What Is Theatre's Role As A Worship Tool In A Messianic Synagogue?

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WHAT IS THEATRE’S ROLE AS A WORSHIP TOOL IN A MESSIANIC JEWISH SYNAGOGUE?

by

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B.F.A. Shenandoah University, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre for Young Audiences in the Department of Theatre in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I worked with an ensemble of teenagers from Ayts Chayim Messianic Synagogue in Boca Raton, Florida to develop an original Purim play to be presented for the congregation and the public. I specifically explored “What is theatre’s role as a worship tool in a Messianic Jewish Synagogue?” My ultimate goal in this process was to honor God through the creative arts, and I used the process of creating the play to discover the specific ways that theatre can be used as a worship tool, from script development to theatrical presentation.

I hypothesized that theatre could be used as a worship tool if both the attitude of the artists is one of worship and the artists strive for excellence because it is ultimately for God. I furthermore hypothesized that worshipping throughout the process by way of the group’s teamwork, attitude, and quality of work would be an integral part of producing a successful product. I sought to discover specifically what theatre as a worship tool looks like in the context of a Messianic Synagogue and what practices I glean from models of Christian drama ministries and what practices emerge from my process that are unique to Messianic theatre when used as a worship tool. How can I infuse my spiritual foundation with my artistic training?

The majority of this project focused on the process of creating the play, from writing the script to dress rehearsals. The ensemble met weekly to explore the themes of the biblical story of Esther, brainstormed ideas for our adaptation, developed a script, and executed production aspects such as acting and design elements. Simultaneously, I kept a rehearsal journal with reflections on each lesson and the process as a whole. I completed research on contemporary theories and practices of Christian theatre artists in order to compare and contrast different approaches to faith-based theatre; these approaches are described in this thesis and conclusions.
are made as to how this research can be applied to my study. At the end of the presentation, I
conducted interviews with members of the ensemble and the leaders of the congregation to
receive feedback about the process, final presentation, and their perception of how theatre may
be used as a worship tool.

In this thesis, I write about the experience as a whole, evaluating our ability to use theatre
as a worship tool for this specific presentation. I then process the implications this project has for
future Messianic Jewish theatre, as well as the project’s impact on my growth as a theatre artist.

My final conclusions based on this experience are that theatre’s role as a worship tool is
to create an atmosphere where people are comfortable worshipping. Furthermore, the process of
creating the play helped the youth and I discover how to be effective “ministers” and artists that
create an atmosphere of worship. Based on my research, I posit that theatre can play many
“roles” in the context of a Messianic synagogue: a bypass, sandpaper, or light, to name a few.
Finally, artists and places of worship have something to contribute to one another, but both
parties must move forward with the understanding that the Scripture provides a theological
framework from which to base artistic choices and that artists need to develop their own specific
approach to theatre while suiting the mission, vision, and values of the host congregation.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first acknowledgment goes to my Creator, the first and greatest Artist. May this thesis be a sweet-smelling aroma offered up to You.

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“The holidays are coming and we must plan a special outreach event—I know, let’s have a play!” “The youth really need something to bring them together—how about a play?” “We do Purim plays every year—it’s tradition!” In my experience, one hears versions of the above sayings in a Messianic Jewish synagogue. But have we, as congregational members and responsible artists, really examined our purpose for producing a faith-based play in a place of worship? New genres of theatre do not just appear out of a vacuum; they are derived from a system of values that inform the artistic choices made. The art created reflects the values of the dramatic theory. Could I, as a Messianic Jewish artist, uncover a dramatic theory to the use of theatre as a worship tool through the process of producing a play for a Messianic Jewish synagogue?

As theatre develops within the Messianic movement, I strive for discernment and evaluation that sheds light on what it means to make Messianic theatre. What differentiates it from other forms and genres? While Messianic theatre certainly borrows traditions, theories, and practices from the mainstream theatre world, the difference between sacred and secular theatre could be attributed to the artists’ worldview. I view my role in theatre and subjects such as truth, relationships, the Bible, religion, and my purpose on earth differently than traditional artists because my faith invades every aspect of my life. I am interested in the theology that underpins what we do artistically. Is there a theoretical approach to theatre that I can adopt that will inform theatre’s role in synagogue life? I believe the uncovering of a theoretical approach to the use of

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1 Also known as a “Purim Schpiel,” a Purim play is a presentation of the story of Esther from the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew word “Purim” literally means “lots,” which refers to the lots the antagonist Haman used to determine the date he plotted to kill all the Jews.

2 Please see the section on Messianic Judaism later in this chapter for the definition of this term.
theatre as a worship tool will inform the choices faith-based artists, such as myself, make throughout the process and execution of a production.

In this study, I examine the process and presentation of an original play collaboratively created with an ensemble of teens from the youth group at Ayts Chayim Messianic Synagogue in Boca Raton, Florida. First, I provide an overview of our process from conceptualization to scriptwriting to rehearsal. I then describe what I term the “realization,” which refers to the fullest possible realization of the play, the presentation. I evaluate the realization based on how well our goals (from throughout the process) were executed in the realization, as well as participant and viewer responses to the quality of the presentation. Based on this process, realization and reflections, I conclude with recommendations for how theatre may be used as a worship tool in the Messianic synagogue. I include theoretical and practical approaches that we uncovered throughout our process of attempting to make a piece of theatre that could be used as a worship tool.

At the outset of this study, it seemed to me that the process should be viewed as an act of worship just as much as the final product. This was important to me because I felt that the goal of our end-product should match the goal of the journey along the way, lest we be accused of hypocrisy. (Throughout this study, the Scriptures are consulted for examples that inform the work and the choices we make. Many translations and versions are cited, including the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) edited by David Stern, which is the primary Messianic Jewish Bible). Yeshua ³ said, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me” speaking of people whose external actions did not match the internal condition of their heart (Matt. 15:8, CJB). I hypothesized that the way we treated each other and the goals we upheld

³ Jesus’ Hebrew name, which Messianic Jews prefer to use in speaking of Jesus.
during the process would impact the final “realization” of our hard work, the presentation of the play. Therefore, I paid attention to the effective use of teamwork, the quality of the work itself, and the general attitude of the participants. Through my observations and the observations of other congregational leaders I examined how the ensemble members interacted and worked together and whether they had a willing attitude or an unwilling attitude. I measured the quality of the work by how well we achieved the goals we established in the beginning of the process. (The measurement for quality is discussed further in the section “Should Theatre Be Used as a Worship Tool?”).

The Overarching Question

Ayts Chayim already uses elements such as music, dance, the sermon, testimonies, and even tithes and offerings as tools to worship God. Indeed, most Messianic synagogues in America commonly accept the use of creative arts such as music, dance, visual art, and media as aids in the total worship experience. The use of theatre—usually referred to as “drama” in religious settings—is a newer concept in Messianic synagogues, though it is certainly not foreign. Individual congregations may produce an occasional play for the holidays, but I know of no Messianic congregation that uses drama on a regular basis. However, I believe that using artistic forms requires responsibility and choices. For example, there are many kinds of music that could be labeled “religious,” but each congregation must choose the kind of music that suits its particular mission, values, and purposes. These decisions led me to question what is our

4 Pertaining to practices or beliefs of a religion. Please see Appendix G for another definition of “religious.”
responsibility concerning the use of theatre in the synagogue and how does it affect the choices we make? Do we view theatre as a preacher, a guide, a judge, a mirror, a magician—or a combination of many roles? What is theatre’s role as a worship tool in a Messianic Jewish synagogue? That is what I sought to discover as I worked with a group of teenagers from Ayts Chayim Messianic Synagogue to create an original Purim play to be presented for the congregation and the public.

Definition of “Worship Tool”

Worship

What is worship? This is no small question, for volumes of books are written on the subject, but I shall attempt to provide a working definition for the purpose of this study. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, defines terms in Scripture from Hebrew. The Hebrew word for “worship” as it is used in the Scriptures is actually a “word-picture” for bowing down (Harris 914). In fact, in Judges 7:15, only one Hebrew word is used, yish’tachu, but the New American Standard Version translates it “bowed in worship” (“Judg. 7:15;” T’Nach, emphasis mine). This word-picture connotes an attitude of adoration to the object, person, or deity being worshipped. Alison Siewert, director of ransomTHEdonkey, a Christian performance group, and author of Drama Team Handbook, defines worship in this manner:

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5 “Word-picture”: a word or phrase that creates a strong visual image.
Worship is coming to God and seeing him rightly. In the worship service we gather as a community to connect our lives with God’s life and our stories with God’s story. When we enter into worship, we enter into an encounter with God that changes us. Worshipping God puts God in his rightful place and us in ours. Worshipping offers us contact with God: we perceive what he’s like and what he promises; we bow down and rise up in exaltation of a King who loves us and the world he made. While it can include singing songs and listening to sermons, it can also be a time in which we see and hear pictures of God and his kingdom. Worship celebrates the Lord of the universe and helps us see how we are woven into his story. (20)

This definition suggests that when worship takes place, things start to happen inside of us and around us. These various definitions suggest five indicators that worship is taking place: relation, edification, transformation, adoration, and celebration. Each of these indicator help clarify my definition of worship and will be used to illuminate theatre’s role as a worship tool during my work with the Ayts Chayim youth group

- **Relation:** “Worship is coming to God and seeing him rightly… Worshipping God puts God in his rightful place and us in ours” (Siewert 20). The arts are one of the methods available to turn a congregation’s thoughts to their collective relationship with God. In this study, I explore how specifically theatre can fulfill this function of worship, which is to portray our relationship with God as multi-faceted. I believe we are God’s children, friends, disciples, and co-heirs. Worship could be said to be exercising the unlimited access we have to God through our relationship with Him. *The MacArthur Study Bible,*
New King James Version (NKJV)⁶, edited by John MacArthur, provides over 25,000 scholarly notes as well as the full text of the Bible. According to this source, we get to determine the level of our relationship with God: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (Jas. 4:8, New King James Version). International conference speaker and founder of the ministry Messenger International, Dr. John Bevere describes our potentially intimate relationship with God in Drawing Near: A Life of Intimacy with God. Bevere posits that, like Moses and the burning bush, we must turn aside or depart from our regular course of action in order to recognize God’s voice (6). God wants all of His people to love hearing His voice more than they love the things of the world. This is our spiritual appetite and can be likened to our physical appetite: if we feed on health food, we will crave health food; if we feed on junk food, we will crave junk food (Bevere 31-2). In the worship service, we must intentionally turn our thoughts to God and away from any barrier that blocks our fellowship with Him.

• **Edification:** “In the worship service we gather as a community to connect our lives with God’s life and our stories with God’s story” (Siewert 20). To edify, according to Encyclopedia Britannica, means “to instruct and improve especially in moral and religious knowledge.” The word “edify” is derived from the Latin term meaning “to erect a house” (“Edify”). Edification, then, is information that builds, uplifts, or improves the state of a body of people. The word has a religious connotation, but could easily be translated to all relationships, as well as the inner edification of an individual. If one uses the metaphor of erecting a house, the house, which represents either a group of people or

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⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all quoted Scripture in this thesis is derived from this source. Please see List of References for full citation.
an individual person, must have a strong foundation in order to withstand wind, heavy rain, and the weight of the occupants. In spiritual terms, connecting our lives with God’s life provides the necessary foundation to withstand life’s trials and tests. By virtue of the collaborative process of creating a play, one usually experiences such trials, which test whether a group of people will fall apart or stick together through the difficult times. In our process of creating the Purim play, I focused on edification as an aspect of worship by observing how well we edified one another and the result of such edification.

- **Transformation:** “When we enter into worship, we enter into an encounter with God that changes us” (Siewert 20). I posit that when we leave a worship experience, we should not be the same as when we entered. It is difficult to describe this experience in words, but I believe God does “business” with each person individually as well as the collectively. “Worship” is so much more than singing a slow song; it is about the inner transformation that motivates us to make a change in the way we live our lives. I hoped, as a result of participating in this process, that the youth would experience spiritual transformation in their walk with God and that the viewers of the piece would likewise walk away changed.

- **Adoration:** “…we bow down and rise up in exaltation of a King who loves us and the world he made” (Siewert 20). The Scripture says that God “inhabit[s] the praises of Israel” (“Ps. 22:3”, World English Bible). When we show affection for God, He promises to meet us where we are. It is typically easy to display adoration through musical worship by singing praises to God, but how can we show our affection through theatre? We used the process of creating the play to discover opportunities to display our adoration of God.
• **Celebration:** “Worship celebrates the Lord of the universe and helps us see how we are woven into his story” (Siewert 20). Experiencing the four concepts above typically causes us to celebrate over our relationship with God, the edification and transformation He provides, and the ability to express our adoration of Him freely. We, as followers of God, are thankful that the Lord of the universe cares enough to make a place for us in His story. What exactly is His story and how can we celebrate this story through theatre? What moments of rejoicing did we discover throughout the process and presentation of the play?

*Tool*

*Encyclopedia Britannica* defines “tool” as “something (as an instrument or apparatus) used in performing an operation or necessary in the practice of a vocation or profession” (“Tool”). If that is true, then every worship “tool” should be used in carrying out the worship service. Moreover, I infer that every worship tool must be an *instrument* through which worship flows. Consequently, in examining theatre’s role as a worship tool I ask if theatre is necessary to the carrying out of worship.

What is a worship tool’s role? I define worship tool as any device that points to the presence of the Lord. As noted above, congregants need to consciously turn their thoughts from their own worries and concerns to thoughts and actions that worship God. When we gather corporately for services, we invite God’s presence to come near and “do business” with us, either individually or collectively. Therefore, the instrument that carries out worship must point to the Lord’s presence. After all, the attendees of a service come from many different backgrounds and
walks of life. To use a contemporary analogy from Gloria Brawer, the rabbi’s wife at Ayts Chayim, it is as if we are all listening to different music on our iPods with our headphones on. We are walking around listening to this different music, barely aware of others or our surroundings. Then we all receive the same download (Brawer, G.). When we enter the sanctuary, worship is the vehicle that takes us from our own worries and concerns to a place where our vision is united with the Lord’s. Furthermore, worship makes us sensitive to the atmosphere and to others. I have seen God’s presence become so tangible that everyone in the sanctuary falls to their knees before Him. I have seen people pray for another’s specific sickness without previous knowledge that the person was sick. I have seen teenagers break down and repent for sin in front of the entire congregation. That is the power of God’s presence. When I say that worship is an attitude, it means that one’s intention is the most important criterion for determining whether or not actual worship takes place. Konstantin Stanislavski, the father of modern acting, taught that an actor should discover the inner emotional condition that motivates an external action or reaction (Stanislavski 38). I believe a similar process takes place during worship: the inner change during worship motivates an outer response directed either to God or those around us. Therefore I define “worship tool” as any device that assists in ushering a body of people into an awareness of God’s presence.
Should Theatre Be Used as a Worship Tool?

Herbert Sennett’s Utilitarian View

There are many schools of thought as to what “religious drama,” particularly in the church, is or should be. Since the late 1960s and 1970s, the church began to view drama in new ways. Herbert Sennett, writer, director, and former Chair of the Department of Theatre at Palm Beach Atlantic University, outlines four varying statements about religious drama:

- There is not a separate form of drama which can be classified as “religious.” All drama is religious because it deals with humanity, nature, and the spirit realm.
- Religious drama is not a kind of drama, it is a quality of drama.
- Any high quality play may potentially be used by the church, and one must be open-minded about what may or may not be appropriate.
- Drama can be used for outreach—to “catch the conscious of the king” (Hamlet, II.iii).

Catching someone’s conscious involves creating a story with which he can identify, in the hopes that he will recognize a piece of himself. This approach is used to reach people with the gospel message.

I then condensed these four views into two categorical views of religious drama:

- **Utilitarian**: God can use anything, including theatre, to touch people’s hearts.
- **Non-Specific**: Art does not need to be justified in the church as a “tool” or an instrument.

(The former opinion is laid out in Religion and Dramatics: Essays on the Relationship Between Christianity and the Theatre Arts by writer, director, and educator Herbert Sennett. The latter
opinion is presented in the books *Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts* by international filmmaker and visual artist Franky Schaeffer and *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* by poet, writer, and music critic Steve Turner). In this miniature literature review, I outline the basic arguments of these authors and respond in light of my overarching question.

In *Religion and Dramatics*, Herbert Sennett subscribes mostly to the utilitarian category by proposing that the theatre and the church each have something to offer the other. The church can offer theatres spaces to perform their work, whether religious in nature or not. More than that, a church can adopt a playwright, providing a nurturing environment to develop pieces. Finally, a church can offer theatre professionals a haven or a spiritual family. Likewise, the theatre world can give back to the church by acknowledging Christian contributions to theatre and drama. Sennett calls for theatre professionals to forgive the apparent intolerance of the religious right. Playwrights should be allowed to write pieces that favor Christianity or have a Christian worldview, just as playwrights are allowed to write pieces that mock Christianity.

Sennett derives four possible outlets by which churches can use drama: religious worship, religious education, church recreation, and religious edification. In discussing religious worship, Sennett suggests that drama is the only form of worship that can combine a number of features into one event. Drama enhances the worship in a unique way:

One reason the corporate body of the church gathers for worship is to acknowledge its relationship with God. People often do praise God by expressing that He is the object of their praise and He is worthy to be praised. The rituals of worship are all used by the congregation to aid in identifying with that relationship and what it means in daily life. Here drama becomes an instrumental
tool. A dramatic presentation can easily help people recognize specific situations where one’s obedience to God is useful and even desirable in the ordinary movement of living. (Sennett 11-12)

Franky Schaeffer’s and Steve Turner’s Non-Specific View

Franky Schaeffer posits that modern Christian art and culture is characterized by an addiction to mediocrity, which comes from a misunderstanding of biblical truths and Christianity as they apply to the arts (23-25). After the close of the nineteenth century and the introduction of Darwinism, people began to view themselves and the world in purely utilitarian terms. Man was measured by what he could achieve, produce, earn, or contribute. Any God-given gifts had to be translated into utilitarian usefulness (Schaeffer 29). Furthermore, Schaeffer suggests that man has a vacuum in his soul by denying the God-given arts their proper place, and this vacuum must be filled by something, i.e. mediocre art which is only a shadow of what art could be (Schaeffer 41). “We accept in our spiritual world a mediocrity that would be immediately intolerable in what we regard as the real world, which Christians still live in, even though they try at times to pretend they are having heaven on earth”(Schaeffer 42).

Schaeffer proposes that Christians shift their view of the arts: all the beauty God gave us is a gift and therefore the arts need no spiritual justification. “We do not need to justify our endeavors by tacking on a few Christian slogans at the end to somehow redeem them” (Schaeffer 47). Unlike with compartmentalization of individual sections of one’s life, one’s whole life must come under the Lordship of Messiah (Schaeffer 27). Secondly, he advocates exercising God-given talents: “Of all people, Christians should be addicted to quality and integrity in every area,
not be looking for excuses and second-best” (Schaeffer 45). The answer, as Schaeffer suggests, to the problem of mediocrity in art produced by Christians is for artists to drop the religious expectations that the art be useful and overtly “Christian” in nature; instead artists must commit to producing art of excellence in the way God intended us to use His gifts.

Steve Turner is a disciple of Franky Schaeffer’s father, Dr. Francis Schaeffer, the founder of L’Abri, a small learning community in Switzerland where people came from around the world to try to make sense of their lives and times in the light of Christian truth. Schaeffer (Senior) asks Christian artists to evaluate artistic works through the questions “Is this piece of work technically excellent? Is it a valid expression of the artist’s view of the world? Are form and content well integrated? Is truth communicated?” (Turner 11). Turner agrees with both Schaeffers that God must be the Lord over all aspects of our lives, not just the “religious” compartments. Art can be infused with “godly perception” rather than art specifically about religion: “I have found that some of my clearest and most apparently ‘spiritual’ writing has come when I’ve abandoned the big task of trying to say something profound and am just fooling around with words. This is because I then unconsciously draw on the reserves accumulated over years of knowing God” (Turner 124). His vision for Christians in the arts brings the art into contemporary times to engage people in relevant artistic forms and methods. Christian artists have something to contribute to the world through their art, but they must do an equal amount of listening before sharing: “If we are to enter the debate taking place in the contemporary art world, we have to listen to what is already being said before we contribute….If we want to be relevant we should discover the drift of the conversation, the talking points of today and the vocabulary being used” (Turner 94-5).
Turner’s most unique suggestion is for artists to think of what the Christian might do in art in terms of five concentric circles:

- The outer ring is made up of art that does not suggest an obvious worldview (Turner 83).
- The next circle contains work that is an expression of Christian faith because it dignifies human life and introduces a sense of awe (Turner 83).
- The third ring contains those things that carry an imprint of clear Bible teaching but that are not uniquely Christian (Turner 85).
- The fourth circle gets closer to the heart of the gospel. For example, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* deals with the primarily biblical theme of original sin (Turner 87).
- The center circle contains the Christian gospel (Turner 88).

Finally, Turner emphasizes the importance of inner motivation and spiritual obedience throughout the artist’s creative process: “Our motives for wanting to be in the art world need to be examined” (Turner 119). “A lot of our art making is instinctive. What compels us to create is something inside that needs to get out. That is why the quality of our interior life is so important. If we are living righteously and God’s laws are constantly before us, then the imaginations of our heart will reflect that” (Turner 124). “If we care little about Christian obedience and then endeavor to create art that reflects a Christian perspective, then we have lost our integrity….We are acting a role” (Turner 124).

Both Schaeffer’s and Turner’s positions can be summarized as not clinging to a specific stylistic form as the model for “Christian art,” but rather letting one’s faith to invade one’s artistic vision: “I was calling them [Christians in the arts] not to a particular strategy and definitely not to a special subculture, but to simply ‘be there’ where it counts and create
something different and challenging by staying faithful and allowing that faith to invade their vision” (Turner 127).

I agree with many of the points that Schaeffer and Turner make, but I question Schaeffer’s definition of “good” or “excellence” in art, which he does not provide in the book. Why spend so much time illustrating what “mediocrity” looks like without providing a model for what “excellence” looks like? He justifies his position with the example of creation: God created night, day, the sky, animals—and saw that it was good. Schaeffer argues that it was good, not because it fulfilled any “utilitarian motives” (Schaeffer 36), but just because God made it; I counter that it was good because it has value and usefulness. As believers, our relationship with God provokes action and activity. The same is true of creation. If this were not true, trees would just be tall pieces of wood with branches and maybe some leaves. There would be no fruit. The fruit provides the purpose for the tree’s existence and the way that it reproduces. Just as all creation exists to speak of God’s existence (Ps. 19), the arts are only good if they somehow declare the glory of God—that is their purpose.

On the other hand, this notion that art must have “usefulness” relates to my struggle with the idea that drama is only “useful” for the holidays. When I received permission from Ayts Chayim to do this project, we then had to decide when to hold the play. We originally thought December for Hanukkah, but wanted to give the youth more time to put something together. The next question was “What is the next holiday? Purim!” The play served the synagogue’s need for a special holiday event. I am not suggesting that searching for a coinciding holiday is necessarily a bad thing because theatre has a far-reaching association with religious festivals from the Greeks to the Medieval Church. It is only negative if we start to limit theatre’s usefulness solely...
to holiday celebrations. Where and how else theatre may be used is part of what this project seeks to explore.

I agree with Turner and Schaeffer in that our relationship with the Lord must not be compartmentalized to only one area of our life. Our whole life should be an act of worship. Therefore, there is room for worshipping God with the creative arts both in the collective service and outside of the place of worship. Placing restrictions on where and when or glorifying one method over another is a form of legalism\(^7\) and denies the freedom that God gives.

As believers, we are commanded to do all things with excellence (2 Pet. 1:5-11\(^8\))—but why? Is it for our own sake or rather for the sake of Him whom we represent? Practically speaking, we can decide in our hearts to do something with excellence, but then “life” happens, obstacles get in the way (especially when working collaboratively with other people and their hectic schedules), and we get disheartened. What if, however, we changed our attitude first? Instead of all the pressure being on us to “do excellent,” what if we trusted God to work excellently through us? While this may not be as scholarly impressive a position, I posit that God is more interested in our heart attitude and obedience to Him than whether form and content are communicated. The excellence of the work is a result of the right attitude and obedience.

I believe the reason I respond more positively to Turner’s vision over Schaeffer’s portrayal of mediocrity is that *Addicted to Mediocrity* was written thirty years ago when the church needed to hear Schaeffer’s message. They heard it and began embracing the arts and demanding higher standards of excellence. Now Turner, coming from the same basic approach

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\(^7\) Legalism: Centering one’s heart on pursuing a set of rules and regulations over pursuing the heart of God, which is mercy, grace, forgiveness, freedom, and love.

\(^8\) The World English Bible translates 2 Pet. 1:5 as, “Yes, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence; and in moral excellence, knowledge.”
as Schaeffer of “art for art’s sake,” speaks to the contemporary audience, challenging faith-based artists to go to the next level—to take it out into the world rather than keep it to ourselves.

Rabbi Gary Kivelowitz, guest speaker at Ayts Chayim, once said, “You are either actively pursuing righteousness or passively pursuing wickedness” (Kivelowitz). Which are we pursuing with our art? Though both authors have some good points, at times I find the opinions of Schaeffer and Turner too conformed to the world’s standard and not to God’s standard. John Bevere teaches that we will be hungry for that on which we feast. Both authors casually throw around the words “good” and “bad” without discerning who determines what is good and bad. So much of Christian art was and is labeled “bad,” and I do not deny this to be true to some extent. However, I am more interested in determining why this happens—is it lack of artistic training, lack of depth, lack of planning, or a combination? How can we improve this?

These two books challenged and shaped the way I approached this study. I still hold more to the first school of thought, wherein theatre that serves a purpose in the worship service is just as valid as theatre that serves the purpose of entertainment, social change, education, or escape. Furthermore, drama is an effective tool for ministry because it attracts our love for storytelling and our need for visual representation of biblical truths.

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9 Scripturally, the “world” is seen as one of the major forces of evil. Since the Fall of Adam and Eve, the world has been corrupted from its original state of perfection. The “world” can additionally refer to contemporary trends in culture and society that point to the fallen world system that directly opposes God’s truth.
Messianic Judaism

Definition

Messianic Judaism is rooted in the belief that Yeshua (Jesus’ Hebrew name) is the Messiah and that He is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations defines Messianic Judaism in this way: “Messianic Judaism is a movement of Jewish congregations and congregation-like groupings committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant” (“UMJC”). Carol Harris-Shapiro, a Reconstructionist rabbi who studied a large Messianic Jewish congregation in America, wrote: “Messianic Jewish congregations are composed of both those born Jewish who accept Jesus as their savior and Gentile supporters who adopt a ‘Jewish lifestyle’” (1). As Messianic Jews, we have a calling different than that of the Christian church: to reach out to our Jewish brothers and to live in a thoroughly Jewish way. Messianic Jews try to revive the essence of what Jesus taught in the context of Second Temple Judaism and God’s eternal plan for humanity.

Due to the importance of religious worldview in this study, I include information about Messianic Judaism so that I may establish a clear subject position. We believe that Jesus was born Jewish, lived a thoroughly Jewish life, and fulfilled many of the predictions concerning the Messiah as written in the Hebrew Scriptures hundreds of years before his birth. Some of these

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10 The Reconstructionist movement of Judaism combines traditional Judaism and contemporary thoughts, practices, and beliefs. For more information, visit the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation website at http://www.jrf.org.
predictions were: He was born in Bethlehem (predicted in Mic. 5:1-2, fulfilled in Matt. 2:1), He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zech. 9:9, John 12:14), and He was rejected and unjustly killed (Isa. 53:12, Matt. 27:26). The New Testament, or B’rit Chadashah in Hebrew, was written entirely by Jews (with the exception probably of Luke) who considered following Yeshua a completion of their Jewish faith. Because of the great impact Yeshua had among the nations, over the centuries, people forgot that the first followers of Yeshua were Jewish. Messianic Jewish congregations existed in the Middle East for the first 500 years of the Common Era.

Messianic Jewish Theatre

Since there are no known books about Messianic Jewish theatre or collections of published plays, most of my research into Messianic theatre involved personal interviews and Internet searches. My two personal interviews were with Stan Meyer, a South Florida Jews for Jesus (JFJ) representative and Ayts Chayim member Lydia Jacobs, who toured with JFJ’s Liberated Wailing Wall for three years. When I met with Lydia Jacobs, I found out that the Liberated Wailing Wall (LWW) is a touring musical group that gives presentations to churches and Messianic synagogues, as well as witnesses on the street. Their presentations involve drama and music as a way of teaching Gentile Christians about Jewish believers and supporting Messianic believers. Lydia’s troupe did not do dramas on the street, although some other troupes did in the past. They had four main “skits” they would perform—a spoof of Fiddler on the Roof’s “Tradition,” about a family where one of the members was a Jewish believer and the others were not. The family’s excuse for why they did not believe in Yeshua was “It’s Tradition!” Another skit, of which I received a copy courtesy of Stan Meyer, was “The Olive
The Jews for Jesus website contains basic information about the LWW:

The Liberated Wailing Wall is our mobile evangelistic music team. For over 30 years they have been bringing "Jewish Gospel music," testimony and drama to churches, college campuses and city streets. Over one hundred and twenty individuals have traveled as part of this team and tens of thousands of non-believing Jewish people have heard the gospel through their ministry. The Liberated Wailing Wall has taken many international tours and recorded 11 albums, including their latest, Behold Your God. Their music could be described as a combination of Israeli folk and Fiddler on the Roof! ("LWW.")

The LWW group members are considered full-time missionaries for Jews for Jesus who travel for eighteen months throughout North America and occasionally internationally. By day they hand out tracts and by night they perform (up to six nights a week and some Sunday mornings). Lydia and I discussed the JFJ “Behold Your God” campaign, which was very controversial, especially in the cities with large Jewish populations. Lydia’s parents went to a Reform Jewish temple with a family member where the rabbi warned the congregation about “Behold Your God” campaign events, saying “Don’t go to this” and proceeded to tell them the exact dates,
times, and locations of the events. In actuality, this rabbi gave Jews for Jesus some of the best publicity because people were curious to see why these events were so “bad.” Lydia and I discussed how human nature is drawn to controversy. We joked—half-seriously—that if we wanted to reach out to Jewish people, we could create a flyer for the play that says “Don’t come to this!”

During my meeting with Stan Meyer, I received a paper copy of “The Olive Branch” and an audio recording of “How Not to Witness.” We discussed the lack of codified Messianic theatre and the need for a more formalized approach to drama. Stan observed that many individual Messianic congregations write and produce their own plays, but these plays are isolated to the individual congregations that produce them. Stan emphasized that Messianic believers who had training in theatre should use their abilities to create publications for plays and Messianic theatre so that the genre gains credibility. Instead of individual Messianic artists working in isolation, there should be a forum for artists to collaborate, exchange ideas, and contribute to the growth of a “canon” of Messianic plays.

I googled “Messianic theatre” and “Messianic Jewish drama” to see which websites appeared. I discovered Wendy Cohen, who identifies herself as “a Messianic Jew who uses theatre to reach people for Yeshua” (“My Son the Messiah”). Cohen’s one woman show “My Son the Messiah” is the story of Yeshua’s life told through the eyes of Miriam (Mary in Hebrew), Yeshua’s mother. In her online biography, Cohen states she used to be the director of Spirit Players, a Messianic theatre in Albuquerque. She is now pursuing a Master’s in Worship Arts at Hope International University in Southern California (I mention this because part of the Worship Arts program involves the study of drama for worship). According to Cohen’s website,
“My Son the Messiah” exposes the audience to Jewish customs and perspectives present in Yeshua’s time.

While reading Herbert Sennett’s *Religion and Dramatics*, I noted his mention of a musical called *Rabboni* that played in New York in the 1980s, about the life of Yeshua seen through Jewish eyes. I was intrigued, so I googled the title of the musical and found Jeremiah Theatricals, the producers of *Rabboni*. Jeremiah and Wendy Ginsberg are Messianic Jews (who happen to currently live in South Florida) who wrote a trilogy of musicals with a Messianic flare: *Rabboni, Mendel and Moses*, and *The Time of Mendel’s Trouble*. *Rabboni* was even reviewed by *The New York Times* in 1985, with a mixed reaction. The writer’s basic thesis was that the musical was entertaining, but that its cartoon-like characters and “preachy” message made it less appealing (“Rabboni Review”). *Mendel and Moses* had a recent production in Clearwater, Florida.

I agree with Stan Meyer that Messianic artists need a forum with which to share ideas, for I never heard of Messianic artists such as Cohen and Ginsberg until a chance Internet search. It is difficult to survey the history of Messianic theatre without a unified written source.

*Ayts Chayim Messianic Synagogue*

*Ayts Chayim* (pronounced like *eights ha-yeem*) means “tree of life” in Hebrew. The name is derived from a prayer in the Shabbat liturgy, speaking of the Torah: "A tree of life it is for those who take hold of it and happy are those who support it." *Ayts Chayim’s* Mission Statement is: “To establish a covenant community where Jewish followers of Yeshua, and
Gentiles who are called to serve alongside, worship and live in a Jewish cultural expression, calling our people back to the God of our fathers through faith in Yeshua the Messiah, and are trained in Jewish covenantal responsibility for the purpose of extending the Kingdom of Heaven locally, in Israel and the Nations” (“Ayts Chayim”).

