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Article

# Theodramatic Themes and Showtime in Nassim Soleimanpour's *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*

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**Abstract:** This essay engages the experimental playwright Nassim Soleimanpour's *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* alongside the theological dramatic theory of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Every Soleimanpour play can only happen once. Actors receive the script as they begin the show; any given actor must perform Soleimanpour's drama as a cold reading unique in history. I propose "Showtime" to theorize this theatrical temporality, exemplified by *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* and shared by von Balthasar's theology, on analogy to stage space. This article further examines the play's themes of identity, self-sacrifice, free obedience, and writing about time through a "theodramatic structural analysis" keyed to von Balthasar. Soleimanpour expands Balthasarian theodramatics in unexpected and unintended directions. So too did the performance of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* I attended in 2016 that featured Wayne Brady as the actor. This essay concludes with analysis of that performance and how it places this essay's theodramatic structural analysis into contexts of race and the history of anti-Black racism in the United States.

**Keywords:** Balthasar; improvisation; time; death; theatrical hermeneutics

## 1. Introduction

I performed as audience in a strange play one night in 2016, one where the actor held the script and we discovered its meaning together for the first time. *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* told its story about time, obedience, and death (Soleimanpour 2017). I witnessed what I took to be a religious drama, one where the faithful might feel compelled to kneel in deference to the real presence of God. Others, perhaps, saw a raucous improvised comedy on the edge between a piece of theatrical drama and performance art. I wonder whether Nassim Soleimanpour ever thinks about his play as a work of dramatic Christian theology? Playwright Nassim Soleimanpour both is and is not the actor's voice in *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*, on analogy to how God the Father both is and is not God the Son. Like all analogies, an appeal to trinitarian theology to explain an experimental play falls short. Soleimanpour's rabbits are not Easter bunnies.

My aim, then, is not to explain but to think about Soleimanpour's play in the company of another sort of dramatic theologian, the Swiss-Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar and his five-volume *Theo-Drama* (Balthasar 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1998). *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* exemplifies what von Balthasar imagines to be drama's contribution to a Christian philosophical theology. This essay attempts a "theodramatic structural analysis" of Soleimanpour's play.

For von Balthasar, theatrical drama aids investigation into the frameworks that undergird theological reasoning according to Christian religious symbols in response to God's self-revelation by participants in that real and ongoing drama. Drama foregrounds freedom, action, and presence, and these are also key theological themes for interpreting God's relationship to humans and the created world. But theatre also displays how philosophical theology might be presented to and shared by a mixed and public audience. If drama promises a structure (in Balthasarian terms, a "form") for seeing theology at play, then *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* demonstrates the importance of theatrical drama

for thinking about sacrifice, obedience, and the risks of a dramatic ending already written to be sent forward beyond time. Such themes reflect “dramatic resources for theology” even without the use of overt religious symbols, reportage of religious experience, or revealed knowledge derived from faith. Sacrifice, obedience, and writing about and across time are “theodramatic” categories—deploying von Balthasar’s term for theological dramatic theory—that help clarify the stakes of Soleimanpour’s still ongoing theatrical experiment.

But what could possibly be meant by my phrase “dramatic ending already written to be sent forward beyond time”? How does convoluted dramatic temporality unfold theological themes of sacrifice and obedience? For those interested in von Balthasar’s theodramatic analogy for Christian theology, Soleimanpour would expand a theologian’s theatrical canon to include more contemporary, non-naturalistic, non-European, and non-Christian drama.<sup>1</sup> Such a reading extends Jennifer Newsome Martin’s distillation of von Balthasar’s “principle of generosity toward the often ambiguous cultural contribution of the world, as Balthasar sanctions the mediatory or revelatory capacity of cultural products: music, art, drama, prose literature, and poetry, even those not explicitly or exceptionally Christian” (Martin 2015, p. 201). Particularly, *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*’s metatheatrical ruminations on the drama of history dovetail nicely with von Balthasar’s own sense of the world’s Christian salvation drama (Quash 2005). But this essay intends more than only a Balthasarian reading of an experimental play. Instead, it also looks to Soleimanpour’s play as a model for highlighting the latent religious dimensions of theatrical hermeneutics, particularly in regards to temporality and texts and performing communities.<sup>2</sup>

