

# The human quest for meaning: Theatre as a vehicle for dialogue

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## Introduction

Religion and faith have been the basis of the Maltese cultural identity for many centuries and the Church has had a significant say in the social and political fabric of the country. The last decade has seen a sharp rise in secularisation, clearly rooting the Maltese society in a context that is not dependent on religion. As a result, a wave of not unexpected antagonism, and at times fundamentalism, has been witnessed by both ‘sides’: theists frequently present a scenario of apocalyptic doom whereas the atheists/non-theists perceive believers as incapable of detaching from their deep-rooted need for religion. Initiatives of dialogue and efforts of finding common ground have been few and far between.

Against this backdrop, the project ‘The human quest for meaning’ was conceived to challenge both extremes, starting from the human experience and desire for meaning and significance in life, whether embedded in a religious context or not. The philosophical approach that the project embraces focused on the authentic search for truth in an atmosphere that was honest and open, through dialogue with others in a non-judgemental manner.

With this aim in mind, the project explored the use of theatre as a vehicle for dialogue, more specifically, John Pielmeier’s modern classic *Agnes of God*, not only due to the fact that the script is riveting and engaging, but furthermore because it deals with the theme in a relevant and poignant manner.

The project was divided into three phases. In the first phase, participants were given material to watch and read in the form of Facebook posts involving short videos and written reactions to the script. The second phase was the performance itself, stimulating the audience to engage in a process of reflection. In the third phase, the participants processed the experience of the previous phases and expressed the impact of the process through a questionnaire and through

participation in online webinars. Therefore the project was cyclical: the participants 'received' stimulation in the initial phase and reacted back in the followup part of the project. Moreover, eight performing arts students from the University of Malta followed the project closely, including rehearsals, performances, and webinars. At the end of the project, they were asked for their reactions through an essay where they had to examine how this project could serve as a case-study of using theatre as dialogue.

### Phase 1 - Buildup

As a way of preparing the audience, signalling that *Agnes of God* is more than a performance, we asked a number of contributors to give us their reactions. Gail Debono - a Humanist and forensic psychologist - answered a number of interview questions on video, while Carlo Calleja - a Catholic priest and academic focusing on ethics - wrote on religious conviction and ethical responsibility. Simone Azzopardi - a historian with a particular interest in the history of feminism - and Pauline Dimech - a highly involved member of the Church and an academic focusing on pastoral theology - contributed longer written content on the topic of femininity. The whole preparatory journey, guided by Elaine Falzon, was documented on the Facebook page. The written content has been primarily published through a dedicated Medium page.

### Phase 2 - The Theatre Production

The narrative of the text focuses on a psychiatrist, commissioned to assess a cloistered novice nun who had slaughtered a baby that she had just given birth to. In the production, the naivety of the novice is juxtaposed against the more streetwise Mother of the Monastery who intends to protect the novice from the snares of the science of psychiatry. The play was directed by Tyrone Grima with Simone Ellul (as the psychiatrist), Isabel Warrington (as mother superior), and Kyra Lautier (as the novice) interpreting the main roles.

### Phase 3 - Followup Questionnaire and Webinars

In the third phase of the project, the audience members were invited to answer a short questionnaire and attend two webinars to delve deeper into the dynamics presented in the first phase of the project: one on psychology, ethics, and religion, and a second one on femininity, church, and religion. A climate of safety was maintained throughout the experience and

participants seemed to feel comfortable expressing themselves, to the point of sharing on a very personal level. The two webinars, each lasting two hours - moderated by Christian Colombo with the participation of Carlo Calleja, Vicki Ann Cremona - an academic in Theatre Studies, Gail Debono, and Pauline Dimech - are available online<sup>1</sup>.

As this project developed, and participants contributed in different measures, a wide spectrum of themes emerged. This paper will focus specifically on the question of whether theatre can serve as a vehicle of dialogue, particularly between theists and atheists. Framing this dynamic within a theoretical framework based on existentialist philosophy and theology, as well as concepts in applied theatre, we hope to demonstrate how the project served as a model to answer the established research question. References to data elicited through the interviews conducted with the actors; the questionnaire given to audience members; and the webinars will sustain the insights further.

