of the biblical engagement of many 'ordinary Anglicans'.<sup>2</sup>

### Speaking and Listening or Writing and Reading?

A significant minority of members of the Anglican Communion live in orally focused communities where speaking and listening, rather than writing and reading remain the fundamental means of communication. This not only reminds all Anglicans that literacy *cannot* be the only approach to Scripture, but also that through the last 2,000 years speaking and listening have been the fundamental means by which most Christians *have* encountered Scripture. This tradition of orality reaches yet further back when we read the Hebrew Scriptures with its repeated call to 'Hear, O Israel' (as in Deuteronomy 6:4). For the 10,000 Anglicans of Gambella in Ethiopia, speaking and listening are at the centre of their *present* way of life. My investigations of devised biblical drama as an alternative approach to Scripture involved fieldwork with a group of deacons and priests from these churches (December 2011), and the explorations that we made together have persuaded me that such orally focused churches have their own gifts to offer their sister churches within the Anglican Communion.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 131-147 (p. 133).

<sup>2</sup> BILC suggests that 'ordinary Anglicans' are those who have no formal theological education or training.



### Something different

One of the church leaders in Gambella remarked that '*something seems to be different when you put this thing [Scripture] into drama*'. It is this '*something different*' that I introduce and explore within this paper. Devising drama is the practical means through which a group of people interpret a passage of Scripture by re-telling it through *shown* performance. They use themselves to *embody* the text within the materiality of their own context. This offers a collaborative and creative, imaginative and physical engagement with Scripture. Such an approach to Scripture is readily accessible for orally focused Christians (and others).

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This paper develops four themes that build together to investigate and offer an explanation of the nature of this '*something different*' that is offered by the activity of devising biblical drama:

1. Devising biblical drama is a 'do-it-yourself' approach to both drama *and* biblical interpretation that is collaborative, creative and contextual, and is not reliant on facilitation by experts.
2. Exploring Scripture through the interpretative process of drama encourages the closer investigation of the text that is more usually encountered by ordinary Anglicans through the more obviously literate/reading approach of discussion-type Bible-study groups.
3. Experiencing Scripture through the 'let's pretend' nature of drama as imitative action offers its own gifts to the interpretative process through embodied presentation of a world of possibility held within Scripture.
4. Drama has a particular quality of being neither fully 'here-and-now' or of 'there-and-then', but exists in a border-land that offers a playful fluidity to scriptural interpretation.

#### **1. Devising Biblical Drama: a 'Do-it-yourself' approach to Scripture**

Devising drama enables a group of people to work together to make their own interpretation of a passage from Scripture through the process of re-telling the passage by using their own selves to embody and show it in a physical form. The passage chosen is often, but not necessarily a narrative. A group may work without a text by using familiar, remembered Scripture, but here I discuss a means of working with the text itself that requires only one Bible and one reader (or oral translator where there is no Bible in the local vernacular). The reader needs to be willing to repeat the reading, in full and in



part, as demanded by the rest of the group. Also, crucially, they do so without imposing their own interpretation on the rest of the group. The same method can also be used by groups

where there are more members who can read and where there are more available copies of Scripture. All that is needed is: one willing group, one text, and one open-ended task - "Go, and make a drama ..."

Devising begins from and works within the 'give-and-take' of oral conversation, and leads to an embodied and enacted drama through its *collaborative* and *creative* process that is firmly set within its own local *context*.

- Devising drama demands and encourages a *collaborative* sharing of the variety of gifts held by the individuals who form a group. Imagination, creativity, ideas, and the ability to plan are as important as the ability to enact an imagined character. These are all as essential as literacy and intellectual understanding because instead of interpretation presented only through verbal statements of meaning, it is carried through the *whole communal process* that leads to the shown dramatic re-presentation.
- The collaborative process of re-telling Scripture as drama encourages *creativity* because it is an *exploratory* and *experimental* work of interpretation that transforms Scripture into an enacted *showing*. Unless the dramatization is one that has become traditional, there are no blueprints to copy or adapt. It is up to the group themselves to decide how they will show their particular passage of Scripture.
- The collaborative and creative process forms 'our' interpretation, made by 'us' in the particular here-and-now of 'our own' *context*. The devised drama expresses in material terms both Scripture **and** 'this' particular group of people's worlds of individual and shared experience and knowledge in a holistic way. These are secular as well as spiritual; imagined as well as actual; subconscious as well as conscious; and carry their hopes and fears as well as their norms and values. A group of devisers/actors have nothing other than themselves and their world from which they can develop and build their communal interpretation of the biblical narrative, so bringing text and context closely together.