Ayts Chayim has a highly detailed vision of who they are and what the congregation exists to do, which can be summarized by the following points. They celebrate all of the Biblical feasts, other Jewish festivals, and they observe traditional Jewish life passages such as B’rit Milah (circumcision), Bar and Bat Mitzvah. The congregation holds to the command to disciple and train members into spiritual maturity and Godly character so they may fulfill their calling within the Body of Messiah in the power of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit). Ayts Chayim leaders and congregants are dedicated to passing on the Messianic Jewish heritage to the next generation. Lastly, the congregation seeks to bless the Church by teaching the Jewish Roots of the faith (“Ayts Chayim”).

One thing with which I am impressed is Ayt Chayim’s principle of “character over gifting,” which corresponds to Steve Turner’s idea that believers should be spiritually healthy inside before exercising their gift on the outside. Often churches learn of a new member’s talent (singing, for example) and automatically seize that talent, saying, “Ooh! We’ll put you on the worship team!” before taking time to build a relationship with that person. I already learned an important lesson from speaking with Rabbi Ira Brawer, the rabbi and founder of Ayts Chayim: ministry is just as much about who the person is, as it is about what gift the person possesses. That philosophy is what I believe to be the beginning of Messianic Jewish theatre, where, if the heart attitude is excellent, the product will be excellent.
ACMS Youth Group

The ACMS youth group consists of 12-17 year olds who “desire to learn to live as Messianic Jews and Gentiles together in community” (“Ayts Chayim”). They experience weekly teachings and study of the Torah\textsuperscript{11}, Haftarah\textsuperscript{12} and B’rit Chadasha\textsuperscript{13} portions for the week. Additionally, the youth are challenged to serve in various synagogue ministries and in the community. I observed that most of the youth already have a relationship with God and go above and beyond the call of serving the congregation in various ways. The group is a tight-knit one, so they enjoy spending time together, whether that is worshipping together in youth group meetings or playing laser tag. One youth group member referred to the group as a “refuge” in which she is accepted physically, socially, and spiritually.

Jesse, the youth group leader, told me that the existence of the youth group is partially due to a play production. Four years ago, Jeff and Evelyn, members of the congregation who became my co-laborers for this project, directed the youth in a play for Hanukkah. The process formed a bond between the youth, and the congregation decided that building healthy relationships during the teenage years was extremely important; thus, the youth group was born. As a result, these teenagers still experience many of the emotional struggles of typical adolescence, but they have a firm spiritual foundation on which to rely. During services, they sit up front, take notes during the sermon, and worship musically along with the music team. Each of them possesses special talents, and several of them used their musical talents to form a Youth Worship Band, which leads musical worship during services once a month. This is truly the only

\begin{footnotes}
\item Torah refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Pentateuch.
\item Haftarah refers to a reading from the Prophets section of the Hebrew Bible.
\item Brit Chadasha is Hebrew for “New Covenant,” which is how Messianic Jews refer to the New Testament of the Bible.
\end{footnotes}
congregation I have attended where the youth are “on fire for God” and extremely involved in synagogue life, which I expected to impact the final outcomes of this project.
CHAPTER TWO: THE PROCESS

Conceptualization

We often begin the process of putting on a play in one place and end up in another place altogether. In fact, this is usually a positive result of growth along the journey from page to stage. In my case, I began with one concept, observed that it produced undesirable results in the practical application of the concept, and consequently altered the concept midstream in order to produce a more desirable outcome.

I began this project with the idea that I would work with the members of the youth group from Ayts Chayim on devising an original play using the devising techniques of an artist named Michael Rohd. Rohd, Founding Artistic Director of Portland’s Sojourn Theatre, is the author of Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue, which provides a framework for devising original work, especially with teenagers, as a way of engaging community in dialogue surrounding “hot topic” issues. Rohd borrows ideas from Augusto Boal, the Brazilian creator of “theatre of the oppressed,” by challenging spectators to become “spec-actors” and replace actors in a scene by acting out an alternative solution to a problem. Based on several workshops that I took with Rohd, I knew I wanted to incorporate his approach to theatre in my work with the youth group.

After choosing my theoretical approach for this faith-based theatre program, I proposed the project to Rabbi Ira and his wife, Gloria. The following is an excerpt of a journal entry written after our initial meeting:
May 28, 2006

I was really excited [about the meeting] because it seems like my vision for my thesis project and their vision for the youth do match up. After talking with them, I feel like they are more receptive than I thought. I know I may meet some obstacles during the project, but at least the two leaders are excited and on board. We talked about the youth getting trained in theatrical terms and techniques, presenting scenes and plays for holidays and festivals (and periodical other times), and going around to church youth groups to present Messianic Jewish topics through drama. I also spoke about how I was not necessarily looking for students already experienced in drama because it will be about process. I also care that the heart of worship is there so that God can have His way in this project.

Then I had a meeting with Jesse and Janneth, the leaders of the youth group, to discuss in more detail how we could incorporate drama into the normal youth group meetings. By the end of the meeting, they told me that they were interested in doing the project, but that they still wanted to take time to “get to know” my husband, David, and me. Honestly, I was frustrated. I knew that entrusting me with the youth group was no small thing and would require great responsibility on my part, but I was getting mixed signals from the congregational leaders as to whether this project would happen or not. How long would it take to “get to know” me?

I conceded that, as new members and new ministry leaders, it was important to first build relationships with those whom we would collaborate. I needed to be patient. A few months passed, and the six of us (Rabbi, Gloria, Jesse, Janneth, David and I) had a meeting where we decided to move forward with the drama project and chose specific dates. They wanted the presentation to coincide with a holiday, and I thought Hanukkah would work. The rabbi was
concerned that it would not be enough time when taking the youth’s busy schedules into account, so we looked to the next holiday: Purim, the Festival of Lots. Truth be told, I did not want to do a Purim play. I just wrote and directed a Purim play for another Messianic synagogue the year before, and although it turned out fine in the end, I told myself “Well, I’ll never do that again.”

The “cons” were that the season in which Purim is situated is a particularly busy one. The “pros” were that I knew the story of Esther could be told in many ways, so I was not limited to the same storytelling style of last year’s Purim play. My initial project research gave me the desire to explore Jewish-Christian relationships throughout history, so I thought we might set the story during the Crusades, which would bring more gravity to the tale. The different storytelling possibilities excited me. “Perhaps it will be different this year,” I told myself.

There was one more matter to discuss before the project was definite. Rabbi said, “Jeff, one of our members, directed plays before with the youth. Last year at Purim he had ideas, but someone else was in charge, and his ideas got overlooked. Would you be willing to work with him?” I said yes, but the truth is I was determined to make this project my “baby.” I wanted to involve Jeff in the rehearsal process in order to get another perspective, but I had already decided that the Rohd technique was the “right” approach. Jeff seemed open to trying new techniques with the youth, although he seemed to prefer the comedy-saturated approach to playmaking (“I usually write the jokes before anything else in the play”) from which I was trying to get away. He also knows the youth very well because his son is one of the youth group members.

Once we all decided to move forward with the project, I discussed notions of participation and responsibilities with Jesse and Janneth. I did not want to force the youth group members to participate as actors in the play, and I wanted to take advantage of the youths’ gifting in other areas, such as sound or scenic design. Jesse and Janneth urged me to require everyone to
participate on stage, and I took their advice, thinking that it would be positive for the ensemble’s unification during the process. I still wanted to take advantage of behind-the-scenes talents by allowing them to choose a non-acting duty and holding weekly production meetings to track the progress of technical aspects of the play.

I designed the process so that we would try out different Rohd techniques as a way of devising material for the play. We would discuss the moments that worked best and use them to springboard into a fully-developed piece. I wanted to focus on creating group tableaux from stories and themes, devising from adaptations, and using devices like ritual, recurrence, progression, and frame\textsuperscript{14} to pull a story together. I was interested in exploring the dramatic relationships in the story of Esther while letting the youth find out how the themes of the story applied to their everyday life.

I decided that the first three weeks would involve exercises and activities based on Rohd’s work to orient the group to devising and to familiarize them to working with me. Then we would begin our actual rehearsal process by reading the Book of Esther in the Scriptures, discussing the themes surrounding the story, and start devising material on one of the themes from the story that most resonated with the group. Week after week, we would refine and build on what we created. I envisioned the final product as highly visual with concise dialogue and lots of music. I did not know exactly what it would look like, but I felt confident that it would examine the story of Esther in a different manner than that of the traditionally comedic tone of Purim plays.

\textsuperscript{14} Ritual, Frame, Recurrence, and Progression refer to different methods for connecting self-contained scenes together into a cohesive story. Ritual refers to a kind of ceremony, a frame is a structure that surrounds the scenes, recurrence is a recurring theme or image throughout the piece and a progression uses a recurring theme or image that builds and changes each time. These terms are the ones Rohd used in the workshop I attended.
Although I had some clear ideas about how I wanted to structure the devising process, I also struggled with how to open the group’s eyes to various interpretations of the story of Esther without pushing my own responses to the story. I was struck by the serious nature of the story, which is typically portrayed in a light-hearted, comedic manner in traditional Purim plays. The stakes of the story are high; if Haman’s genocidal plot succeeded, the entire Jewish people would have been wiped out! For Messianic believers, this is even more serious because if the Jews were annihilated, the Messiah could not come. Yet the seriousness of the situation, in most of the plays I experienced, is glossed over with *Commedia dell’arte* type stock characters and broad, slapstick comedy. I saw immediate parallels between Haman and Hitler and wondered if there could be a way to modernize the story to bring the serious themes closer to home. On the other hand, I did not want to force my ideas and interpretation of this story onto the group, so I decided to leave the decisions about tone and style up to the group.

*A Turning Point*

*Is It Rehearsal or Class?*

Four weeks into the project, there was a large turning point that caused me to change the focus of the project and ultimately changed the way I viewed faith-based theatre. Before the youth group meeting started, Jesse and Janneth talked to me. They were concerned that the process of the play was not what they expected and that many of the youth were confused and

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15 An Italian form of theatre; improvisational plays that arose out of a stock of characters and situations.
even ready to drop out. The feedback they received from the youth was that the process felt more like a theatre class than a rehearsal for a play.

Up to this point, I observed signs that the youth were not fully subscribed to this approach to theatre. Some of them showed a lack of engagement through their body language: when we read through the story aloud in a circle, one of the participants kept changing his position on the chair until he was belly down on the seat of the chair with his legs dangling aimlessly in the air. Jesse, who walked in to see this display, had a twenty minute lecture to the group in the next session about showing proper respect in drama rehearsal. My solution to the problem was to push the youth to remain engaged in an activity no matter what, as Rohd advocates in his book. I trusted that once we began exploring “the meat” of the story and its themes, the youth would find something to get excited about and become more amenable to the experimental methods used to create the play.

From my perspective, I had to introduce the youth to theatrical terms and techniques in order to show them how to apply the terms and techniques to playmaking. I knew most of them acted in plays before, but devising was a new technique, so I treated them as if they were beginners. I should have made the statement “Forget everything you know about acting.” I take the same approach as my college acting professor: I recall her telling us that one would not expect a person to pick up a cello and instantly know how to play a concerto. No, one must be taught how to hold the cello and the bow, how to make a decent sound, and how to read the music. Nor should teachers/directors expect people to be able to act without a strong foundation. It is for that reason I felt strongly about holding orientation sessions to the Rohd techniques. I hoped to hook the young people to these methods so that we could then apply them to our adaptation of the Esther story.
I remembered the rich, meaningful pieces the participants developed in a short amount of time at the Rohd workshops I attended. I desired that kind of result from the youth group, but they seemed almost fixated on being silly. This created tension because I wanted them to take the work seriously and find a richer meaning to the story of Esther and they responded to the exercises in a way that trivialized them. I surmised that it was their young age that elicited these responses, as the majority of the silliness came from the younger members of the group. I observed typical teenage insecurity and an extra concern about their appearance and what their friends would think. For example, during a tableaux exercise I put a girl and a boy in the middle of the circle and invited the other students to mold the two into a pose. Inevitably, one of the students put them in an embarrassing embrace that, while not inappropriate, was highly uncomfortable for the two.

When we started to try to put the pieces of devised material together in groups, the results were not what I expected:

October 14, 2006

I gave them time to work on their group tableaux—and this took more than the five minutes I planned because they had to discuss what the pose meant and what other people could be. I told them they did not all have to be people—some of them took this in a very silly way, becoming “the ring” for the proposal. Fortunately, they decided this was too silly. They decided to show stages leading up to the proposal and then the wedding. But Kevin16 was highly distracting as an observing crazy homeless person sharing the taxi with the couple. I called them on it after they presented, but tried to frame the criticism in a positive way by

16 All of the youth’s names have been changed to protect their privacy.
emphasizing Kevin’s great comic abilities and that they just need to focus on an appropriate situation. The other group’s tableau was more abstract, which I personally enjoyed, but the other group said “What was THAT?” Their images were evocative and they even had a clever way of transitioning into each pose by group members rolling into and out of the picture.

The more that I pushed the group to develop “serious” responses to the exercises we tried, the sillier most of them became. The participants who did take the work seriously became frustrated at the ones who were not engaged. I observed from our first meeting that the group generated an electric energy by feeding off of one another’s ideas; this energy now produced a negative effect. If one participant showed restlessness or frustration, the others sensed those feelings and the restlessness and frustration spread throughout the group. I thought I clearly explained the overall process of devising the play, but when they kept asking questions like “When are we getting a script?” I knew I had a problem. Like my early experiences with theatre, in their thinking when you rehearse a play you get a script and find out your part. You highlight your lines and memorize them—eventually. The director tells you what to do and where to stand. Memorizing all your lines and reciting them perfectly is a big deal.

I discovered when I spoke to Jesse and Janneth that the youth held the above pre-conceived notion of what it looks like to put together a play and the steps involved, and their frustration grew out of the fact that my process did not match their expectations. They considered the activities and exercises “beneath them.” I was aware that teenagers and young adults wanted to believe that they know “everything.” Whenever I work with teenagers there is a high level of a “been-there-done-that-what-else-you-got?” attitude. This group was no exception; especially because they know that they are gifted creatively. The youth group members began to tell me
memories of past plays, and it was clear that they thought they knew everything they needed to do to put on a play. This new technique did not fit into their picture of playmaking, so they dismissed its benefits.

Up to this point, even though I observed that the group was not responding as I hoped to the Rohd techniques, I was unaware that the frustration was to the point that some were either questioning their commitment or ready to drop out of the project altogether. After all, the youth seemed to enjoy certain theatre games we played, such as “Captain on the Guard,” which they requested every week. I still believed that as we got further into the Esther story and more of our version was devised, the youth would become more invested. When Jesse and Janneth explained the degree of discontent the group had toward the exercises, I decided to abandon that method and adopt a more traditional approach to play production.

Starting Again

Part of our new approach to the play involved focusing on the play as an outreach. I was not aware until this point that the Purim play was going to be the only event of the evening; I originally thought it would be part of a larger service. We now had a great responsibility because this event is one of a few “points of access” Ayts Chayim gets each year, meaning that members of the congregation invite Jewish family members and friends that would not normally come to our services. I thought if I could get the group to focus on the outreach aspect and consider their audience, they would be drawn again to the project through a unified goal.

17 “Captain on the Guard” is a theatre game in which the leader calls out commands that elicit certain responses from the participants. For example, when the leader says “Captain on the Guard,” the students must salute. Whoever fails to execute the proper response in a rapid manner is eliminated until only one person remains.
On the day that I learned of the youth’s discontent, I scrapped the lesson I originally planned. I leveled with the group—which was unfortunately only half of the group since the other six were away in different parts of the state at a competition. I made the youth aware that the play would be the Purim event, and we discussed how the play provided an opportunity for outreach to the Jewish community. I also expressed “my heart as a director” (as Jesse called it)—which was that theatre can be used as a worship tool just as music is used to usher people into the presence of God. I knew this group liked that idea because many of them were already involved in other forms of worship such as the youth worship band or the dance team. I told them I think of theatre as a more passive form of worship for the audience; what makes something an act of worship depends on the attitude of the heart. If an audience member’s heart is tuned a certain way while watching, perhaps it could be considered worship. Actors can worship God by acting with excellence for His glory. We had a huge brainstorming session and I made a promise to them: when we met again in two weeks, I would have a script on which to begin work. I could see that they liked this idea—it was a concrete “fruit” of our progress toward the end product. Gabriela, who came late to rehearsal, commented how glad she was that she came because she got to share her ideas for the script.

Upon reflection, I realized that my preferred method of playmaking is usually script-based over improvisation because it is easier for me as a director to creatively springboard off of a play that has its root in the written word. However, I initially resisted a script-based approach to the play because it did not fit my concept of what I thought Rohd’s techniques were supposed to be. Furthermore, I wanted to highlight the collaborative nature of Rohd’s techniques by giving a voice to the youth throughout the playmaking process; I thought it would be too much of “me” if I alone wrote the script. After the turning point, I thought writing the script would take pressure
off of the youth and create buy-in when they saw that I took their ideas and incorporated them into the script. I planned to get feedback from the group after presenting them with my first draft; we would revise and refine the script together based on their ideas.

Script Development

Reading and Responding to the Biblical Text

We read through the biblical account of Esther’s story as our starting point of script development. After each chapter in the Book of Esther, we stopped to discuss the main events of the chapter and emerging themes or points of interest. The text provoked some interesting dialogue in the group, and they suggested ideas for how to translate the story to the stage. The discussion revolved around the origin of Haman’s hate for the Jews and Mordechai’s rich speech to Esther which serves as a motivational pep talk for her decision to approach the King uninvited, the penalty for which is death. Mordechai says to her,

Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Esth. 4.13-14, emphasis mine)

Why was Mordechai so sure that relief and deliverance would come to the Jews? And what exactly did he mean by “for such a time as this?” These were questions that we planned to explore further in order to more deeply understand the verse’s meaning.
We also talked about the overall theme of the story and heard each person’s view on what kind of story we were telling. I used the example of “Little Red Riding Hood:” is it a story about not talking to strangers or the importance of heroes? It depends who is telling the story and the choices made that emphasize a particular theme. Group members gave just a word or short phrase to sum up the story. The ideas included: God’s providence and deliverance of Israel, “survival-of-the-holiest,” the eternal presence of an adversary, courage, obedience versus disobedience, God’s perfect timing, and the symbolism of the golden scepter that spares Esther’s life. The group reached a consensus that our story would focus on obedience. Esther was obedient to how God wanted to use her—which was to save her people. We really liked the phrase “for such a time as this.” We decided it means that God puts us in specific places and the reason is not always known to us at first, but that His timing is perfect. As a result, I chose the phrase “for such a time as this” as the title of the piece.

Target Audience

After “the turning point,” where my concept changed from a devised piece to rehearsing and presenting an original script (written by me using their ideas), we brainstormed more specifically what the story could be. We had a great conversation about how each decision should consider our audience’s ages and background. Our audience would consist of a broad spectrum of people, from small children all the way to 90-year-old great-grandmothers. Moreover, some of our guests might not be familiar with either the specific details or the entire story of Esther. We discussed how do we simply tell the story in a way that they will understand?
How will that affect where we set the play, the overall tone of the piece, and other artistic considerations?

Stylistic Approach

I shared with the youth my desire to explore the piece with a more serious approach so as to expose the high stakes and the real-life emotions of the characters. The group was amenable to that idea, especially in light of the discussions we had surrounding the themes of an eternal adversary and anti-Semitism. However, some of them were concerned that the serious tone might get boring and we would need some comic relief. I thought of the great comedic abilities in this group and wanted to take advantage of that, so we decided perhaps a serio-comic approach would be best. We mentioned Fiddler on the Roof as a model—a story with a serious premise and light-hearted reactions.

We also discussed the possibility of using songs in the piece, either original or pre-written. One individual was strongly opposed to singing because she thought it would take something away from the piece, but others liked the idea. Jesse recommended it strongly, which seemed to influence the youth’s opinions. I agree that most people in the audience were more likely to be engaged during a musical number, especially if it was well done. It would also take advantage of musical abilities, as many members of the youth group are capable of playing instruments and singing.

And finally, we talked about setting. To modernize or not to modernize the story—that was the question. After discussing the benefits of modernizing versus preserving the traditional setting, we decided to compromise. We will have a modern frame that is our vehicle into the
traditional story. The modern frame will be a parallel story happening at a high school where a Jewish girl witnesses an anti-Semitic act and calls a Messianic Jewish friend for counsel. The latter counsels the former by telling the story of Esther. The contemporary school idea came initially from Jeff, who wrote a Purim play for elementary school students whereby a school bully teases a classmate about wearing a yarmulke. At first, I thought the idea of a high school setting was too cliché for a modernization. I had visions of Shakespearean romantic comedies made into teeny-bopper high school movies. The group convinced me that a school setting would be a good choice because it is realistic to where the young people are in their life right now and almost everyone in the audience would identify with a school setting.

Struggles with Modernizing

In writing the play, I was concerned about the “modern parallel,” wherein a high school bully convinces the principal to oppress the Jewish students in the school. Could I really convince the viewers that a seriously anti-Semitic act could occur in an American high school in the 21st century? What is the worst that could happen—after teasing the Jewish child, the school bully then steals his yarmulke? As Steve Turner writes in Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts, if the central conflict of faith-based theatre is mild or unconvincing, the story will lack a sense of truth:

If the obstacles the writer introduces either don’t seem challenging enough (for example, the protagonist is handed back too much change in a store and worries

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18 Yarmulke: A head covering worn by Jewish men to symbolize God’s covering.
19 Namely the 1999 film 10 Things I Hate About You, a modern remake of Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew set in a high school.
about whether to return it) or don’t seem real enough (for example, a fight ensues but no punches are seen to land and no blood is spilled), then evil doesn’t appear evil enough, and if good triumphs, it won’t appear good enough. (Turner 40)

One of the cast members suggested that I set the play in the South in the 1950s, but I did not want to generate stereotypes about Southern prejudices, and the 1950s is almost as foreign a time in young people’s minds as ancient Persia. I do believe that the seeds of evil are present in the world today and when the circumstances are right, anti-Semitism flourishes in communities, even in the United States, but what principal or School Board would go so far as to banish or kill all of the Jews in a school? My husband thought it was a mistake to modernize Esther’s story to the degree that it changed the plot of the biblical story; he argued that the anti-Semitic act had to be the same, i.e. to kill all of the Jews. I agreed that the stakes needed to be equally as high as in the biblical account, but I countered that that the modernization was merely a parallel situation and that we were not suggesting the two stories were exactly the same.

Summary of the Modern Parallel

The play we created begins at the Persy High School prom, where Harry “Ham” Anderson is voted Prom King. Ham announces that Quinn Vasti, the Student Government Association President, is his Prom Queen, but Quinn is nowhere to be found. Suddenly she enters in jeans and a t-shirt and announces that she will leave Persy immediately, renounces her title as Prom Queen and SGA President, and walks out leaving everyone in shock. Memphis, Ham’s friend, encourages him to talk to Principal Ahauser as a way to get back at Quinn and gain his reputation back. The next day, Ham, seeking revenge against Quinn and her fellow Jews,
proposes a new school project to Ahauser: they will recreate how it felt to be a Jew in Nazi Germany. All of the school’s real Jews will wear mandatory yellow armbands and do grunt work; even the slightest disobedience will be punishable by other students “pretending” to be Nazi soldiers. Hadassah, a Jewish student, hears of this and tells Quinn later that afternoon at her house. Quinn encourages Hadassah to use the fact that Ahauser likes her and does not know she is a Jew to run for SGA President. Hadassah doubts she can do anything, but Quinn tells her the story of a young woman named Esther.

The circumstances of this modern component became our vehicle into telling the traditional story. In the play, Hadassah must make a decision about her course of action based on the new information gained from hearing Esther’s story. In the end, Hadassah, newly elected to the SGA, invites Principal Ahauser and Ham Anderson to enjoy a pizza after the football game which signals the end of the play. The audience members do not find out exactly what happens, but it is inferred that Hadassah’s contemporary “banquet” leads to the reversal of the school project. This subtle ending allows the viewers to fill in that last blank and poses a question to them: “What unique situation do you find yourself in where you could use your influence to honor the Lord?”

Once the first draft was complete, we read through the script as a group. I got the sense that the group felt relief at finally having something tangible in front of them. They laughed at the parts that were supposed to be funny. The read-through also served as an audition, whereby I could test out different people to read different parts. I asked them to let me know if there was a specific part they wanted to read for, and we rotated readers for each part whenever there was a new scene. I then cast the roles from the twelve youth group members and moved into the formal rehearsal process.
Casting

In general, I approach casting youth almost exactly as I would adults, except I look for opportunities to cast a young person in a role that will challenge her. I did not expect any major “diva” complexes to emerge regarding casting, but I did want to find out who was interested in which part. I had them all write their top three preferences for roles and, at their request, any recommendations for other ensemble members. I rather liked their idea of nominating someone else for a part because it put the focus on a fellow ensemble member and was a way of gauging how the group viewed their own abilities and strengths. I made a chart with all the roles available listed down the page in rows and three columns: Their Preference, Peer Preference, My Preference. I just wanted to see where there was majority approval and weigh my options.

I was confident after working with the group for almost two months that I was familiar with their abilities and strengths. Noah, a football player himself, was the obvious choice for Ham Anderson, the high school football bully and the modern counterpart to Haman. Tamara, the student studying acting at a magnet arts middle school, seemed to be the group’s choice for the double role of Hadassah/Esther. After these two “easy” role assignments, it became more complicated to divide the other roles. A challenge of directing biblical stories, particularly with young people, is that there are usually a wealth of male roles and only a handful of female roles and a disproportionate amount of male/female actors. Two young men, who are normally on the quiet side, read far better than I expected, so I cast one as Principal Ahauser and one as King Achashverosh. I anticipated that I would have to help them with these large, important roles, but I thought it was worth the effort. Jeff questioned whether I thought Paul was ready for the King
and I said I thought it would be a good challenge for him. I knew Kevin and Kayla had great comedic potential, and interestingly enough, both wanted to be Haman, the villain, as their primary choice. I entertained the scenario of a female playing Haman and decided I did not want to cast a female in the role because, while there would be some gender bending in the supporting roles, I felt the principle roles should be cast appropriate to gender. Instead, I cast Kayla as Memphis, the wannabe “gangsta” friend of Ham Anderson, and the Joker/Servant role that I wrote with either Kevin or Kayla in mind.

I decided to let Kevin play Haman, though he was not my obvious choice for the role (I originally thought that, like Hadassah/Esther, Ham/Haman would be played by the same actor). Kevin is the youngest youth group member at age twelve, so he lacks the maturity and focus that the older members possess. I knew right away that he had comic abilities, but in our exercises he always seemed to express them in distracting methods, meaning the tone of the scene was serious, but he acted in a way that made it absurdly comedic. This was the reason I had reservations about giving him the role; I feared that he would dilute the serious demeanor of Haman while searching for comical bits. However, it did not seem fair to give such a large role to Noah, who was not present for the read through. After Kevin read for the role at the first read-through, Jeff seemed to think that he could handle it, so I gave him the part.
Thomas was the most difficult youth group member to cast. I honestly did not know in what role to cast him. I had all my other male roles filled (or at least the roles that I decided had to be played by men), so I gave him Mordechai. I knew this was risky because Mordechai, the cousin of Esther, is the hero of the story. There are times when working with youth that I cannot picture any of them achieving the strength and maturity necessary to play a certain role; the role of Mordechai was such an example. Mordechai must be the pillar of strength that supports Esther when she feels powerless. Though I did not feel absolutely confident about this particular casting decision, I wanted to challenge Thomas, so I told myself he would rise to the occasion.

Rehearsals

Mutual Frustration

After the script was written and the parts were cast, we had an unforeseen three-week break because I had to travel out of state for a family emergency, placing rehearsals on hold
until January. We would then begin our formal rehearsal process with just under two months until the play was scheduled. I, Jeff, and one of the parents of the youth were concerned that just rehearsing on Saturdays would not be enough time to prepare the full production in time. I decided to schedule rehearsals on Sunday afternoons as well, and Jeff was kind enough to offer his home as a rehearsal space since the church where we met was not available. At the beginning of the three-week break, I sent this email to the cast:

I wanted to get everyone's feedback on the Purim script, so please email me your comments and I will take them into consideration. I want you to consider our ultimate goal, which is to worship the Lord. Do you honestly feel that all parts of the script do that? If not, what needs to be changed? Part of worship is doing something with excellence for the glory of the Lord, so do you feel that the script is all-around excellent or are there some parts that could be improved? What about the characters--do you feel as if all of the characters are developed as much as they could be or should they be fleshed out more? Are there any relationships you feel could use something more? What about the tone of the play--do you feel there's a good balance between comedy and drama? Is the story clearly communicated or are there parts that could be made clearer? Take some time to think about all of these, and I look forward to reading your comments.

I also need everyone to tell me if they can commit to rehearsing Saturday AND Sunday starting in January and February. Tell me specifically WHAT DATES you will not be there. Tell me now so that I can coordinate a rehearsal schedule and try to work around your schedule. It will be harder to do this if I only find out a week before that you're not going to be there. PLEASE everyone,
let's pull together and do this project with excellence for God's honor and glory!

Now on to memorization...Please, please, please, MEMORIZE ALL of your lines during this break. This is how they do it in professional theatre--you memorize your lines before you actually start blocking the play. I think for our purposes it would serve us well if we can get the lines out of the way. If you need tips for memorizing, please talk to me. Remember to also be familiar with the person's line before you--your "CUE."

I got this response back from one of the youth that caused me to change the extra rehearsals to only every other Sunday:

Sunday might be a stretch for a lot of the youth because when we're in school and ALL of Saturday is taken up in our schedule, Sunday is the time that I use to work on weekend homework, big projects, etc. Also (and I know this may sound petty) but having rehearsal every Saturday AND every Sunday really leaves no other social time with friends. Fortunately I am committed to the play, but, because of the commitment, I know that I have to be completely honest.

I could understand that holding extra rehearsals would be a sacrifice for everyone, so I extended some grace to them by finding a compromise. I sent out all the proposed rehearsal dates, including extra Thursday rehearsals in the playing space two weeks before the play, with the expectation that the youth would tell me exactly which dates held conflicts for them. Some of them showed responsibility by letting me know when they would miss rehearsals. Some of the cast was not as good about communicating an absence. While in the middle of a Shabbat service, one of the youth whispered to me that she would not be in attendance for that afternoon’s rehearsal. I said we would talk about it after services. I pulled Jeff in to help
with the discussion, as this individual missed many previous rehearsals and we planned to use this one to catch up. She had a decent reason for needing to miss rehearsal, but her attitude was negative when pressed about the many absences. Ultimately, we could do nothing to convince her to attend rehearsal, and as a result one of her roles was given to another cast member. This change was not made to “punish” her, but rather came about because of the necessity to make progress in our allotted rehearsal time. I stressed to this individual and the entire cast that their presence in rehearsal was crucial; I let them know that I appreciated the sacrifice of time that each person made.

In fact, I knew many of them would miss an important Junior Reserve Officer’s Training Corps (JROTC) competition that was scheduled for the day of the play. Those involved with the JROTC program questioned why we had to have the performance that day or if we could move it to another date. I explained that we could not for reasons such as space reservation and marketing materials that had already been distributed, and they understood but were understandably disappointed. As the weeks passed, this sacrifice was one factor that seemed to contribute to their growing frustration. They felt they were forced into the play and the long rehearsal process.

**Blocking and Memorization**

I too was frustrated throughout the rehearsal process because we were falling seriously behind the rehearsal schedule due to cast absences, having to play catch up, and moving at an achingly slow pace during blocking rehearsals. One of the ways we dealt with frustration and lack of progress was to pray before and after each rehearsal, asking God to bless our process
and bless those who would eventually see the presentation. I felt that the Lord gave me a deep assurance that the play would come together no matter what our current process looked like.

With less than eight weeks until the presentation, I knew we needed to move quickly through blocking the play. I thought we could split the play in thirds and finish blocking in three two-hour rehearsals. This plan would give us plenty of time for what I call “stop and go” and “stumble through” in which we could refine the blocking, experiment with characters, and build relationships within the play. It actually took six weeks, or eight rehearsals, to block the entire play. I expected the actors to take the blocking that I gave them without questions so that we could quickly get through the tedious blocking process. I discovered that they had many questions as we blocked about how to move and the reason behind the movement. I supplied a reason, but finally I told them that it was their job as actors to supply the motivation behind a character’s movement and to justify anything the director tells the actor to do. I communicated to them the need for speed, but it seemed like there were still many distractions that inhibited our productivity. The main reasons I attribute to our lack of productive rehearsals was a lack of focus, too much time spent playing “catch up,” and failure to meet memorization deadlines.

The picture below speaks volumes regarding the many absences from cast members. It shows Nathaniel (on the left), Ayt’s Chayim’s intern, filling in for the actress playing Esther at a rehearsal that she suddenly could not attend. Nathaniel was a wonderful team player, especially considering that I did not even take time to show him the blocking, I just handed him a script and told him to read Esther’s lines (the linen over his head was his idea). Almost every rehearsal had at least one person missing; once again, I felt powerless because I could
not control the various life events that caused people to miss rehearsal and I could not change their casual attitude toward missing rehearsal or leaving early. One time, one of the youth wanted to leave early because his mother arrived early to pick him up, and he claimed he needed to go because she was a very busy person. I refused to let him leave because I did not want to display favoritism; rehearsal was scheduled until 5:30 and he would leave when everyone else was dismissed. It was instances like this that showed me that the absences were not just extenuating circumstances; they were also tied to this growing negative attitude taking over the group and there would be no change until there was a change of heart.