The rest of the paper develops by introducing the idea of meeting “the other” through theatre, and subsequently expounding it as a three-step process: starting by creating the space for encountering the other, followed by the leap into strangeness involved in meeting the other, and finally, unpacking the aftermath of the encounter.

## Meeting the other through theatre

Central to the dialogue between theists and atheists is the concept of the other. Otherness is what defines us as human beings, and yet as Eco succinctly argues, this fundamental notion within the human reality causes so much fear and anxiety.[1] This may be due to the power dynamics that Sartre elaborates upon by presenting the conflict between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’. The self wants to assimilate the other into its reality, whereas the other does not identify itself with the self.[2] Sartre maintains that in relationships, there is never a state of equality: it is either a form of *trans-descendence*, that is looking down at the person, or *trans-ascendence*, looking up at the other.[3] This dynamic manifests itself in the violent confrontation that takes place between theists and atheists, where both factions trans-descend each other. The theist accuses the atheist of spreading evil in the world, whereas the non-believer perceives

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<sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/wRqY7yPpvkQ> and <https://youtu.be/7KC8onRy32s>

the believer as an immoral hypocrite[4] or as ‘from the Middle Ages’, as Mother Miriam Ruth states in her first encounter with the psychiatrist (Act 1, Scene 2).

For this dynamic to be balanced, power dynamics need to be discarded: dialogue cannot occur if one talks from a position of political superiority. The Christian believer should not seek refuge in the comfort of the tradition of the Institution, and the atheist needs to detach from the security that the empirical nature of science offers. Rorty defines this process as a transition from the metaphysical to charity.[5] The focus shifts from a philosophical one which attempts to prove a perspective, to a reaching out in dialogue and in action. Theatre is a powerful medium that addresses the balance in the power dynamics and allows this transition to happen. It does not attempt to explain but it offers the audience an experience where they can relate with the characters on stage. Although the audience members will not always ‘love’ each character, by penetrating their reality they will understand it better. For the duration of the play, the audience member is in relation with, and to, each character. Boal describes theatre as ‘a revolution of Copernican proportions’ because through it ‘we continue to see the world as we have always seen it, but now we also see it as others see it.’[6] Through theatre ‘a triad comes into being. The observing-I, the *I-in-situ*, and the not I, that is, the other.’[7] A space of a sacred nature, is created whereby without losing identity, the self can see the reality of the other without feeling threatened by his presence. A performance has the potential of being non-hierarchical and dialogical,[8] thus allowing the exchange and the challenging of ideas. The theatrical dynamic allows us to suspend prejudices or strong ideological perspectives because we are freed by, and from, the portrayal of the narrative, since we know that the enacted story, albeit relatable, is not our own. This allows a level of detachment where reflection can occur. Theatre also has the benefit of using metaphor and symbols, and as the existentialist theologian Bultmann argues, deep realities in the human existence can only be captured through metaphors and symbols.[9] Kierkegaardian philosophy expounds on the notion that a story evokes existentialist questions and invites the listener to partake in a journey, or may it be more correct to say, multiple journeys.[10] All good theatre ‘performs the same function of reflecting, symbolising, clarifying’.[11] While some comments from participants’ questionnaires challenge the necessity of a theatre piece to generate dialogue on the basis that they had already delved into such reflections prior to the performance, the beauty of a theatre piece is that it makes this delving a collective process. Others, in fact, commented on how important inclusion and dialogue is and that theatre allowed this to happen.[12]

## Creating the space for the encounter

The encounter with the other will not necessarily lead to a change in viewpoint, and certainly that is not the objective, but it will provide a fertile terrain for empathy to be nurtured.[13] As Isabel Warrington claims, theatre ‘creates a scenario...it is a very powerful tool because you are putting people in a particular situation, you are showing all angles of a situation.’[14] The role of the performer, or the director, is not to impose his agenda but to create an empty space where dialogue can occur. Self-emptying (*kenosis*), and not self-imposition, makes an artistic work authentic.[15] Simone Weil refers to this imposition by presenting the analogy of eating food. In her vision, art should not be destructive and exploitative. It should not imitate the person engaged in the process of eating, who transforms the food into energy for himself.[16] Rather, art is the gazing at the food.[17] As Grotowski stated, the performer ‘must stop thinking of himself all the time...we are engaged ceaselessly with maintaining our trivial chatter and with reaching our goal...I am either behind myself, or ahead of myself, but never there, where I am.’[18] This dynamic is reinforced by the results of the questionnaire given to the audience who watched *Agnes of God*: Few of the respondents felt that the production challenged their beliefs (or lack of), though most of the audience remarked that the play made them ask important questions.[19] This demonstrates that the underpinning rationale of the project was not to alter perspectives but to encourage audience members to reflect, and, moreover, to dialogue about their reflections.