Any given performance of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* self-consciously underscores its uniqueness in history. Soleimanpour’s script has been played hundreds of times, but each and every performance demands a new actor to discover the drama for the first time alongside the audience. The performance thus underscores a singular, unrepeatable happening in the lives of its players (actor and audience) as well as the performance history of the world.<sup>3</sup> While the same “eph-hapax” quality might be said theoretically about every theatrical performance, the theatrical conceit of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* depends on theatrical drama’s formally repeatable historical singularity (Balthasar 1988, p. 21).<sup>4</sup> In other words, any given actor can only play *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*’s script once, but that script can be and has been reused time and again by new and different actors. After generally tracing some of

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<sup>1</sup> There is an undeniable Eurocentrism to von Balthasar’s dramatic theory as a “product of the Western world . . . although originally [the world-stage concept] arises from an awareness of the world which is at least as Asiatic as it is European. Quite apart from the Greeks, countless other peoples have been acquainted with the cultic and mythic drama: Egypt, Babylon, China, Indonesia, and Japan with its Noh plays that survive to this day”. (Balthasar 1988, p. 135). But von Balthasar contends that the exclusion of other religions and cultures reflects the finitude of a single reader enmeshed in a particular culture. He puts it explicitly in the “Foreword” to the first volume of the entire trilogy of which *Theo-Drama* is the middle part: “But the author’s education has not allowed for such an expansion, and a superficial presentation of such material would have been dilettantism. May those qualified come to complete the present fragment” (Balthasar 1982, p. 11). The finite human can only interpret God from the standpoint of human finitude, and this includes social location and education as well as choices regarding the sorts of arts and cultures a theologian consumes.

<sup>2</sup> Many Christian theologians have identified the productive resonance between theological interpretation and dramatic interpretation. (See, among many, Vanhoozer 2005, 2014; Vander Lugt and Hart 2015) For von Balthasar, “All theology is an interpretation of divine revelation. Thus, in its totality, it can only be hermeneutics” (Balthasar 1990, p. 91).

<sup>3</sup> On the uniqueness of historical events in theatre history, see (Balthasar 1988, p. 301).

<sup>4</sup> Repeatable historical singularity shows why von Balthasar’s believes drama, an event that unfolds in time characterized by free action, must become a preferred mode of Christian theological interpretation. All the more so if there is “a biblical answer to the question” of human existence that might be “intelligible to human beings”. The “human dramatic question” of existence receives God’s “divine dramatic answer”. God’s *definitive, unique, and singular historical action* in and through the person of Jesus the Christ “is relevant in all ages”. Von Balthasar coins the neologism “eph-hapax” from the Greek *eph-* (as in the “all over” quality to skin in “epidermis”) and *hapax* (“once”) to describe this universally applicable “unique answer to all instances of the question” posed by the drama of human existence. “Eph-hapax” alludes to the technical term from literary and biblical criticism: *hapax legomenon*, a word that appears only once in a given text. Ironically and poetically, von Balthasar’s term “eph-hapax” appears three times in the five volumes of *Theo-Drama* but *only* in the single cited paragraph on (Balthasar 1988, p. 21) (“ephhapax” in the German, cf. Balthasar 1973, pp. 20–1). The paragraph clearly proceeds with the Bible in mind, but the three-fold singularity of “eph-hapax” in the text and its object of reference (i.e., the *action* of God in the Christ “most acute” when “Good Friday turns into Easter”) perhaps also means to invoke von Balthasar’s trinitarian Christology.

the play's themes "in abstract", I will turn to the particular performance of the play I witnessed as a participant-observer and its productive frictions between history, text, performance, and interpreting community. *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* calls attention to theatrical drama's situatedness within and in response to a much wider story, including stories that actors, audiences, playwrights, and producers may never have intended to be told.