Figure 2: Nathaniel fills in for Esther

Would we also need a change of heart in order to get the actors to memorize their lines? The deadline for memorization came and no one was off script! Kevin told me, “I’ve memorized two of my lines” and I thought “That’s it?” When I asked Jeff what he thought about the lack of memorization, he replied, “There’s not enough pressure yet. As it gets closer, they’ll feel the pressure to memorize their lines.” This is completely contradictory to how I am accustomed to working. An actor cannot begin to work on character unless they are memorized; holding the script in hand inhibits the actor in so many ways. That is why I set
the deadline for memorization one month before the presentation. I felt helpless as a director in this area: I could tell them over and over again to memorize their lines, but I could not force them to do it. I tried to have run-throughs off book; they would try to sneak their script on hoping I would not notice. I made them get rid of the script, telling them to make up the line if they did not know it. Thomas, who played the hero Mordechai, did not memorize his lines completely until the last week before the play. I found out later that it had nothing to do with time or busy schedules: it was only when he decided to have a positive attitude about the play that he decided to memorize his lines, and he did this in two days. He had actually lost an extra monologue I wrote for him during the rehearsal process, and he and his parents frantically emailed me to send it to them. I was annoyed at first, thinking how irresponsible it was of him to lose that page. I still wish he had not waited until the last minute to memorize, but I am proud of him for changing his attitude and quickly doing his job correctly.

Most of the youth in the play had a similar attitude shift at an earlier point in the process. I knew that it was frustration that caused them to have a negative attitude, but I could not find the solution to ease their frustration. In fact, their frustration frustrated me! Nothing will shut me down creatively like a negative attitude. Therefore, the youth asked questions that I sensed had an attitude behind it and I responded negatively to the attitude, instead of answering the question. I felt I had no other option than to assert my “authority” as a director. One of my favorite phrases at one particular rehearsal became “I’m the director!” I started to test out music during the scene transitions, and my choice of music was probably the most debated topic among the youth. When they disagreed with the choice of music, they stopped rehearsal to say, “That music doesn’t go with this scene.” I then had to tell them that I certainly welcomed their ideas; however, ideas must be expressed at a proper time (which
was not in the middle of a scene or run through) and with a respectful attitude. I could tell that they wanted to help and they wanted to have a voice in things that they cared about like music, but they could not see that I as a director had a broader vision over the entire piece. The music, the characters, the costumes, and other aspects had to work together to make one unified story. From my point of view, it seemed as if when I wanted their opinion, they had nothing to say, but when I wanted them to go along with my idea because it contributed to the unified story, they questioned my choices.

Repentance

During the process, Rabbi gave a series of messages in services on living in “covenant community.” One of those messages discussed how one must model what one wants to receive (Brawer, I.). If one wants to be listened to, one must listen. If one wants others to embrace one’s ideas, one must be open to other’s ideas. At some point, I realized that perhaps the reason the group did not listen to directions was because I was not a good listener. I apologized to them and said I would try to be a better listener. The group responded well to my honesty and became more attentive for a certain period of time.

Another time, one of the youth openly confessed in services in front of the entire congregation that she had been having a negative attitude and apologized to me. I was moved by her repentance, as was Jeff and the entire congregation. However, that afternoon, I found her fighting with another cast member about something and going back to her negative attitude. I had to remind myself that we are all human, we all make mistakes, and these youth are still half-children, half-young adults. It was difficult for me to trust whether the moments
that they repented or apologized were genuine because I did not see a long-lasting change in their attitude or behavior.

**Successful Moments of Collaboration**

There were some nice moments throughout this process despite our many obstacles. When we ran through Scene Two, where Ham convinces Principal Ahauser to endorse the Holocaust project, the actors Louis and Noah fumbled the original blocking given to them, which was very specific about when to cross where. I sensed that reiterating that same blocking would not help them remember it any better, so I explained that any movement should reflect the power struggle between Ham and Principal Ahauser. If someone stood and the other sat, the person standing had the power. If both were standing and someone sat down, that gave the other person power. With those guidelines in mind, Louis and Noah began to play with blocking that showed the power struggle and the scene was much more interesting to watch. In the end, they did not have the confidence to make it consistently clear why they sat down or stood up, but there were a few moments in the presentation where the motivation was clear and the delivery was right. Those moments in the play are the reasons directors love rehearsal because we get to see the play become more interesting as actors discover ways to enrich the relationships in the story.

Once the first draft of the script was written, the refining process of script development took place during rehearsals. There were a few scenes in our modern adaptation that I felt did not accurately reflect the way contemporary teenagers speak, but I did not know the right words to use in the dialogue. This feeling was confirmed the first time Naomi and Tamara
ran through the scene between Quinn and Hadassah where Quinn encourages her to use her favor with Ahauser. Here is a sample of the original text of this scene:

HADASSAH. Why did you leave so suddenly? You never told me.

QUINN. It’s really complicated, but basically Ham Anderson found out my faith and my beliefs. He chose me as Prom Queen so that he could humiliate me. He wanted to make me dance seductively and told me if I didn’t, he would tell everyone I rigged the SGA election, which is a total lie.

HADASSAH. Why does he hate you so much?

QUINN. He hates the Spirit of God in me, not me personally. He may not realize it, but his hatred towards the Jewish people comes from Satan, the Adversary.

HADASSAH. Well, it’s actually worse than you think. I think Ham persuaded Principal Ahauser to do this really messed up school project. Everyone “pretends” it’s WWII Germany and the Jews are persecuted. Only the list of “pretend” Jews is all of the real-life Jewish kids in the school—except for me. I wasn’t on the list—I think Ahauser doesn’t know I’m Jewish. But what’s going to happen if this bogus project actually becomes a way of persecuting the Jewish kids at Persy?

QUINN. You know, this sounds like a sticky situation. But I think you shouldn’t worry because you are in a unique position. Ahauser trusts you, doesn’t know you’re Jewish, and there’s a new SGA position open.

HADASSAH. But who am I? I can’t change anything all by myself.
Figure 3: Naomi (left) and Tamara (right) rehearse Scene Two

The scene was originally written as a phone conversation between Quinn and Hadassah, talking about what happened at school. The actors felt it would be more effective if they were in the same room and could connect—we tried it their way and it was much more interesting. But I could sense that some of the lines were hard for them to relate to, and I looked at the text and said “Did I really write that? It hardly sounds like something that would come out of a teenager’s mouth; it sounds too ‘preachy.’” From the girls’ perspective, the whole scene’s subtext was “This isn’t how I talk.” I said “Stop!” and had them improvise, in their own words, the gist of the scene. It was great because they said the same thing in more believable language and made the dialogue their own. I had to be honest with myself about the script’s shortcomings and be open to their ideas to make it better by organically improvising in rehearsal. I think this was one of the best moments of collaboration throughout the entire process.
Directing Challenges

The scene where Mordechai is paraded around in victory because of saving the king from an assassination attempt was probably the most difficult scene to direct. I envisioned the sequence as a large production number in which there would be celebration, singing, dancing, and possibly even audience participation. In hindsight, if I wanted the scene to be the large production number I pictured, I should have started choreographing the sequence at the beginning of the blocking process. Instead, it was one of the last scenes blocked since it comes later in the play. After vacillating several weeks about which song to use, I asked Naomi and Taylor, the dancers, to incorporate a dance they already knew into the scene. Another challenge of this sequence was that we would need to be in the actual space to block out how the “crowd” would follow Mordechai down the aisles of the sanctuary. I hoped by bringing the action into the audience’s space that the viewers would become involved in the procession by clapping and cheering for Mordechai. I did not know exactly how much I wanted the actors to interact with the viewers, but I wanted to create an atmosphere where the viewers would be comfortable getting up to dance with the dancers. Furthermore, how could we convey that the parade traveled all over the city in our limited playing space? Lastly, how could we make that atmosphere like that of a parade—should the actors toss out candy? I made several choices to address these questions: I gave the actors in the “crowd” party hats and party blowers to increase the levity of the situation. I coached the actors to ad lib and keep “selling” the joyous celebration. This in itself proved to be challenging, especially because Thomas felt embarrassed by showing any kind of emotional display, whether happy or distraught. Jeff suggested he do something with his
yarmulke, such as tip it to the audience members in rhythm to the song. We also tried a conga line and a do-si-do once the song was at its midpoint and that seemed to add humor. Lastly, I told the crowd to vary their traffic pattern by occasionally weaving behind the flats, and this provided some visual variation in the stage picture for the viewing audience. The song, dance, and crowd movement still seemed to drag on, so we decided to fade the song out three-quarters of the way through. Even with the improvements, the parade lacked the explosive energy it needed in order to convince the director. Something else needed to happen during the parade that furthered the plot: Haman sees his henchmen, who refuse to cheer, or Mordechai’s Jewish friends rejoice over him; something to make the parade more than sheer spectacle, but nothing we tried gave us the “missing link” we sought. It crossed my mind for the briefest second that we could cut the scene altogether, however, Mordechai’s victory seemed too important a plot point to cut out. I decided the scene had to be included even if it was not the large scale production number for which I hoped.

Figure 4: The Parade

There were several times I vacillated between two choices, lingering in indecision until a decision had to be made. For example, what would Quinn wear to make her speech at the dance:
a prom dress or casual clothes? In the end, I chose casual clothes—a sweat shirt and jeans—to convey that this was her first appearance at the dance and that she did not plan to stick around to socialize. This costume choice also gave shock factor to the characters, making her speech that much more scandalous to the characters. One of the actors even ad-libbed a line in disgust: “Look what she’s wearing!” Also, most of the choices I went back and forth on were things I discussed with the group and Jeff to get their input. As we rehearsed more and more, I observed that the youth began to know the world of the play more intimately. They still did not have the entire perspective of the director, but they began to make connections about what a character would logically do under the given circumstances or how different pieces of the play tied together. For example, Tamara felt that Hadassah should run after Quinn when she leaves the dance to show support for her friend. We tried it in rehearsal and it was a really nice contribution because it showed the audience “Oh, they’re friends;” it was a logical thing for her character to do. It made the scene more realistic because Tamara drew from her own experience as a teenager and the importance of loyalty to friends in their moment of need.

*Behind the Scenes*

I wanted the youth to be equally responsible for designing and compiling the needed scenery, costumes, props, and music in order to provide them with an entire play production experience. I recalled the Theatre for Young Audiences Tour class where all of those enrolled divided off-stage duties that included scenery construction, properties, costumes, marketing, booking, and so on. I planned to use a similar model whereby the youth would brainstorm a list
of production duties necessary to bring the play to fruition. We would then hold “production meetings” before or after each rehearsal to discuss the youth’s progress with their respective duties. I thought that involving the youth in every area of decision-making would give them a sense of ownership over the play and challenge them to use their creative abilities in new ways.

Early in the rehearsal process, the group brainstormed their list of necessary duties, which included costumes, props, scenery, playbill/marketing, sound, and writing. Many of them wanted to do more than one job, so I considered their preferences and divided them up into teams.

As time went on, a couple of things happened that caused me to reevaluate how to approach the production duties. There was not enough time to rehearse the play and hold a meeting to track behind-the-scenes progress. The play became an ensemble piece, with many actors playing more than one role, and so we did not have the luxury of working on production duties with one group while another group rehearsed, which would have been the ideal situation. The lack of rehearsal time made it clear that these duties had to be carried out outside of rehearsal. When I suggested this to the group, I heard complaints that they would not have time to work on their production duties outside of rehearsal because of heavy homework loads. I understood their point and decided to lighten their burden by taking care of some of the duties. Tamara and Naomi were still interested in helping with props and costumes respectively, so they helped me with making lists of the needed items. Naomi helped me conceptualize what the actors would wear and organized how we could acquire the costumes.

Next, as the play’s concept changed from a devised piece to a script-based piece, the writing team’s role was marginalized. Instead, the script was already written for the cast based on their ideas. Moreover, instead of the writing team dictating what was added, the entire cast could give input and many of the additions grew up out of improvisations conducted in rehearsal.
One member in particular clinged to what I said about writing the play and said “But I thought we were going to write it?” He was one of the six youth that were not present at our brainstorming session; he and the others not present said they felt disappointed that they did not get to contribute their ideas to the formation of the first draft, which set the play’s main structure. No one suggested any major changes when offered the opportunity, so I concluded that they just wanted me to know how the change in concept impacted them emotionally.

We discovered that congregational members who normally take care of marketing special events had started to market the play. I tried to communicate several times to them that if they needed, the youth were willing helpers, even if it was just to hang flyers. I was told that they had it under control, so I let them handle the marketing aspect. A similar thing happened with sound: the youth would obviously not be able to run the sound board during the play and there were already adult members who normally operate sound during Shabbat services. These sound technicians were recruited to run the sound for the play because they already knew the sound system.

Finally, there was a lack of concentrated organizational effort in these production areas. I tried to assign specific duties and deadlines for each team, but I did not enforce these deadlines because I questioned whether they were realistic to the youth’s schedules. Kayla expressed an interest in stage management, so I thought she could help me enforce those deadlines and follow up with everyone’s progress, but that idea somehow fell by the wayside. We never made time to sit down with the scenic design/construction team and hammer out a plan, and so it fell to me to make final scenic design decisions when the time arrived to build the scenery. I intuitively felt as a director that the priority had to be on the acting portion of the play, so the technical elements took a back seat during the process.
We had an evolving concept for the set. The initial scenery conversations with the group revolved around accommodating both the modern and ancient settings. The youth proposed a curtain that would divide the stage horizontally in two parts. The scenes in modern day would take place in front of the curtain, and Hadassah and Quinn would pull back the curtain to reveal the ancient Persian palace. We liked the idea, but this scenario posed several problems. The playing space does not belong to us, and we are not supposed to put anything on the walls, which would complicate how to rig up the curtain on a polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipe that would run the width of the stage. Furthermore, most of the play takes place in the ancient Persian setting, so why would that location only take up the upstage half of the stage? Moreover, this stage actually becomes narrower in the upstage part, giving us even less space for the Persian setting. Thirdly, was this the most practical way to design the set? My discontent with the curtain scenario caused me to explore ways to have a different form of set design that would achieve the same function as the curtain. I thought about the ancient Greek periaktoi, triangular flats with multiple scenes painted on each side. This seemed a possible solution to the problem of multiple settings in two different time periods. They could even be used as masking by painting one side black. They would be freestanding so that nothing would touch the walls, and I was fairly confident that they could be made with inexpensive materials.

The problem, however, is that scenic design and construction has never been my forte. I especially felt weak in this area when I had to explain the periaktoi concept that was in my head to Jesse, who agreed to build whatever set pieces we needed. I began to explain them as
three solid painted panels attached together in a triangular shape. I tried sketching what I pictured in my head. Jesse wanted to know of what kind of materials they would be made; I knew what the materials looked like but I had no vocabulary to describe what they were called. He seemed to think that they were wooden frames with painted fabric attached, which was different than my original idea, but I decided it was similar enough that I could work with that if he could build it. Then Jesse asked about measurements. I previously measured the dimensions of the stage to get an idea for how big the pieces should be. I said they should be eight feet tall and four feet wide, thinking that 4’x 8’ panels are a standard size for scenery construction. Later we discovered that we should have considered how to get the pieces inside the church before determining measurements, as these pieces would be built in Jesse’s garage and transported to the church.

Costumes

I recall being in a Goodwill store shopping for costumes and thinking to myself, “I am tired of ‘bathrobe’ Bible dramas where the ‘period’ costumes look like the same combination of terrycloth, turbans, and tunics.” I wanted a unique visual look for this show that brought a contemporary flavor into the ancient setting so that actors and audience alike are confronted with relevant, identifiable signs. I began to search that Goodwill for clothes with interesting textures in warm earth tones that would evoke another time period. I decided to be completely, unapologetically inauthentic to what fifth century B.C.E. Persians would wear, favoring a “retro” look that mixed and matched textures, prints, and styles of clothes to bring

20 Before Common Era.
contemporary clothing trends into the ancient setting. This experience of searching thrift
stores for bargain costumes solidified the boldly anachronistic concept I infused into the
visual and audio format of the show. The music followed this same concept by
unapologetically inserting contemporary music into the ancient setting; however, the
contemporary music used still evoked something ancient, as most of the songs were in
Hebrew. Uncovering this concept through costumes and music was a very rewarding part of
the process for me, as it contributed positively to the show and gave the youth the “fruit” they
sought from the production values.

Figure 5: Examples of "Retro" Fake Period Costumes
Music

Paul helped me with the musical selection of the opening song, since I know almost nothing about “techno” music. Naomi gave me an album of Israeli music, of which I selected several songs for transitional music, music for the parade sequence, and for the curtain call. Music was an area that we collaboratively worked on through trial and error. I brought music into rehearsal to test out during scene transitions and the youth told me if they thought the choices fit or not. They were very opinionated in this particular area because music is an important part of their teenage lives. The music became like another character that aided in the storytelling, and the youth intuitively sensed which musical selections helped and which ones hindered our unified storytelling goal.

For example, I wanted Haman and Esther to each have a “theme” that we would use for their important scenes and transitions. Esther’s was from “Scheherazade,” which was appropriate because that opera is also about a royal romance. Haman’s theme was “Wicked Soldier” from a contemporary rock band called Tonic. Sarah thought her sweet, classical theme sounded too “cheesy” and melodramatic, especially as underscoring for her entrance, but I asked her to just trust my decision in this instance.
A wonderful change took place two weeks before the play, beginning with our paint day. All of the youth gathered on a Sunday afternoon in Jeff’s garage with a unified goal: to paint the panels for the periaktoi. Everyone had their paint clothes on; they were prepared. I was prepared with the muslin panels, which I cut to the right size and drew the scenes in pencil. I did this because Jeff pointed out that in the play he did with the youth, it took them two full afternoons to paint their scenery. I wanted to give the group a head-start so that we could get the majority of the panels painted in one afternoon. There was no fighting about who got to paint which panel as I anticipated. They were all honest about their individual levels of artistic skills; some said they were content painting two panels entirely black because they knew they were not ready for the detailed paintings and others said they were eager to exercise their artistic skills on the more intricate palace scenes. I explained the six different panels we had to paint and they split up into teams based on their abilities and the level of skill needed for each panel. Jeff’s wife, Evelyn, thought ahead and bought food for the teens to enjoy before painting, which put them in a good mood. They had a clear assignment, and it hit home that this play was really happening—and soon! I was only supposed to have them for two hours, but when they saw that the work was not complete, most of them were willing to stay on for three hours more to help.
During a break from painting, I began to try some of the clothes purchased at Goodwill on the girls. They tried on their prom dresses that they brought from their personal closets. Evelyn assisted in the costume fittings and even began pulling clothes from her closet that we could use. We experimented with mixing and matching clothes and adding accessories. Like most theatrical productions, the costumes added tremendously to an actors’ sense of the character. The girls felt good because they finally knew what they would be wearing and I felt good because it was a sign that we were getting closer to our production goals. There was still a lot to be done, but it gave all of us hope that things were starting to come together.

There was fellowship that took place on that day. Most of them ended up painting their faces as well as the panels; I suppose that was comical to them although I did not really understand the purpose of it. Some of the girls performed a spontaneous dance to the ‘N Sync song “Bye Bye Bye.” There was a light-hearted atmosphere created as we worked. Furthermore, all of the youth took care with their work. I have a wonderful memory of Thomas during our paint day, where he was one of the most “gung-ho” about painting. He even researched and gathered some images of ancient Persian palaces for our palace scenes. He was thrilled when I
assigned him to draw and paint almost all of Principal Ahauser’s office. I discovered his outlet for service is behind-the-scenes; it is his way of worshipping.

_Putting the Pieces Together_

During the next week and a half I spent a lot of time at Jeff and Evelyn’s home gathering props from their collection, pulling more costumes, putting finishing touches on the panels, and reviewing the list of things to be done. They were a wonderful support system for me, inviting me over for Tuesday night pizza, a tradition in their family. I also had assistance from people in my Twenties Group; many of them served either backstage or front-of-house. With these wonderful people coming alongside, I started to feel a great peace that everything would turn out all right.

At long last, it was Thursday, our technical rehearsal/first dress. I spent almost the entire day sewing costumes, making last-minute props, and preparing the scripts with lighting and sound cues for the technicians. I felt the pressure of how important that night’s rehearsal would be both to the actors and the technicians. It was only our second time in the actual sanctuary, where the play was to be performed. The chaos began when we discovered that the triangular set pieces were too big to fit inside the doors of the building. We had to cut the wooden frames in half, get the halves inside, put the halves back together, and then staple the fabric (where the various scenes were painted) to the wooden frames. That took a long time, and someone asked if I wanted to start the cue-to-cue while they assembled the pieces. Although this would have saved time, I did not want to start without the set pieces because Jesse and Janneth (as the stage crew) had to practice moving them in the scene changes. The church sanctuary’s lighting is not
designed for theatrical performances, and we had to have some of the house lights on during the scenes in order for there to be enough light to see the actors. Backstage was anarchy with nervous young teenagers deciding it was every person for himself or herself: costumes were strewn everywhere, actors barely knew where to enter and exit, boys had to cut through the room used as the girl’s dressing room in order to enter on the opposite side of the stage. Young Kevin quickly covered his eyes upon walking in on a bunch of changing girls, a sight he did not expect. All of the new elements threw the cast: the new space, the props, the costumes, the music, and being backstage.

At 8:30pm (an hour later than scheduled), we began a cue-to-cue to make sure the sound and lighting technicians knew their jobs. Actually, as a director, I needed to see if and how all the pieces came together in this technical run through. Nathaniel acted as stage manager to cue them and cue the actors who entered from the lobby up the center aisle. Youth group members exiting through the lobby ran across the parking lot to enter through the side doors for their next entrance onstage, in plain view of the invisible viewers. And it was LOUD backstage. Meanwhile, as it approached 10:00pm, parents began to call wondering when we would be finished. One parent said she was on her way to pick her two girls up and did not care that we were in the middle of the rehearsal. We did not even get to do a dress rehearsal because the cue to cue lasted so long.

I entered the rehearsal knowing that it would be chaotic, but I did not expect this many challenges. In all of this, I should have been stressed out--and I was. In fact, I was short with all of the people present, and I had to apologize for it later. However, I found myself feeling hopeful and noticed that everyone else was patient throughout the insanity, as if to say, “We’ve just got
to do this, so let’s do it together.” I could only think “It could have been a lot worse,” and I somehow knew that everything was going to come together. It always does—doesn’t it?
CHAPTER THREE: THE REALIZATION

Forty-Eight Hours and Counting

It was an enjoyable experience to see the major components of the play come together two days before the play: everyone was finally memorized, they understood their characters better, and they knew the sequence of the play. We then started to play. In an ideal situation, we would have arrived at this place of playfulness a couple of weeks before the presentation. Yes, we had our moments in blocking rehearsals in which we tried improvisational bits inspired by the youth, but for the most part the attitude from both director and cast previous to this point was “Let’s just get through it.” It is not that I did not want the play to be good—I usually prefer to give fewer adjustments as the play gets closer to performance because I want the play to become the property of the cast. Instead of making fewer adjustments to the play, I got spontaneous ideas to enhance the play’s humor while watching the final run-throughs. I needed a way to cover a costume change, so I had Kayla, as the King’s servant, walk into the empty throne room, make sure no one was looking, sit down on the throne, realize how good it felt, and pantomime bossing people around. The King catches her and she clumsily falls off the throne in a perfect pratfall. It was awesome! We added an additional “sneaky servant” bit later to cover another dead space, and both bits were some of the funniest and most memorable moments in the play. I was amazed that the bits worked as well as they did since last-minute additions rarely go as planned due to lack of polished rehearsal.
I spent much of this process trying to make the tone “serious;” now I found myself playing into the broad-based comedic conventions of a traditional Purim play. When I observed the play with an audience, it seemed that humor and laughter released something intangible—it engaged the audience and made them want to know more. Furthermore, humor energized the cast more so than any of my other direction because it utilized their naturally comedic inclinations. Humor gave them the freedom to joyfully play by refreshing old scenes with a new freshness. Parents told me after the play that the youth were convinced that the play was not funny and told their parents to laugh anyway even if it was not funny. The attitude of “let’s just get through it” disappeared in the last forty-eight hours; instead, the youth started to see various production elements come together, new bits were added to enhance the play, and they seemed ready and eager for an audience.

In the script of the play, the King announces Esther as queen, but we never see her crowning. Yet, in the Scriptures, the text specifically states that the King “set a royal crown upon her head” (Esth. 2:17b). It occurred to me the day of the play that we lacked that crucial plot
point. In his sermon, Rabbi Ira spoke of the crowning as a picture of our relationship with God. We are commoners that God, our King, has mercy upon and gives a crown to reign with Him (Brawer, I.). I also like to think that the king demonstrated how much he loved Esther by placing the crown on her head himself. The problem was that, since I had that revelation the day of the play, we had no time to practice it before the presentation. I chose to insert the crowning moment despite never having done it before because I felt it was important that the audience see a visual representation of the picture that Rabbi described. I directed the King to indicate that the Servant should get the crown. Kayla, as the Servant, was told to anticipate going backstage to retrieve the crown and bring it out to the King. The King took the crown and placed on Esther’s head. Despite no rehearsal, the moment succeeded—not a word was spoken, but the audience got that it was an important moment. There was even a cheerful “Woo!” right after the king placed the crown on Esther’s head, and everyone applauded loudly after the guards shouted “All hail Queen Esther!”

In one of our final dress rehearsals, there was a noticeable dead space between Mordechai’s speech to the audience and Bigtan and Teresh coming out for their “assassination plot,” due to a frantic change of costume backstage. All of a sudden, Noah and Louis came up the center aisle as the guards, improvising, “So, did you catch the game at the Coliseum today?” “Yeah, there was blood and guts everywhere, it was awesome!” And so on. I was proud of the initiative the actors took to cover for their cast mates. We decided to keep the moment because it was funny and provided a necessary diversion to cover the transition. In addition to getting a big laugh from the viewers in the presentation, the bit made the presence of the guards known in the area—they circled around just in time to catch the two would-be assassins.
Use of Space

Making efficient use of the space was a great challenge during the last rehearsals. The church sanctuary was not designed for theatrical productions; for example, the physical layout of the playing space provided challenges in terms of exits and entrances. I planned to use the center aisle for many exits and entrances, but once someone exited down the center, they had nowhere to go except the lobby or outside. I originally conceived that the actors would go next door to the fellowship hall, where there would be a baby monitor in which actors could hear the play live; hence, they would know their upcoming cues. The baby monitors I bought did not work between buildings, so my next thought was we could have crew members who would cue the actors using walkie-talkies. This was risky, however: what if the actors were not ready on time, what if the person cuing them made a mistake or some other unforeseen event caused late or missed entrances? I considered making additional aisles along the extreme sides of the house so that actors could walk up them and return backstage after exiting down the center. However, making extra aisles would limit the number of seats, and I did not want to do that just in case an extraordinary amount of visitors came. As it was, we decreased the number of seats normally in the sanctuary by taking out the first few rows to give extra playing space to the actors and by only having two seating sections instead of three. The only option left was to use the small lobby of the church, so we placed the needed props and costumes in a container in the lobby and instructed the actors to change in the bathrooms. We put up black butcher paper on the transparent doors to mask this area from view. Nathaniel, my stage manager, cued the actors
waiting in the lobby when it was time to go on. This solution seemed to be the best given the circumstances.

The other entrance and exit problem occurred when an actor exited down the center and entered from one of the doors on either side of the stage. He had to go outside and around the building to the door connecting to backstage, but there were clear windows on either side of the sanctuary. Fortunately, these windows had blinds, which we pulled down. Since the play was at night, this blacked out the outside world so that the viewers could not see teenagers running frantically across the parking lot to make their next entrance. All of these solutions were simple, but they made a big difference. Gloria noted that the presentation was “very well executed…I liked that you pulled the shades down, you blacked out the back, you really worked hard with what you had to make it into a theatre as much as you could and that was very good” (Brawer, G.).

**Lighting**

Another technical problem associated with this space was that the “stage lights” alone were not bright enough to light the actors. The lighting system consisted of a series of dimmers for the general stage wash, two “pulpit” spotlights, specials on the floor in front of the stage, and a strip of lights house right, house left, and center. We changed the typical chair set-up from three smaller sections to only two large ones, so that we could have a long center aisle, which meant that we could use the center house lights to light the aisles. It became necessary to keep these center lights on for almost every scene in order to properly light the actors. Unfortunately, these lights also cast some light on the viewers and made it constantly seem as if someone would
enter up that aisle. Furthermore, the knobs with which to dim the lights did not allow Jeff, who acted as lighting operator to turn all lights off at once, so our blackouts were gradual fades because he could not just push one button, he had to quickly turn two dials down at a time. Then we discovered that Jeff and Isaac, the sound and lighting technicians, could not see when the actors were ready for the next scene, so Nathaniel had to cue Jeff and Isaac. Nathaniel would tap Isaac, Isaac would tap Jeff, and Jeff would turn on the lights.

Figure 8: Lights at full power still left something to be desired

*Ensemble*

The strength of the ensemble became clear during the presentation. The cast came pre-bonded in an already tight ensemble. For the most part, these ten young people are all really good friends, despite the different developmental stages of the younger teens versus the older ones. Rabbi noted, “What came out to be really strong were the relationships within the youth group. I think it made a big difference because they’re so tight with each other and it [the play]
just flowed naturally…and that added to it. It’s an intangible thing” (Brawer, I.). Throughout the process, the group’s tight bond was both a blessing and a curse in my experience. It was a blessing because, for the most part, they got along and contributed collectively to the creation of the play. However, the tight relationships also produced “familiarity,” in which they felt familiar enough with one another that they had no qualms about rejecting someone’s idea or correcting each other. The night of the presentation, though, the ensemble was only positive, both on stage and off. There was a more charged connection between actors than ever before. We worked hard to create an energized opening scene. Many times in rehearsal, the freestyle dancing that opens the prom scene was about as energized as watching a rock move. During the presentation, though, the cast collectively established an exciting atmosphere through movement and voice. Everyone began on the same channel and stayed there throughout the presentation. Ensemble timing was sharp. For example, in the first scene in ancient Persia, the King’s party guests are a bit tired after a 187-day party:

KING. This party is over.

GROUP. (in unison) Yes!

KING. But I hereby call a royal meeting with my officials and advisors.

GROUP. (in unison) Aww.

Another example of excellent timing was in the added scene where Naomi and Gabriela “audition” for the king. After Carmela (Gabriela) sings awfully, the Servant (Kayla) says “Next!” After Drusilla’s (Naomi’s) interpretive dance and subsequent nervous vomiting, the King and Servant promptly say in unison “Next!” One cannot teach that timing. It seemed too good to be true that these key moments in the play could go so well when so much of the process of rehearsing them went so poorly.
There was peace backstage where, twenty-four hours before, there had been chaos. Evelyn, my costume coordinator, noticed that there was “teamwork backstage—it got a little chaotic at times…but it was in order. During the play they [the cast] helped each other…and they did it with joy. ‘What can I do for you?’ There wasn’t craziness like in the dress rehearsal” (Richman, E.).

**Acting**

As I watched the presentation, I observed the “realization” of all the hard work that went into the process. The cast experienced the freedom of memorization that I tried to instill in them earlier in the process. When they did not have to think about what their next line was, it freed them up to begin to *play*. This realization was most noticeable to me in the acting because the actors performed the best presentation of the play than ever before.

Figure 9: Naomi as Drusilla, the Interpretive Dancer
Naomi had so much expression in every role she played. She had some difficult lines—both in length and content—and she personalized them, played around with delivery, and added subtext. Her speech as Quinn had so much more underneath it than what she said because she knew her subtext. The only choice of hers with which I disagreed was her crying at the end of her prom speech. One of her shining moments, especially based on the positive audience reaction, was her interpretative dance that she performed for the King. She said, “I will now perform an interpretive dance entitled ‘Dandelions’” and proceeded to throw herself around on the floor, to jump up in the air, and throw her arms around expressively. Kayla accompanied her on a bongo drum, while wearing a beret and sunglasses to give the moment a beatnik feel. I later found out that Naomi had rug burns on her feet and legs from rolling around on the ground during the dress rehearsals and subsequent presentation.

One cannot be afraid to be “ugly” when playing a villainous character. For example, I worked with Noah to punch up the word “kosher” when complaining about the Jews. In the presentation, he came across as really nasty and played his hatred of Jews truthfully. If we tried to dilute the level of anti-Semitism or the evilness of Ham and Haman, it would not have worked. The central conflict would be weakened and we would not side as much with the protagonists.

In general, Louis and Noah made a great comedic team as the guards. I did not know from the start that they were going to do those roles, because the roles of scribes, guards, and officials were supposed to be played by the young man who dropped out to focus on his bar mitzvah. Louis and Noah started filling in during rehearsal, and the first scene they tried was the one where Esther first appears before the King. They wanted to be blown away by her beauty and stare open-mouthed at her the whole scene, which was funny. Eventually, we decided to
combine all of the multiple guard/scribe/official roles into one role as the guards that also read scrolls and delivered messages. Now that there were two guards, they could play off of one another as they reacted to the King. In the scene where the King is lonely, they decided to display signs of boredom by chewing on their swords and falling asleep on each other. During Haman’s first scene, where he makes everyone bow to him, everyone else leaves after Haman’s exit, but the guards remain cluelessly bowed down on the ground. Louis gets up, realizes everyone already left, kicks Noah, Noah gets up, Louis starts to run off and falls on his face, and Noah runs after him, arms flailing. Once again, one cannot teach that kind of comedy.