The challenge lies in the mechanics of the process: how can the communication happen without being violent, without imposing one’s agenda? An equivalent risk would be presenting the polarities in a clinical manner. Portraying both sides of the argument in a neutral way can result in a sterile scenario in which no dialogue occurs, or else a new synthetic reality is created that is not authentic to either polarity. A theatre student Denise Perini stated that the production of *Agnes of God* ‘leaves it up to the spectator to determine whether or not there is synthesis between the two poles.’[20] Leach also believes that ‘each spectator is manufacturing her or his own kind of meaning.’[21] In this project, the aim was not to steer the conversation in either direction, but to create an empty space where the dialogue could take place. Referring to Simone Weil’s metaphor, an empty room creates the space to insert the doors and the windows to make it habitable.[22] The philosophy endorsed

in the practice of Forum Theatre sheds more light on this complexity. Although Forum Theatre operates in a specific and different way,[23] the praxis of this production was nonetheless influenced by the Boalian approach. Like Forum Theatre, this project was aware that it was ‘about what a roomful of people believe at a particular moment in time’.[24] Not only should the practitioner not be afraid of multiple readings, but he should see them as an opportunity for more dialogue.[25] It is this dialogue that results in transformation. Even though a person does not change his opinion, he will still be marked, and by consequence, transformed because of the theatrical experience. Indeed, Jackson, paralleling Weilian spirituality, insists that looking at the problem is already therapeutic.[26] *Agnes of God* went beyond only looking. The audience members stated that the production made it easier for them to engage with people of a different or no faith. The transformative aspect was nurtured even further in the webinars where a platform was created to facilitate and deepen the encounter. One of the key elements that emerged in the webinars is the notion of groundedness. As the conversation unfolded it became clear that the issue at the core of the play was not the existence or nonexistence of a god *per se*, but of what a person decides to attribute meaning to. Through its narrative, the production offered a grounded space: it transcended the mystical, rooting the experience in the relational.[27] This contributed to the ‘transformative’ element in the dialogue, which quoting Dr Livingstone’s final line, ‘would be miracle enough. Wouldn’t it?’ (Act 2, Scene 5).

## The encounter as a leap into ‘strangeness’

Kearney develops the concept of otherness further by denoting the other as the ‘stranger’. This word is not presented as a negative term. On the contrary, in Kearney’s vision, the stranger is a gift in our lives that is exploding with possibility through encounter.[28] We need to pay heed to the stranger who we encounter in our path. Certainly, this encounter is often-a-times daunting because it requires the exploration of the unknown, but it is only through the absurdity of such a risk that the beauty of the discovery can occur. Borrowing an analogy from Nietzsche, the process is akin to walking on a tightrope, with all the perils involved. Indeed, in Nietzsche’s account, the tight walker falls off the rope and dies but does so happily.[29] This leap also implies the humility and the openness of receiving a reality that is not ours. It places the receiver in a place of vulnerability, exposing his nakedness to the

