Dancing in Sacred Space: Some Reflections on Liturgy and Performance

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Musical concerts are commonly presented in churches; dance performances rarely so. What happens when a dance concert is offered in a sacred space? What impact does the sacred environment have on the performance, on the audience, on the performers? What impact does the performance have on the place? More specifically, what happens when the bodies of dancers are brought into contact with specific places in the church building?

These questions raise further ones about how the body symbolizes and how audiences respond to movement through the kinesthetic sense. Taking three site-specific dance performances as examples, we will explore the interaction of dancing body, performance and sacred space. We will consider analogies between body and building, and hope to cast some light on the relationship between performance and liturgy. Finally, we will discuss possible basic conflicts between liturgy and the arts as a whole.

From 1993-1995, a series of organ-and-dance performances was presented at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church on the south side of Chicago. Two different programs were offered, the first in 1993 and 1994, the second in 1995. This Festival of Organ and Dance featured performance by organist Thomas Weisflog, who played works by Jehan Alain, Calvin Hampton and others on the church’s 3,600-pipe, B. F. Skinner organ. A small, professional, modern dance company performed, augmented by a group of community dancers. The site-specific choreography was by the author. It used the particular architectural features of the church as sources for movement, and attempted to highlight those features by means of movement.

The church was designed by Barry Byrne, an associate of Frank Lloyd Wright, and dedicated in 1924. Anticipating the liturgical reform of 40 years later, Byrne designed the sanctuary to thrust out into the nave, rather than be separated from it, making St. Thomas the first modern Catholic church in the United States. Interestingly, Byrne referred to his collaboration with the sculptor Alfonso Ianelli as a dance, with the lead shifting back and forth as needed.
Dance has often been incorporated into liturgy, at this church and elsewhere, but the Festival was clearly non-liturgical. A dance concert in a church brings together dancing bodies, performance, and sacred space. We will examine each in turn.

**Body**

We in modern Western culture are not very comfortable with the fact of embodiment, and we tend to check our bodies at the door when we enter the sacred space. This attitude conflicts with the central importance and multivalence of the human body in the sacred expressions of Christians: body is self, community, consecrated bread, Incarnation. Despite cries from various corners for full participation and opening up of symbols, many people are uncomfortable with the dancing body in the sacred space, in or out of liturgy. Is it really all right to stand on the communion rail? To jump from the pulpit? What about the altar? I will not detail the long history of dance in the church, from the Psalmist’s command to “dance in praise of God’s name” (Ps 149), through the condemnations of John Chrysostom (Davies 20-21), through the many edicts against dancing in the medieval and Tridentine church (Gagne 51-60), each a piece of evidence that dance was taking place.

Contradictory feelings about the body in liturgy are revealed stunningly today in conflicts over the design of worship spaces. For example, accusations of “new-age pantheism” were recently brought by a member of a congregation faced with a proposed seating change which would have brought the members of the community face to face. Similarly, the “modesty rail” which shields the lower halves of the bodies of the choir in some churches expresses an anthropology distinctly opposed to the “open” ambo, whose transparency allows the word to be proclaimed by a whole person, entirely visible.

**Performance**

Views of performance in modern American culture have been heavily conditioned by a commercial theatre, as well as film and television industries operated for profit. I would like to counteract this by proposing a more rudimentary definition of performance, based on Victor Turner’s etymological study in *From Ritual to Theatre* (13). Turner sees performance as expression or something “pressed out” of experience, the meaning which is squeezed out of an event. He points out that Old French *parfournir* means