![Figure 10: Louis (foreground) and Noah (background) as the Clumsy Guards](image)

Taylor did a great job as Hegai. First of all, I had to change that character to a female even though it is a male in the biblical account. In today’s world, a man that is in charge of ladies’ make up is assumed to be gay, and the teens picked up on that and wanted to play the character that way. I did not think that choice would be welcomed by the congregation, so the character became female. In rehearsal, though, to pump up Taylor’s performance with fun lines
like “Hegai here to prepare you for the best night of your life,” I told her to think about Hegai as a female Richard Simmons, so excited about cosmetics and getting prepared for the King. She took it and ran with it. She is a dancer, so she physicalized each role with gestures—her gestures became cheerleader-esque and she punctuated each word with a different gesture. I wanted her character to have a tool belt from which she would get all of her beauty supplies (as a side note, it was a struggle to find someone with a tool belt that we could borrow—it came covered in dust with nails and screws in the pockets). Once we got the tool belt and two water bottles with which she would spray the girls, she made a whole routine of pulling the bottles out of the tool belt, throwing them up in the air, like a cowgirl/clown. There was a gasp of surprise from both the girls and the viewers when she sprayed the girls with real water. Another moment of improvised script development occurred during Hegai’s scene. I wrote Hegai’s line as, “This young lady has a lovely face and figure,” but in rehearsal, Taylor said, “This young lady has a lovely face—and thighs!” It was a keeper. Then Naomi, in character as Drusilla, one of the other young virgins, called Esther “thunder thighs.”

Figure 11: Taylor as Hegai
I had to work with Paul to become more “kingly” and authoritative. I asked him to think about the scene where he thanks Mordechai as if it were a press conference, where the President honors an unknown person for their hard work. In this case, I told him to play it as if he was only interested in doing good public relations and getting his picture taken while awarding Mordechai. On that note, Nathaniel came in and took an actual picture, which we decided to do in the actual play. The use of a digital camera was another anachronism that conveyed the emotional state of the characters.

Figure 12: King Achashverosh throws a party

Kevin steals any scene in which he appears. He needs to learn to both take and give focus at the appropriate times. He came in strong with Haman, which is exactly what we needed. He loved the accessories of his costume—the eye patch, the spike bracelets and biker gloves. I think I could have removed the red cape and had more fun with the gothic look. We had Haman and the King do a little secret handshake. He perfectly executed the interactions with Mordechai: I wanted to him to walk by Mordechai, realize Mordechai did not bow, back up, and try it again. He even lifted up his eye patch in disbelief. We needed to work with him to speak slowly and clearly because he had a tendency to rush through his lines, but in the presentation he was fine. I
I am happy with the decision to cast Kevin as Haman because he portrayed a wonderfully evil Haman who was funny because he was so mean. What is more, Kevin’s “vertically challenged” status contributed to the comedic nature, especially when the actress playing his wife, who is about a head taller than he, picked him up and carried him offstage. This role was also beneficial for Kevin’s maturation process as performing gives him an outlet by which to express and differentiate himself from his older brother, Thomas, who is also in the youth group.

Figure 13: Haman pitches his plan to the King

Kayla turned out to be one of the strongest actors in the piece because, though she did not have a large quantity of lines, she shined in all of her roles. We discovered she possessed a talent for physical comedy, which surprised me because most of the girls her age are not physically or mentally comfortable letting go of inhibitions to express themselves physically. As I mentioned in the first section of this chapter, Kayla handled the last-minute bits with her character beautifully. She truly had a role in which she could succeed with her natural gifts and abilities, and that contributed to the overall quality of the play.
Writing and Direction

Transitions

While the music helped, the transitions were still too long between scenes. Jesse and Janneth, serving as the stage crew, hustled while moving scenery, but moving the triangle units took time. An audience member decided to take flash photography of them while they changed the scenes, which defeated the point of a blackout when the audience can see the stage crew.

The transition between Haman’s execution/Esther plea for her people and back into modern day with Quinn and Hadassah was a tough one. I decided we had to have a Quinn voiceover narrating some of Esther’s actions—and it had to be voiceover because Naomi had to change from a parade dancer to Quinn. Furthermore, Tamara had to dash off right after her Esther line because she had to transform back into Hadassah within approximately one minute. The whole sequence was not as smooth as I intended in the script, but it worked satisfactorily.
We used music to cover the transition and added a blackout to cover the scene change, and meanwhile the voiceover played. Originally, we wanted a curtain that all of the palace scenery could go behind and the Quinn/Hadassah scenes could be played in front, so in theory the transition would be faster and smoother. The different direction we took with the scenic design complicated how to transition back into the contemporary world. Next time, I would play with blurring the line even more between the contemporary and the ancient so that the transitions from one to another are smooth and flawless.

The Quinn/Hadassah scene still sounded too “cookie-cutter,” like a glossed over version of reality, not how teenage girls would talk. The scene is an example of the kind of drama from which faith-based theatre is trying to get away: “in-your-face” statements about matters of faith. Drama ministry wants to call these kinds of scenes “slice of life” but they are not (or at least not to me) because they come up with the answer too quickly and err on the side of cheesy. How do we become more realistic and subtle without giving in to postmodern denial of absolute truth? The characters are allowed to have doubts and insecurities because they are real people.

Quinn served as a narrator in places, although I tried to cut out as much narration as possible by showing the events unfolding rather than telling. It was important to me to use as much actual Scripture as possible because the account gives us so many lines. The text needs some expanding to show the circumstances, but the text says so much.

The joke with King Achashverosh’s name was well-received and probably could have been played up even more. We added an ad-lib for Kevin to call him King “A-kashi-rice.” The different versions of the King’s name was one of my first jokes because some Bibles call him by the Greek name, Xerxes, some use the English translation of the Hebrew, Ahaseurus, and the Complete Jewish Bible (a Messianic Jewish Bible that uses all the original Hebrew names of
people and places), uses the Hebrew rendition, Achashverosh. And even with that name, there are several pronunciations I heard—so no one in America really knows what it is anyway, why not make fun of it?

For the more “serious” parts of the play, I was inspired by the movie *One Night with the King*, which explored the story of Esther in a more epic, serious, and romantic way. I liked the idea that the young virgins that appeared before the King were not necessarily there voluntarily, that they were afraid of dangerous palace life, to be apart from their families, and the unknown outcome. The movie portrayed the Persian palace to be a dangerous place—one false move in front of the king could get you killed, there were political plots going on underneath the surface, and life as a royal concubine was not all rainbows and lollipops. How that translated into our version is that the girls entered the scene of the women’s quarters quiet, scared, uncertain. Also, Mordechai shares with the audience that he was scared when Esther was taken and how dangerous the palace is. We also tried to convey that danger in the scene before Esther approaches the King and when she approaches him. In typical Purim plays, the part with the women trying out before the King becomes like a beauty pageant—and we had some of that—but it was a mix of comedy and drama.

Jeff wrote a little ditty for Naomi and Gabriela, as the other two virgins trying out before the King: “I’m Going to Impress Him.” Then I wrote and added a scene not in the original script where Naomi and Gabriela “audition” for the King and are rejected—then Esther comes in as the enchanting third auditionee. I liked these additions for several reasons: they added humor; they gave us a break between Esther’s short scene with Hegai and Esther coming to the King, showing the elapse of time during her preparation; and they showed that Esther did not have to try to “impress” the King with singing or dancing—there was just something different about her
that attracted the King. Sometimes the crowning of Esther seemed too cut-and-dry because she becomes Queen within one scene—but we do not know; maybe there was only a short passage of time between her first meeting with the King and her crowning.

I wrote Bigtan and Teresh, the two would-be assassins, as a foil relationship—Teresh was the brains, Bigtan was the beef. The juxtaposition was great in performance with Kayla as Teresh (mobster style) and Gabriela as Bigtan wearing a silly hat. The girls added in singing the *Mission Impossible* theme as they were about to execute their plan. Then we added a chase scene with silly music while the guards catch them. I originally had Bigtan and Teresh present for Haman’s entrance, for they would bow down to Haman, but we had to get rid of them to show that they were immediately punished. It was interesting to have many important plot points—the assassin’s plot, their capture, Mordechai’s reward, and Haman’s promotion—all in the same scene. I liked it because it kept the plot moving, but could the audience really grasp all that in one scene? This mega-scene also showed both Mordechai’s and Haman’s change of fortune, which are both important to the structure of the play, so it makes structural sense that they would coincide.

During my last Purim play, I was not exactly sure how to show the “casting of the pur,” which decided the date for the Jew’s destruction. I read that it was some kind of divination ritual, similar to pulling straws to decide something. In the past Purim play, I had a roll of the dice, but for this play I decided to have them literally pull straws. I imagined the dumb henchmen could even be upset over pulling the short straw. Kevin added a bit where the henchmen are laughing evilly and Haman says “Shut up!” The henchmen then strike yoga poses and try to meditate in order to discern the date. Haman: “Can we just pull the straws?” Henchman 1: “Who has ‘em?” Henchman 2 (stage whispered to Haman): “They’re in your pocket.” Haman proceeds to take out a dagger, some poison, and finally the straws. It would have been nice to have a third thing in the
pocket before the straws since jokes usually unfold in threes, but it was still funny. I learned a lot about comedy through this process—and it was nice because most of the bits came out naturally through improvisation and spontaneity, while still following some basic “rules” of comedy (timing, the law of threes, etc).

We slightly changed the story’s ending. In the Bible, the King gets upset when he hears of Haman’s betrayal and walks out of the room. Haman then pleads for Esther to spare his life, but when the King enters the room again, it appears as if Haman is raping Esther. In our version, when Esther exposed Haman’s betrayal, the guards just took him away, instead of displaying the suggestion of rape. I thought it irresponsible and unnecessary to portray the sexual suggestion of the Biblical ending, in light of the young age of the actors and the broad age-range of the viewers. However, I questioned the level of responsibility I had to stay true to Scripture. Would the play come across as watered-down if we made this adjustment to the ending? Alison Siewert, author of *The Drama Team Handbook*, challenges artists to explore the risky parts of the Bible: “It is tempting to trim down the dangerous parts of Scripture and stick with our favorite verses, our posters, what will fit in a two-verse song. But to trim the Word down is to truncate our personal and communal growth, our evangelism and our art. We risk becoming numb to the real stuff—the unpredictable, the dangerous elements of the kingdom” (Siewert 18). In theory, I agree with Siewert’s position on exploring riskier parts of the Bible in drama, but practically speaking, we had to consider our context, which included our target-audience, the age of the actors, and our storytelling goals. The group decided in our early brainstorming sessions that they wanted to focus on Esther’s obedience, so everything in the script had to contribute to that theme. Likewise, we decided that using the original ending in which the Jews killed 75,000 people in
self-defense did not fit in with our purpose in telling the story, which was to illustrate how Esther was obedient to use her position to save the Jews.

I catered to the youth’s tendency for levity, and I think it was a good use of their natural abilities and interests, but I still felt a responsibility to treat the more serious themes with respect and equal energy. I had to work harder to commit them to this, but it was worth it to get both loud laughter and cheers of happiness at Esther’s crowning. In 2004, Lara Greene wrote a thesis entitled “How Devising Original Theatre Work Can Serve the Spiritual Development of Christian Youth.” She, too, worked with a youth group comprised of teenagers to devise an original piece, and we shared many of the same challenges throughout our processes. Green experienced a similar situation:

Afterwards, some of the youth came to me and asked if we could change the topic of the play. The reason they offered was that they were concerned that their congregation would not sit through a ‘sad’ play. I believe their first instinct to change the topic was in response to wanting to protect and support their friend. I could not discern what course of action to take. I wanted to honor their feelings of concern and their desire to be part of a play with more levity. At the same time, I knew that they had voted and chosen this serious topic a couple of weeks ago and was not sure if this should be a time where I challenged them to push through their comfort zones. I realized that part of recognizing and helping the group to articulate their voice was to let them include an element of humor. However, I was not sure how to help them find their own balance between addressing a serious topic and using humor as a tool to explore it. (Greene 47)
What I realized about humor was that it is a therapeutic way of dealing with a serious situation. I illustrated this in my Director’s Notes\textsuperscript{21} in the program: “What we as a group came to realize is that our retrospective look back at the story allows us to laugh at the situation and mock Haman’s plan. Did he really think he would succeed as long as God was on Israel’s side?” The Italian film \textit{Life is Beautiful}\textsuperscript{22} is a wonderful example: like Guido, if the Jewish people did not laugh and take joy in the sweetness of life, we would cry our eyes out over the oppression of our people. For Messianic Jews, we can laugh because we know that God will always protect His people.

I think the strongest part of the play was the traditional story itself; the modern parallel could use more work in writing, direction, and development. The traditional story of Esther was more familiar to our target-audience; therefore we spent less time explaining the given circumstances of the plot. The comical, light-hearted tone of this part of the play seemed easier for the viewers to enjoy. Moreover, the traditional story of Esther already has a dramatic structure that builds towards the central conflict of Haman, Esther, and Mordechai’s rise to power and subsequent reversal of fortune. The modern parallel, while an interesting approach to the serious overtone of Esther, did not receive the same care and polish as the traditional component. I consider much of the dialogue in this part awkward and unrealistic; for example, what kind of teenager, albeit the SGA President, says, “For reasons I cannot disclose, I resign my office as President?” I think Quinn and Hadassah come up with answers to their questions too quickly when confronted with Ham’s threats: “Ahauser trusts you, doesn’t know you are Jewish, and there’s a new SGA position open.” Perhaps a more subtle transition into the story of Esther,

\textsuperscript{21} Please see Appendix B for the full Program Notes.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Life is Beautiful} tells the story of a Jewish Italian man named Guido, who convinces his young son that the horrors of their concentration camp are a fantastic game in which they must compete in order to win a tank.
whereby the girls discover the book of Esther lying around in Quinn’s room, would be more interesting. Finally, I would like to see the modern parallel bring in other social/spiritual problems beyond just anti-Semitism: prayer in school, racism, and other real-life issues that are present in school-culture today. In general, though, the viewers were supportive of the entire play, with enthusiastic cheers after scenes from both the modern parallel and the traditional story.

Congregational Feedback

The presentation was well-received by the viewers, some of whom commented on the “professional” quality of the production, the talent of the youth, and that it was clear that a lot of “hard work” went into the play. The following are excerpts from a post-production reflection conducted with Rabbi Ira, Gloria, Jesse, Janneth, Jeff, and Evelyn on March 11th. The participants of this conversation did not know my definition of worship tool, nor did I prompt them to talk about the presence of God in the performance:

Jennifer: What were your general impressions of the drama presentation?

Rabbi Ira: As a member of the audience, I thought it was great…It was funny…I thought they did a good job acting, they played their parts, they did the right balance of serious acting and having fun. And the transitions were good considering the limitations of the facilities…Lighting transitions and music, they all worked out really well…again, we’re so limited because that facility is not set up for theatrical productions. They seemed to know their cues.

Jen: You immediately connected humor with the fact that it was great. Are you trying to suggest that there’s a connection between being successful and funny?
Ira: Well, if you’re trying to be funny and you’re not funny, that’s not good. If it was a serious play, then you’re probably not going to be funny; if it’s a Purim play, then obviously it’s obviously humorous…and if it falls flat, that’s not good. We’ve all seen movies and plays…that are trying to be funny and they’re not funny.

Gloria: I thought it was very well done. The kids all knew what they were doing. Even if they missed something or did something it wasn’t like “Oh, they really blew it here” because they ad-libbed and they made it work. I thought the play was good in that it had the modern, you know, today—we don’t think anything like that would happen again, but in Nazi Germany…sometimes you don’t know behind the scenes what’s going on and what’s being plotted…I thought that the content of that happening in modern day and reflecting back to what happened to Esther and the Jewish people then, so I thought that was good bring the old and the new together. I thought the kids did a great job just fumbling through at times, but it fit what was happening. It was just really funny—I probably would have been laughing the whole time, but I had to pull myself back so I could hear the next line so I didn’t miss anything, but I wanted to let it rip! And a few times I did…just knowing the kids like I do, you just see them, and knowing all the behind the scenes stuff with all the griping, and all the stuff…but it was just so, so good. And very well executed…I liked that you pulled the shades down, you blacked out the back, you really worked hard with what you had to make it into a theatre as much as you could and that was very good.

Evelyn: From a spiritual aspect, there was a point where I just came out and I was watching Tamara. She was just walking and I just felt the Spirit of the Lord—there was just the moment I looked at her and said, “My God, she is Esther.” Her countenance, her walk,
her demeanor, it came across as Esther and I was so impressed, I was taken back and I said “Going back to Esther, I saw, visualized that beautiful woman—the confidence and yet humility.” It was all there in Tamara. And then another moment I saw—and it’s not because it’s my son—I saw Paul and the two guards and it blew me away because I saw a “regalness,” I saw the compassion. And then I went back and I said, “You know, the King had such compassion for Esther, and loved her.” And I saw that relationship and I saw the guards and I thought, “My gosh, they were strong and they were protecting the King.” But there was no humor, because they were protecting the King and I saw a very serious time because she was going to plead for her people and that was the seriousness of that. I felt the Spirit…it was more than just a role…again, it was the moment and I had to stand still and look and watch her walk down and I went down into this different world: “That’s how it was, that’s how she portrayed herself, that’s how she is!”

_Gloria:_ I think the time that Louis and Noah were having the encounter as Ham and the Principal, and Noah’s “We need to do something about this and I have a plan”—I felt the presence of God during that time. You know what, we’re not far removed from that and in these days and times, we can’t think that there’s not that spirit still alive and well.
Jeff: Coming from the point of view of watching rehearsals to the whole production, it was amazing how cohesive the play looked from where I was, compared to the bits and pieces they were trying to get together. And it had a lot to do with the timing, I thought the timing was excellent, when the kids came on and sat down and got ready, did their lines, and...when they spoke to each other, you could just feel the continuity of the whole play. And that was very fortunate. And of course you had the side things of Kayla coming on—just saying two hours before, “You know why don’t you do this” because people have to change, just to kill some time—flawless with her impromptu performance. Naomi made a comment that stuck in my mind—she wanted to make it so much better each time she went up there, to produce the effect she wanted to produce...and she’s got the rug burns to show for it! She had a good attitude from the beginning and the work ethic was there, highly impressive.

Jesse: From our perspective, you got to see the kids as the dress rehearsals went on—from the last dress rehearsal until the play, there was a change in the kid’s attitudes, in their engagement in the production, they got more serious, there was less “jokey-jokey”—they
were there to have a good time too, but they were very focused about “Where am I supposed to be” and “Make sure you’re at your part” and they were very focused about doing it. And because we were in the back, they would come in through the side door and Noah said, “Oh, that was the best one I had ever done on that one!” and they were very excited about making it right. It was good to see that…backstage the kids were feeding off the response of the audience…maybe it wasn’t their part in the play, but they’re there waiting in the wings for their next scene and they hear the audience [laughing] and they go “Oh, that was great, yeah!...He must have got it!” There was a peace also backstage that had not been there the night before even or even that last run through—that was the hand of the Lord over the entire environment.

_Evelyn:_ And the teamwork backstage—it got a little chaotic at times…but it was in order. During the play they helped each other…and they did it with joy. “What can I do for you?” There wasn’t craziness like in the dress rehearsal.

_Jesse:_ We were shocked to see the girls come out for the girl scene, the women’s quarter scene. We weren’t expecting them out there as quickly because they never did it that quickly!

It was interesting that Evelyn picked up on Esther’s confidence and humility, which was something that Tamara and I discussed in rehearsal. Tamara asked me, “When I go into the King, how can I be confident and humble?” I told her to think about humility not as a quality of weakness, but of confidence that God worked through her. One is humble because one knows the wonderful accomplishments have nothing to do with our own efforts, but with God using one in specific situations. It is impressive how the cast “arrived” at just the right moment—they truly peeked at the performance. I worked the scene at the gate between Thomas and Tamara right
before the last dress rehearsal and we saw the connection between them that night like no other practice.

Figure 16: Esther and Mordechai at the gate

The positive reception of the play was an important event for me, the youth group, and the congregation as a whole. I learned that the process does not have to be a perfect picture of “worship” in order to have worship take place during the realization. It is preferable if one’s process is worshipful in the sense of having the right attitude, being obedient to use ideas that increase the quality and serve the purpose of the play, and keeping our relationship with God the focus of the process. However, we are imperfect people in an imperfect world, and God is merciful. The challenges we experienced made the success of our presentation that much more special because we worked for it. This event is important for the congregation’s future because Rabbi is now interested in using drama both in services and as an outreach to groups outside our congregation. Many members raved about the “professional” quality of the play and suggested we take the show on a tour! Our process was important training for future processes and the
realization of the play demonstrated drama’s effectiveness at Ayts Chayim Messianic Synagogue.
CHAPTER FOUR: REFLECTION

An Ideal Situation

I struggled with the youth’s casual absences in rehearsal, that they did not know their lines, did not seem engaged with the project, or had an altogether hostile attitude. I concluded midway through the process, “Surely, we’re not worshipping, so this project cannot even be considered theatre as a worship tool! If only everyone’s attitude was unified, then we could get somewhere!” I sought counsel from the rabbi and youth group leaders, who helped me to accept and embrace the obstacles as a growth experience. I should not have been surprised to find obstacles, which do not necessarily reflect the level of professionalism or the quality of a theatre piece; rather, how one reacts to the obstacles can ultimately impact the outcome of the production, either positively or negatively. The existence of an ideal situation is a fallacy.

I hypothesized that worshipping throughout the play production process by way of the group’s teamwork, attitude, and quality of work would be an integral part of producing a worshipful product, and I still hold to that conclusion to a certain degree. When the youth group shifted their attitude toward the play to that of “This is about more than me,” that shift caused them to pull together as a team and dedicate themselves to making the play a quality product. I then saw that the group worshipped God through their act of service on the play. The group and I observed elements falling into place quickly as the play approached and we both attributed things “coming together” as the blessing of the Lord on our shift in attitude.

I disagree with the notion implied in my hypothesis that if a part of the process is not perceived as “worshipful,” that theatre cannot be used as a worship tool. My mentors, Rabbi Ira,
Gloria, and Nathaniel, helped me realize that worship leaders are imperfect people leading other imperfect people into the presence of God; we do not have to put on a “show” as if everything is perfect during the process. For this reason, our prayer time before and after each rehearsal was a crucial component of the process because we could authentically express both worship for God and our worries or concerns about the play. Prayer validated theatre’s role as a worship tool because we sensed that the play was more than just “the play;” it was an opportunity for God to use theatre for many beneficial purposes unknown to us at the time. Furthermore, we discovered through prayer that the obstacles we experienced were opportunities that revealed a spiritual undercurrent in which God could turn the ugly outward appearance of the process into a beautiful final outcome.

What if, for example, not everyone in the play actually wants to be there? What if the writing leaves something to be desired? What if the whole cast is convinced that the play is going to utterly flop? What if, no matter how hard one tries, an important scene does not quite work? Does one just accept failure and give up? I experienced all of the obstacles described above during this process, and as tempting as it is at times, giving up was probably the least worshipful act I could have committed. After I let go of my struggle with all of the obstacles, I realized that my role as a worship leader was to be obedient to God and to serve others (both of which are acts of worship in themselves). I remembered that I believe God planted the seed in my heart to produce a play for worship purposes, and He would be faithful to equip me for the work. If I were to quit or bend to frustration, I would basically tell God, “I don’t like the way you are handling this, and I am going to fix it my way.” I could be obedient to God by keeping my determination high to see the play to fruition and serve the youth by equipping them to become the worship leaders that would make the play a worship tool for the viewers.
My second major discovery in this process was that worship is not this “religious” thing where we all have to get “right with God” before we can effectively worship Him; it is in the midst of seemingly endless, impossible problems that we can experience the deepest worship by bringing all of the problems before God and relying on Him for help. In other words, when a youth group member came up to me in the middle of services to tell me she would not be attending that afternoon’s rehearsal, I had to choose to continue worshipping God in prayer even when that was the last thing I felt like doing. When complications such as this arose, my instinctual feeling was to question “Why is this happening to me?” Instead, I admitted to God that I did not have all of the answers, nor the means to change the hearts of the young people. In the last two weeks before the play, I decided not to let my feelings determine the amount of worship that I showed to God. I had to trust that God would work to pull everything and everyone together in order to bring glory to His Name.

Real Life Reflections

Once I accepted this idea that our process did not have to—and would not be—“perfect,” I began to look at our process differently. The entire process helped us discover how to be effective ministers of worship. In my experience, any organized worship tool needs to have good leadership, and therefore we would be worship leaders by actively participating in a play produced for the purpose of worship. As Rabbi Ira stated in our first planning meeting, ministry is just as much about character as talent. The youth began to realize they were more than actors in this piece; Naomi wrote in an email to the cast “Thank you for being willing vessels for the
Lord.” I shall now evaluate the entire process and realization of the play based on the criteria and questions I set forth in the previous chapters.

**Conceptualization**

I think the congregation and the group had pre-conceived notions about drama and playmaking. They thought a certain thing about how the play would look, and I suppose I did not clearly paint the picture that the approach to theatre that I wanted to use was far different than a traditional theatre process. I had good intentions—I thought Michael Rohd’s methods would be the perfect vehicle for deeply exploring the themes surrounding the story of Esther. And maybe it would be for a workshop setting or an experimental project. But I did not consider the greater context—the target audience, the amount of time, and the interest of the group. If I had been absolutely crystal clear about what this process would look like and presented it as such, I may have had a better experience. At this point (after the project), however, I prefer to use what works rather than forcing on one particular technique because of Janneth’s advice of being flexible in order to allow God to move throughout the process of creating the play. Once I was freed from sticking only to Rohd’s techniques, I found that I could still work collaboratively with the group, without the guilty thought at the back of my head, “What would Rohd do?”

I hated to abandon the method altogether, but I realized that perhaps the group, the congregation, and I were not ready for this kind of approach to playmaking. I was still learning how to be comfortable in the way Rohd facilitates the exploration of a subject. I intuitively approached the facilitation of the Rohd techniques from more of an educator’s standpoint by
pushing the educational agenda behind the exercises. I even reflected on the early sessions from a teacher’s point of view, critiquing how well the lesson was facilitated and assessing the impact on the “students”. Simultaneously, I knew that this process had an end goal of a play production, but in my thinking, the exercises were the means to the end product. Based on post-play interviews with the youth leaders who observed our early process with the Rohd techniques, a strict adherence to the one technique may have hindered the group’s creativity rather than helped it:

**Jesse:** There were a couple of things that were challenging for the kids. They’re comfortable with people they know, but with people they don’t have a relationship with, it’s difficult to know what that person’s mindset is, where they’re coming from. You were new to them anyway, which is one thing. And you were coming from a place where this is not only something that you’re doing for school, but this is also your job, so this is something you do all the time, you’ve been doing this for a long time. You’re used to certain expectations from certain people and these kids were not expecting Theatre 101, they weren’t expecting the background of it. They were expecting to come in and say “Guys, this is what we’re going to do, we’re going to put a play on, and this is the general story, let’s sit down and talk about it.” And that’s not what you did, you had a different kind of idea, which wasn’t bad, it was just totally unexpected. And because they didn’t have any kind of preparation for that, the pre-conceived expectations lasted for weeks and weeks.

**Janneth:** And I think that’s where some of the attitude came in because they felt like “Oh, my parents pushed me into this because I wouldn’t have volunteered for this, I volunteered to do a play, I didn’t volunteer to take theatre classes.” And that’s basically what they felt at the beginning, that they were going to school. “We’re in school five days out of the week; we don’t want to go to school.”
The youth expected one thing and I gave another without clearly explaining what was going on (although I thought I was being clear at the time) and this caused them to disengage. I was so caught up in getting them to take the work seriously, that I missed that the exercises were not working for them. And this group is not un-creative. They have done plays before—but I guess I wrote that off as “fluff.” I wanted to take them to a deeper place, both spiritually and theatrically, but I missed the element of creating buy-in from the very start, which was important because one of the aspects of worship is “edification,” instruction that builds or uplifts the group. Unity—everyone working toward the same goal—is something for which Ayts Chayim ministry leaders strive and it seems to make the services more successful and worshipful. The youth and I both knew we were creating a Purim play, but our differing expectations gave us nothing to get each other excited about. Finding something to get excited about eventually helped the group share the same vision for the play, which was that the play would be used to worship God and reach out to the community.

I subscribe to the idea that whenever young people are involved in theatre, the teacher/director’s primary focus should be on process over product. The young people learned about themselves, about working together with a group of people, and developed an appreciation for the art form throughout the process. In my experience with this project, when I tried to give the process too much attention by forcing it to be “educational,” the youth sensed my hidden agenda and fought it. I initially focused too much on spiritually transforming these kids through the educational presentation of Rohd techniques combined with lessons in faith. I did not trust that just by being involved with this play, they might be spiritually transformed; I do not have to beat them over the head with spiritual truths. Jesse and Janneth eased my burden by telling me that if I gave the kids something to sink their teeth into and they worked on it together, the
spiritual transformation would be invisibly present. I found this to be true for the rest of our process: when I just focused on creating the play with the group, the spiritual training came naturally as a by-product of our activity.

The conceptualization phase of the process demonstrated to me the importance of creating buy-in, which in our case was sharing the same vision both spiritually and artistically. Our spiritual vision was that we are worship leaders guiding people into the presence of God, and our artistic vision was to combine the traditional Purim story with a modern parallel. I learned to avoid being too “educational” or “spiritual” because people will typically resist agendas that are forced on them without the leader presenting any reason for them to buy-in to the ideas. Instead, the process of creating the play helped us learned something about each other, our roles as worship leaders and, worship itself.

Script Development

In my experience, young people want structure and boundaries to be set. They rely on adults to set up the structure so that they can then have freedom to experiment within the structure. Moreover, these structures have to excite them enough in order to evoke creative responses and enthusiasm. For example, adults select a theme that lands the youth in a specific neighborhood, but the youth get to decide what kind of house or which direction to go. The process almost has to start off with a “bang,” where the structure is presented and the kids are shown the freedom they have to make choices within that structure. If the structure slowly emerges, it is not as exciting and minds are likely to wander. I think that is what happened to us. I expected us to create something together—like magic—but magic does not just happen. I
needed some “bait” to make the conditions ripe for creativity. They became excited when I brought them a couple of ideas and said, “Let’s choose which one we want—the story of Esther set in a tiki bar in Hawaii or on the planet Mars.” Just as Jesse and Janneth suggested, when the youth had something to sink their teeth into, their creativity was endless; a simple suggestion or question, such as the one above, provoked excited chatter and a myriad of ideas branching off of the original suggestion.

Rehearsals

In my post-production reflection with the congregational leaders, I found out that Thomas’ parents, Jesse and Janneth, sat down with him a week before the play to find out the reason for his attitude, which led to a huge “blowout.” Jesse and Janneth discovered that Thomas’ negative attitude stemmed from three main points: a) He does not like acting and felt he was forced into this play, b) He thought he was going to be able to help behind-the-scenes in writing the play and designing and building the scenery, and c) Thinking he was not a good actor, he was afraid he would mess up the play for everyone else. He also wondered how he was the only character without “a single funny line?” Jesse and Janneth said his turning point in this blowout came when he realized what the other youth realized a month earlier—“it’s not about me.” This play would serve the larger purposes of reaching out to the community and serving God. Once Thomas bought into the idea of serving, he memorized his lines in two days, right before the first dress rehearsal (Hutcher, J.). I worked with him and Tamara on the incredibly important scene between Mordechai and Esther where he challenges Esther to appeal to the King to save the Jews, coaching them even the afternoon of the play. Rabbi Ira, in our post production
reflection, noted that serving is a form of worship; certain youth, including Thomas, bought into the play when they realized it was an act of service. Different people may get excited about various forms of worship, and it behooves the leader to discover which group members get excited about serving and in what capacity. Likewise, it may take some group members longer to become unified with the team because they have not found their role in the group’s unified goal. As with Thomas, it was clear from his negative attitude throughout the process that something was wrong, but it was difficult, even for his parents, to diagnose the source of his angst. Practically speaking, a leader should allow group member to voluntarily serve in the areas in which they feel most comfortable.

*Behind the Scenes*

With the right amount of guidance, the youth and I could have worked on the technical duties together if time had allowed. This would have created more “buy in” throughout the process, especially for the ones whose passion is not acting.

The behind-the-scenes process was not without collaboration, however. Paul’s musical contribution of the techno song “Sandstorm,” was the perfect piece for the start of the play and the prom scene. I learned that as a director working with youth, I had to give guidelines or suggestions that are specific enough as to land them in the neighborhood I wanted, but they pick the address. I knew I wanted a techno, upbeat piece of music appropriate for a prom, but I know almost nothing about techno music. It was amusing in rehearsal to see all the youth pull out their iPods and start looking for music we could use. Things like music—which is an important part of their lives—triggered their eagerness to contribute something. Most of the music I used for the
play came from an album of modern Israeli music that Naomi loaned me. It was perfect because it was in Hebrew, so it connoted another land, but had a nice blend of traditional and contemporary sounds. It blurred the line between the old and new, which fit in with what we were trying to do artistically. That album was another almost last-minute addition that came within the last two weeks of the play. Costumes and music became like characters themselves in the play.