stranger. This context leads Kearney to elucidate a fundamental point: the dialogue is not a space to explore commonalities. If so were the case, the approach would be reductionist. The exposition of the vulnerable within us does not reveal that we are the same but that we are indeed different. But because we have allowed ourselves to be so intimate and expose our innermost core, without fear, to each other, we can now celebrate the beauty of our differences.[30] They no longer remain a threat but are transformed into a gift that deepens our relationships. This process is facilitated by the theatrical experience: the culture of openness allows the audience member to grow as an individual, but also in tandem with others, including, and possibly particularly, the others who are different.[31] Simone Ellul spoke about an improvisation show in Istanbul that she was involved in whereby questions of a controversial nature were projected, and the audience members had to move into a space according to their opinion about the matter. Ellul related how family members and friends who attended the show together were surprised by the response of persons within their cluster. The ‘strangeness’ of these responses developed from unexpectedness to a sense of playfulness, as these revelations occurred within the freedom of expression that the production allowed for.[32] Kyra Lautier defined the theatrical encounter as a platform of honesty.[33] Hence, theatre does not present a harmonious encounter: without a trauma there is no drama. The theatre thrives on conflict.[34] But the ‘conflict’ is not antagonistic or destructive. It is the ‘conflict’ of polarities that do not shy from expressing themselves in a crude manner because it is only when the strangeness of the conflict is exposed that authentic dialogue can take place.

This tension, inherent in the dynamics of alterity, are reflected in the revelation of desire in the theatrical experience. The theatre is based on the externalisation of a desire, often portrayed in the struggle faced by the characters on stage. Each character is drawn to, as much as he is repelled from, the object of desire.[35] This desire is always intimately connected with the other. But the desired other is not necessarily a known other, and frequently, and possibly as frequently as in everyday life, the encounter is frightening. Theatre offers the opportunity to embody and externalise the desire, and its struggle, in a way that as an audience we can observe and study the dynamics.[36] As Kierkegaard acknowledges, befriending is equally as challenging as detaching.[37] Nevertheless, the externalisation of this desire facilitates not only the cognitive process, that is, the understanding of the intricacies of the dynamic, but, furthermore, offers a possibility of dialoguing with it.

## The aftermath of the encounter

As stated above, not only will the encounter with the other not necessarily lead to a change in viewpoint, but it may well possibly be the case that it does not even produce a definite result. If it does, it is often without any clarity. The complex dynamics of the process demonstrate that the encounter is embedded in doubt. Kierkegaardian philosophy warns that an attempt towards clarity could only result in further obscurity. The important truths in life can never be understood[38] and, moreover, the ‘understanding of human nature, though, should not be viewed primarily as a formal or fully developed anthropology or ontology concerned with objective certainty.’[39] The existentialist theologian Paul Tillich says that ‘doubt, and not certitude, is our human situation, whether we affirm or deny God. And perhaps the difference between them is not so great as one usually thinks.’[40] *Agnes of God* does not attempt to provide answers. As a director, each phase of the rehearsal process led me to a different conclusion, and even after the process was over, I still cannot claim to have reached a conclusion. It would be more fitting to state that I have embraced more fully the doubts that this encounter has exposed me to. This ‘uncertainty’ featured extensively also in the results obtained through the questionnaire whereby the overwhelming response was that it is healthy to question faith.[41]

## Conclusion

These insights show that theatre is a vehicle that spurs people to think and to converse. By witnessing a narrative, albeit metaphorical, the audience is drawn into another universe which may not be a reflection of their immediate reality or perceptions. This process increases and develops empathy towards these other ‘foreign’ realities. Sharing of narratives is powerful because irrespective of whether you are in agreement with the philosophical framework overarching the story of the character, you cannot deny or negate it because it is his or her story. The fact that we suspend our realities for the duration of an hour and a half places us in a liminal space where we can see the world through the eyes of the characters. Most audience members claimed that the theatrical experience allowed them to empathise with other worldviews, whether from a theist or atheist perspective, through the process of asking themselves fundamental questions of an existentialist nature. These insights also accentuate



how important it is to keep on exploring the use of theatre as a vehicle of dialogue and to be supported with the needed infrastructure from the institutions for such a space to develop even further.

The analysis of any project that has taken place in the last two years cannot be referred to without placing it in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This project becomes even more relevant in this context since it was a project exploring encounters in a period where encounters were limited and perceived as threatening. Despite these hurdles, the theatrical act makes use of creativity to discover novel ways of expressing itself. Apart from the standard procedures, imposed by protocol, in this production the actors minimised physical contact to explore different ways of conveying emotions. This also meant that the dialogue with the audience had to happen in a different way. No immediate post-performance discussions could be held because the audience was rushed out immediately after each performance. Audience members did not have the opportunity of cross-fertilising ideas and feelings over a glass of wine straight after the shows. This lack of immediacy was remarked by Isabel Warrington in the interview conducted with her as a hurdle that did not permit the dialogue to happen as extensively as it could.[42] This immediacy was nonetheless addressed by holding the webinars a few days after the production was over.