*Collaboration, creativity* and *context* in relationship with *Scripture* form the particular identity of both the conversational and physical process, and of the drama that results from it. Though the fruit of the devising process is seen within the final drama, this cannot be viewed as the total result, for the interpretative *process* itself speaks as powerfully to the participants as will what is shown, seen and heard within the end product of the *drama* itself.

## 2. Exploring Scripture: The Interpretative Process through Drama

All interpretation requires exploration and imagination as it seeks to unfold and reveal what is contained within a text so that it may be explained and understood. Scholarly

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biblical interpretation uses a variety of methods in this task, while Bible-study within church congregations often seeks a 'close reading' of the text through a process of conversational discussion, that yet may remain focused on just one or two phrases or verses.

Devising drama encourages a group to engage closely with the *whole* text of a passage due to the practical need to know what lies within a text before they can transform it into an embodied and enacted performance. One of the church leaders from Gambella described this part of the task as a type of 'Bible-study': *'Without Bible-study a drama cannot come. So for the drama to be a drama, we need to know the process and characters in the Bible. The Bible will lead you until the end of the drama.'*

As a practical way of telling a narrative through showing, devisers/actors find that they have an intrinsic need to explore the text to discover answers to a number of questions:

- What is done and by whom? This shows the action and characters within a passage that will be used to form the drama.
- Where, when and how is everything done? This discovers the contexts and the causal sequences within the passage that are then used to form the plot of the drama.
- Why does this happen? This deeper question seeks to make sense of a passage so that it may be re-presented within a dramatized form.

Beyond the explanation of what is explicitly lying *within* the text of Scripture, devisers of drama need to use their imaginations to explore and make decisions on what is *not* contained within the text. They use what they have found *within* the text as a basis for *filling in gaps* of emotion, action and dialogue. These may be implied, or they may be left to the 'reader's' imagination, but unlike within a *told* text, filling in these gaps is necessary for the physical form of a drama. For instance, a group devising a drama based on *The Good Samaritan* have to decide how they will dramatize, 'He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them' (Luke 10:14). In what manner did the Samaritan go up to the injured man? Did he keep looking around in case of bandits? What did he say as he performed these actions? Was the injured man unconscious, and if he wasn't, what did he say to the Samaritan? A group making this drama can only answer such questions by bringing their own world of experience and imagination to the task, so drawing the text and their own world into closer relationship.

When devising drama within the confessional setting of the Church devisers will seek to remain true to what they find within a text as they make interpretative and dramatic decisions to re-tell Scripture within their drama. Where a drama is to be shown to others it adds another call for interpretative care, as one of the church leaders from Gambella reflected: *'We can keep with the story so that they understand through the drama: the activities, they mean this. They don't understand before. We need to make very clear for them so that they understand.'* Yet, the devisers are also performing amongst themselves. Another church leader saw that as they interpreted for others, so also they were forming their own understanding: *'The people doing the drama, they're teaching people. They are teaching themselves also - and aware-ing themselves.'* This remains true even where there is no audience.



The drama that results from this oral and enacted process of exploratory explanation and imaginative understanding offers its own interpretation of the text. This will be shown by what a group has chosen to include, add or miss out, as well as by the ways in which they have made their enacted 'telling-by-showing'. The possible world that the group of devisers has found within a passage of Scripture is made for and in relationship with their own context. Such a devised and dramatized interpretation will not form the definitive interpretation of this particular passage of Scripture, but rather what has been developed for this particular time and place. The drama forms an *embodied* and *so experienced* interpretation that will be remembered and understood, encouraging further reflection, so forming part of any subsequent interpretative engagement.

### 3. Experiencing Scripture: The Embodied "Let's Pretend" Nature of Drama

This discussion of the interpretative process at work in devising drama has hopefully shown how drama accords with other methods of interpretation that seek to make a 'close reading' of the text. Yet, the devising process remains distinct in that it demands an embodied, practical application of what has been found within the text and of interpretative decisions that have been made. Unlike within Bible-study, these will not necessarily lead to verbal explanations of meaning, for within drama meaning is expressed and *so experienced* through the doing of the action that makes its performed and shown interpretation.