The set was one of the decisions in which I vacillated between many ideas. The triangle units we used served their purpose (although it would have been nice to paint the wood frame black—but no time!). I wanted the extra fabric we had to serve as set dressing on the walls behind. We would elegantly drape it to look like flowing curtains in the royal palace. Two problems—we really were not supposed to hang anything on the walls in the first place (it is not our building) and the fabric was not all the same kind. I bought those hooks that college students use in dorm rooms that are supposed to come off easily. I found some matching pieces of fabric—very pretty dark burgundy-- and tied them in such a way that they looked elegant, but we still could have used a few more pieces to make the stage look fuller. It was kind of bare with only one panel on each side. Next time, we need to find people in the congregation who are gifted in the visual arts and scenic design.

**Teamwork**

During the last two weeks before the play, Jesse, Janneth, Jeff, Evelyn, and Nathaniel were an enormous help to me physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and artistically. They shared my workload out of a compulsion to serve, thereby worshipping the Lord. One of the
most common phrases heard from the viewers after the play was that they could tell it took “hard work” to bring the play to life. This would not have been possible without the efforts of each youth and each adult who served alongside. These lessons in teamwork taught me that one of theatre’s great benefits is its collaborative nature, which provides a great opportunity to show adoration of God through positively working together with others. It is difficult to put together an entire production with only one person; in fact, I posit that God prefers teamwork in ministry because He can use each person’s unique perspective and bring both the participants and viewers together through worship.

During our “turning point” discussion, Janneth said something very powerful. When one tries to stick to a plan no matter what, sometimes one blocks the way for God to move. I have heard it said that interruptions are God’s lesson plan. When one takes the ideas the young people give and work with them, that is where God can move and the group can come up with something so much more powerful than any individual can.

**Quality of Work**

In the end, a lot of the spontaneous, ad-libbed moments became little *lazzis*, contributing to the *commedia dell’ arte* style of the piece and playing into typical Purim play conventions. I felt we needed to play into the style at times because it met the expectations of the viewing audience. Furthermore, as well as adding to the entertainment value of the viewing experience, the bits polished the entire piece, enhanced the enjoyable quality of the play, and unified the cast together—because they began to *play* with each other. With comedy it is usually more difficult
to achieve the desired results, and I observed that the ensemble’s timing and reactions were well executed, which made our comedic attempts successful.

The lesson I learned in these last-minute additions is that spontaneity provides the necessary element of freshness to art. It also fits in with my preferred organic style of acting and directing, where I will try anything once in order to see if it works with the overall goal or objective of the scene or character. Spontaneity brings nuances to the art. Steve Turner recalls how the band U2 used spontaneity to benefit their art: “Sound checks and jam sessions were recorded so that new musical themes could be spotted” (108). This openness to new forms of creativity makes us better artists and, on a spiritual level, allows God to work through us, both of which are important in being an effective worship leader. I believe that part of worship is obedience, where by I must follow the things He whispers in my ear. The things He whispered to me were not necessarily all profound spiritual truths—most of the time they were jokes. This was ironic, since I secretly mocked Jeff’s statement about writing jokes in a play first; I learned that the comedic parts could served a purpose just as much as the dramatic ones. Spontaneity and flexibility in creating a play served as my transformational aspect of worship, whereby I expanded my view of what makes up a “quality” play and learned how to hear from God throughout the creative process.

Goals and Methods for Carrying out Worship

Lara Greene also found in her thesis that focusing on goals of the piece channeled the youth’s ideas for choices:
By challenging the youth to clarify the point of their play, I hoped to help them clarify for themselves what they believed. Each time they needed to make a decision about the direction of the play, I would direct their thoughts to their intentions for the piece. What do you want this play to say? I found this focus to be helpful in keeping their ideas on track and channeling their energies. (51)

The goals we focused on in creating the play were: to worship and honor God throughout the piece, to appeal to a broad range of people, to include a mix of humor and drama, and to combine the traditional story of Esther and modern parallel in a contemporary setting. Not every idea the youth proposed—and there were many—was usable because the ideas did not line up with our goals for the piece. For example, one of the guards wanted to make a joke about Esther’s thighs, calling back to Hegai’s comment about Esther’s lovely face and thighs. That comment, coming from a male character, seemed crude and not suitable for the kind of clean humor that honors the Lord, so I vetoed the idea. I explained the reason, and reminded the cast that every choice would “say” something about the play, about the youth as representatives of God and about God himself. Furthermore, we needed to remember our target audience, which was composed of families, children, elderly people, and everyone in between. Every choice either supported or rejected the notion that we were creating an atmosphere whereby our viewers would feel comfortable worshiping God.

I do not think the youth always understood why I made certain choices, and they questioned other adults surrounding the play about why something had to be a certain way. Janneth told me after the play that she explained to them that I viewed the play from a different, larger perspective. Apparently, the youth, especially in their “negative attitude” stage, sought affirmation from parents about things they did not like about the play. They lacked that
affirmation, for the parents, without communicating to one another about this, stood as a unified front in support of my choices, believing with complete faith that I had a vision and knew how to achieve that vision. One of the biggest matters the youth questioned was my choice of music for transitions and underscoring. One actor came out from backstage and stopped me during a dress rehearsal, saying “This music does not work for this scene change at all.” I was taken aback by the attitude expressed in this statement and the sheer nerve of stopping the scene to tell me I was wrong. I understood why she thought that, and I did end up changing the music for that transition, but I made it clear that I would not accept ideas expressed in a disrespectful manner. This is one area of the play where education came naturally through the process: the youth learned that having a relationship with someone, especially a leader, does not grant one the right to blatantly reject her ideas. The goal of my choices was to unify all storytelling elements and the goal of the youth’s choices was to have their voices heard. At our noblest, we both wanted to enhance the quality of the piece as a way of honoring the Lord. At our poorest, I wanted to exert creative control and they wanted to complain. We both wanted the best for the play but held different views of the choices that would achieve our goals. I could not always discern the information sought when the seeker’s complaining tone of voice overshadowed the question; likewise, the youth did not always receive clear communication from me, hence, they had erroneous ideas about the length and quality of the production that stemmed distrust of my directorial abilities. In the realization of the piece, the viewer’s positive reactions solidified the youth’s trust in my vision, albeit in hindsight. The youth and I both had selfish motives for exerting our will over the choices made; we could have had better unity in the many decisions that were required.
Attitude of Participants and Leaders

In a way, I still hated compromising my vision for the project by giving into the “traditional” method of rehearsing a play and by including as many humorous bits as I could to feed the group’s desire for comedy. However, I had to back up and ask myself “Was this project supposed to be about me? Who am I doing this for anyway?” Those convicting words reminded me that this project was supposed to be collaborative and God-honoring. If I held to my own vision as the “only way,” I would only serve myself, leaving the youth and God outside of the process. Even though the process was not collaborative in the way I conceptualized, collaboration naturally arose from using the youth’s ideas and abilities in the formation of a script that suited those interests and abilities. My only regret is that I put together a writing team, comprised of three youth group members, whose job it would be to take the devised work and write down these pieces in script form. They would have been primarily in charge of developing the script with my supervision. Once I wrote the script, however, there was little purpose for the writing team. Although I left a few extra scenes for the writing team to develop and add into the play, time constraints made this impossible. As a result, that was one area where their expectations were not met, and I know those ensemble members were disappointed about it.

Am I suggesting that one should try to have a lousy process so that the product can “miraculously” come together at the last minute? Of course not, for it took hard work and a commitment to excellence to overcome the obstacles. Once again, though, I grant preference to spiritual truth over finite situation: we must not sacrifice God’s presence for excellence in our own strength. Alison Siewert, in Drama Team Handbook, states that “Excellence is only a means to the end of beautiful, God-filled art” (39). So many believer artists today talk incessantly of the
importance of excellence. I agree one hundred percent that excellence is important, but only if it is God’s excellence. Like Moses said, “If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here” (Exod. 33:15). He sought the Promiser, not the promise. This is part of worship. We must seek the One who fills the art with excellence, not the excellence itself. One does not open up the pages of *American Theatre* magazine and find multiple articles about the importance of excellence in mainstream theatre. It is assumed. The articles demonstrate various styles and methods in which theatre artists currently create excellent theatre. I challenge faith-based artists to move past just talking about how important excellent art is and start discovering the various methods to *make* it excellent. I challenge believer artists to find the styles and methods that suit the gifts God gives to each of us individually. As Franky Schaeffer and Steve Turner propose, there is no formula or style that makes something faith-based art. We are free to experiment to discover our own artistic preferences, which are the ways that God can use our abilities to achieve His purposes.

*The Realization*

I am so pleased that, according to Evelyn, the costume coordinator, the ensemble served one another *with joy* during the presentation. I believe serving one another with joy brought them into a right relationship with each other and with God, who instructs us to love our neighbor as ourselves. After the play, the youth fondly recalled “rallying together” in the last dress rehearsal and presentation. Backstage was chaotic at times but the girls helped Naomi with some tricky quick changes. During the second dress rehearsal, the group made a unified decision that they needed to run through the play again that night. Furthermore, the youth commented that they felt
the presentation was “set apart” by God because the play went the smoothest it had ever gone before. To me, though, this principle of serving is perhaps even more important than the play itself: the play lasted one night, but the moments of relationship-building that took place that one night will probably carry on throughout these young people’s lives. That is important to me because if everyone had these kinds of relationship-forming experiences, I do not think the world would be the same. Mainstream artists as well as “believer artists” need to hear this: though unconventional in professional theatres concerned with ticket sales and reviews, we need to be concerned with cultivating healthy ensemble relationships if part of our mission as artists is to change the world. What I learned is that this kind of change is not free; it costs the time spent, energy exerted, tears shed, and other intangibles, but in the end a relationship where someone puts another’s need before her own by asking “What can I do for you?” is priceless because serving another with joy is a skill not easily taught or learned. This is worship—or at least, it can be with the right inner motivation. I observed great acts of service starting on Paint Day; Naomi and Evelyn even returned an additional night to help me put finishing touches on the painted panels. And while I did not have to work to build the relationships within the ensemble, I personally had to build a relationship with each youth in order to have credibility with them. I had to work to preserve the relationships within the ensemble, focusing the group’s unity towards the realization of the play. Therefore, I can only conclude that part of theatre’s role as a worship tool is to be the glue that brings people together. The process of creating the play brought the youth and I together as a team working toward the same goal, and the realization brought the youth, the congregation, and various community members together through the experience of watching the story of Esther unfold. Perhaps some viewers recognized the piece as
a worship tool and perhaps some did not, but the joyful atmosphere after the play made it seem as if everyone received something positive from the experience.

_Theatre’s Many Roles_

**What Differentiates Messianic Theatre from Other Forms and Genres?**

After experiencing the process of mounting an original Purim play with young people at a Messianic Synagogue, I am not sure that there is much difference between producing a “faith-based” play and producing a “mainstream” play, in terms of outward activities. The same concepts of storytelling apply to writing the play; costumes, sets, props, and sounds need to be designed, gathered, and built; actors need to memorize lines, and a body of people come to view the play’s unfolding. If much of the process and realization are the same, why do we need to define theatre’s role specifically in a Messianic Jewish setting? I discovered that the outward activities seen through spiritual eyes revealed the importance of inner motivation and that the inner motivation needed to be controlled by my spiritual beliefs in order to allow faith to invade my artistic vision. This discovery came about through our pre- and post-rehearsal prayer, where I could sense that, no matter how far it appeared we were from being prepared, everything would turn out fine because God was in control. My spiritual beliefs furthermore helped me as a leader to know on what to place my focus in working with the cast, which, for this process, was teamwork, attitude, and quality of work. I felt compelled to strive for unity in the teamwork, help the youth keep negative attitudes in check, and constantly strive for excellence in quality. No
matter what a leader’s focus, every part of the process and realization needs to be filtered through a theological lens whereby it is good to question: “Is this a godly act? Am I being obedient to what God wants me to do? Do I have the right heart attitude at this moment?” I also need to know why I produce a play, not just the steps necessary to carry it out, so as to determine whether I have a God-honoring motive or a self-honoring motive. What is my end goal and how do I consequently view the piece’s role?

Throughout my process and research, I developed metaphors that shed light on theatre’s role as a worship tool; I recommend four general roles to frame one’s approach to the function of “theatre-for-worship.” These roles are not mutually exclusive and can co-exist throughout one piece; however, a company or artist will want to decide which role dominates in order to determine the piece’s intended affect on the viewers:

- **A Bypass**: This kind of piece seeks to inform, educate, or convey a specific message. In Christian and Messianic theatre, this usually takes the form of a channel for hearing the gospel (Siewert 24). In our script development phase, we had to decide how to present the story of Esther and on which theme we would focus. We chose to focus on Esther’s obedience, and this focus was conveyed in some of the dialogue at the end of the play, “But you see, God placed Esther in a specific time in order to deliver her people. And Esther was obedient to use her position to carry out God’s plan for preserving the Jews.”

This category can be likened to the fifth circle of Steve Turner’s five concentric circle model for determining how closely a piece of art is connected to the message of the gospel. I think that theatre is always a bypass for some kind of message, but how that message is conveyed can be extremely subtle or all too obvious. I must be careful of both because if the message behind the piece is too subtle, the viewers will be confused about
the piece’s intent, much like one of the groups was confused by the abstract piece another
group created with the early devised work from the Rohd techniques. If a piece is too
obvious in conveying “the message,” the viewers may become skeptical of the “preachy”
tone, just as the youth resisted educational or spiritual agendas that seemed forced or
contrived. The Bible story of Esther never directly mentions the name of God, so the next
time I produce a Purim play, I may cut out my “preachy” explanations of God’s
deliverance. If God was comfortable to let us “read between the lines” of the story, I
should likewise not worry that the viewers will not “Get the message.”

- **Sandpaper:** Sandpaper refines our rough edges. The issue presented may rub us the
  wrong way, but the end result is growth and transformation. Theatre for the purpose of
correcting dates back centuries and was especially embraced during the Restoration
period with comedies like Congreve’s *The Way of the World*. Corrective theatre posits
that when one “holds up the mirror to nature” people will see how ridiculous or unjust
their actions are and that realization will spark a change in their behavior. The amount of
change employed is usually connected to how hard the “sandpaper” rubs. People usually
respond positively to gentle correction over correction that comes across as
condemnatory or judgmental. We must “catch the conscience of the king,” not seize the
conscience, beat it, and strangle it to within an inch of its life (Shakespeare; Sennett 4).
Catching the conscience requires a commitment to playing the truthfulness of a scene and
accepting the risk that not everyone will get “the message.” For example, I was not sure
how the viewers would respond to the modern parallel, and I feared that despite all my
work, no one would be convinced that something like this could happen. After the post-
production reflection with the leaders, I knew that the modern parallel did strike a chord
with viewers because, as Gloria said, Ham’s anti-Semitism reminds us that with the condition of the world as they are, we may not be far removed from something like that (Brawer, G.).

• *Salt:* The New Living Translation of the Bible translates Yeshua’s words in Mark 9:50 as: “Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other.” Salt can be used as either a preservative or a seasoning, both of which have theological implications in the Bible for a believer’s purpose in the world. I like to think that part of theatre’s role as salt is to preserve the stories of the world, keeping them fresh and relevant so that they maintain their saltiness. If the stories lose their saltiness, humanity loses its distinctive identity among the created beings. One of my discoveries as an artist throughout this process was that I like to bring the ancient world of the Bible into today’s world in order to show the universal nature of the Bible’s themes. This concept manifested itself in the visual and audio choices of the play where I blurred the line between the ancient and contemporary, using anachronism and music and costumes that had a “retro” flavor without committing to authentic period clothing. Setting the frame in modern times in a high school was an attention-grabber because the viewers had to deal with a more familiar setting, which brought freshness to the traditional story as well as a suggestion that the same kind of anti-Semitism exists today. Salt also speaks of diversity, of being mixed into the whole of humanity as a way of living in peace. Theatre can break down the barriers that keep us apart from different kinds of people. These two principles seem contradictory: how can we maintain our distinctiveness and mix in with people different from ourselves? I think that one must be solid in one’s own value system, but be
flexible in matters pertaining to customs and preferences. And lastly, salt is a seasoning that makes us thirsty. As it is said, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink;” however, you can make the horse thirsty. Our goal in using theatre as a worship tool is to point to God in such a way that people will want more of Him.

- **Light:** Light reveals, divulges, and exposes. Light can be a *spark* that provokes dialogue, which spreads like *wildfire* in heated debate. Light can be a *beam* that pierces the surrounding darkness: “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph. 5:11). Finally, light can be a *beacon* that reveals our environment, guiding us through to safety. It is through light that we see everything else more clearly. C.S. Lewis put it this way: “I believe in God like I believe in the sun. Not because I can see him, but because by him I can see everything else” (qtd. in Turner 51). This last category is the one to which I gravitate because it complements the notion that our faith should influence our artistic vision at all times in varying degrees of brightness. Light can be both gentle and harsh, depending on the type and source of light; I want to gently nudge people awake at times and harshly shock at others. Light is the category that dominated our Purim play: we exposed the darker themes of Haman’s anti-Semitism, sparked the thought that something similar could occur in modern times, and shed light on the joyous, celebratory nature of Purim plays.

By considering the intended affect we want theatre to have on our viewers, we can specify theatre’s place as a worship tool, either as an event in itself or as a part of a larger service comprised of several worship tools. In the case of our Purim play, I initially thought the play would be just one event in a special Purim service, but the congregational leaders decided to make the play the only special holiday event. The “packaging” surrounding the piece made a
difference in how I thought about the play’s role as a worship tool because the people in attendance would be there for the primary purpose of seeing the play, the event would be used as an outreach to community visitors, and the play would have to be able to stand on its own as a singular event. In this context, the celebratory aspect of worship seemed fitting as the dominant aspect, so the intended affect on the audience was to uplift. Ultimately, this intention validated comedy’s contribution to the play because the generally comedic tone of the play increased the feeling of celebration, which can be an expression of worship.

Artists’ Roles

Furthermore, I concluded in the process that those of us responsible for leading the people into worship were worship leaders. Our prayer time was just as important as our rehearsal time because the youth would be ministering to the congregation through theatre, so we needed to take time to build up our spiritual and artistic sensibilities. Defining the worship leader’s role is an important part of the process because how we think about our role in the carrying out of the worship will influence the worship tool’s impact. I propose three specific roles for worship leaders of theatre to help us define our ministerial focus:

• **Priests:** I find that there is a godly calling for Messianic Jewish artists to act in a priestly role because of God’s national calling on Israel to be a “Kingdom of priests, a holy nation” in Exodus 19:6. I base this argument mainly on Daniel Juster’s book, *The Irrevocable Calling*, which posits that there is an irrevocable calling still placed on the nation of Israel to be priests that act as intercessors for the nations. Theologically speaking, the definition of priest to which I subscribe is that of the Levitical priest, who is
responsible for making an offering to the Lord that represents the redemption of Israel and the whole world (Juster 17). Messianic Jews exist to keep the understanding of the coming of the Messiah Yeshua as a completion of God’s plan of redemption that began with calling of ancient Israel and will end with the restoration of Israel. Speaking of Bezalel, the artist of the wilderness tabernacle, God says, “I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of workmanship” (Exod. 31:3-5). It is exciting that this artist was filled with the spirit of God because in those times, only priests were filled with the Spirit of God. I think God makes a direct reference to artists’ priestly role in experiencing the presence of God. Like Leo Tolstoy said, “To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced and having evoked it in oneself, then by means of movement, line, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling—that is the activity of art” (qtd. in Turner 66). First, we experience feelings personally and then by the means of our craft we express them in words to let others in on the experience, which cannot fully be described in words. “We need to translate the gospel…in a manner that invites the nations into worship. In every age of human history, God has expressed himself in ways people can understand. He is a God who wants to be known” (Siewert 23).

- **Prophets:** The priestly role speaks of what God has done, and the prophetic role of an artist speaks of what God will do. Siewert explains that, “Drama interprets the present in God’s terms and helps us know the future in his terms” (15). We are to be the kind of prophets that observe the trends, behaviors, and mindsets of the current times and provide
a spiritual explanation for declining conditions. At the same that we address the problems of contemporary society, we provide a glimmer of hope for the future. Prophets were known for doing strange things like marrying prostitutes (Hosea) or burning sections of their hair (Ezekiel) in order to illustrate a spiritual principle. Artists are like prophets in that manner because we hold a different view of reality, are committed to illustrating elements of truth, and sometimes do “strange” things to communicate those truths. These unusual acts grab the attention of the public, causing them to question the motivation behind the act and what it could mean. Lastly, artists must be like priests and prophets in that we know how to discern the voice of the Lord. These priestly and prophetic roles must not be perceived as a “Get Out of Jail Free” card whereby we think of ourselves as infallible religious authorities—we are not preachers, pastors, rabbis, or elders. All believers are called to fulfill a priestly and prophetic role, and artists fulfill those roles when we use our art to intercede for the redemption of the world and engage people with contemporary issues that point to our need for God.

- **Storytellers:** Our third role as artists is just to be good storytellers. We have to know what kind of story we are telling, and how our individual story connects with the canon of God’s story. What archetypes are we fulfilling: Messiah-figures, the Adversary, the Father, the doubting Thomas, or the faithful servant? “Drama in its truest form is about bringing people together around a story in which characters ask questions, deal with their fears and engage conflict that prompts the audience to respond. A good drama creates tension and elicits a response” (Siewert 23). The story of Esther has all of this, and the question we subtly challenged the audience to was “What unique position do you find yourself in that could be used to honor God?”
Characteristics of Messianic Theatre

What is the Theology that Underpins What We Do Artistically?

First and foremost, the Bible should be a believer artist’s rulebook, inspiration, and guide. The Book is full of stories, examples, and verses that speak about every type of situation, emotion, or topic that we experience as humans, as well as the hope we have in God. To change, dilute, subtract, or add to the Bible’s teachings is a severe mistake that will dilute the impact of our art. A successful believer and artist is a growing believer artist, and this starts with a relationship with God and reading His Word. I use the term “rulebook” to describe moral absolutes, not artistic ones. That is to say, we must make moral choices throughout the artistic process that uphold the Bible’s teachings. To compromise our beliefs in favor of bowing to a relativistic worldview in which truth is multiple and situated will lead to disobedience and ultimately weaken the extent to which God can use our art for His glory.

Secondly, a believer artist can certainly glean from mainstream theatre practices and standards, as long as these practices and standards do not contradict biblical teaching. We do not have to “reinvent the wheel” in order to make theatre that worships the Lord. By using existing models for making theatre, we can use the excellence of the art form as a vehicle for worshipping the Lord. There are aspects of the theatrical process that uphold spiritual principles; for example, theatre is usually a collaborative process that involves some degree of sacrificing time, energy, and ideas to the formation of the piece. We must seek people who are willing to make those sacrifices for the benefit of the creative team.
Worship was important to me even when I focused on the Michael Rohd component. Since the project was for the synagogue, it had a greater spiritual significance than just a thesis project. Actually, all the work that artists do should be expressions of worship. Like Franky Schaeffer says, we cannot compartmentalize our life into “sacred” and “secular” categories or else the Lord is not Lord over our whole lives. Once the Michael Rohd component went away, I had to figure out what it was that I was trying to find out. I thought about how music is more commonly accepted as a worship tool in both church and synagogue. If we defined the specific ways theatre can be used and the methods for putting pieces together, would theatre become more commonly used in Messianic synagogues? Most of the books that discuss the various uses of theatre in a religious setting (i.e. Sennett, Siewert, and Pederson) list theatre for worship purposes as one form of “religious theatre” among others such as recreational, educational, and outreach. Believing artists should produce works that are all expressions of worship, no matter what other purposes they fulfill. The Shabbat service or Sunday morning church service does not have a monopoly on worship. I do not think we intentionally compartmentalize this, but that is what ends up happening through the language we use. We have enough trouble making the word “worship” not synonymous with the “musical” portion of our service. We struggle not to enforce the idea that the “praise” songs are the fast songs and the “worship” songs are the slow ones. We do not want to get trapped in the idea that theatre as a worship tool translates only to performing skits or sketches during the service to correspond with the pastor’s/rabbi’s sermon topic.
Importance of Leadership

Practically speaking, Lara Greene developed a series of questions for artists to consider when producing faith-based theatre in a place of worship:

Questions for negotiating a balance between focusing on the youth’s creative process and the quality of their play: How can I use exercises that develop theatre skills and material for the play? What style of play do I hope to see at the end of the process? What format for giving and accepting criticism will I establish with the group? Whose opinion will have the most authority when making decisions (mine, the participants’, the parents’, other leaders in the organization)? How open am I to the style and content of the performance being entirely in the hands of the group? (Greene 68-9)

When working with any group of young, untrained, or inexperienced actors, one has to find the stimulus to get their creativity going. In this case, the youth group is naturally very creative, but still needed some prodding to create buy-in and release that creative license. I found music, comedy, and improvisation effective for releasing their creativity. Once they could put some of themselves into the play, they experienced ownership over the bit or the scene. For example, one actor wanted to change her character name to “Julio.” We added a bit where the servant brings the king a number of items and he waves them away—it became a comic bit that they all loved. We added an “audition” scene before Esther meets the King where two untalented girls sing and dance badly for the King. Personally, I loved giving the group choices and freedom if they proved they were mature enough to handle the responsibility. I still hold, though, that there needs
to be an adult leader who has the final say in all choices and to whom the group can look for guidance. As always, a good leader needs to let the youth know what she expects from them and the appropriate way to voice ideas or criticism.

We also must follow the hierarchy of authority, whereby we respect people placed in a position of authority over us. I was fortunate that the rabbi and elder gave me freedom to lead the youth as I wished, but if they wanted to change some aspect of the play, I would have listened to them as long as the change did not violate God’s Word. Many artists may struggle with this concept because no one likes to be “censored” or told what to do, but I challenge believer artists to obey what God tells us concerning our leaders. I trust that my leaders have greater maturity, a greater vision for the “big picture,” and that by trusting them the youth will trust me as their leader. Leaders can also be the mouthpiece through which to hear the voice of the Lord, especially when we ask God to give us an answer on a given matter. Maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships throughout the process and realization of a play is one aspect of worshipping God.

A Vision for the Future

Dramatic Theory for Messianic Theatre

Rabbi Ira and Gloria have a vision whereby theatre could be taken out into the community or into church youth groups, so that people could be exposed to the Messianic viewpoint. For Messianic synagogues with the same vision, I would suggest examining this idea through a spiritual and artistic lens. From a spiritual perspective, the leaders involved should
pray for God’s will on the matter. Does the proposed project uphold biblical teaching? Is the ultimate purpose of the project to glorify God? Is it suited to the size, mission, vision, style, and target population of the congregation? Artistically speaking, does the congregation have believer artists with the ability and willingness to accomplish the proposed project? Does the congregation have the resources to meet the needs of the project? How will the project be framed? For example, if the youth group took the Purim play to church youth groups, we would probably frame it as the story of Esther, not a Purim play, because the former is a more familiar term for an audience of church-goers. The occasion and purpose dictates the framing, which will change depending if the piece is performed by itself, for a holiday, or as a part of a larger worship service.

This latter approach to drama is called “mosaic,” which is the approach taken by Alison Siewert in *The Drama Team Handbook*: “We saw drama as more than a decorative part of worship…the multimedia-driven services and events we had experienced lacked a certain kind of authenticity we found ourselves yearning for…So we committed from the start to making drama an equal part—along with preaching and music, fellowship and prayer—of the service” (Siewert 22). I like this model because one form of worship flows into the other; there is diversity in the expression of worship, but the aim of the many forms is the same. The leaders of all the areas of worship need to be purposefully creating an environment where worship continues even when the song ends; otherwise, there is a tendency to compartmentalize the worship just into the music or just into the sermon or just into the tithes and offerings. The rest of the service then becomes either rote ritual or entertainment. There is nothing wrong with being entertained by a sermon, scene, or song, but entertainment is not the end in itself. If it were, people could just stay home and watch television. When we enter the sanctuary, we come to worship God and allow Him to
transform us, collectively and individually. A drama team must strive to develop fresh material so that congregation members do not take it for granted or become desensitized to the use of theatre in the service.

What I dislike about the “mosaic” approach is that since drama comprises one of many forms of worship, the scene is usually presented in a very short time frame. Steve Pederson, drama director at the “drama ministry Mecca” Willow Creek Community Church and author of *Drama Ministry: Practical Help for Making Drama a Vital Part of Your Church* writes that his sketches must be eight minutes or less. I understand that drama has enjoyed great success at their church, but I wonder how effective an eight-minute scene can be. Most of the sketches I read as research for this project completely lacked character development and the characters reached their conclusions too easily. My personal recommendation to the Messianic movement is to stay away from the “sketch” approach because it is difficult to write a good eight minute scene that comes off as genuine.

A drama team needs to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I am also part of the musical worship team at Ayts Chayim, and we will often ad-lib or improvise during a song because we feel the Holy Spirit is leading us in that direction. This usually allows the congregation to collectively enter a deeper stage of worship: I see people sing their own message to God, give a testimony, or fall to their knees. One would not necessarily want to ad-lib or improvise during a scripted scene if one’s scene partners do not experience the same leading or cannot follow in the same direction. However, that is where the rehearsal process becomes ripe ground for experimentation and spontaneity. We experienced the hand of the Lord giving us spontaneous ideas the last days before the play, as well as during the presentation, when scenes
ran smoothly in places where before there had only been chaos. I attribute our success to diligent preparation fueled by the trust that God would anoint the final presentation.

The other aspect of the overarching question is how a viewer could worship while watching a piece of theatre. Part of me doubts that a play could illicit the same response as a powerful song, as described above. Would one really expect to see a viewer fall to one’s knees weeping while watching a play? Perhaps not—although one never knows—but I propose that God is more interested in inner transformation than the outward manifestation. A viewer could shout out something in the middle of a scene that seems profound, but their real inner motivation is to direct attention to themselves. Rather, artists are gardeners in God’s vineyard: we plant seeds, we nurture them, and sometimes we rip out some weeds. We may see some seeds reach fruition and some may fall by the wayside. The result, though important, is not within our control, so we must not place too much emphasis on the outward result. Recently, I read an article in *American Theatre* about the theatre company Ten Thousand Things (TTT), a company that takes theatre to community centers, homeless shelters, prisons, and other nontraditional venues. They are known for provoking emotional responses from unlikely audience members who may never have seen a play before: “To watch TTT is to glimpse the essence of theatre: gifted actors telling a story that sparks the audience’s imagination. The unpredictability of live theatre is heightened here. There are not only the actors to watch as they live the story but also the unusually engaged audiences” (Butchy 27). On the other hand, viewer response lets us know whether or not the material is having the intended effect. The Ayts Chayim youth were energized and validated when they heard viewers laughing and cheering. Once again, the spiritual must take priority over the artistic; it is more important to focus on our “Audience of One”—God—than to seek the approval of man.
I envision the Messianic movement fully embracing theatre as a worship tool and seeking out avenues for presenting theatre regularly, just as many churches developed successful drama teams. There would be many different uses of theatre, from outreach to education to recreation, but all of the forms of theatre would be united in the purpose of honoring the Lord. I think God will appoint creative believer artists in Messianic synagogues with this same vision to see drama used as a worship tool. The exciting part of the growth of drama is that the style or expression of theatre does not have to be the same in the Messianic movement, that one believer artist may have a completely different approach than another artist. I see theatre breaking down barriers and strengthening the relationship between Messianics and the church and Messianics and our Jewish brothers and sisters. Collections of plays from the Messianic movement and books on Messianic theatre will be published. We need to refine how we place theatre in the context of the Messianic synagogue. I suggest that theatre be viewed as another component of worship, or ushering people into the presence of the Lord. Believers must take this responsibility seriously by continuing to mature in their relationship with God and refining their artistic sensibilities.

I believe that using emerging techniques and theories from mainstream theatre could revolutionize faith-based theatre. Most of the major books about religious drama base the genre’s dramatic theory on Aristotle’s *Poetics*. It comes across almost as arrogant to assume that the Aristotelian presentation of theatre is always best for faith-based theatre because there are many other theories that exist that are completely anti-Aristotelian. Theorists such as Augusto Boal or Bertolt Brecht influenced the way that I approach theatre, and I hold that faith-based artists need to know both their theoretical preference and which theory suits the piece being presented in order to produce the best possible artistic quality. Rohd’s theories and methods attracted me because they would have provided the youth with a strong voice in the creation of the piece.
They also allow for exploration of a topic from many different angles, and the resulting product has the potential to powerfully impact the viewing audience.

Instead of only looking to Aristotle’s theories on dramatic structure, we should look to other artists and theories. For example, Michael Rohd’s and Augusto Boal’s work could be used to create collaborative pieces about faith. However, perhaps choosing the right time and place for this kind of experimental work is wise. Will the participants from a given congregation make the experimental leap with you, the drama leader? We cannot blame the congregational members for being afraid of these less familiar forms because the experimental lends itself to “dangerous” realms where questions are left unanswered and the environment created appears to “tolerate” anything, even the darker things of this world that we try to shun. I would like to nudge believers in this direction anyway because I think that it is worth it to go outside of one’s comfort zone in order to discover something deeper and richer about our God, our relationship with Him, and with one another. We cannot grow complacent with our arts. Would one think that just because one sang a certain kind of song, one had mastered every kind of musical form?

In order for theatre to excel and expand within the Messianic movement, the art form must reach the professional level to some degree. I hope to see Messianic synagogues supporting professional theatre artists and even professional theatre companies. I would like to create one of the first professional Messianic theatre companies. Plays from the Messianic repertoire must be compiled and published. Articles must be written and published in scholarly, artistic, and religious journals describing high quality projects taking place in Messianic synagogues. Attempts should be made to inform both the religious and non-religious communities about this new genre of theatre. This kind of theatre could be a bridge that brings traditional Jews and Messianic Jews together, breaking through the barrier of stereotype, contrary beliefs, and
religious stigma. However, a Messianic synagogue or theatre company should not employ these methods without qualified personnel with the artistic and management ability to carry out such projects. The “ideal” situation would be to use a believer artist with a degree in theatre and experience in professional theatre as the leader of a theatre program within a Messianic synagogue. If there is a desire to do theatre, but no such leader, perhaps either willing participants could take college classes in various aspects of theatre or training centers could be established within the Messianic community.