It is best to include, however, a warning. Scholarship about contemporary theatrical drama risks spoiling the plot. For some, the "spoiler" is a kind of ruin to the fun of discovery that prematurely releases dramatic tension; for others, "spoilings" empower critique.<sup>5</sup> In the case of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*, such "spoilings" necessarily transform the object of consideration for the uninitiated. To already know the contents of the play's next page changes the play's theatrical possibilities and player's theatrical choices. Indeed, Soleimanpour *prohibits* foreknowledge about that which is unrelentingly destined by the printed script: "Give the actor the instructions below 48 hours before their performance. DO NOT give them a copy of the play. Ask them not to see the play, nor to learn anything about it before" (Soleimanpour 2017).<sup>6</sup> Such rules do not govern the audience; it is certainly possible to see this play again and again, night after night. Soleimanpour explicitly directs this prohibition to the performer alone. But *all* first-time witnesses to *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* play along in their own role. In a qualified sense, *everyone* who does not already know the play's script shares the actor's experience of time. The end has already been written, printed, given, and held by the actor, but its contents are not yet fully revealed or realized. I contend that this structural dynamic makes the play evocative of Abrahamic religious temporality. The entire book of history has been written and remains known to God in God's providence, but the world's story unfolds with human freedom and under the author's divine command against divination and soothsaying. Obedience to tradition, too, becomes a motif in *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*. I dutifully commend my reader to follow Soleimanpour's instructions and consider watching or reading the play for the first time prior to continuing this essay to get a sense of the play without the "spoilings" necessary for my writing. Already, theatrical obedience and timing become complicated themes.

## 2. Words, Presence, and Soleimanpour's Theatrical Style

Theatrical words can transcend historical boundedness and political boundaries.<sup>7</sup> Soleimanpour plays with language as a recurring theme in order to transfigure the relations of history and relationships across space and time. The play speaks from pasts, presents, and futures as an autonomous text. Its script renders the actor into a prophet of a non-existent past, and its plot meditates on the very problem of con-scripting an actor to follow the play down this rabbit hole. To perform with a script is, for Soleimanpour, to be obedient to that script's mission. The actor issues the commands of the playwright: "I actually made someone make you do something. [ . . . ] What are your limits of OBEDIENCE?" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 25). Theatre, therefore, demonstrates an analogous obedience to the one expected in response to the call of God. Obedience to God differs from obedience to a

<sup>5</sup> Certain theatrical styles, such as Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater, intentionally give away the plot so as to encourage critical and distanced reflection on its political and ethical meanings.

<sup>6</sup> The first words of the printed script are "Instructions to the Producer/Presenter". Some pages of the print version, such as the one referenced here, are not numbered. Soleimanpour includes words in all capitals as a way to indicate something important for the actor to emphasize. All of the capitalization, boldface, and underlining in my quotations from Soleimanpour's script match the original.

<sup>7</sup> Soleimanpour is not alone amongst twenty-first-century playwrights who use theatre to cross religious, colonial, and militarized boundaries between the middle east and the north Atlantic, but Soleimanpour's experimental *form* sets his work apart. For example, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (Kushner 2004) approaches quite similar ideas about border-transgressing poetics thematically. Similarly, too, the multiple published versions of Kushner's play carry their own sense of an "unfinished" project. Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, however, deploys many of the expected conventions of a Broadway or West End production (e.g., memorization, naturalistic costuming and acting, scenes, a curtain call) missing from *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*.

playwright's text (rarely is God so straightforward), yet a text speaks action into being without its own voice.