Throughout the project, enough energy and momentum have been gathered that the producers and academics involved continued to explore what spillover benefits can be considered for future initiatives. As a first step, a report was sent to the Catholic ecclesiastical authorities of Malta with our findings and reflections on the project. This was well received and after two positive meetings, there seems to be fertile ground which could see further projects and conceptions materialising. At this stage it is unclear what shape or form this may take; it can lead to a series of other one-off projects, or perhaps more optimistically, a form of a more permanent space of encounter (in all the senses of the word) possibly involving a series of playful exploratory events, provoking static/dynamic exhibits, etc. What is sure at this early stage of our plans is that art - especially theatre - has a central role to play in facilitating the exploration of “otherness” in a compelling and creative way.

## References

- [1] Umberto Eco and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, *Belief or Nonbelief* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), 94-5.
- [2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 388.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 430.
- [4] John R. Shook, *The God Debates: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Guide for Atheists and Believers (and Everyone in Between)* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3-4.
- [5] Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, “What is Religion’s future after metaphysics,” in *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 56.
- [6] Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), 26.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 13.
- [8] Nicola Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 199.
- [9] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1960), 67.
- [10] Marcia C. Robinson, “Kierkegaard’s Existential Play: Storytelling and the Development of the Religious Imagination in the Authorship,” in *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski (USA: Northwestern University Press, 2018 ),77.
- [11] Adrian Jackson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, xxii.
- [12] Questionnaire on the production of *Agnes of God*, administered online on 4 December 2020.
- [13] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10.
- [14] Interview with Isabel Warrington, held on 6 April 2021.
- [15] Katherine T. Brueck, *The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 38.
- [16] Simone Weil, *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers, Volume VI: La Science et l’Impensable (septembre 1941 – février 1942)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 459.

- [17] Simone Weil, *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers (1933 – septembre 1941)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 143.
- [18] Jennifer Kumiega, *The Theatre of Grotowski* (London: Methuen, 1985), 225-6.
- [19] Questionnaire on *Agnes of God*.
- [20] Denise Perini, “Staging the unanswerable: An investigation into *Agnes of God* as and Applied Theatre Performance,” (Assignment, University of Malta, 31st January 2021), 4.
- [21] Robert Leach, *Theatre studies: the basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 194.
- [22] Simone Weil, “Textes chinois,” in *Écrits de Marseille, Volume II: Grèce- Inde-Occitanie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 437.
- [23] Boal believes that the strongest distinction between conventional theatre and Forum Theatre is in the former the only form of communication is one-way, from the stage to the audience. (Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, 27). This project challenges this by allowing the audience the space, albeit, not immediately, to respond. The objective of this project was, indeed, to provide, encourage and nurture this space. Another important difference is that Forum Theatre addresses the tension between the oppressed and the oppressor, offering the former the required empowerment (ibid., 1). In the context of this project, as explained before, there has been oppression addressed at either side. However, the objective of this project is not to investigate the oppression.
- [24] Jackson, “Translator’s Introduction,” xix.
- [25] Ibid., xix-xx.
- [26] Ibid., xx.
- [27] “Psychology, Ethics, Religion,” webinar held on 8 December, 2020.
- [28] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 7.
- [29] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (London: The Folio Society, 2005), 12.
- [30] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 178.
- [31] Jerzy Grotowski, “Towards a Poor Theatre,” in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (New York: Routledge, 2002), 36.
- [32] Interview with Simone Ellul, held on 9 April, 2021.
- [33] Interview with Kyra Lautier, held on the 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2021.

[34] Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, 16.

[35] *Ibid.*, 58-9.

[36] *Ibid.*, 24.

[37] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, (London: The Folio Society, 1985), 16.

[38] Jonathan Rée, introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, by Kierkegaard, x.

[39] Robinson, "Kierkegaard's Existential Play," 72.

[40] Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 97.

[41] Questionnaire on *Agnes of God*.

[42] Interview with Warrington.