I discovered that my personal desire for faith-based theatre is to bring ancient truth and contemporary style together so that the old is made new, the unfamiliar familiar. Just like Shakespeare or the Greek classics can be modernized, I believe the Bible’s stories possess the ability to be transferred into the twenty-first century without destroying the major facets of the story. In the case of the Purim play, we did not replace the traditional story altogether with a modern version; we used the modern parallel as a vehicle into the traditional story. This method increased the biblical story’s relevance because everyone could connect with a school setting and the social pressure associated with high school. It is exciting to me if viewers come away with a fresh or even personalized view of biblical stories, saying “That story was for me, for today.” This approach may not be the approach of other believer artists in Messianic synagogues, and that is fine. Every artist must discover his own voice and then continue to make work in that vein.
**Conclusion**

At the outset of this study, I seemed to think I could discover the “specific methods” for using theatre as a worship tool, as if there were a scientific formula to follow when producing a play. There is no such formula, but my answer to the overarching question is actually very simple. Theatre’s role is to worship God. There are certain benchmarks we can look for that indicate that worship is taking place, such as relationship-building, edification, transformation, adoration, and celebration. However, the only true test of genuine worship is the attitude of one’s heart, and only God can determine that. The Bible says, “…man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7b). Steve Turner calls for the theatre to be made holy in an artist’s life: “The Bible has no equivalent division between secular and religious in the believer’s life because anything good in the temporal world can be ‘set apart for God,’ in other words made sacred” (57). When asked if they believed that theatre could be a positive tool for worshipping the Lord, the Ayts Chayim youth group gave a unanimous “Yes” and one of the reasons provided was that “You can use anything to glorify God.” I would add to that statement that God can use anything or anyone, especially if the individuals involved have a willing, obedient attitude. God is the first and greatest Artist, creating the best play ever told and we get to help him tell it. Our attitude determines the impact our story will have in “His Story.”
APPENDIX A
FINAL SCRIPT OF “FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”
Scene One: The Dance
Present day. The prom at Persy High School.

An atmosphere of levity and celebration. Some students are dancing to an upbeat song, a few wallflowers, a few coming in and going out, some getting refreshments and talking. PRINCIPAL AHAUSER approaches a microphone and speaks.

PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
If I could have your attention, please. Ahem. (A boy is still dancing energetically.) Young man, please stop that. (A girl is talking on her cell phone loudly.). Young lady, put that down. Ahem. And now the moment you’ve all been waiting for—put your hands together for Harry “Ham” Anderson, your new Prom King!

Applause. HAM ANDERSON eagerly grabs the microphone from AHAUSER.

HAM ANDERSON.
Thank you for your votes, Persy High! As this year’s Prom King, I promise to make this a year you will never forget. This year, we will take our school to new heights of glory—I’m talking about football championships, prestigious college scholarships, and opportunities for advancement for each one of you. In order to do this, we must unite. You’re either with us or against us. And anyone against us must be treated as our enemy. Are you with me, Persy High?

(A cheer from the crowd.)

And now I will name my Prom Queen. DJ, get our song ready—this is gonna be great. This year’s Prom Queen is none other than SGA President Quinn Vasti!

Everyone moves to the sides to allow room for HAM to dance. But QUINN does not appear. A beat. HAM’s humiliation rises.

Come on out, Quinn, don’t fool around. Quinn? Quinn!

QUINN appears, but approaches the microphone, not the dance floor.

QUINN.
Good evening. For reasons I cannot disclose, I must resign from my office as Student Government President. Tonight will be my last at Persy High School, therefore I must decline the title of Prom Queen. I apologize and thank you for understanding.

She exits. Everyone watches her go in stunned silence.

HAM.
Huh? She’s not gonna dance with me?! Her loss.
Gradually everyone goes back to dancing. MEMPHIS pulls HAM aside.

MEMPHIS.
Yo, H-man, you shouldn’t let Quinn embarrass you like that. Just think—all of the girls here are gonna tell their girlfriends who aren’t here that Quinn dissed you and they’ll think you’re soft. Then everyone starts dissin’ you and your dreams of victories and championships go down the tubes. I think you should tell Principal Ahauser to choose a new SGA Prez now.

HAM.
I can do better than that. I’m gonna make sure no one ever says the name Quinn Vasti without spitting in contempt.

MEMPHIS.
You sure do use a lot of SAT hot words, Ham.

HAM.
Oh shut up, Memphis.

Scene Two: The Principal’s Office

HAM.
And so, Principal Ahauser, as you can see, the only reason Quinn Vasti would not dance at the prom is because of her Jewish beliefs that you can’t dance on a Friday night or else you have to fast forty days and forty nights.

PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
Look, Ham, I know you were embarrassed when Quinn turned you down, but don’t you think you’re taking it too far?

HAM.
I beg to differ, Principal. In fact, I see this catastrophic event as a grave danger to our majestic school if we do not nip this in the bud.

PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
And what is it that you want to nip in the bud?

HAM.
The group of kids in this school that constantly bring the reputation of the school down. Don’t you see? I want what you want. I want Persy to be more than just a school—I want it to be an empire! And I know you want that too because: number one, you would finally prove to the higher-ups that you’re not just a puppet principal and number two, that you really do deserve that promotion to the School Board.
PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
Hey, how do you know about that?

HAM.
I have excellent sources in both high and low places. Let me get right to the point. There is only one group of students in this whole stinking school keeping you from that. Time after time they whine and complain, “You can’t have football games on Saturdays—it’s the Sabbath!” or “Why can’t the cafeteria serve kosher meals?” Remember the time they reported you to the Superintendent because you called Ms. Goldstein’s husband a “rich Jew who made his money by sadistically pulling teeth out of people’s heads?” Sure you remember. You were this close to getting fired and were on probation for three months.

PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
So what do you propose we do? Tell them all to leave?

HAM.
Well, I want to have a little fun with them before that. If anyone asks, it’s a school project to recreate how it felt to be a Jew in WW II Germany. We make them wear the armbands with the yellow star, they have to do grunt work around the school, and they’re punished for the slightest bit of disobedience.

PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
This will never work.

HAM.
Oh, it’s gotta work, Ahauser. Because if you don’t do this, as quarterback of the football team, I’ll throw every game and bye-bye championship. I’m so popular—these kids view me as King of the school—you know I could make this year hell for you. Or heaven. Your choice.

(HADASSAH enters.)

HADASSAH.
Oh, sorry, Mr. Ahauser, I didn’t know you were in the middle of something.

PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
No, Hadassah, it’s ok. Ham and I were just finishing up. I’m glad you stopped by—there’s something I want you to do. Type up a letter to all the teachers about a new school-wide project we’ll be launching next week.

HAM.
Good choice, Ahauser. Catch ya later.

(HAM exits).
HADASSAH.
Sure. What’s the project about?

AHAUSER.
We’re going to recreate how it felt to be a Jew in WW II Germany. I’ll give you a list of students’ names that will be the Jews and will wear armbands with the Star of David on them. Some students will be appointed Nazi soldiers and some students will be civilian members of the Nazi party.

HADASSAH.
Wow, that’s intense. Are you getting any heat from the School Board?

AHAUSER.
They really like the idea—hands-on learning and all that. I think it will be interesting for students to identify why the Nazis did what they did.

HADASSAH.
And identify with the pain and suffering of six million people? How do you think the Jews felt?

AHAUSER.
Afraid, of course.

Scene Three: Quinn’s House

Later that afternoon.

HADASSAH.
So how was your first day at your new school?

QUINN.
It was all right. It was a relief to finally get away from Persy.

HADASSAH.
You never told me why you left so suddenly?

QUINN.
It’s really complicated, but basically Ham Anderson found out my faith and my beliefs. He chose me as Prom Queen so that he could humiliate me. He wanted to make me dance seductively and told me if I didn’t, he would tell everyone I rigged the SGA election, which is a total lie.

HADASSAH.
Why does he hate you so much?
QUINN.
He doesn’t hate me personally so much, he hates what I represent. Lots of people around the world hate the Jews just because they’re Jews.

HADASSAH.
Well, it’s actually worse than you think. I think Ham persuaded Principal Ahauser to do this really messed up school project. Everyone “pretends” it’s WWII Germany and the Jews are persecuted. Only the list of “pretend” Jews is all of the real-life Jewish kids in the school—except for me. I wasn’t on the list—I think Ahauser doesn’t know I’m Jewish. I think it could just be a way to persecute the Jewish kids at Persy?

QUINN.
You know, this sounds like a sticky situation. But I think you shouldn’t worry because you are in a unique position. Ahauser trusts you, doesn’t know you’re Jewish, and there’s a new SGA position open.

HADASSAH.
But who am I? I can’t change anything all by myself.

QUINN.
Let me tell you a story about another young Jewish woman who thought she couldn’t change anything. It happened a long time ago in Persia, which was the greatest empire on the planet at that time. The King of that land, King Achashverosh, threw a 187-day party to show all his subject how rich he was. It was great the first 97 days, but then it got a little bit old.

Scene Four: The Palace Garden

*Party guests enter dancing to upbeat music, but gradually get tired and fall over the stage.*

ZETAR.
How much longer do we have to be here?

BIZTA.
Yeah, if I have to see one more golden vessel or pot of gold, I’m going to have a royal breakdown!

HARVONA.
Put a lid on it, the King’s coming!

KING.
Ah, esteemed guests! Men of Persia! Behold the royal Joker. Entertain us, Joker!

JOKER.
So did you hear the one about the Queen and the scepter? At last year’s banquet, the King called
Queen Vashti to come appear before him—and she wouldn’t! *(Laughs)* You shoulda seen the look on his face! *(Laughs again and party guests laugh with him.)*

KING.
Thank you, Joker, that will be enough.

*(The GUARDS take JOKER off as JOKER shouts, “Please, no—I have a family!”)*

ZETAR. *(aside)*
She wouldn’t come!

BIZTA *(Imitating Vashti).*
“He wants me to what? No way!”

HARVONA. *(Imitating Vashti’s girlfriends)*
“That’s right, girlfriend! Don’t let that man tell you what to do!”

KING.
Silence! I will not be mocked in my own court. Guard! Go and bid Vashti to come here NOW!!!

ZETAR.
Guys—this could be bad.

BIZTA.
Yeah, what if she doesn’t come?

HARVONA.
Is he going to take it out on us?

*(The three guests quiver and shake in nervous anticipation.)*

GUARD 1.
She said she won’t come!

KING.
What?! This party is over!

GUESTS. *(relieved)*
Yes!

KING.
But I hereby call a royal meeting with my officials and advisors.

GUESTS.
Awww!
(The party guests realize they’re the officials and advisors and gather around the King.)

KING.
According to the law, what should we do to Queen Vashti, since she didn’t obey the order of King Achashverosh brought to her by the officials?

MEMUKHAN.
Vashti the queen has wronged not only the king, but also all the officials and all the peoples in all the provinces of King Achashverosh. For all the women will find out and start showing disrespect toward their husbands; saying, “King Achashverosh ordered Vashti the queen to come and she wouldn’t—put that in your pipe and smoke it!” This very day, the noble ladies of Persia and Media who hear of the queen’s behavior will gloat about it to all the king’s officials, which will bring about no end of disrespect and discord. If it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree—and let it be written as one of the laws of the Persians and Medes, which cannot be altered—that Vashti is never again to be admitted into the presence of King Achashverosh, and that the king give her royal position to someone better than she. That’ll show ‘em!

KING.
Let it be done just as he spoke. And let the scribes write letters to all my 127 provinces, proclaiming the decree to each people in their own language. That’ll show ‘em!

MEMUKHAN.
That’s what I just said.

KING.
Oh.
(Beat).
Let it be done!

SCRIBES.
Yes, King A-house-for us!

KING.
It’s Achashverosh!

(A clock ticks to show the passage of time. SERVANT offers food to the king.)

KING.
I’m not hungry…

(SERVANT goes away and returns with a mirror.)

KING.
Uh, I’m getting so old!
(SERVANT goes away and brings out a roll of toilet paper.)

KING.
Not yet. (Beat.) I’m lonely!

SERVANT.
The king should appoint officials to gather all the young, good-looking virgins in Shushan. They should be put under the care of Hegai the king’s officer in charge of the women, and she should give them all the cosmetics they need. Then, the girl who seems best to the king should become queen instead of Vashti.

KING.
Sounds good to me!

Scene Five: The Women’s Quarters

(Girls enter, scared and looking around their surroundings. HEGAI speaks to them).

HEGAI.
Fear not, ladies, Hegai here to prepare you for the best night of your life!
What, you ask, do you need to enter into the presence of the King? Let me think—ah, I know.
First myhrr!

(She gives them all myhrr.)

HEGAI.
Now perfume!

HEGAI.
Now just wash, rinse, and repeat about fifty times daily. Ah, but who is this? (HEGAI comes to ESTHER.) This young lady has a lovely face and figure. She must move to the front of the line.

GIRLS.
Hey!

ESTHER.
Excuse me, madam. When do you think I shall be able to appear before the king?

HEGAI.
Not so fast honey. You must complete six months of oil of myrrh treatment and six months of perfume and cosmetic preparation. To the spa with you!

(The other girls hurry out, eager to get to the spa. SERVANT comes out with a tray of jewels).
HEGAI.
Now Esther, choose whatever you desire from the women’s quarters to take with you to the king’s palace.

ESTHER.
What do you suppose would please the king?

HEGAI.
Won’t you choose for yourself?

ESTHER.
I will choose only what you recommend.

HEGAI.
Then I recommend you go in with a pure and sincere heart—and a cute little bag. Now go on and capture some royal heart.

(ESTHER exits. CARMELA and DRUSILLA, the two girls who came in with ESTHER, re-enter. They are playing with makeup in their bathrobes.).

DRUSILLA.
Wow! I really want to be Queen and have people bow down when I pass.

CARMELA.
I really want to be Queen and boss people around.

DRUSILLA (singing)
I’M GOING TO IMPRESS HIM BY SHOWING OFF MY RINGS.

CARMELA (singing)
I’M GOING TO IMPRESS HIM AND SHOW HIM I CAN SING! LA-LA-LA-LA-LA! (Hits a painful high note).

DRUSILLA.
Nah!
I’VE ALREADY BEEN TO THE JEWELRY EXCHANGE.

CARMELA.
I’VE SPENT HOURS ON MY VOCAL RANGE. “DOE, A DEER, A FEMALE DEER…”

DRUSILLA.
I’M GOING TO IMPRESS HIM—

CARMELA.
I’M GOING TO IMPRESS HIM.
Both.
We’re going to impress the King—oh yeah—we’re going to impress the King!

(Both girls struggle to get to the front, pushing each other and ending up in an awkward “final pose” as the song ends. They run off arguing and quibbling.)

Scene Six: The Royal Palace

Servant.
Announcing Carmela of Babylon.

Carmela (singing badly)
Puppies are cuddly,
Puppies are cute;
They’re never nasty or mean.
I’d give a home to all of the puppies,
If ever one day I’m a queeeeeeen!!

(She is escorted out by the Guards before she can finish.)

King.
Next!

Servant.
Announcing Drusilla of Tzin.

Drusilla.
I will now do an interpretive dance entitled “Dandelions.” Hit it!

(Servant plays bongo drums wearing a beret and sunglasses. Drusilla does an interpretive dance for the King.)

King.
That was—different.

Drusilla.
Th-tha-thank you, Your—(she gags and rushes off holding her stomach).

Servant.
Next!

(Esther approaches the King).
KING.
How are you called?

ESTHER.
Esther, Your Majesty.

KING.
Esther—you are exquisite.

ESTHER.
Thank you, Your Majesty.

KING.
You also seem different than the other women. I wonder why that is.

ESTHER.
Perhaps because I haven’t lost my lunch in your presence, Your Majesty?

KING.
And a sense of humor—how refreshing! Well—Esther--what would you say if I told you I choose you to be my Queen?

ESTHER.
I do not know what to say, Your Majesty. If indeed you choose me, I humbly accept and thank you.

KING.
People of Shushan, greet your new Queen, Esther of Shushan!

OFFICERS.
All hail Queen Esther!

Scene Seven: The King’s Gate

(MORDECHAI is at the gate as two of the king’s eunuch’s, BIGTAN and TERESH, walk by).

MORDECHAI.
As Esther’s cousin and guardian, I feel responsible for all that has happened. Yes, it’s wonderful that she was chosen to be Queen, but the palace can be a dangerous place. I was so scared when I discovered she had been taken to the palace in the middle of the night. I could just imagine her insulting one of the guards and finding herself behind bars! Now, I worry that she’ll insult the king himself—and face an even worse consequence. Lord God, please protect her—and most importantly—guard that tongue of hers!
BIGTAN.
If I were the king, I wouldn’t have gotten rid of Queen Vashti in the first place.

TERESH.
Yeah, she was the best thing going for him!

BIGTAN.
Someone needs to show him how to run the empire!

TERESH.
Better yet—we could run the empire!

BIGTAN.
Um—I don’t think the King would allow that. But we could ask him.

TERESH.
No, silly, we’re not gonna ask the king, we’re gonna kill him!

BIGTAN.
Oh, good idea. Kill the king! (TERESH shushes him. Whispered:) Sorry. Kill the king.

(BIGTAN and TERESH freeze in a pose with daggers raised.)

MORDECHAI.
This can’t happen. I must get word to Esther.

(MORDECHAI exits as BIGTAN and TERESH hum the “Mission Impossible” theme while performing “stealthy” moves. ESTHER and MORDECHAI return with guards).

ESTHER.
Guards, get them!

(A chase ensues. The GUARDS finally capture both would-be assassins and take them off. They re-enter as the KING comes up the center aisle for the “press conference.”)

KING.
I want to thank Mordechai—(poses with MORDECHAI for a picture)—the gatekeeper for foiling the assassins’ plans. From this day forward, let this brave act be recorded in the King’s Royal Journal.

SERVANT.
Yes, Your Majesty.

KING.
Servant, read today’s entry back to me.
SERVANT.
“Chose blue silk today instead of purple. Had porridge for first breakfast. Counted number of
tiles on palace floor. Had hummus and pita bread for second breakfast—

KING.
Ok, that’s enough—my life is so boring!

SERVANT.
But don’t you want to hear about Mordechai—

KING.
Maybe some night when I’m having trouble getting to sleep. Meanwhile, I want you all to
welcome the new chief advisor, Haman!

OFFICERS.
Long live King A-house-for-us!

HAMAN.
It’s Achashverosh, swine! Bow. You there—bow.

MORDECHAI.
I bow only to the God of Israel.

HAMAN.
A Jew? How sweet—Not!

(HAMAN passes by MORDECHAI, who stands tall. HAMAN even backs up and passes by again,
but still no bow).

HAMAN.
You SHALL bow to me! Thanks for the promotion, King A-kashi-rice. Peace out.

(He exits. Everyone else exits except for the GUARDS, who are still bowed down. One GUARD
realizes they're the only ones left, gets up, kicks the other guard, the other guard gets up and
they both run out. One guard trips and falls and the other one goes down. They run off, arms
flailing.)

Scene Eight: Haman’s Lair

(HAMAN’S ADVISORS are sprawled on the furniture, but come to attention when HAMAN
enters.)

HAMAN.
Who is that Jew to think he is so special, that he is excluded from showing proper respect to a
man of my stature?

HAMAN’S ADVISOR #1.
Let us consult the stars for the outcome of this bothersome people!

ADVISOR #2.
Cast the Pur!

ADVISOR #3.
That it may reveal the time of their destruction!

(ADVISORS strike “meditation” poses, trying to keep balance, but failing.)

HAMAN.
Can we just pull the straws?

ADVISOR #1
Well, who has ‘em?

ADVISOR #2 (Whispering to HAMAN)
They’re in your pocket.

HAMAN.
The 13th of Adar. Perfect.

ADVISOR #1.
But that’s 11 months away!

HAMAN.
No, it’s just enough time for me to win the king’s favor in this matter. It’s perfect.

(All exit, the ADVISORS laughing evilly at first and then coughing.)

Scene Nine: The Royal Palace

HAMAN.
There are a certain people scattered over all your empire. Their laws are different from those of every other people’s and they don’t keep the king’s laws, so there really isn’t any point in keeping them around. If it pleases the king, have a decree written for their destruction and I will pay more than 300 tons of silver to take care of the mess.

KING.
The money is given to you, and the people too, to do with as seems good to you.
Scene Ten: The King’s Gate

(The gate of the city. MEMUKHAN enters and approaches MORDECHAI).

MEMUKHAN.
Oh, Mordechai isn’t it awful? I don’t understand why the king would be so hateful to your people.

MORDECHAI.
What are you talking about?

MEMUKHAN.
Haven’t you heard? The king gave Haman permission to kill all the Jews!

MORDECHAI.
Oh, my people! NOOOOOO---

ESTHER.
Mordechai, what’s--

MORDECHAI.
NOOOOO----

ESTHER.
Mordechai, I said what’s wr--

MORDECHAI.
NOOOOO!

ESTHER.
Are you done?

MORDECHAI.
Yes. Get me my sackcloth and ashes.

ESTHER.
What? No! You can’t just loiter outside of the palace in sackcloth—it’s against the rules.

MORDECHAI.
Oh, Esther. You’ve got to do something! Haman is going to destroy all the Jewish people. Please go into the king and plead for our people.

ESTHER.
Everyone knows that if anyone, man or woman, approaches the king in the inner courtyard without being summoned, there is just one law—he must be put to death—unless the king holds
out the golden scepter for him to remain alive; and I haven’t been summoned to the king for a whole month.

MORDECHAI.
Don’t suppose that merely because you happen to be in the royal palace you will escape any more than the other Jews. For if you fail to speak up now, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from a different direction; but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows whether you didn’t come into your royal position precisely for such a time as this.

ESTHER.
Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Shushan and fast for me. Don’t drink or eat anything for thee days and nights. My maids and I will also fast. Then I will go in to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.

Scene Eleven: The Royal Palace

(In the palace, the KING and SERVANT are playing a card game. The KING is winning).

ESTHER.
Ahem.

(ESTHER waits patiently. GUARDS raise their swords to strike at ESTHER. The KING holds out the golden scepter to ESTHER).

KING.
What is it you want, Queen Esther? Whatever your request, up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you.

ESTHER.
If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet I have prepared for him.

KING.
Bring Haman quickly, so that what Esther has asked for can be done. Let’s get some grub!

Scene Twelve: The First Banquet

(ESTHER serves the KING and HAMAN the banquet of wine).

KING.
Whatever your request, you will be granted it; whatever you want, up to half the kingdom, it will be done.
ESTHER.
My request, what I want, is this: if I have won the king’s favor, if it pleases the king to grant my request and do what I want, let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them; and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.

Scene Thirteen: Haman’s Lair

(As HAMAN leaves the banquet, he sees MORDECHAI, who will still not bow to him, but stands tall and defiant in front of him. HAMAN stomps home to his wife, ZERESH).

HAMAN.
Esther the queen let nobody into the banquet with the king that she had prepared except myself; and tomorrow, too, I am invited by her, together with the king. Yet none of this does me any good at all, as long as I keep seeing Mordechai the Jew remaining seated at the King’s Gate. Mordechai won’t bow to me. It’s not fair.

ZERESH.
There, there. It’s okay. You can fix it.

HAMAN.
How?

ZERESH.
Build a gallows 75 feet high and have Mordechai hanged in the morning. And then go merrily off to the banquet with the king.

HAMAN.
Why, Zeresh, how very evil of you! It’s times like these that remind me why I married you. Now I feel better.

Scene Fourteen: The King’s Bedroom

KING. (dreaming)
Assassins! Help! Hail Mordechai the gatekeeper! (Awakens) Ahh! Mordechai! Send for the Royal Journal! Find the entry about Mordechai.

SERVANT.
Mordechai, Mordechai—“And thus the royal toothbrush was disposed of and replaced”—no, that’s not it. “There were 450 bushels of grain sold to the Jebusites today”—no, definitely not it. “Wild baboons were imported from the Orient and given to palace servants as bonus checks?” What am I supposed to do with a bab—Oh, here we go—Mordechai! “And so Mordechai reported the assassins’ plans, thereby saving the king’s life.”
KING.
And how did we reward this man?

SERVANT.
Um, we didn’t, Your Majesty. Too late to give him a baboon, eh?

KING.
Who’s that in the courtyard?

SERVANT.
It’s Haman standing there.

KING.
Have him come in. Haman, my trustworthy advisor, what should be done for a man that the king wants to honor?

HAMAN.
For the man (winks to the audience) that Your Majesty wants to honor—nothing less than a royal robe and a parade on the best horse through the city square—and don’t forget cheering crowds!

KING.
Hurry, and take the robes and the horse, as you said, and do this for Mordechai the Jew, who sits at the King’s Gate. Don’t leave out anything you mentioned.

HAMAN. (Parading MORDECHAI around with absolutely no enthusiasm)
This is what is done for a man whom the king wants to honor.

(There is an elaborate song and dance number, celebrating MORDECHAI’S victory. At the end, ZERESH pulls HAMAN aside).

ZERESH.
If Mordechai, before whom you have begun to fall, is a Jew, you will not get the better of him; on the contrary, your downfall before him is certain.

Scene Fifteen: The Second Banquet

ESTHER.
The banquet is ready.

KING.
This is delicious, my dear. Whatever your request, Queen Esther, you will be granted it; whatever you want, up to half the kingdom, it will be done.
ESTHER.
If I have won your favor, king, and if it pleases the king, then what I ask be given me is my own life and the lives of my people. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, killed, exterminated. If we had only been sold as men- and women- slaves, I would have remained quiet; since then our trouble would not have been worth the damage it would have caused the king to alter the situation.

KING.
Who is he? Where is the man who dared to do such a thing?

ESTHER.
A ruthless enemy—it’s this wicked Haman!

HAMAN.
I…I…I…All I said was to kill them! Oops.

KING.
Off with him to the gallows he built for Mordechai!

SERVANT.
Yes, King A-horse-go-bust!

ESTHER.
It’s Achashverosh! (then sweetly) If you please.

(A GUARD takes HAMAN off the stage).

QUINN. (Voiceover)
That day King what’s-his-name gave Queen Esther the house of Haman and Mordechai was given his position in the royal court. Esther spoke to the king, fell down at his feet, and implored him with tears to counteract Haman’s evil scheme against the Jews. And the king held out the golden scepter toward Esther.

ESTHER.
If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor in sight, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, which he wrote to annihilate the Jews in the king’s provinces. For how can I endure to see the evil that will come to my people? Or how can I endure to see the destruction of my countrymen?

KING.
You yourselves write a decree concerning the Jews, in the king’s name, and seal it with the king’s signet ring; for whatever is written in the king’s name no one can revoke.

QUINN. (Voiceover)
And the Jews of Shushan celebrated the victory with a feast on the 13th of the Jewish month of
Adar, the day they were supposed to be annihilated. They called these days Purim, after the Pur that had been cast to decide the date of the genocide. But you see, God placed Esther in a specific place at a specific time in order to deliver her people. And Esther was obedient to use her position to carry out God’s plan for preserving the Jews.

HADASSAH.
So perhaps I’ve come to Persy High for such a time as this?

QUINN.
Perhaps. Remember—you have nothing to fear—God’s in control.

HADASSAH.
Where do I start?

QUINN.
You could do what Esther did—ever hear the expression “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach?”

Scene Sixteen: Persy High

PRINCIPAL AHAUSER.
Come in. Ah, Hadassah—how is my new SGA President?

HADASSAH.
Fine, Mr. Ahauser. I was wondering, though—in honor of our first football victory, could I treat you and Ham Anderson to a pizza after tomorrow’s game?

The End
Shalom and welcome to our Purim “Schpiel”—which is Yiddish for “scene” or “play.” Since the 1400s, Purim is celebrated in part with the presentation of a *schpiel*, recounting the brave acts of heroic Mordechai (hooray!) and Queen Esther (ahhh) and the disdainful deception of Haman (boo), one of the Bible’s most evil characters.

As the youth group began to explore Esther’s story, we asked “What relevance does this story have in the 21st century?” As a director, I was fascinated by the juxtaposition of comedy with the serious stakes of the story. After all, the entire Jewish people would have been wiped out if Haman’s plan succeeded. Yet, we continue to tell this story in a comical, light-hearted style that almost glosses over the plight of our people.

What we as a group came to realize is that our retrospective look back at the story allows us to laugh at the situation and mock Haman’s plan. Did he really think he would succeed as long as God was on Israel’s side? Which brings us to our decision to do a modern parallel in which we pose the question “If the circumstances were right, could something like this happen in today’s world?” It’s extreme, but remember that the list of Israel’s foes is long. As Quinn says in the play—“they don’t hate me, they hate what I represent”—or rather Who we represent.

A note about stylistic choices: we took liberties by combining contemporary references, clothing, and music into our ancient setting. This serves two purposes: firstly, there’s a comic joy in seeing and hearing familiar things in an unfamiliar setting. We know it’s not supposed to be there, but it’s still funny. Secondly, by blurring the line between modern and ancient, we bring the two parallel stories together. We see the story through the eyes of young Hadassah, who must make a choice after hearing the story as to which course of action to follow. And finally, a challenge: What unique situation do you find yourself in where you could use your influence to honor the Lord? Perhaps you’re there “for such a time as this.”

Enjoy!
APPENDIX C
TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS
Jen: What were your general impressions of the drama presentation?

Rabbi Ira: As a member of the audience, I thought it was great...It was funny...I thought they did a good job acting, they played their parts, they did the right balance of serious acting and having fun. And the transitions were good considering the limitations of the facilities...Lighting, transitions and music, they all worked out really well...again, we’re so limited, because that facility is not set up for theatrical productions. They seemed to know their cues.

Jen: You immediately connected humor with the fact that it was great. Are you trying to suggest that there’s a connection between being successful and funny?

Ira: Well, if you’re trying to be funny and you’re not funny, that’s not good. If it was a serious play, then you’re probably not going to be funny; if it’s a Purim play, then it’s obviously humorous...and if it falls flat, that’s not good. We’ve all seen movies and plays...that are trying to be funny and they’re not funny.

Gloria: I thought it was very well done. The kids all knew what they were doing. Even if they missed something or did something it wasn’t like “Oh, they really blew it here” because they ad-libbed and they made it work. I thought the play was good in that it had the modern, you know, today— we don’t think anything like that would happen again, but in Nazi Germany...sometimes you don’t know behind the scenes what’s going on and what’s being plotted...I thought that the content of that happening in modern day and reflecting back to what happened to Esther and the Jewish people then, so I thought that was good bringing the old and the new together. I thought the kids did a great job just fumbling through at times, but it fit what was happening. It was just really funny—I probably would have been laughing the whole time, but I had to pull myself back so I could hear the next line so I didn’t miss anything, but I wanted to let it rip! And a few times I did...just knowing the kids like I do, you just see them, and knowing all the behind the scenes stuff with all the griping, and all the stuff...but it was just so, so good. And very well executed...I liked that you pulled the shades down, you blacked out the back, you really worked hard with what you had to make it into a theatre as much as you could and that was very good.

Jeff: Coming from the point of view of watching rehearsals to the whole production, it was amazing how cohesive the play looked from where I was, compared to the bits and pieces they were trying to get together. And it had a lot to do with the timing, I thought the timing was excellent, when the kids came on and sat down and got ready, did their lines, and...when they spoke to each other, you could just feel the continuity of the whole play. And that was very fortunate. And of course you had the side things of Kayla coming on—just saying two hours before, “You know why don’t you do this” because people have to change, just to kill some time—flawless with her impromptu performance. Naomi made a comment that stuck in my mind—she wanted to make it so much better each time she went up there, to produce the effect she wanted to produce...and she’s got the rug burns to show for it! She had a good attitude from the beginning and the work ethic was there, highly impressive. And it wasn’t just her, I’m just isolating her at the moment.
Evelyn: From a spiritual aspect, there was a point where I just came out and I was watching Tamara. She was just walking and I just felt the Spirit of the Lord—there was just the moment I looked at her and said, “My God, she is Esther.” Her countenance, her walk, her demeanor, it came across as Esther and I was so impressed, I was taken back and I said “Going back to Esther, I saw, visualized that beautiful woman—that confidence and yet humility.” It was all there in Tamara. And then another moment I saw—and it’s not because it’s my son—I saw Paul and the two guards and it blew me away because I saw a “regalness.” I saw the compassion. And then I went back and I said, “You know, the King had such compassion for Esther, and loved her.” And I saw that relationship and I saw the guards and I thought, “My gosh, they were strong and they were protecting the King.” But there was no humor, because they were protecting the King and I saw a very serious time because she was going to plead for her people and that was the seriousness of that. I felt the Spirit…it was more than just a role…again, it was the moment and I had to stand still and look and watch her walk down and I went down into this different world: “That’s how it was, that’s how she portrayed herself, that’s who she is!”

Gloria: I think the time that Louis and Noah were having the encounter as Ham and the Principal, and Noah’s “We need to do something about this and I have a plan”—I felt the presence of God during that time. You know what, we’re not far removed from that and in these days and times, we can’t think that there’s not that spirit still alive and well.

