



imago

spring 2001 NEWSLETTER volume three issue one

In recent days

I have been giving some thought to the question of how the imagination works. Though nowhere near a conclusion, on this matter I have come to see that the imagination serves to help us to get a better grasp on reality. This of course is contrary to popular

opinion, which commonly sees the imagination as our best resource for fantasy and illusion. I don't doubt that the latter is also a way in which imagination can be employed, but it is not its chief role. Imagination takes us further than ordinary perception and enables us to move beyond a simple copy of things to a deeper more wholistic grasp of the world. Imagination can bring us in touch with the real, enabling us to discover something of the richness of its texture, the breadth of its meaning and how things connect in a larger context.

When one thinks of imagination in this way it is not a very large step to see the link between imagination and faith. For faith, too, is meant to aid us in coming to a deeper and more coherent sense of reality. And so I am inclined to say that faith requires imagination.

It has been claimed by some, that we have lost our imagination. But it would seem that it is not loss that we suffer, but rather a serious pummeling by an army of resources in the service of a consumer culture. The contemporary imagination is in need of a fresh vision that will be food for the hungry spirit. If, as Hebrew scripture scholar, Walter Bruggeman suggests, we are exiles in a foreign land, then we need to be careful not to succumb to the current consensus about what is real and what is not. The exercise of faithfulness will instead offer an alternative reading of reality that is born of an active and engaged imagination shaped by the biblical story.



The initiatives of **imago** are designed to support and encourage just such exercises of faithfulness, particularly as expressed by those who are artists. A number of new projects have been proposed to come under the **imago** umbrella and are currently under consideration. *Beyond* magazine, familiar to many in western Canada, centred in Calgary under the leadership of Karen Neudorf, has recently been accepted as an **imago** project.

Rob Des Cotes of Vancouver, who is a pastor and plays jazz flute, was in touch toward the

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end of last year to tell me of an upcoming visit to the Toronto area. That visit was the catalyst for three jazz events put on by **imago** at the end of January, one of which was a "jazz vespers" service at Little Trinity Anglican Church. Rob performed in all three occasions. The hope is that we will be able to provide more opportunities of this sort for artists.

At the end of March, British screenwriter Murray Watts will be in Toronto and Vancouver for a brief visit. Murray is a keen and articulate proponent of the arts. He has had wide experience in both the dramatic and film arts. An abridged version of a lecture Murray gave, appears in this issue of the newsletter.

Imago is once again pleased to partner with the Institute for Christian Studies for the annual "Art Talks", this year featuring Jeremy Begbie from Cambridge England. Jeremy will be in Toronto, May 11 & 12 to give a public lecture and participate in a

Symposium discussing his recent book *Theology Music and Time*. (Cambridge University Press) Details of these events can be found in this newsletter.

IMAGOtalk is now underway. This Internet discussion group is intended to be a forum for discussion of issues related to faith and the arts. If you wish to join, email: imagotalk-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

With this issue of the newsletter we have taken on a new look. Many thanks to Stephen Groff who helped us launch the newsletter nearly two years ago. We welcome Warren MacDonald of macDonald design who has created our new look and will be doing our design work in the days ahead.

We are grateful for your interest in **imago** and encourage you to inform others who you may wish to receive this newsletter and participate in **imago** events. I hope to see many of you at the events planned for March and May.

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An Evening with British Screenwriter Murray Watts –

Wednesday March 28, 7:30 p.m., Wycliffe College, Sheraton Hall, 5 Hoskin Ave. (between Queens Park and St. George south of Bloor) A lecture titled: Pandora's Box: Is There Hope for our Culture? followed by a short film "Small Miracles" on the making of *The Miracle Maker*.

A showing of the feature length film *The Miracle Maker* –

Thursday March 29, 7:30 p.m., Stone Church, 45 Davenport Rd. (north of Bloor between Yonge and Bay) A discussion will follow with the screenwriter Murray Watts.

Murray Watts was a founding member of both Upstream Theatre and Riding Lights Theatre Company of which he is co-director. He is an acclaimed playwright and screenwriter and his film *The Miracle Maker*, has been seen by millions across Europe and America. His novel based on the screenplay of the film has now been published. This was written at Freswick Castle in Scotland, home of The Wayfarer Trust, that he has established to offer support and encouragement for all, but especially for those working in the arts.

Christ on Stage and Screen

by Murray Watts.