Obedience to the text requires the actor's free choice to be obedient. To borrow Paul Ricoeur's phrase, the script is a "mute text" until the actor communicates on its behalf.<sup>8</sup> "This communication needs an INTERMEDIATE . . . the person who is called THE ACTOR" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 24). Is the "I" spoken by a character co-identical with the ego of the actor or the playwright? Or are we already playing roles dictated to us by innumerable cultural scripts? Soleimanpour displays such roles in the playful animal pageants and rabbit parables of the script (Soleimanpour 2017, pp. 16–17, 38ff). Clear distinctions between what marks obedience to a "felt presence" in religious experience (a "call") or obedience to unspoken social rules can be difficult to draw (Dox 2016).<sup>9</sup> *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* posits a playwright responsible for the text now printed on the physical script. The playwright's body remains distinct and distant from the historical event of performance, but he is nonetheless given a *present* voice by the actor. Audiences hear Soleimanpour's "I" in the actor's voice. Accounts of easy co-identification between actor and writer further rupture in Soleimanpour's later work, *Nassim*, a heartfelt piece about language and home, where Soleimanpour plays *himself* alongside another unknowing and unknown actor.

I want to linger for a moment with the comparison between *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* and *Nassim* to delineate some of Soleimanpour's theatrical techniques and style. Both plays are exercises in what Aida Rocci calls Soleimanpour's "manila envelope theatre" (Rocci 2017). Any given performance features an actor who does not know the play's script in advance. That is, both pieces feature a "COLD READING" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 3) from printed scripts by actors with the help some of our era's ubiquitous telecommunications technology and some plot-consequential props. *Nassim* even includes live projections and photography as a part of the fun. As a genre, Soleimanpour's "manila envelope" dramas foreground their own materiality. Though the plot is metatheatrical and seems to be mostly an actor talking about actors talking, a Soleimanpour script *cannot* be dematerialized into memory or smoothed into the veneer of spontaneity in rehearsals.<sup>10</sup> Performances will be rife with mistakes and improvisations as easily understood to be innovations as they might be considered "glitches" in the theatrical ritual (Grimes 2014, p. 73).<sup>11</sup> Both *Nassim* and *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* invite the audience to participate, both on stage and off. Both *Nassim* and *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* collapse distance and estrangement by means of a shared and textually mediated experience. Both *Nassim* and *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* prompt us to consider Soleimanpour's biography as revelatory or, perhaps, at least interesting enough to merit a night's entertainment.

The figure of the playwright is present for both plays, but in very different modes. The instructions to the producer of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* requests (quite politely) that "it might be nice" if an "empty

<sup>8</sup> "The text is mute. An asymmetric relation obtains between text and reader, in which only one of the partners speaks for the two. The text is like a musical score and the reader like the orchestra conductor who obeys the instructions of the notation" (Ricoeur 1976, p. 75). Here, Ricoeur is not being esoteric. Texts are mute because they lack the mouths to speak on their own behalf. Soleimanpour's theatrical script operates like Ricoeur's reference to a musical score: in order to speak the text/script/score *must be played*.

<sup>9</sup> Donalee Dox's *Reckoning with the Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance* opens new ways to consider the spiritual knowledge imparted by "what cannot be seen in vernacular spiritual practices but is (for practitioners) nonetheless present" (Dox 2016, p. 148). Empiricist methodologies that require the confirmation of presence only through *material* and *measurable* proof create difficulties for performance studies interpretations. Dox calls performance the "permeable boundary between people's sense of an inner, spiritual life and the bodies acting in the materiality of culture" (Dox 2016, p. 60). For Dox, the materialist norms of the "performance paradigm" dismiss or explain away spiritual knowledges prior to serious investigation on practitioner's terms.

<sup>10</sup> Soleimanpour's experimental approach—"for ME, this is not so much a PLAY, as an EXPERIMENT" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 3)—exemplifies Larry D. Bouchard's "three overlapping sorts of metatheatre" (Bouchard 2020, p. 4). Both Soleimanpour's style and the *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* script foreground the theatricality of each performance (MT-1); the titular rabbit parable with its audience participants and animal pantomimes constitute a show within a show (MT-2); and the play's metaphors about obedience, suicide, and life (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 46ff) present the entire event as MT-3.