Rabbi: What came out to be really strong were the relationships within the youth group. I think it made a big difference because they’re so tight with each other and it [the play] just flowed naturally…and that added to it. It’s an intangible thing.

Janneth: They started out with a tight relationship. These kids have already done stuff together, they’ve been through a lot together, they all have really solid relationships. That makes a huge difference versus a bunch of people who don’t really know each other.

Jesse: From our perspective, you got the see the kids as the dress rehearsals went on—from the last dress rehearsal until the play, there was a change in the kid’s attitudes, in their engagement in the production, they got more serious, there was less “jokey-jokey”—they were there to have a good time too, but they were very focused about “Where am I supposed to be” and “Make sure you’re at your part” and they were very focused about doing it. And because we were in the back, they would come in through the side door and Noah said, “Oh, that was the best one I had ever done on that one!” and they were very excited about making it right. It was good to see that…backstage the kids were feeding off the response of the audience…maybe it wasn’t their part in the play, but they’re there waiting in the wings for their next scene and they hear the audience [laughing] and they go “Oh, that was great, yeah!...He must have got it!” There was a peace also backstage that had not been there the night before even or even that last run through—that was the hand of the Lord over the entire environment.

Evelyn: And the teamwork backstage—it got a little chaotic at times…but it was in order. I didn’t see it before, but during the play they helped each other…and they did it with joy. “What can I do for you?” There wasn’t craziness like in the dress rehearsal.

Jesse: We were shocked to see the girls come out for the girl scene, the women’s quarter scene. We weren’t expecting them out there as quickly because they never did it that quickly!
Jen: Based on your observations of the process, which parts of the process were most effective in terms of teamwork, quality of work, and general attitude of all participants?

Evelyn: We met three Sundays at my house, and I wasn’t so involved, but my impression of the time the kids were painting was that it was really neat. I think you did a very good job at the drawing, but what I saw was unity. I think the kids were interested in painting. It was a whole day, so I think that had a lot to do with it. They stayed together, they put in the time, some more than others, who just really wanted to make this work. The leadership motivated them because you said “This is what had to be done” and that was what they did. It was well-organized.

Jeff: I want to thank you for being steady through the whole process because I know it was little shaky at times and there were some “attitudinal” things at the beginning. The consistency of showing up every week may have been getting to them and they were being pulled in different directions.

Gloria: I think that we, as parents—we heard complaining from the kids most of the time. K’veetching is one of their highlights, they k’veetch more than they talk about the good stuff. We tend to be like that as people, we don’t talk about “Oh, everything is so wonderful.” I think that when we handed out the forms to have the kids commit, we were more excited about committing them because we had decided we were going to do this and so we committed them. “Hey guys, you’re going to do this and sign this” and all that. As time went on, there were friendly reminders to us: “You signed us up for this, we didn’t really want to commit to do it.” I don’t think they thought about all this time, every Shabbat and I think that was some of the angst from the start. It was a long day, especially if they’re doing worship, then they’re there all day and they have to eat and they weren’t really on top of planning ahead of time for that...But on the other hand, it’s training for them—they need to be thinking about the next day and food....I think that in the early part, you were doing things with them that you would need to do with people that you haven’t ever worked with before and they were wondering why they were doing that kind of stuff. It was juvenile to them. In the end, when you look back and say “Remember when we did this? It prepared you to be able to do this part of the play, to be ad-libbing and building their trust.” But to them it was kind of a waste of time. ...I think they thought they were going to be writing the play, but you wrote the play and said “This is how we’re doing it.” They have to have some kind of base to start with...and that brought in more attitude because they felt like they were going to be more involved in that part....There was somewhat of a shift because some of us said, “You know what, guys, this isn’t about you. Whenever I had a chance being with a group of them (which was a lot), I said, “This is about you guys. This is a project that Jennifer came to, we prayed about, we accepted to do and you guys were on board, we’re not shutting it down, so you’re going to have to change your attitudes and get on board with it.” And I know that there was a change with Naomi in that she said “If I just get on board and instead of being an outsider, be an insider, then we’ll be able to move forward.” And giving them jobs to do helps because doing costumes—everything they did was training for them. I think they all shut down some of their complaining and decided they wanted to get on board. It was serving.

Jesse: There were a couple of things that were challenging for the kids. They’re comfortable with people they know, but with people they don’t have a relationship with, it’s difficult to know what that person’s mindset is, where they’re coming from. You were new to them anyway, which is one thing. And you were coming from a place where this is not only something that you’re doing for school, but this is also your job, so this is something you do all the time, you’ve been doing this for a long time. You’re used to certain expectations from certain people and these kids were not expecting Theatre 101, they weren’t expecting the background of it. They were expecting to come
in and say “Guys, this is what we’re going to do, we’re going to put a play on, and this is the general story, let’s sit down and talk about it.” And that’s not what you did, you had a different kind of idea, which wasn’t bad, it was just totally unexpected. And because they didn’t have any kind of preparation for that, the pre-conceived expectations lasted for weeks and weeks.

**Janneth:** And I think that’s where some of the attitude came in because they felt like “Oh, my parents pushed me into this because I wouldn’t have volunteered for this, I volunteered to do a play, I didn’t volunteer to take theatre classes.” And that’s basically what they felt at the beginning, that they were going to school. “We’re in school five days out of the week; we don’t want to go to school.”

**Jesse:** I think had the first one or two sessions just been a sit down and “Erase anything you know because this is what we’re going to do: we’re going to talk about theatre in general.” Give them an idea of a larger vision and then let them ask the questions about it. To me, when the kids started to have more buy-in and more fun is when they got to use their own creativity. Some of it was goofy and silly, but they really enjoyed that kind of stuff. They really owned that part. They’re not little kids anymore—four years ago when they did this other play, they needed a lot more hand-holding, but most of these kids are 15, 16, and 17. We’re learning as parents that they want to be treated like adults, they want to have a voice like an adult, but unfortunately they want to feel like they have choices, but they don’t have the maturity to speak out for themselves. They usually lash out with attitudes instead. On the director’s side, I would say if there was more information, like “vision-casting,” could have made it smoother, and on the kids side, shame on them for having bad attitudes and not owning the responsibility of what they committed to do. There were some small things that could have made it a little smoother in the beginning, and meanwhile, God made the whole thing work out for His glory anyway. The kids’ attitudes mellowed out anyway, and they started to have buy-in anyway, it just took a little longer.

**Gloria:** The change started to come when we told them, “Look, you’re serving another person’s vision right now, it’s not about you.” I think what Jesse said would be good. I think they really do have fun doing it, and the response they got, and all the people that came up to them afterwards. Paul is so funny—like his Dad in a way, the dry sense of humor—and Kayla and Taylor, they’re hams from the beginning. Noah’s always on. You could have an outline—I bet in three months if we said we were doing a play, they would all be on board. Four of the kids were in JROTC and that weekend they had a pretty serious field meet, and four of our kids couldn’t go. We had to tell them that they had a prior commitment and it was a miss for them. I think that was some of the attitude too. It gave us the opportunity as parents to correct stuff if we saw it and work through things, so it was a nice growing experience. And, like Jesse said, you were new on board.

**Rabbi:** Honestly, that was one of our main concerns in the beginning. And it wasn’t a reflection of you, it was just that you’re new and they don’t know you that well.

**Janneth:** And kids are all about relationship. That’s the one thing Jesse and I have discovered that you will have no effect on the kids if you don’t have a relationship with them.

**Evelyn:** I think relationship is key, but kids are kids and they’re going to be disobedient. They’re going to question you. I had a lot of the kids come up to us—because they knew us—and say “I don’t like this and that.” What was so beautiful about this whole process—and disobedience had to play a part because that’s how you learn—was that “It’s not what you want, it’s what the director tells you to do.” And they saw that and understood that—although they complained, they understood
that concept. And I thought of them as actors, paid actors—when the directors says one thing, that’s how you have to do it. These young people weren’t getting paid, but they were obedient. And I saw that obedience and I think it had to do with their family dynamics and the setting, because the Spirit of the Lord was there. They just needed encouragement. Noah, the night of the play, came over to our house and went to Jeff “Mr. Jeff, how do I do certain things? How do I project?” I thought that was really nice because they were asking the opinion of the adults.

Janneth: It’s really neat how God works to keep the parents a unified front because I think the kids tried to find people to complain to, but because we all stood firm—none of us really talked to each other—but we stood firm. After a while, they realized that we weren’t going to change.

Gloria: I had four of them in the car one day after school and I said “You know what? I am not going to hear any more. It’s not about you, you guys just need to get off of it and do whatever you’re told.”

Jen: Agree or Disagree: Based on this experience, I think theatre can be a positive tool for worshipping the Lord. Justify your answer.

Rabbi: Absolutely. You start out with something rough and it becomes an act of worship because there’s unity, which is part of worship because God called us to be in unity. There’s humility—there’s a lot of aspects of worship that can be shown: dying to self, serving one another, giving up their Saturday afternoons when they would rather be doing other things. Those are all acts of worship. And ministering to the congregation and the community at large.

Jesse: Yeah, all the youth from Glades Pres. was there and they were all like “Wow, this is really great, we haven’t seen anything like this before.”

Gloria: After the thing people were saying “Why don’t we take this on the road for the Capital Campaign and we should go to some other churches and do this.” One of my heart’s dreams for our youth and the congregation is to first get our feet wet in the churches, then we go and do stuff like this, or we do mime or something to tell them about who we are.

Jen: What would you have liked to improve upon in the drama presentation?

Janneth: I think sometimes there was a lack of communication as far as what was going on in your head. They felt sometimes like when they had questions like “Why are we doing this?” or “How about this?” and they felt like they had no way of having input. And I think it was the stress, you’re frustrated, you were pushed to a certain degree, but your response was “I’m the director.” The kids sometimes felt like they didn’t have a voice or an opportunity to say “We’re seeing that this scene change isn’t going to work because we’re backstage.” They would sometimes want to have certain input—and I would try to tell them “She’s looking at it from a different perspective. You may have input, but she’s seeing something that you don’t see. You have to just trust her and go with what her judgment is.” I think there wasn’t a lot of communication—even with something like the triangles where we knew you wanted something, but we couldn’t get you to just say “I want this.” And it seemed like you would just say “Yes” to whatever we would say.

Jesse: And it was not even close to what you said you wanted. The frustrating thing for me was that I went to the store and bought all these materials and I asked you to come over before I started building it. And you came over and I said “Is this what you want?” I’d only built one little
triangle. And I said, “Imagine this now going up eight feet.” And you went “Yeah.” But then later in that evening, when realized these weren’t even going to fit in the building and you went (after they were completely constructed) you went “Yeah—no, what I was thinking was these foldable things that you zip tie.” I just put an entire day into building these things—if I had better communication about what materials it would have been made out of—because I called you from Home Depot. That same communication problem that I felt—the kids felt too.

**Janneth:** We know the kids didn’t make it easy for you because they would not show up to practices. So we understand that part of it. But that’s one of those areas where you’ll get stronger in it just by working more with kids and getting older. Jesse and I have worked a lot with the kids and we’ve stumbled.

**Gloria:** And they have a relationship with them to say “You know, you’re really not hearing what I’m saying right now.” Because the freedom in relationship is to be able to say that.

**Jesse:** We had a blowout with one of our own kids. One of them was engaged and the other one was clearly the most not engaged kid in the entire program. And we had to sit down with him and find out what was going on. What was going on was he doesn’t like acting, he never has liked doing these kind of things, it’s not what he enjoys. He hates it, he doesn’t like being in front of people, he doesn’t like getting out there, it’s not in his comfort zone, it’s far beyond his comfort zone.

**Janneth:** He had an idea that doing this play he could do something else. Like backstage, he thought he was going to get more of a choice about what his role would be.

**Jesse:** And then he ends up with a main role—a very important role, and in the Bible story, the most important role in the entire story. He’s like A) I don’t like doing this and B) I’m not a good actor and I don’t want to wreck the whole thing because I’m not good at this and C) Say I do this thing, which I’m obviously already committed to doing, how is it that my character is the character that has no funny lines in the entire play? In his mind he’s like “If I mess this up, I could potentially screw up the entire play!”

**Janneth:** It took us a while to get that out of him—basically a week before the play. He felt like “What’s the point of telling you because I don’t have a choice anyways?”

**Jesse:** There’s some attitude stuff that the kids had to really work through. It took a long time of wrangling with him and I think he did okay, but it wasn’t until the last day that he got by. It took him the entire production until the last day to get on board.

**Gloria:** On your behalf, Jennifer, when you’re the new girl, you already had attitudes going into it. And so, by the time that you got to…communicating got very sketchy because you had a lot of frustration already built up and you’re getting a lot of guff. They didn’t call to tell you they weren’t coming.

**Jeff:** You have to draw a line between how much they’re going to input and how much you’re going to say “Ok, that’s enough.”

**Jesse:** From the outside looking in, it’s easy to take the defense of your kids. So it’s easier to go “Yeah, she’s not this.” There’s something to be said where you need more freedom of expression in the beginning, but there comes a point where you have to draw the line or else it’s a disaster.
Gloria: They forget their place sometimes. They think that they’re adults and I’ve had to tell my kids “You know what? You’re not an adult and you need to learn your place.”

Nathaniel Binger could not attend this meeting, but submitted written comments afterwards:

1. What were your general impressions of the drama presentation?

I generally liked the play. It had some genuinely funny moments, the acting was solid (for most of the kids anyway), and the audience connected with what was presented.

2. Based on your observations of the process, which parts of the process were most effective in terms of teamwork, quality of work, and general attitude of all participants? Least effective?

The most effective parts were those that were clearly communicated, and the ones that got the kids excited. I clearly remember everyone enjoying themselves during the pre-practice exercises. These were great to loosen everyone up, and to transition themselves to the practice ahead.

Also, as I mentioned, when objectives and expectations were clearly communicated, it made for a smoother time, with greater fruit. I don’t have specific examples per say, but the kids responded well when they knew what they were supposed to be doing.

4. What would you have liked to improve upon in the drama presentation?

First and foremost is the lighting/sound setup. Ideally, we would have liked to have the kids faces lit, but considering the circumstances, everyone looked pretty good.

Also, a few of the scene/costume changes were a bit long.

5. Agree or Disagree: Based on this experience, I think theatre can be a positive tool for worshipping the Lord.

I would define worship as anything that specifically declares to God who He is. It’s something done with the right heart. The challenge with theatre, or taking the play specifically, is that all the pressure, practices, and deadlines make it quite difficult to focus on the Lord and give Him His due, even though the play itself glorified Him.

6. If agree, what do you think could be the next step for theatre as a worship tool? If disagree, why not?

In order for theatre to be an positive tool for worshipping God, there needs to be a comfort level that only comes with time and practice – so I see theatre as something that can be used as worship, but it is not as easily accessible as singing, prayer or time in the word (all of which I consider worship tool).
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW WITH YOUTH GROUP MEMBERS
March 31, 2007

Note: The poor quality of the tape recording did not allow me to transcribe this meeting word-for-word, so I have summarized the statements of unidentifiable individuals throughout this interview. When a speaker is identifiable, they are named.

Looking back on the process, they knew that their attitude was negative in rehearsal.

*Naomi:* Everyone didn’t know what was going on. [Implied that that was a root of frustration].

Closer to the performance, the teamwork got better because everyone was “determined to make it better.”

The beginning of the process seemed slow, took too long to get off its feet, so that caused confusion, frustration, and a negative attitude.

*Gabriela:* The group had teamwork because they all knew each other from the start.

*Jennifer Pedraza:* Share a favorite memory from the process:

The first dress rehearsal. The chaos of the backstage was enjoyable and stressful at the same time.

Paint Day—dancing to nsync and painting faces.

Everyone rallying together. Having extra rehearsals and spending time together.

*Jen:* Share a negative memory:

They felt bored at times.

They felt forced into the play by their parents.

They missed the JROTC competition, which is a huge deal to some of them.

*Gabriela:* I was only trying to help by suggesting you change the music and you snapped at me. Sometimes we didn’t feel like we were asked.

It took a lot of time—felt like they were practicing every day right before the play.

The exercises seemed like a waste of time to them.

Props and costumes did not come together until the last minute, which made it seem like the play was never going to come together. If things were prepared to show beforehand, they might have understood where the play was going better and had a better attitude.
Two days before the play, Kevin got sick and wasn’t sure if he was going to be able to perform. He was exhausted by Friday’s dress rehearsal and phoned in the second run through of the night, which the rest of the cast insisted they do.

*Louis:* After the first dress rehearsal, it started to be more fun. Costumes, sets, and props helped make it more “real.”

They missed youth group and were expecting play practice to only take up half of their youth group time.

*Jen:* Do you prefer an improvisational or script-based approach?

*Gabriela:* If we’re given something that’s already written, we can use that as a base but add our own touches to make it our own.

*Jen:* What did you take away from the “Realization”

Hearing the audience laugh, applaud, and participate helped the actors tremendously. Before going on they thought people were not going to like it, but the sounds from the audience boosted their confidence.

They had fun!

The second dress rehearsal on Friday night helped their confidence a lot. They as a group made that decision together with me saying “You really don’t need to because it looked fine out here, but if you want to, I’m not going to stop you.” By the time the presentation came on Saturday, they had run through the play 3 sold times and did not need to think about where to go, what to say, which costume to wear, which way to exit, etc.

Everyone in the cast anticipated the presentation because it had been announced in services, the congregation seemed to be anticipating it.

Even two nights before the show everyone was whining and complaining and the rehearsals went late, that was the most fun for some of them. They were all doing it together for a reason because the show was happening no matter what.

The presentation was “set apart” or anointed because it went the smoothest it had ever gone before.

Poor Kevin was traumatized backstage by having to cross from one side to the other through several changing girls.

*Jen:* Possible improvements?

More than one performance to make all the effort worthwhile.
Timing for rehearsal: summer when school’s out.

Have a real stage.

Dinner theatre style play.

Find ways to get more people—market to the churches we know, etc.

Tamara: The audience perhaps did not make the connection of the play as a worship tool.

Naomi: Through the process of being annoyed and having a negative attitude, we were able to worship when we changed our attitude. We had to die to ourselves and say “I don’t like this, but I’m doing it as unto the Lord.”

Louis: You can use anything to glorify God.

Kevin: Theatre is a great worship tool because people might come to the play just because they think it’s fun and see something about God that leads them to accept Yeshua as their Savior. People don’t know the play is going to be about God and they’ll enjoy it.

Thomas: Attitude defines whether a play is worship, whether in a secular or sacred setting.

Tamara: The content makes a difference in defining whether its worship or not, as well as the attitude of the people (volunteering their time, showing respect to the director and that their heart is “in it,” their motivation, God is honored in the atmosphere as the true director.

Stories are effective tools for identification.

Plays will (hopefully) keep people awake, keep their attention. In musical worship sometimes people can fall asleep or just drift off. Hopefully the story will be interesting enough to grab their attention.

Unbelieving family members who would not normally go to a Shabbat service came to the play.
APPENDIX E
SAMPLE LESSON PLANS AND REFLECTIONS
Sample Lesson Plans

LESSON ONE

Introduction

Warm-Ups: Zip Zap Zop, Circle Dash.

Circle Dash
Everyone stands in a circle around one person who is standing in the middle. The object of the game is for any two people in the circle to silently signal each other and switch places. The person in the middle tries to get to an open spot before the switchers. The person left takes the spot in the middle. This is a silent game.


Time: 5 minutes

Introductory Activity: “It Made Me Think” (Theme: Gifts)

Bridge Work: “Brainstorming in Tableaux”

Performance Activity: “Flipbook Tableaux in Groups”

--Add dialogue
--Write a monologue

LESSON TWO

Warm-Up: Circle Dash
Everyone stands in a circle around one person who is standing in the middle. The object of the game is for any two people in the circle to silently signal each other and switch places. The person in the middle tries to get to an open spot before the switchers. The person left takes the spot in the middle. This is a silent game.


Time: 5-10 minutes

Intro. Activity: Personal Story Reminder. “Speak aloud one word from your gift story that will remind everyone what your story was about. For example, “apples,” “sleepover,” “bar mitzvah.”

Brainstorming in Tableaux: “Start by making an image to represent the word “gifts.” This can be an abstract definition. One at a time enter the playing space and hold the tableaux for a few seconds, then come out of it.”
2) “Now start to incorporate some of the images from the stories, whichever ones resonate with you. Maybe an idea from more than one story resonated with you, like the theme of the gift of friendship. Find a way to represent that theme.”
Time: 10 minutes

Bridge Activity: Let’s select about three to four images that represent all of the images for “gifts.” Which ones resonate with you? Go to the one that resonates with you most.
Time: 5 minutes

Performance Activity: 1) Group Tableaux—join onto the individual image to make a group tableau, not losing the essence of the individual image. Allow each group to view the tableaux.

2) Flipbooks—create a series of 5 images, where the 1st group tableau is image number 3. What kind of story are you telling? Fine tune for tempo and transition from one image to another.

3) Now everyone gets one line. The line is not spoken to each other, but rather sums up the essence of the image. For example, “It was the best gift I ever received.” Practice the images with the dialogue added in.
Time: 30 minutes

4) Perform the flipbooks. Ask the audience members what questions the flipbooks provoke.
Time: 10 minutes

5) Each person writes a monologue based on a question that resonates with them. Discuss what a monologue is, the various kinds of monologues: memory, story, confrontation, crisis. The most interesting monologues show conflict, range in emotion, and has a clear beginning/middle/end. For example, “I went to the park the other day. I saw a woman sitting on a park bench crying. I wanted to go over and help her, but I something held me back. I just went back home. Later, I saw the news on tv and it said that a woman committed suicide by walking into the street right near the park. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was her. And I couldn’t help but wonder if I could have done anything to stop her just by walking over and asking if she was ok.”
Time: 10 minutes

6) Homework: Take your monologue, decide its overall theme and message. Find a section in the Bible that mirrors that theme/message. Look especially in the Psalms. Take that section and be ready to perform it next week off book (about 1 minute).
Time: 5 minutes

LESSON THREE
Warm Up Activity: Red Ball Yellow Ball.
Create an imaginary ball and pass to a student by saying “Red ball, ______.” He/she responds with “Red ball thank you.” Make sure the students give the ball a size and a weight and commit to catching it. When they have gotten used to this, throw in more balls with varying sizes and shapes, each with a different color.

Source: Lanny at Shenandoah University
**Time:** 5 minutes

Sharing of Psalms and monologues. Lead group discussion about each piece.

**Time:** 15 minutes

**Putting the Pieces Together**

**Goal:** Using the work from the previous 2 weeks, we will put together at 10-15 minute piece with the theme of “Gifts.”

**Step 1:** Process the activities from last week. How did you think about gifts before? Were there any changes in your thinking because of the activities? What do we want to say about gifts through this piece? Who is our audience (peers, adults, children, everyone)? Develop a concept.

**Step 2:** Selection and arrangement. Select the pieces that worked the best for the “concept” of the piece. What is the order that will tell the best story?

**Step 3:** Transitions. How do we transition between pieces? How do we make the piece uniform? Framing, Repetition, Escalation, Ritual. Develop a through-line.

**Step 4:** Rehearse and refine.

**Step 5:** Show to an audience and lead a discussion. Questions for audience: 1) What questions did the piece stir up in you? (either artistic choices or responses to the content). 2) Which moments did you resonate with the most? 3) What general “message” did you come away with? Questions for group: 1) Which moments really worked for you? 2) What could have been improved or refined had we had more time? 3) Which moment was the best collaboration going on for you? 4) At which point did you feel lacked strong collaboration?

**Time:** 1 hour

**Closing Activity:** Numbers.

**Time:** 5 minutes

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**LESSON FOUR**

--Quick warm-up activity: Zip Zap Zop and Walk in a Circle, Jump, and Switch.
--Read through Book of Esther in a round-robin reading style.
--Discuss themes and events after every chapter
--Review themes and events at the end of the book, brainstorming ideas for the play.
--In between weeks, challenge students to think of at least one question about the story to share with the group.

**LESSON FIVE**

**Goal:** To explore a theme of Esther and begin to see how it could apply to our work.

**Warm Up:** (20 minutes)
Captain on the Guard: There are several formations the group must learn. “Captain of the Guard” is stand up straight, hands behind back, legs together. “At ease” is same with legs separated. “Starfish” is four people’s hands in a circle, walking around. “Island” everyone runs to one part of the room. “Mermaid” is one leg up and say “Hi, sailor.” “Poop deck” everyone hits the floor. “Shark attack” find a partner and one person jump into the other’s arms. You can get out when you do not do one of the formations in time, do not have a partner, or are the last one to the island.
Source: Michael Rohd

Cover the Space: Set up a big rectangle in the space using four chairs as corner markers. Everyone starts walking around in the space. No talking, no contact, and keep moving. After a while, tell everyone to be aware of their own body, the bodies around them, and the space on the floor. Then ask them to begin to make certain that the space on the floor is covered. They need to keep moving at all times, get to corners and sidelines, and to always move to empty spaces to “cover the space.” If you were to should “Freeze!” they should be evenly distributed around the space, filling it. You should “freeze,” point out how they’re doing, and send them right back to covering the space. It’s a game of freezing, getting new instructions, and finding their rhythm again.
Variation 1: After a while shout “freeze” and ask them how fast they can create three triangles using all their bodies without talking about it. Say “go.” Return to cover the space solo. Then freeze, form three squares, and so forth.
Source: Boal via Michael Rohd.

Rehearsal: (1 hour) We need to decide now which theme is the most important to the group—the one that will be what the story is about to us. I think ultimately it boils down to God’s deliverance of His people. In the interest of time I may choose this theme to explore out of the ones that were suggested. I also feel confident in this because it was the first theme suggested. We need to explore this theme more fully as it applies to the story. The next rehearsal we will explore the relationships of the story. The questions is—at what point do we start to write things down? My gut is that we’ll be writing down the effective parts that we devise, but there can still be revisions since this is an original work. The group will be able to play and revise pretty close to the presentation.

Collective Tableaux: Everyone on their own forms an individual tableaux in response to “God’s deliverance of His people.” Read Scriptures that deal with God’s deliverance and participants respond with their bodies.

Examples: “When the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel who delivered them” (Judges 3:9).
“Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, The God of my salvation, And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness” (Psalm 51:14).
“Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord, Lord, hear my voice!...I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning...O Israel, hope in the Lord, For with the Lord there is mercy, And with Him is
abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel From all his iniquities” (Ps. 130: 1-2,5-6a, 7-8).
“You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance.” (Ps. 32:7).
All of Ps. 102.

Choose a few images to keep and tag others to step out and look at the images.

“Now think of situations in your own life where God has delivered you in the perfect way. Respond with your body in a way that recalls that situation.”

Choose a few images to keep and tag others to step out and look at the images.

Lead a discussion/selection process about which images resonate with the group as a whole. Talk about the meaning conveyed through each image as it relates to deliverance.

Break off into small groups by choosing several images that resonated with the group (perhaps one inspired by the Scriptures, one inspired by a student’s experience). Form a group tableaux with that image as the centerpiece.

Make “flipbooks” a series of five images with the group tableaux as the third image. Work on transitions from one image to another.

Add dialogue for each “slide.”

Perform the piece for each other. Viewers ask questions in response to the piece, questions that are provoked by the content of the piece, NOT artistic choices. For example, “Why is God so faithful to deliver His people?”

Production Meeting: (30 minutes)
Here are some teams I think we need, but I will ask the youth what kinds of jobs we need:

1. Writing Team:
2. Costume Design/Coordination:
3. Set Design/Construction:
4. Sound Technologists:
5. Public Relations Coordinators:

Brainstorm a job description for your team: what kinds of things will you be responsible for? What specific assignments or tasks will you complete and by when?

LESSON SIX
Today we will focus on defining character and environment. My goal is to “flesh out” the main characters and explore possible settings in order to have a basic foundation for our story. We
already know the theme of the play, now we will continue to get more and more specific. The writing team’s job will be as participants and viewers to take notes on the parts that we could use, ideas sparked by the group’s collaborative work, and patterns that they see stirring in the group.

I keep thinking about casting though. At some point, either myself or the group will have to decide who plays Esther, Haman, the King. Usually in Michael Rohd’s work I suppose participants would choose their own original characters. I’m thinking of emailing him about how he approaches casting, especially for an adaptation. Should I let the group decide who plays what part or should it be my ultimate decision?

1) Zip Zap Zop—with self-elimination.
2) Trust Circle
3) Monologue Work (adapted)

Questions:

Why does Memucan suggest that Vashti be de-throned?

What was Esther thinking as she approached the King unsummoned?

Does the King love Esther or is he just attracted to her?

Why does Haman choose to hate the Jews?

Why does the King agree to the edict against the Jews?

What is God’s point of view in this story?

Why did Vashti choose not to appear before the King?

Why did the King choose to extend mercy to Esther and not to Vashti?

Why does Mordechai choose not to bow to Haman?

Get a list of words or phrases responding to the questions. After making the list, every person chooses one of the questions publicly, goes off, and creates a character, point of view, and story that goes along with the question. Each person spends 10 minutes alone, thinking about who this person might be and creating an answer to the question in monologue, first person form.

Then participants come up one at a time, sit in a chair facing the group, and tell their story. They don’t perform it. They simply tell it from the point of view of the character they’ve created. After they tell their story they stay in character and the rest of the group interviews them about their life, their choices, their story. The group cannot be judgmental but they can be inquisitive and try to learn as much about this person and their point of view as they can. Then the next person goes.
At the end, process what was done with the group. Discuss any discoveries or gems that came out and what could be explored further.

Now go back to your monologue and apply a specific time and place to the piece. Does this change anything about the way that your character moves, speaks, or views the world?

Perform the monologues a second time and note any differences.

**Production Meeting**

Announce final teams.

Brainstorm a list of assignments or roles for each team. Deadlines?

If time, let each group break off and discuss plans of action together. Most importantly, PR, Scenery, Writing, Archiving?

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**For Such a Time as This**

**Production Responsibilities**

**Music/Sound Team Responsibilities**

1. Select music and sound cues. **DEADLINE:** Saturday, Feb. 11th
2. Combine music/sound in order onto one CD. **DEADLINE:** Sunday, February 18th
3. Recruit sound technician(s) for performance. **DEADLINE:** Saturday, February 17th
4. Investigate microphone options. **DEADLINE:** Thursday, February 22nd
5. Tech sound cues to sound technician. **DEADLINE:** Thursday, March 1st.

Budget: $25

**Stage Manager Responsibilities**

1. Write blocking for all scenes. **DEADLINE:** Ongoing.
2. Make sure all production team deadlines are met. **DEADLINE:** Ongoing
3. Help Prop Master gather props. **DEADLINE:** Saturday, February 17th
4. Assist director in running rehearsal. **DEADLINE:** Ongoing

**Scenery Team Responsibilities**

1. Acquire Set Pieces (flats, throne) **DEADLINE:** Saturday, February 17th
4. Select and recruit run crew (if needed) **DEADLINE:** Saturday, February 17th
5. Purchase supplies for backdrop (muslin, paint, brushes, tarps, etc). **DEADLINE:** Sunday, February 18th
6. Paint flat **DEADLINE:** Sunday, February 18th
7. Teach run crew responsibilities. **DEADLINE:** Thursday, March 1st

Budget: $100
Costume Team Responsibilities

1. Brainstorm and develop costume ideas.  DEADLINE: Saturday, Feb. 3rd
2. Director approves designs.   DEADLINE: Sunday, Feb. 4th
3. Distribute costume plans to cast.  DEADLINE: Sunday, Feb. 11th
4. Cast gathers individual costumes.  DEADLINE: Sunday, Feb. 11th
5. Director pulls additional pieces.  DEADLINE: Saturday, Feb. 17th
6. Select and recruit dressers (if needed) DEADLINE: Saturday, Feb. 17th
7. Teach dressers their responsibilities.  DEADLINE: Thursday, March 1st.
Budget: $25

Playbill Team Responsibilities

1. Team brainstorms ideas for layout/design.   DEADLINE: Sunday, Feb. 11rd
2. Director writes director’s notes for program.  DEADLINE: Sunday, Feb. 18th
3. Director approves program layout/design.  DEADLINE: Sunday, Feb. 18th
4. Decide printing materials (paper type) and quantity needed.  DEADLINE: Thursday, Feb. 22
5. Decide a budget—how much do you need (reasonably)?  DEADLINE: Thursday, Feb. 22
6. Coordinate printing of programs.  DEADLINE: Thursday, March 1st.
7. Select and recruit ushers to distribute programs.  DEADLINE: Thursday, March 1st.
Budget: $50

Video/Archiving Team Responsibilities

1. Take pictures at all rehearsals.   DEADLINE: Ongoing
2. Select and recruit a videographer for performance. DEADLINE: Saturday, Feb. 17th
3. Coordinate videoing a rehearsal—when and how? DEADLINE: Thursday, March 1st
4. Go over any specific info. with videographer.  DEADLINE: Thursday, March 1st.
Budget: $20

Props Master Responsibility

1. Gather all props needed.  DEADLINE: Saturday, Feb. 17th
2. Coordinate prop placement for performance.  DEADLINE: Thursday, March 1st.
Budget: $25

Directing

1. Set up voiceover recording for Naomi
2. Purchase baby monitors and test in church
Director’s Production Deadlines

February 10th
Select music and sound cues.
Talk to Jesse about construction
Design flats
Make costume sheets for cast

February 11th
Meet with Naomi about costumes and distribute to cast
Set up voice recording for Naomi
Purchase baby monitors

February 15th
Test baby monitors in church

February 17th
Talk to Isaac, Ben, Jordan about sound team/videography
All props gathered
All set pieces gathered: throne, curtain, grommets, flats
Talk to Adam about being on run crew
Cast gathers individual costumes
Director pulls additional pieces
Talk to Cristiana about dressing
Record Naomi’s voiceover

February 18th
Combine music and sound cues into 1 CD.
Paint flats
Write director’s notes for program
Finalize program design

February 22nd
Talk to David I. about microphone options
Talk to Lydia and Melissa about ushering
Video equipment?