Drama's embodied and imaginative form uses the "let's pretend" nature of children's play as its basis. This free play is organised into a drama that tells a story by doing and showing. A passage from Scripture may be read, told, remembered and imagined and so needs no material existence. As soon as it is enacted it is brought out of the realm of the mind and imagination into physical activity that is shown within the here-and-now of the present context. As the drama is happening within and using the things of its own specific context, it represents the things and happenings within Scripture. Devised biblical drama automatically brings the world-of-the-text and the world-of-these-particular deviser/actors together.

Drama is intrinsically symbolic - people, objects, actions, space and time represent and make present other people using other objects in other places and times. So the there-and-then of the biblical text is made symbolically present in the here-and-now as if it was actually taking place. The nature of drama's physicality separates it from other symbolic art forms such as literature and painting, for within drama two forms of physical existence, one an actual reality, and the other an imagined and representational reality are held together in one form that is understood and accepted by both performer and audience.

This can be described as a developing series of relationships. An act-scheme (what is done in the drama) shows an act-image (what it represents). This may or may not be closely imitative. The act-scheme is always representational, involving the shared imagination of those present. This relationship can be extended. The act-image itself is representative of the whole 'inner-life' of the drama. This, following Rowan Williams' statement with which I began, can also be seen as representative, in that the 'inner-life' of the drama offers its own 'possible world' for deviser/actors and spectators to engage



with and reflect upon. These related relationships are illustrated in the explanatory chart below, using the *Good Samaritan* as an illustration.

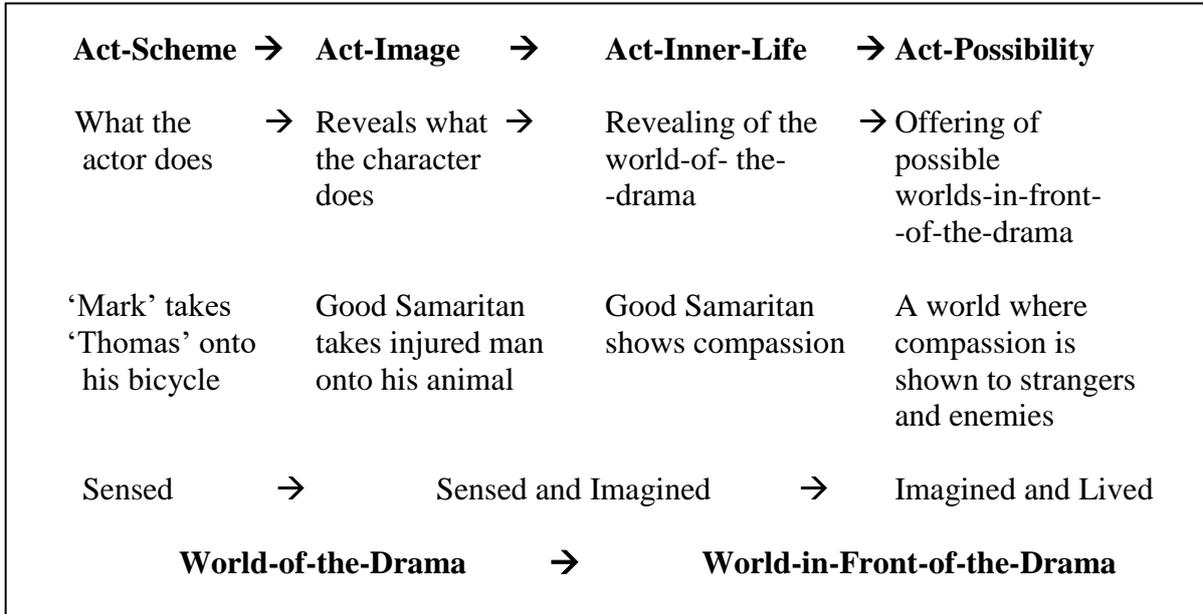


*Samaritan, Local Assembly of Anglican Church in Ethiopia, 2010 The Good*





Photograph by Janice Proud, used with permission



The Symbolic nature of drama” a representational process

This double nature of act and image and the worlds that these represent is physically *experienced* by the actors of a drama. They are both producer and product in necessarily close relationship. As makers of their character, deviser/actors have to use the world of their own consciousness, experience and imagination to produce what they consider will best show the act-image of their character and his/her activity. Enacting their characters, 'Mark' and 'Thomas' are both themselves and also not-themselves. They are themselves acting a

character, and yet, in some sense they are also not-themselves in that through the activity of making-present they become the injured man and the Good Samaritan. Playing a role is an experienced participation in the world of the biblical narrative, encouraging empathy as well as reflection.