<sup>11</sup> For Grimes, "ritual glitches" are noticeable and unintended disruptions to ritual action, like a "badly timed flyover of military helicopters" that can stop a public reading (Grimes 2014, p. 110). A ritual glitch calls attention to ritual as human activity capable of "failure" and open to criticism.

seat in the front row” be reserved for the playwright.<sup>12</sup> The script calls repeated attention to the mobile “self” of the narrating actor and the script’s writer. Do actors play Soleimanpour or themselves? It is not an Iranian dissident in 2010 who commands the scene but printed papers that construct a world and invite action. “Sometimes I get scared writing this play. I feel I’m designing a BIG GUN which will shoot somebody one day. Maybe even myself” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 35). These pages and the risks inherent in their interpretation must be given over to someone else to read. Words and stories connect across real time and space. *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* instructs its audience members to send Soleimanpour an e-mail during the course of the play. In the print version, “nassim.sn@gmail.com” still appears prominently in and around the text. *Nassim*, by contrast, calls for Soleimanpour himself to be there, a character in his autobiographical play. Both pieces therefore confront and build theatrical identities through materiality, confirming how human characters and non-human props “play” on a shared continuum in performance. *Nassim* even concludes with a totem of its performance history: a book filled with instant-print photographs taken at every performance. (Archaeologists who uncover this artifact can locate the performance I attended in Dublin by looking for an image with an airline blindfold, my “gift” to Nassim during the play.)<sup>13</sup> History and meaning are co-constructed between audience and actor. Where *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* concludes in silence and e-mail, *Nassim* concludes with a phone call in Farsi. In Soleimanpour’s theatrical drama, communication becomes embodied and technologically mediated. Words, even if misunderstood, connect people through the things and experiences we share.

### 3. Porous Boundaries of Stage Space and Showtime

Soleimanpour’s words (mediated through bodily movement, breath, speech, and material technologies) create the conditions of theatrical presence both spatially and temporally. The actor in Soleimanpour’s play holds the pages of the script as a prop that is part of the show. The script has its own agency as a player in the drama. Scripts can be metaphors as well as physical objects. Soleimanpour’s drama revels in this ambiguity. By asking audiences to give unplanned gifts (*Nassim*) or to use their smartphone to communicate *in medias spectaculum* (*White Rabbit Red Rabbit*), Soleimanpour points beyond the symbolic and literal perimeters of the stage space—so objects in the pocket of an audience member might become props, too. The script’s words trigger present embodied actions that erase the boundary between active players and passive watchers. Soleimanpour’s plays are full of invitations for the audience to become what Augusto Boal calls “spect-actors”, simultaneous observers and participants in the theatrical event (Boal 1985).<sup>14</sup> During *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* every member of the audience assigns themselves a number and speaks it aloud; some numbers are called to play along with the script (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 2). The script therefore assigns roles to the members of the audience (one, two, three, and so on); sometimes and for some people, the script transforms those roles into missions. Number 5 *always* receives the crucial instructions to set the plot in motion: “I want you to choose a glass of water, take the vial and stir its contents into the chosen glass with the spoon. Then put the cap back on the vial. Go ahead. AND BE CAREFUL. DON’T SPILL ANYTHING” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 5). These rules are written into the script as part of its dialogue. At other points, the script invites unspecified volunteers to take on a scripted role.<sup>15</sup> During the play’s off-Broadway run in 2016, Nathan Lane joked about his distaste for audience participation, for him a theatrical taboo that “falls somewhere between incest and folk dancing” (Gioia 2016). Certainly, all conscious audiences

<sup>12</sup> Soleimanpour has since witnessed and participated in performances of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*. For a description, see (Youngs 2013).

<sup>13</sup> I saw *Nassim* at the Project Arts Center as a part of the Dublin Theatre Festival on 6 October 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Von Balthasar’s theory of theatre makes the same point, though without invoking Boal’s sense of political action or his technical term: in *Theo-Drama* “the boundary between the actor or agent and the ‘auditorium’ is removed, and man is a spectator only insofar as he is a player” (Balthasar 1988, p. 18).