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote a play about a Russian worker who was forcibly confined in a psychiatric hospital so his dangerously anti-social behaviors could be treated. This play was called *Cat-walk* and its hero's "sickness" was that he believed in Christ and, far worse, refused to keep quiet about his beliefs.

Almost exactly twenty years later, I was in Moscow meeting Russian animators to discuss the making of the feature film on the life of Christ, *The Miracle Maker*.

I could have never imagined such an extraordinary turn of events. I was deeply moved and said so, in a brief address to artists and model makers who were animating my screenplay. At the end of my talk, one of the animators questioned me in Russian. The interpreter turned to me, deeply embarrassed. "I really should not translate this question because it is far too personal. One really should not ask questions like this." "Try me," I said. She took a deep breath. "The question is ... are you a believer?"

There was a short pause. I looked at my British colleagues, knowing I had not discussed my personal beliefs with some of them at all, then at the room full of Russians smiling politely in anticipation. I said, "Yes, I am a believer, and I'm quite prepared to talk to anyone about this. But there is something else I want to say – which might alarm some Christians. I honestly

feel that this film project is a great deal better because I am working with agnostics, people struggling with doubt, atheists, people who are drawn to beliefs other than my own.

"It is important that I am a Christian, but in a very deep way incidental to the success of this film artistically. I am employed because I've written screenplays for film and television, I've worked in animation, and it is known that I have some knowledge of the Bible, but not because I am a believer. I'll go further and say that if it were all Christians attempting this life of Christ, it would almost certainly be an artistic disaster."

Let me first of all add here, for the sake of those experiencing a sharp intake of breath, that there is a long and deeply painful background for me of Big Christian Projects in film and television that have failed catastrophically. They collapsed through a deadly combination of pious talk, overblown expectations and serious financial mismanagement, or suffering from a kind of super-spirituality and a lack of professionalism, rather than anything sinister or hypocritical.

But, underlying my reply to the Russians, was not just a reflection on these dangers, but the even more serious consideration of truthfulness and quality in our work in film, video and the theatre.

I think that there are very searching questions for us to ask about why the best work – even directly dramatising the life of Christ – has not come from religious sources (Pasolini's film is the most outstanding example, and Dennis Potter's original and disturbing play *Son of Man*, is another). And there is, I think, a deeply disconcerting question mark over the claim of many Christians to be interested in the truth, whether psychological or spiritual.

I would argue that the history in particular of the theatre, over the last century, has been more devastating in its honesty and paradoxically closer to Christ in spite of the beliefs of the writers – some of whom have passionately hated what we might call institutional Christianity.

I think my Russian interpreter's story illustrates something very important that is happening today, and it also illuminates a crisis that is now occurring in the performing arts as well as in the churches.

Dramatising, in *Cat-walk*, the diary of the Russian factory worker was an extraordinary experience: not only because of the insight it gave me into the faith of a Russian Orthodox Christian, but because it illuminated a connection between Christianity and the theatre which came to be of profound importance to me. The purest expression of the Christian faith is essentially dissident. The nearer it comes to

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being an "establishment" religion, the further it is from Christ and the fainter his voice becomes, a voice which calls his followers into inevitable conflict with the status quo.

Theatre, at its most powerful, often has the same extremely disturbing function. It is a dissident art-form, prophetic in the sense of interpreting the present from a position of alienation and anger. It is also, in the work of many great dramatists from O'Casey to Miller to Tennessee Williams, an expression of deep love and sympathy for humanity in all its lostness. The figure of Christ, in my view, has trod the boards of many theatres and has wandered, unseen, through dramas of lost hopes, bitterness, longing, laughter absurdity and passion.

Christ may be – whisper it softly – found more often in some theatres than in certain churches.

It may be that when we are seeking to discover the presence of Christ, or to hear his voice we are looking in entirely the wrong places.

The painter Emil Nolde said "Love is God, so is anger. But the Devil is a flatterer." We may wish to invert that first phrase and say, with St. John, "God is love", but the point about diabolical flattery is the real issue here. The wrong place to look for Christ is

where people prefer comfortable lies about themselves to the truth, however difficult, because according to the gospels “the truth will set you free”. Where there is no truth, there is no freedom.

There is a terrible sickness in the present age that is the result of spiritual malnourishment, a lying to ourselves. At the heart of our self-flattery is the cherished conviction that we are not accountable for our own actions.