Deepening layers of engagement within the drama affects the whole person within the indivisibility of body, mind and spirit. The actual presentation of an act-scheme imitates an act-image that offers an act-inner-life which leads to imagined worlds of possibility beyond the bounds of the drama. These may in their turn lead to reflection and fresh ways of actual living within the beckoning call of the kingdom of God. In this way, the playful double-nature of the act and image of the embodied and experiential 'let's pretend' of devising biblical drama offers possibilities to the community of the local



church that beckon toward the future through the process of developing and performing their own interpretation of a passage of Scripture.

#### 4. Drama as a border-land between Here-and-Now *and* There-and-Then

As other times and spaces are made present through devised drama, the ordinary time and space of everyday reality remains as a frame within which the drama is seen and experienced. While the actors (and any audience) are focused on the representational space and time, they are held together as one community journeying through the imaginative existence that they have created together from what they have found within the passage of Scripture. The remembered there-and-then of the biblical text is brought physically into the here-and-now of this particular present. The two realities – of the drama and of everyday life – are in close physical juxtaposition, so that each offers itself as commentary on the other.

Beyond this, the experienced nature of the dual reality that is neither quite here-and-now nor there-and-then allows a fluidity of time and space where anything can happen. It is a border-land that is outside the norms and boundaries of the everyday. Through enacting 'our' own drama that 'we' have devised from Scripture within this space in 'our' midst, the remembered past is brought into the materiality of the present as a 'possible world'. As such it offers anticipatory possibilities of what-might-be. These beckon 'us' forward, toward what Scripture calls us to be and become. In this way, and in practical experiential terms, our engagement with Scripture, as Rowan Williams proposes, *breaks open and extends 'our' own possibilities* beyond the status quo of 'our' present situation. As drama, this is not only through thought and imagined possibilities but, within the 'let's pretend' framework these possibilities are made symbolically present and are actually experienced. Within the drama of the parable of *The Good Samaritan*, 'Thomas' not only thought about or imagined the Samaritan placing the injured man onto his animal, he actually experienced the compassion and care of Mark-as-the-Samaritan. Both the actual and the imagined action within the one unified form of a drama happen within and in the midst of actors playing their characters who are present in the actuality of here-and-now.

Devising biblical drama in Gambella is also full of the play of comic fun and laughter. One of the Gambella church leaders had spoken of drama as play: *'We just take the passage, and we can play. We play!'* Yet, another leader wished to more clearly define what he meant by this way of 'playing': *'To show drama is very good for us. We gain something. It is not because we are just playing. We live it. We have experience.'* As devising biblical drama offers experienced participation in the possibilities of the worlds-of-Scripture through enactment as well as through discussion, it remains a serious engagement with Scripture as well as an approach that has the fun and fluidity of play.

Scriptural interpretation through devising drama offers *'something different'* that adds its own fresh perspectives through experienced participation. As far as I am aware, no one in Gambella has ever said of drama, "We don't want to", or even, "We can't". They approach the activity with an exuberance that is both deeply engaged and full of fun as they set about the 'serious' task of scriptural interpretation. Their dramas show that the process of devising offers an accessible approach to Scripture that is not specifically reliant on prior knowledge and understanding, or on facilitation by either theological or theatrical



educators. What it *is* reliant on is a willingness to engage communally and creatively, experimentally and experientially, in practical and playful, serious and fun terms with the possible worlds offered by Scripture, one's own world, and one's whole self.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, writing as a theologian, beckons us to enter the world of Scripture so that our own possibilities may be extended. In his foreword to *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery*, the report of the *Bible in the Life of the Church* project, Archbishop Rowan reminds Anglicans that we always read Scripture both 'in company with believers of every age and place' and with 'the perspectives and skills of [our own] human culture'. In support of the second phase of the project Archbishop Justin Welby calls us to consider the question: 'Can their context and perspectives be a gift to mine?' He writes of a non-particularized 'other'. The orally focused Anglicans of Gambella are discovering the gift of devised biblical drama for their own context, and it is here offered to the wider Communion as an alternative and experiential means of accepting the invitation of Scripture to enter its worlds and to follow its beckoning call to live ever more fully in the kingdom of God.

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