<sup>15</sup> An unspecified volunteer becomes especially important at the play’s conclusion by playing the role of the “White Rabbit” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 57ff).

participate in a theatrical performance; Soleimanpour even warns how “it is YOU, spectators, who ARE there. YOU are there. YOU are participating” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 56).<sup>16</sup> Soleimanpour’s script commands a violation of the spatial boundary between actor and audience, the ‘sacred’ distance that sets apart stage and seats in the house. The absent Soleimanpour, through the voice of the actor, calls these number-characters up to the stage to play along. The opening counting ritual concludes by musing on the question “Did you count me?” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 3). Theatrical presence and participation need not be reduced to spatial proximity.

But Soleimanpour’s drama also blurs the *temporal* boundaries between actor, audience, and playwright in its conscious construction and subversion of what I call “Showtime”. Theatre always calls time to mind.<sup>17</sup> It takes time to perform a story.<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Schneider explains, “Time is the stuffing of the stage—it’s what actors, directors, and designers manipulate together” (Schneider 2014, p. 7). Showtime is that time set apart from other times by a theatrical event and during which a theatrical event occurs.<sup>19</sup> Showtime identifies the temporality of performance, the temporal dimension of the stage’s space *shared* by performers and audience. One does not require a proscenium arch to make a stage, but the activity of performance, what Peter Brook calls the “act of theatre”, brings a stage into being for some witness (Brook [1968 ] 2019). This is the difference between the scaffold that makes a platform in the front of any potentially empty auditorium and the performance that renders that platform into a stage for the show. In Shakespeare’s famous speech, Jacques announces “All the world’s a stage” thanks to its mere “players” with “entrances and exits” (Shakespeare 2006a, II.7). The boundaries of the world-stage, then, are not galactic wings or an oceanic apron but human parcels of passing time. Showtime is that which a showstopper disrupts but does not negate. Here, I distinguish “Showtime” from the description of a given performance’s “run time”: the show’s duration as a length measurable by a clock. Speeches after a curtain call do not add to a play’s run time, but they are an aspect of *this* performance’s Showtime. Breaks for applause or laughter or lament constitute meaningful moments of a theatrical event. A subway car is not an architectural stage, but, in New York City, the (often unwelcome) announcement of “Showtime!” could transform mass transit into an acrobatic arena in the time between stops. Yet a play can twist time into knots, imagining morning sun after sunset or plunging a midday performance into midnight darkness. Hamlet reminds us how theatrical “time is out of joint” (Shakespeare 2006b, I.5). Showtime holds the strangely mutable and subjective experience of time’s passing during performances. The same duration of time might carry a thick slowness for a dull play or a surprising lightness and speed during an exciting one. Showtime, therefore, refers at once to the “time of the play” (as in the drama’s temporal settings and its performance histories) as well as the “play’s time” (as in the theatrical event that occurs *in* time and *with* time). Just as a performance needs its stage space, a performance happens during Showtime.

Stages are places set apart within a wider geography, so too Showtime sits apart from other times *within* wider histories.<sup>20</sup> Every performance of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* remains singular thanks

<sup>16</sup> Near the end of the play, Soleimanpour includes “PASSIVE” witnessing as a mode of participation for “my spectators”, those numbered and present (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 56ff).