If anything (and this is our favourite, our most honey-tongued whispering to our soul) we are the true victim. Whatever damage we have caused to others, well... we were damaged in the first place. Look at our lives! Look what has happened to us! Look how, with all the best will in the world, we could not have avoided these regrettable mistakes. Pity us, even though we destroy our relationships and allow our societies to decline and silently conspire in the destruction of our planet. Pity us, because we are victims.

So who is to blame? Who is accountable? The reason I have emphasized this question, and the virus of irresponsibility which has infected our world, is because I think that this is one of those places where Christ hangs bleeding on his cross, alone and

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ignored, but the long shadow of that cross falls across theatres and touches the work of the finest dramatists.

The same cannot be said for many churches, where doors are closed to Christ, because all they are concerned with is an exclusive comfort for believers, the flattery of a “spiritual outpouring” exciting the emotions and massaging the soul. The poor soul, victimised by the world, not responsible for others, pampered souls in an orgy of



The Institute for Christian Studies in partnership with Imago is pleased to present the Art Talks! Series

The Jazz of Life

The Wonder of Music
in Theological Perspective

Free Lecture: May 11, 2001
Multi-media performance lecture by Jeremy Begbie,
Associate Principal, Ridley Hall, Cambridge, UK,
Friday, 7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m., St. James Cathedral,
85 Church Street, Toronto. Reception to follow

Symposium: May 12, 2001
Saturday, 9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m., Trinity College,
Combination Room, 6 Hoskins Avenue, Toronto.
For information contact Jerry Bell at 416-978-4127 ext. 223, toll-free 1-888-838-5247
Email: jbell@icorec.ca

self-forgiveness, who live a lie and think that freedom is raising hands in the air and singing reassuring songs. Christ sits outside and weeps with the excluded.

Before “Outraged of Spring Harvest” writes to me, let me say that I am not talking about styles of worship’ but about the meaning of our worship and the purpose of our lives. We are to live for others, and that means going far beyond joyful thoughts of our own salvation or even inspiring hymns about the greatness of God.

The greatest plays and films are often not about comfort for the soul; they are about people in situations of conflict, people living on an emotional cliff-edge, individuals struggling to survive against overwhelming odds. People who sit weeping on the doorstep outside the comfort zone; those who have no access to the collective reassurance of religious groups, political movements or happy marriages and stable families.

These reach out to us because of the extreme vulnerability of the protagonists or their loneliness or their subversive humour.

The best of plays and films tell us how the passion of Christ is not a thing of the past. They tell us how we are all characters gathered around the cross in the year 2000. We are all to blame. And it is this point of responsibility, of accountability, this disturbing arena where no one is innocent – without which there can be no hope of any redemption, psychological, religious,

social or political – that is fundamental to great theatre and is utterly inimical to contemporary politics and to much religious belief.

Christians, as well as politicians, nationalists, religious and political fundamentalists of all persuasions, frequently project evil into the world, invent bogeymen, castigate “unbelievers” “outsiders” political rivals, the Devil, the media. There is always an innocent and an injured party and it is themselves.

Of course, I am not saying that all the great plays are concerned with this kind of accountability, nor that this is the only theme where we can find the figure of Christ walking towards us, unexpectedly, through the storm of our mental chaos. There is the risen Christ too, to be found in laughter and celebration, in farce and comedy, in the midst of a self-forgetting joy that is extremely unusual in churches. True laughter liberates us from ourselves, even if for a fleeting moment, a glorious moment of truth. But I have chosen to emphasize this element of accountability because I think it has been of critical spiritual importance in our times and is now dangerously under threat.

This article was first given as a lecture at ICOREC and was subsequently published in Autumn 2000 issue of TransMission, the newsletter for The British and Foreign Bible Society. It is reprinted here in shortened form with the permission of the author.

Upcoming Events

Juno Winner Deborah Klassen

will be in concert at Unionville Alliance Church on **Saturday, March 24, 2001** at 7:30 p.m. Deborah Klassen is well known throughout Canada and the U.S., Sweden and the U.K. for her passion, truth and sincerity in singing God's music. She is the recipient of the 2000 Juno Award for best Gospel Album. Deborah will be in concert at UAC with The Great Wooden Trio, who will offer up a unique collection of stories and

ballads together with lyrical acoustic sounds and rhythms. The evening will also include a specially assembled, combined children's choir.

The Jewels for Jesus Adoption Agency and Mission Inc. will be hosting this event and proceeds from the evening will benefit Jewels for Jesus. Tickets are available in advance or at the door for \$20.00 each. Please, come and experience this unique and special performance for a very special cause. This is one you'll not want to miss!