March 1st
Tech sound cues
Tech run crew, scene changes
Tech costumes
Print programs
Coordinate videotaping a rehearsal
Hang fabric from church ceiling.
Sample Reflections

Reflection on Lesson #1

Observations: This is a really neat group of young people. They all have special gifts, some of them are obviously already creative. I will need to work to maintain focus, concentration, and to build a level of trust whereby they can take the work seriously. Jesse and Janneth are able to more easily access deeper levels of response from them because they have a wonderful rapport and relationship already built up with the group as a whole. Part of this process will be getting to know the group as a whole and individual members. In the meantime, how can I quickly gain their trust for the purpose of creating a safe space and eliciting the richest responses?

Constructive Criticism for Myself: I probably spent way too much time introducing the project and warming up. I need to focus on timing because I only got half of what I planned accomplished and the end sort of fizzled out without a clear resolution. If a participant is not taking something seriously, I should call him/her on it. I will not let the individual—and in some cases the group—move forward until they respect the work. The young people need to know they have power and the implications of the choices they make. They are not going to get that if I settle for the shallow work they put forward. I need to take charge more—yes these are teenagers that are more developmentally advanced than elementary students, but they still need limits, boundaries, and clear directions.

Successes: They all seem excited and willing. They have a lot of energy and enjoyed “Zip Zap Zop,” especially the competitive version. They pay attention to the rules, but would rather correct each other than correct themselves. They all have stories to tell.

Challenges: Commitment—the teens have a lot going on in their lives. I am afraid that some of them will not be able to commit to the project at all or that there will be a number of conflicts in the way. I will deal with that on a case-by-case basis. Focus—they need to be engaged at all times or they will create a distraction. Self-Consciousness—“how will I look in front of my peers?” is a definite concern. I need to encourage risk-taking and the nature of the safe space. How to introduce theatre terminology in light of time—I might have to give a crash course in some cases. For example, tableaux are explained as frozen pictures. I have to then relate tableaux to the next activity, giving them two layers of information at once. Anticipating challenges—how do I anticipate parts that they will struggle with or not understand or be hesitant about? And finally—how will all of this tie into “faith-based theatre?”

Reflection on Lesson #2

An Idea I Had: The movie One Night with the King, which tells the Esther story, just came out last night. I want to organize an outing with the youth group to see the movie as a way of introducing the story to them and possibly to get ideas for our play. Janneth really liked the idea because she saw it as another bonding opportunity with the group. I like the idea because it’s a movie that directly relates to the story we want to tell and may be a way of getting the kids
excited about it. The con against seeing it is if it influences their thinking too much and takes away from creativity/originality. My feeling is with this group because this theatre thing is new for some of them, that it would do more good than bad.

Successes: We were pretty good on time today and accomplished a lot in an hour and a half. As a teacher I had to improvise a few times when things did not go as I planned, and I think I did well with that. The students loved the Circle Dash game and had fun with it.

Challenges: Different levels of development, willingness to participant, and attention span. The younger students have trouble paying attention, listening to and following directions and this frustrates the older students sometimes. Adam, one of the younger students, can have a bad attitude. He told me he did not want to participate, I prompted him to try to work in the group, and he refused. He later asked if he could participate again, but I continued to have to speak to him about various behavior problems. I know that Jesse and Rabbi are working on his attitude problem and plan to speak to his parents.

Also, I think the theme of “Gifts” was perhaps not the best choice for evoking wonderful stories. When I attended the Rohd workshops, he used “Transitions” as the theme and it seemed just perfect. Everyone could identify with some kind of transition and created more than one meaning for the word. Or perhaps my expectations are too high in working with these middle-high school aged kids. They are typical teenagers: concerned with their appearance, what their friends think, etc. Some of them have been a little more “sheltered” because they are home schooled.

Touching: I discovered yesterday that it was asking a lot to expect them to be comfortable touching each other. I made the mistake of putting a girl and a boy in the circle yesterday and inviting the other students to allow them to mold the two. Inevitably, Adam, put them in an embarrassing embrace that while not inappropriate, was highly uncomfortable for the two.

Basic Events of the Class: The first round of brainstorming in the circle elicited only three responses and two were totally silly. I reminded the youth to think more deeply about gifts, telling them about the family heirloom I received as a present when I was sixteen (and they want me to bring it in next week). We then discussed the biblical view of gifts—gift of teaching, hospitality, music, etc. I then had them start to brainstorm images again. I took Dorothy Heathcote’s advice and let the silence get to them until someone had to do something. We did the “resonance test” and decided on two images. Unfortunately, the girl and boy were in the same poses, so I made a quick decision to split them up. Also, interestingly enough, the students already assigned meaning to the tableaux. For example, I had the girl put one hand on the boy’s head and one hand on her heart. The children interpreted that as her praying for him. One person had the boy get on one knee, put his hands out to her and that was interpreted as a proposal. So then I chose the groups because I could already see if I gave them freedom to chose their group there would be gender segregation—and some boys that I did not want to be together would end up in the same group. So I made the groups and gave them time to work on their group tableaux—and this took more than the five minutes I planned because they had to discuss what the pose meant, what other people could be. I told them they did not all have to be people—some of them took this in a very silly way, becoming “the ring” for the proposal. Fortunately, they
decided this was too silly. For the proposal, they did stages leading up to the proposal and then the wedding. But often Kevin, the silly student who has focus problems, was a little too distracting as an observing homeless person or a crazy person sharing the taxi with the couple. I called them on it after they presented, but tried to be positive in that Kevin has great comic abilities, they just need to be focused into the appropriate situation. The other group’s tableaux was more abstract, which I personally enjoyed, but the other group said “What was THAT?” Their images were evocative and they even had a clever way of transitioning into each slide by group members rolling into and out of the picture. One of the group members, Tamara, is attends a special arts school for theatre, so she was basically the director within her group. She is a gift to the whole youth group because she brings a lot of insight and creativity, but she can become a little too dictatorial and dominant. The part where I asked them to think of questions the piece provoked did not go as planned. They wanted to ask questions about artistic choices the groups made rather than questions provoked by the pieces themselves. Also, I did not have the groups add dialogue in the interest of time. Perhaps if I had, the concept behind the more abstract piece would have been clearer and thus easier to respond to. We took some time to discuss the makings of a monologue and they took about 5 minutes to write the monologues. I fear that some of them will just describe what they saw rather than making up a story about it in the first person. I also fear that few if any of them will actually do the homework because of busy schedules. I found out that about half the youth group made a drastic change in schools this past week and thus have a lot of homework to catch up on. Apparently the new charter school did not turn out so well and the kids have to now go to public school or home school. So next week, whatever we do, it should be self-contained and not ask too much from them. At the same time, my goal next week is to take something we did in the last two weeks and have them shaped it into something that could be performed, even as a rough piece. This week I will search the Scriptures for passages about gifts that we could use. I hate to do their homework for them, but I think I have to at this point.

Reflection on Lesson #3

Observations: My goal of this lesson was to show the “fruit” of the activities of the past two weeks by putting the pieces together into a sharing. I knew this would be a rough piece, not a finished product. The process of going from the individual tableaux, flipbooks, stories, and monologues to a 10 minute piece combining all of them was a huge task to accomplish in an hour and a half. Throughout this process, I am learning my role as a facilitator and when to back off and when to give a little more direction and guidance. I am learning that if I want the group to listen to each other, I have to be a great listener. That was one of the greatest challenges today—the group wanted to talk over each other and only cared about their own ideas. However—opening and closing in prayer, which I had been forgetting to do in the past two weeks—really helped bookend this session and invite the Lord into our work! One of the students who is a little quieter volunteered to close us in prayer, which I thought was a big risk for him.

I gotta say that I love a great warm up. Red Ball Yellow Ball is perfect for this age group, although it can still be challenging. I just love using this to get everyone’s energy up and focused and having fun—and this is what happened today.
We did have some monologue performances—of course from the most vocal participants in the group. One took the point of the view of the waitress in the “date” scene, which I commented was an interested approach to take an outsider view. The other two monologues I watched and then asked for a volunteer to be a “partner” in the scene, gave them a “moment before” and watched the monologue again. We discussed how this effected the piece and how a “moment before” or a situation makes the scene more interesting. One of the students wrote a piece about the “generations” tableaux as if they were fish evolving into people and flying away. She wanted to make it clear that she did not believe that, but it was a comment on evolution. I spoke to the group that sometimes seeing things on stage that you don’t agree with can be a good way of confirming what you do believe and provoking conversation with other people. I have a feeling we will be returning to this theme—and I hope so because it would be a great conversation to dig into with this group. We also may have to discuss this topic so as to make specific choices for our Purim play.

Then we moved on to brainstorming how to fit the pieces together into a 10 minute “sharing.” I reminded them of the work that had been done with the flipbooks, the personal stories, the images, and the monologues from today. We developed a list of possible “concepts” based around the theme of gifts. We decided on “the gift that keeps on giving”—which included life, friendship, and marriage. So the idea was that there would be the piece about Generations, the stories about friendship, and the marriage flipbook. I did a quick “crash-course” about the framing, repetition, escalation, and ritual. The word “ritual” evoked some not so biblical images with them, because they immediately thought about people bowing down to something, cutting themselves, and other pagan activities. I had to clarify by saying it was something symbolic, possibly without dialogue, and possibly involving everything. It turned out that we used the generations tableaux as an “escalation” between scenes and flipbooks. Everyone broke out into groups to rehearse their piece. The people that were not in a story I assigned to figure out the transitions, and the beginning, and end. This was another “listening” disaster because everyone in that group was talking at once. It was also challenging because we did not have anyone there to teach the transitions to. We had to regroup after everyone rehearsed—which thankfully did not take long since it was basically a touch up, not reinventing the wheel. So we decided on an order, ran through it in a very rough manner and performed it for Janneth and Jesse. They did not quite get all of the meaning behind the tableaux, but they enjoyed it. Jesse told me afterwards that he could see some of the students getting more into the work. We discussed the moments of collaboration, and the students said it was fun. We discussed how they could better collaborate with each other next time.

I think we definitely could have gone deeper with piecing the sharing together, but there was a limited amount of time. For example, exploring more fully what “the gift of marriage” means. Or the gift of friendship, the gift of life. Also, if there were more time, we could definitely refine the transitions so that the meaning behind the pieces was more clearly conveyed. We have to be absolutely clear about the choices we make—unless we choose to make an image or an action intentionally vague to an audience. One of the students was supposed to be a crazy hobo in the taxi with the couple, but Jesse thought it was a baby. Huge difference! (especially considering that the wedding was not until after that tableaux—uh-oh!). I know that even if we do not try,
people will make some kind of meaning from a piece. But don’t we want to direct that meaning toward a target? How do we want to think of meaning-making? As a fixed beam of light that shines the message clearly and unquestioningly? Do we want to be a candle? Do we want to be a flashlight? All of those images mean something and could be a metaphor for conveying meaning or “shining light.”

I met with Lydia Jacobs today, a member of Ayts Chayim. She recently toured with Jews for Jesus’ Wailing Wall project, which gives presentations to churches, messianic synagogues, and witness on the street. Their presentations involved drama and music as a way of teaching Gentile Christians about Jewish believers and supporting Messianic believers. Their troupe did not do dramas on the street, although some other troupes did this. They had four main “skits” they would perform—a spoof on Fiddler on the Roof’s “Tradition,” about a family where one of the members was a Jewish believer and the others were not. Their excuse for why they did not believe in Yeshua was “Tradition.” Another scene—which I have one version of given to me by Stan Meyer, was the “Olive Branch” about the relationship between Jews and Christians. Another was “Saved, Shmaved, Who Wants to Be Saved?” which was one of the more serious scenes. And the last was “How Not to Witness,” about a Gentile boy talking to a Jewish girl in a college cafeteria—which was apparently controversial among some southern churches. Some of the scenes were written in the seventies and need to be updated, they were written by former troupe members. Lydia’s troupe did write one scene through the course of their mission. I also asked her a little about witnessing to people on the street—in their training they are told to get the person’s attention quickly and if they are obviously not interested, try to disengage because you don’t want to be there with the person all day. Actually, we got to talking about the “Behold Your God” campaign, which was very controversial, especially in the cities with large Jewish populations. Lydia’s parents went to a reform temple with a family member where the rabbi warned the congregation about this campaign, saying “Don’t go to this” and proceeded to tell them the exact dates, times, and locations of the campaign events. So actually this rabbi gave Jews for Jesus some of the best marketing they could ask for. We talked about how natural human nature becomes curious when there’s controversy involved—we want to see what it’s all about, some people like to be stirred up. So we joked—half-seriously—that if we want to reach out to Jewish people with a flyer for the play that says “Don’t come to this!” I think we have to be careful and think it through, but there could be some truth in this when we go to advertise. We could stir up talk in the Jewish community by creating controversy. I’m ready to take the Purim story and turn it upside down. I want to bring out the serious message behind the typically festive presentation and say “Why do we hate each other?” I think placing the story in the different time period, such as the Holocaust, could do that. I don’t know if it will work for this piece, but I’ve always envisioned this with God on the sidelines the whole time, looking on and ultimately controlling what happens. Actually, if I ever direct Children of Eden, I may never have the actor playing God leave the stage. Adam, Eve, Noah, Cain, and others only think that God has left them in the wilderness alone. The whole time God is looking on in silence, but with love. Actually, it may be really neat to transition from scene to scene with God coming on and doing something that sets up the next scene. And the same actor who plays God plays a minor part—perhaps as a palace servant, but really turns out to be God (unbeknownst to the characters, but somehow the audience gets it?). I hear that the new movie One Night with the King fleshes out the relationship between Esther and the King by exploring how Esther felt about him, which the
Scriptures do not exactly say. I’m interested in doing that too to some extent, but not just to create a great romance.

Reflection on Lesson #4

We began to read the story of Esther and had a very interesting discussion about the contents of the story. Here are the highlights of the discussion:

1) Why did Queen Vashti not come before the King? Was she a) pregnant b) afraid—with good reason—that she would be made to do lewd things before the drunken men c) busy with her own party of female friends. d) just plain sassy? In my opinion, it was probably closest to the second choice. If she was pregnant, maybe she would not have her own party for the women. Surely she knew the grave consequences of disobeying the King, and would not have done so if she was just enjoying her own party. Again, there had to be more of a reason beyond just sass for her to give up her position as Queen. The men were all drunk, had been partying for some time, and it was disgraceful to ask the Queen to appear before them. The movie One Night with the King also provoked the question of why did the King request Vashti in the first place? Did he know she would not come, yet called her to show his counselors and subjects a point? Was there a political move involved?

2) The Unalterable Ruling—which returns later in the decree against the Jews. Once the King makes a decree, law, or edict, it is irrevocable.

3) “Obtained favor”—Esther obtained favor from Hegai and the King, a sign of God’s providence and presence in the story. He put her in the place where He wanted for future use.

4) Did the King love Esther or was he just attracted to her? Was she just beautiful or was it something in her character that attracted? How did Esther feel about the King?

5) The character of Haman. To harm Mordechai was not enough for Haman, he had to strike at his whole people. How far back did his hate go? He is one of only a few Agagites around because the rest of the race was wiped out by King Saul. We mentioned the parallel with Hitler. What were Haman’s friends like? Were they royal courtiers like him? Probably not because the darkness of Haman’s nature probably attracted criminals, low-lifes, miscreants.

6) Symbolism of extending the golden scepter. One Night with the King did a great job with this scene, although maybe a little over-dramatized. It was raining and Esther had called for a litter to escort her to the King un-summoned. Hegai stopped it because he was protecting Esther, so she ran in the rain to the King’s court where many people were present, including Mordechai. She enters the court soaked, throws the doors back, and walks down the hall toward the king. Haman and others are shouting that its against protocol, she has not been summoned, etc. The guard literally has his sword drawn and is about to strike when the King physically blocks the blow and extends the golden scepter with a LION’S head on the end. Also, the film suggests that the reason the King had not summoned her for so long was that he suspected she was unfaithful.

7) “Such a time as this”—what does that mean? Also, Mordechai basically says that if Esther does not appeal to the King, God will raise up another deliverer. I’ve read that
perhaps Mordechai and Esther were secular Jews, but those verses make me seriously doubt that. Mordechai had faith that God would deliver their people.

8) Why did Esther invite the King to two banquets before making her request? The intimacy of a meal, preparing his heart, wooing him with food. Was it in her plan or did she improvise because she was afraid to make the request in front of the King’s court? The latter is how the movie presented it, but I like to think that it was in her plan all along.

This is such a rich story, and it’s exciting that we get to fill in the gaps of the story and explore these interesting characters. We left off at the beginning of chapter six and will pick up there next week. My goal is to finish the whole story, brainstorm ideas, and start to work them on our feet next week.

**Reflection on Lesson #5**

Jesse had a twenty minute lecture to the youth about respecting me because the last rehearsal there was a lot of disrespect, especially in the body language of the participants. I think this time it made me less tolerable of complaining, lack of focus, and disobedience. I have to set clear boundaries for the participants so that everyone can enjoy the process. I also have to push for participants to stay engaged in an activity no matter what. Michael Rohd encourages this in his book.

We continued reading the Book of Esther aloud and discussing after each chapter. We make some discoveries about the last part of the story, which is not usually included in traditional renditions of the Purim story. The Jews kill 75,000 Persians who apparently tried to harm them first. We discussed whether that was justified and there were mixed opinions. We also talked about the line that “the fear of the Jews” went around the country and many believed in the God of Israel.

We pieced the main points of the story together from the end up to the beginning. This is a challenging but valuable exercise because it forces one to think of the motivation behind a given event.

The themes the group decided the story conveyed were: God’s providence and deliverance, “survival-of-the-holiest,” the eternal presence of an enemy/adversary, courage, obedience vs. lack thereof, “for such a time as this,” and the symbolism of the golden scepter. The group is also interested in exploring and displaying the history of Haman’s people and its significance in Esther’s story.

The question is where to go next. We need to get up on our feet and start devising. The youth already have ideas about where they want to go, although I can tell that I will have to work to get them to consider the richer points of the story that we discussed. It sounds like they want to modernize the story. Now I don’t know the best way to devise—my gut says on their feet and we keep the parts that work. The other option is to sit down and plan out the whole story.
The other component is the production aspect. We need to decide the jobs outside of performing and delegate them.

Now is when it gets really interesting!

Reflection on Lesson #6

Wow. Yesterday was a huge turning point in the project and the way I view faith-based theatre. Before the youth group started, Jesse and Janneth talked to me. They were concerned that the process of the play was not what they expected and that many of the youth were confused and even ready to drop out (ouch). They said it felt more like a theatre class than a rehearsal for a play.

I realized that perhaps myself, the group, and the congregation are not ready for this kind of approach to play-making. I am not Michael Rohd, and I’m still learning how to be comfortable in the way he facilitates the exploration of a subject. Also, perhaps my strict adherence to one technique hindered the creative ability of the group rather than helped it. They were expecting one thing and I was giving another without clearly explaining what was going on (although I thought I was being clear at the time) and this caused them to disengage. Once again, a problem I sometimes have in my teaching is creating buy-in. That’s so important because if a group is not on board with you, they’re not going to follow you into uncharted territory (which Michael Rohd is). I know that the group likes me as a person now and knows me much better than they did before, but I missed the element of buy-in. I was so caught up in getting them to take the work seriously, that I missed that perhaps it was not working for them. And this group is not un-creative. They have done plays before—but I guess I wrote that off as “fluff.” I wanted to take them to a deeper place both spiritually and theatrically. And I have faith that that can still happen—I just need to be flexible to what they’re giving me.

Janneth said something very powerful. When you go in with a plan, stick to the plan no matter what, sometimes you block the way for God to move. But when you take from what the young people are giving you and work with it, that’s where God can move and the group can come up with something so much more powerful.

I also believe I was focusing too much on spiritually transforming these kids through the process. That’s not my job—that’s God’s. Also, I didn’t trust that just by being involved with this play, they will be spiritually transformed, I don’t have to beat them over the head with it. Jesse and Janneth made me realize that if I give the kids something to sink their teeth into and they work on it together, the transformation will be a natural by-product. We talked about focusing on the fact that this play will be a huge outreach. I was actually not aware that the Purim play is going to be the only event of that evening—I was thinking it would be part of a larger service. So we have a great responsibility because this event is one of a few “points of access” we get each year. Members of the congregation will invite Jewish family members and friends that would not normally come to our services and may have their own pre-conceived notions about Messianic Jews. If I can get the group to focus on the outreach aspect and really think about their audience, God will use that to mature their walk with Him.
Speaking of pre-conceived notions—I think that’s what the congregational leaders as well as the group had. They thought a certain thing about how the play would look, and I suppose I did not clearly paint the picture that this approach to theatre that I wanted to use was far different than your normal theatre process. I had good intentions—I thought Michael Rohd would be the perfect thing to more deeply explore the themes surrounding the story of Esther. And maybe it would for a workshop setting, or an experimental level. But I did not consider the greater context—the target audience, the amount of time, the interest of the group. If I had been absolutely crystal clear about what this process was going to look like and presented it as such, I may have had better luck, but right now I’m ready to use what works rather than just one technique. Also, perhaps it is better to use an approach that I am comfortable with. I can still get collaboration and feedback from the group, I just don’t have to always have at the back of my head, “What would Rohd do?”

So I scrapped the lesson I planned for yesterday. I leveled with the group—all six of them. The other six were away in different parts of the state, but now the other six will tell them what they missed. We talked about how this would be the Purim event and the opportunity that it provides for outreach to the Jewish community. I also expressed “my heart as a director” as Jesse said—which was that theatre can be used as a worship tool just as music is for ushering people into the presence of God. I know this group likes that idea because many of them are involved in the Youth worship group or the dance team. I told them I think of it as a more passive worship for the audience, but that it can still be worship if their hearts are tuned a certain way while watching. And that we can worship God through the art by doing it for His glory and with excellence. I made a promise to them—we would have a huge brainstorming session and when we meet again in two weeks, I will have a script for them to begin work on. I could see that they liked this idea—it was a concrete “fruit.” And I should have known myself—I myself prefer to work with a written script over improvisation, the latter of which I can do but is not my strength. I thought it would be too much of “me” if I wrote the script. But now I think that takes pressure off of them and they will buy in if they see that I took their ideas (“She was listening to me?”) and incorporated them into the script. Also, after I bring them a script, we can still tweak it and get feedback from the group. We had a great conversation about how each choice we make needs to consider our audience’s ages and background. We are playing to a very general audience, from small children all the way to 90-year-old Ms. Frida. Moreover, some of our Jewish guests may not be familiar with either the specific details or the entire story of Esther. How do we simply tell the story in a way that they will understand? How will that effect where we set the play, the overall tone of the piece, and other artistic considerations?

I shared with them my desire to explore the piece with a more serious approach so as to expose the high stakes and the emotions of the characters. They are amenable to that especially in light of the discussions we’ve had surrounding the piece. However, some of them were concerned that it might get boring and we would need some comic relief. I think there are great comic abilities in this group and that we should definitely take advantage of that. So we decided perhaps a serious-comic approach where there’s a bit of both. The moments that are supposed to be funny are funny and the parts that are supposed to be dramatic are dramatic. We discussed Fiddler on the Roof as a model of that—a story with a serious premise and light-hearted reactions. Laughter and levity are a release by which we cope with grave circumstances—otherwise our people would
never have survived five thousand years of persecution. That would be my purpose in using humor in the story—after all, we win!

We also discussed the possibility of using songs in the piece, either original or pre-written. One individual was violently opposed because she thought it would take something away from the piece, but others liked the idea. Jesse recommended in strongly. I agree that most people in the audience will engage more during a musical number if it’s well done. And members of the youth group are capable of playing instruments and singing.

And finally, we talked about setting. To modernize or not to modernize? After discussing the benefits of modernizing and keeping the traditional setting, we decided to compromise. We will have a modern frame that is our vehicle into the traditional story. The modern frame will be a parallel story happening at a school where a non-believing Jewish girl witness an anti-Semitic act and calls a believing friend for counsel. She counsels her by telling the story of Esther. We wanted a school setting because it’s realistic to where the young people are at in their life right now and older people in the audience will remember when they were in high school (or school at all). My problem is that it is difficult to imagine a seriously anti-Semitic act happening in a school in the United States. Not saying it doesn’t happen—I just want this to be believable to an audience. So I’m thinking of putting an end times twist on it where something catastrophic has happened and America is not the way it once was. Or maybe the person at the school is a Neo-Nazi. I just want to make sure that the frame is not cheesy, that it’s a believable situation that could really happen if the circumstances are right—because that’s how people will “buy-in” to this modern parallel.

I also suggested my idea of a servant character in the traditional story that keeps appearing, is kind of humorous, but it turns out to be the angel of the Lord watching over the situation (which would be revealed in a clever, not cheesy way). The kids immediately thought of the homeless person in Bruce Almighty that turns out to be God. Yeah, I guess it’s been done before, but that doesn’t mean it couldn’t be effective.

We really like the phrase “for such a time as this.” It means that God puts us in specific places and the reason is not always known to us at first, but that His timing is perfect. We are all alive right now for a specific reason. I think that says a lot to the youth.

We also talked about the overall theme of the story and heard each person’s view on what the story was about. I used the example of “Little Red Riding Hood” is a story about not talking to strangers. Just a word or short phrase to sum the story up. We heard many themes and I think a big one was obedience. Esther was obedient how God wanted to use her—which was to save her people.

Now I have to get busy and start writing. I have a collaborator though—Jeff Richman, who has done plays with the youth before and comically gifted in his writing.

Rehearsal #3
I’m feeling very frustrated with the group and the process right now (or lack thereof). The
blocking is moving at a painfully slow pace because of lack of focus, people not remembering the original blocking, everyone trying to play director. One person freely admitted yesterday that they had not read the whole script yet. At one point during our production meeting portion I had to flat out say that I was not getting the proper respect and felt very disappointed in the way the group was behaving. I hate to be this stern figure and I want to make the experience fun for everyone, but I’m not getting what I need from them. Instead, it’s like they don’t know how to talk one at a time or unite on any one subject. At today’s rehearsal, I must reiterate that we respect each other by speaking one at a time! Also, when we are rehearsing a scene that someone is not in, it must be silent. If you have an idea, calmly raise your hand and suggest it. As the director, I have the right to use it or not at my discretion. And as far as not knowing the script by now—after having it over a month—there is no excuse. How can you learn your lines if you don’t read them?

We did have some very nice moments in rehearsal though. There was a line that the Principal says at the end of scene 2: “Afraid, of course” and I wanted him to say it in such a way that the subtext was “They deserved it” speaking of the Jews. The actor tried it that way and gave a very good reading of the line. It had some depth to it. Then, scene 3 is supposed to be Quinn and Hadassah on the phone talking about what happened at school. The girls felt it would be more effective if they were in the same room and could connect—we tried it that way and it worked so much better. But I could sense that some of the lines were hard for them to connect with, and I myself was looking at the text saying “Did I really write that? It hardly sounds like something that would come out of a teenager’s mouth, whether they were believers or not.” So I had the girls improvise the scene, with the gist of the scene the same. It was great because they said the same thing in more believable language and made it their own. The script is by no means perfect, so any way we can make it better or more believable is a plus.

In my experience with faith-based theatre, it is very difficult to get people committed! The group members think it’s ok to tell me the day before that they will not be at the next rehearsal. That’s one of my pet peeves. I experienced that with the last Purim play I directed, and that is why this year I wrote a contract for the youth and their parents to sign, which specifically committed them to all rehearsals. If they are not able to attend, they are supposed to communicate that to me with enough notice. However, I only received four contracts back and did not follow up with the other parents—so it is partially my fault that I did not pursue that. On the other hand, it’s just common courtesy in my mind to say when you are not going to be there.

Today, I need to express these things to the group. God help me to do it in a loving way! It’s ultimately not because of me—they should be present at rehearsals, on time, prepared with their lines, and respectful out of their love and respect for God. They honor Him through even the littlest thing that is done for His Name’s sake. They need to know that God takes notice of that and He’s pleased.

I keep coming back to this as a worship project—which includes in a major way our process. How do we expect to have a worshipful product if the journey to get there is missing the element of worship? But then again, no process is perfect so I should not fool myself that everyone is always going to have the right attitude or work in perfect unity together. But I think of our
process with the Ladies Choir this past year. Yes, we had our trouble spots with the loss of Devorah, getting used to Barbara’s leadership, dealing with multiple opinions. However, somehow we all united together and God blessed it. So here are a few ways that we can worship Him through our process:
1) Unite through our common desire to worship, serve, honor, and glorify the Lord
2) Commit to doing our best at all times
3) Creativity comes from God, so listen for His voice giving you ideas
4) Pay attention to the horizontal relationships—we can please God through honoring others before ourselves
5) Submit to those in authority over you and respect their authority.

As a leader of the group, I need to be careful to follow all of these myself. Perhaps I am not getting the above result because I am not setting a good enough example. I need to listen more, I need to do my best at all times.
March 2, 2007

Jennifer Pedraza
530 NE 47th Street
Apt. 210
Boca Raton, FL 33431

Dear Ms. Pedraza:

With reference to your protocol #07-4182 entitled, “What is theatre's place as a worship tool in a Messianic Jewish Synagogue?” I am enclosing for your records the approved, expedited document of the UCF IRB Form you had submitted to our office. **This study was approved on 3/2/2007. The expiration date for this study will be 3/1/2008.**

Should there be a need to extend this study, a Continuing Review form must be submitted to the IRB Office for review by the Chairman or full IRB at least one month prior to the expiration date. This is the responsibility of the investigator.

Please be advised that this approval is given for one year. Should there be any addendums or administrative changes to the already approved protocol, they must also be submitted to the Board through use of the Addendum/Modification Request form.

Changes should not be initiated until written IRB approval is received. Adverse events should be reported to the IRB as they occur.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me at 407-823-2901.

Please accept our best wishes for the success of your endeavors.

Cordially,

Joanne Muratori
(FWA00000551 Exp. 5/13/07, IRB00001138)

Copies: IRB File
Megan Alritz, Ph.D.

JM:jm
Ayts Chayim: Hebrew for “tree of life.”

Bar/Bat Mitzvah: Literally “Son/Daughter of the Commandment.” A rite of passage that marks a person’s entry into adulthood.

Body of Messiah: Refers to the entire “body” of believers in Yeshua the Messiah, whether Jewish or Gentile.


B’rit Milah: Circumcision.

Commedia dell’arte: An Italian form of theatre; improvisational plays that arose out of a stock of characters and situations. The result was broad-based, slapstick comedy.

Haftarah: A reading from the Prophets section of the Hebrew Bible.

Hannukkah: The Jewish Festival of Lights that celebrates the rededication of the Second Temple after it was reclaimed from the Greeks in the second century before the Common Era.

Hebrew Scriptures (T’Nach): The books of Torah (Law), Nevi’im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings) also commonly referred to as the Old Testament.

Lazzi: a bit of well-rehearsed comic action used in Commedia dell'arte.

Legalism: Centering one’s heart on pursuing a set of rules and regulations over pursuing the heart of God, which is mercy, grace, forgiveness, freedom, and love.

Messiah: Literally, God’s “anointed” one. There were predictions about the character and life of the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures, which Messianic Jews believe Yeshua fulfilled or will fulfill in the Second Coming of Messiah.

Messianic Judaism: rooted in the belief that Yeshua (Jesus’ Hebrew name) is the Messiah and that He is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Miriam: “Mary” in Hebrew.

Purim Play (also referred to as “Purim Schpiel”): a presentation of the story of Esther from the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew word “Purim” literally means “lots,” which the antagonist Haman used to determine the date he plotted to kill all the Jews.
Religious: a. pertaining to practices or beliefs of a religion.
   b. this word can have a negative connotation among believers when it pertains to an outward show of religious acts carried out for the purpose of impressing either God or man. Trying to impress God with religious acts as a way of gaining salvation is futile in believers’ eyes because there is nothing a person can do to gain salvation. Trying to impress people with religious acts is hypocritical because God wants our heart to match our outward deeds.

Religious Setting: I use this term to refer to a generic sacred context, nonspecific to any particular faith.

Religious Theatre: I use this term to refer to a generic genre of theatre that pertains to either theatre for religious purposes or theatre with religious topics. For example, this term could describe either a Christmas passion play or Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* because both have religious influences and topics.

*Ruach HaKodesh*: Hebrew for “Holy Spirit.”

*Shabbat*: Hebrew for “Sabbath.” Shabbat is observed from sundown Friday evening to sundown Saturday evening.

*Torah*: In Hebrew, “law” or “teaching.” The first five books of the Bible, including Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The World: Scripturally, the “world” is seen as one of the major forces of evil. Since the Fall of Adam and Eve, the world has been corrupted from its original state of perfection. The “world” can additionally refer to contemporary trends in culture and society that point to the fallen world system that directly opposes God’s truth.

*Yarmulke*: A head covering worn by Jewish men to symbolize God’s covering.

*Yeshua*: Jesus’ Hebrew name, which Messianic Jews prefer to use in speaking of Jesus.
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