<sup>17</sup> Many scholars have taken up the question of theatrical temporality. Time, after all, is a fundamental analytic category for drama and appears in Aristotle’s *Poetics* as one of its “three unities of time, place and action” (cf. Wiles 2014, p. 55). Aristotelian time is not the only option. Maurya Wickstrom’s *Firey Temporalities in Theatre and Performance: The Initiation of History* reviews how theatre’s time can interrupt passive, “processional histories”. Wickstrom tracks plays and performances like Soleimanpour’s where conventional distinctions between past and present shift into the potentially emancipatory relationship between what has already been and what Walter Benjamin calls “a now” (Wickstrom 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Theatre foregrounds the connection between *Times and Narrative* enumerated across (Ricoeur 1984). There can be no hard distinctions between reading theatrical drama and performing it. In many ways, “reading time” and time spent recalling a production expand to complicate the boundaries of Showtime. Encounters with theatrical drama—reading and seeing and remembering—always occur during some passage of time.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Ubersfeld’s semiotic approach to theatre and time begins its analysis by identifying how “theatrical time” can be understood as the relationship between the “two distinct temporalities” of theatrical phenomena: “the time it takes for a performance to be completed . . . and the time pertaining to the represented action” (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 126, emphasis original).

<sup>20</sup> Performance, like play and ritual, sets itself apart in place and time from other phenomena. My analysis of performance incorporates the philosophy of play at its root. Consider how English language words for theatre show this essential link

to the prohibition on foreknowledge and its always different actor, but the script also calls out the singularity of its temporal moment in history.<sup>21</sup> At one point, the actor demands that Number 6 announce the day of the week, the date, and the year of *this* performance (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 19). Soleimanpour uses this information to differentiate, but not sever, the time of the playwright from Showtime. Immediately after Number 6 provides the date, the actor says “The day I’m writing THIS part of the play is 25 April 2010. So you see how even MY TIME differs from yours” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 20). The time of composition has been caught up into Showtime. Usually, Showtime would be a time of multiple citations. Showtime bridges the “gap” between the “liveness” of theatre and a given play’s rehearsal and performance histories (Schneider 2014, pp. 68–69). But because every performance of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* calls for a unique cast, the actor possesses no rehearsal record to recall and re-present. Indeed, this extemporaneous performance appears *like* a rehearsal with communal improvisation in the presence of the playwright’s script. Showtime marks the time of communal endeavor. Soleimanpour foregrounds the “now” of Showtime in self-conscious awareness of the ongoing present moment. Showtime does not resolve Zeno’s paradox, but it demarcates the finite experiences of beginning and ending.<sup>22</sup>

*White Rabbit Red Rabbit* makes an interesting test case for Showtime precisely because it is *not* a piece of durational theatre that indexes the time of its own performance or responds to a specific moment of time.<sup>23</sup> Audiences might perceive some beginning and perceive some end as the fluid limits of Showtime. In this play, temporal limits echo in the spatial limits of the stage or the limited pages of the printed script. The audience sees a sign of Showtime’s end as it approaches: the script’s pages do not go on forever. Conventional theatrical drama marks the threshold of Showtime with the rituals of a curtain call: bows and applause. But, like so many theatrical experiments that unfold into the night—consider Richard Schechner and the Performance Group’s *Dionysus in 69* and its parade into the streets—*White Rabbit Red Rabbit* frustrates a clear moment of transition from Showtime to after in its conclusion (Performance Group 1970).

#### 4. Dead Ends: “You May Not Touch Him. You May Not Check His Health”<sup>24</sup>

Showtime differentiates the porous temporal and spatial boundary between the event and the play’s afterlife in conversation, worry, delight, confusion, and memory. The play concludes with an invitation for reflection in the presence of death’s possibility. “Dead or alive, [the actor] will want to lie down on the stage for a time and think. About everything” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 60). So, too, will the many spect-actors who depart from the hall. The play stops with the death of the actor who gives life to words. Showtime ends, somewhere, between the seats and the shuffle to the exit. The end of Showtime symbolizes mystery or a transcendent sacred in thin analogy to the moment of death.

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between play and performance. The phrase “a theatrical performance performed in a theater by theatrical performers” could just as easily be written as “a play played in a playhouse by players”. “Play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality by and duration” (Huizinga [1944] 1950, p. 9). For Huizinga, playing *makes* and underlies representation in ritual and dramatic performance, culture, poetry, and art. Huizinga’s theory informs Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of play as a clue to the ontology of the work of art. (See Gadamer 1989, p. 101ff.) For a more recent application of play to the analysis of religion and theatre, see (Mason 2019). For Mason, “Playing creates *being*, in any way that the word *being* makes sense” (Mason 2019, p. 118).