For advance tickets and additional information, please call: Jonathan & Anne Ison: 905-201-9291 (Markham); Jewels for Jesus Adoption Agency: 905-821-6320 (Miss.)

Film Review

The Miracle Maker: The Story of Jesus

Screenplay by Murray Watts. Directed by Stanislaw Sokolov & Derek Hayes. With the voices of Ralph Fiennes as Jesus; William Hurt as Jairus.

Reviewed by Ben Volman

The Miracle Maker is a luminous, engaging vision of the gospel narrative that's remarkably satisfying both for adults and children. Murray Watts has produced a feature length movie that captures the story of Jesus with striking originality.

We first meet the carpenter from Nazareth through the eyes of Tamar, the young daughter of the ruler of a Galilean synagogue. A lingering, incurable disease doesn't stop her from seeing the world through curious eyes. After an intriguing prelude, we watch with Tamar and her family as Jesus emerges into new roles of healer, visionary and teacher. In contrast, Jairus (Tamar's father) struggles to resist the conflicting demands of politics and religion. He must decide if he will let this strange rabbi, who shatters all the old boundaries of faith, heal his daughter.

Drawn largely from the Gospel of Luke, Murray Watts' script delights in communicating the story with fresh insight. As Jesus' ministry emerges out of a lifelong call, we see that his conflicts with the authorities are bound up with a commitment to spiritually nurturing the needs of

common people. As the story becomes darker, Jesus' message is clearly revolutionary and ultimately at odds with those who oppose him.

The excellence of the production values is particularly satisfying. The brilliant use of 3D animation (an advanced hybrid of claymation) lends the players a genuinely warm character. The mix of media styles is also inventive. At times the story is highlighted in animated water colours. The parables, for example, are depicted in a simplified format to highlight their innocence and immediacy.

Given that we're looking at animated figures, Jesus, Mary and the best-known disciples, including Peter, Andrew, Thomas and even Judas, are all portrayed with conviction. The transformation of Mary Magdalene is well drawn, from her dramatic healing to the meeting with Jesus in the garden tomb. Voice-over accents reflect the film's British origins—Ralph Fiennes suggests the common roots of Jesus and Miranda Richardson is a complex, moving Magdalene. As for Tamar, the girl is a delight on screen from the first moment we meet her.

I have a sense that something quite remarkable came together in making this film. And seeing it a second time only enhanced that impressions. Don't miss *The Miracle Maker*, it's an inspiration.

Eli: A Mystery Play of the Sufferings of Israel

This play was written by the Jewish poet Nelly Sachs (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966) while in exile in Stockholm three years after her escape from Berlin in 1940. The play is informed by Nelly Sach's lifelong love of dance, here translated into the context of a mystic folk ritual. The very rhythms of her verse summon up the Hasidic world, full of motion and music, like the work of Chagall. With a cast of 20+ and a live klezmer band, this show runs from **March 27–31** at Redeemer College, Ancaster. Tickets are \$12.00 (students and seniors \$10.00). Call 905-648-2131.

"Of Beggars and Kings"

Wycliffe College Student Council and CRC Campus Ministries, U of T present, **Dan Steven in Concert, Friday, April 6** at 8.00PM, Sheraton Hall, Wycliffe College, Tickets at the door: \$10.00

"Dan Steven's debut CD, *Beggars and Kings*, is an immediately arresting, captivating and inviting piece of work. This album is a brightly burning torch from a remarkable young singer/songwriter supported by a wonderfully talented cast of musicians and a seasoned producer. Keep your ears open for Dan Steven and don't miss an opportunity to hear him live." – Brian J. Walsh, *Christian Reformed Campus Minister to the University of Toronto*

"The Diaries of Adam and Eve"

"Adam and Eve" is poignant, witty, and wise. Author Mark Twain explores the complexity of human relationships in his uniquely perceptive manner. Nick and Joy Hunter are internationally acclaimed for their dramatic readings & performances and have a ministry of drama to prison inmates.

April 19, 20 and 21, at 8 pm. in historic Cody Hall, St. Paul's Church, 227 Bloor Street East, close to Yonge/Bloor and Sherbourne subway. Ample parking nearby. Coffee and desserts will be served after each performance. Tickets are \$10 in advance (\$20 at the door). To order tickets, please call 416-367-9350 or email joyandnick@sprint.ca