<sup>21</sup> The play highlights how time may be marked through differing religio-cultural calendars. Soleimanpour provides his birthdate both according to the Islamic-Solar Hijri calendar prominent in Iran (“Azar 19th, 1360”) and Christian-Gregorian calendar used in most places where the play would be performed (“10 December 1981”) (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 19).

<sup>22</sup> Questions remain as to when one’s experience of a play begins: when does the show start for me? When I see advertisements and this production first appears to my consciousness? When I buy my tickets and begin to anticipate the event as a kind of business transaction? Perhaps when I physically enter the venue or pose for a photo under the marquee? Or is it when I sit down and silence my electronic devices so to limit my distractions from the outside world and enter into the time of the play? These questions ask nothing about the preparation of the actors! Instead, Showtime refers to the overlapping time of performance *shared* between actor and audience.

<sup>23</sup> For more on durational theatre in the context of theatrical temporalities, see the discussion of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Mittwoch aus Licht* in (Wiles 2014, pp. 61–67).

<sup>24</sup> (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 60).

Soleimanpour makes this analogy explicit: the sending at the finale of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* concludes this performance's *unique* Showtime with the instruction for a member of the audience to take the script as gift for future use (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 62). The White Rabbit, played by a member of the audience and now the one leading collective obedience to the script, establishes the last law: "After hearing 'the end,' everyone must leave the theatre" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 60). There will be no time to confirm the impermanence of theatrical suicide. There will be no curtain call ritual to clap distance between Showtime and after, to give away numbers and responsibility. The symbolism of the possibly dying body on stage aligns with the departure of the audience, both "exits" in silence and doubt.

The Showtime of Soleimanpour's play stops in death. One line of interpretation, interested in the ethics of causality, follows the play's focus on the question of the "gun" mechanism: who is responsible for the actor's "death"? Soleimanpour? The actor? The producers? The audience volunteers? The audience witnesses? Industrial capitalism?<sup>25</sup> The script calls forth the conditions for a suicide or homicide or accidental interpersonal violence as entertainment. Soleimanpour highlights how the conditions of this theatrical experiment and its scripts—preset props, authoritative instructions, social expectations—are no different from ordinary social life. Given circumstances might always be turned over to some risk of life and death. Such is the meaning of the titular white and red rabbit parable: ordinary obedience quickly escalates to extraordinary cruelty.

But another line of interpretation goes down its own rabbit hole resonating with what Kevin Hart calls the "dark gaze" onto the sacred in Maurice Blanchot's mystical atheism. Like Soleimanpour, Blanchot enacts a "displaced mysticism of writing [where] to write is to transform the instant into an imaginary space, to pass from a time in which death could occur to an endless interval of dying" (Hart 2004, p. 10).<sup>26</sup> *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* opens towards the sacred in its attention to death's uncompromising mystery. "What MATTERS is NOTKNOWING" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 33).<sup>27</sup> The play *ritualizes* the mystical encounter with uncertainty and its "POSSIBILITY" (Soleimanpour 2017, pp. 32, 50). Drama proceeds in the subjunctive. The risk of death is both playful and existential; the performance of suicide requires *both* a theatrical choice and unrehearsed trust (perhaps even quasi-religious faith) in the harmlessness of the show's props. "This is a theatre, so its VERY probably FAKE ... right?" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 30). The line's dramatic irony relies on an established theatrical tradition and faith in theatrical conventions and their moral code. But, like other avant-garde performance experiments, the play elides physical appearance with emotional reality.<sup>28</sup> The prop poison might well be placebo, but drinking the potion nonetheless *risks* a credible threat of suicide. The theatrical choice to drink in obedience to the script could bring about all too real consequences. Who knows?

This call for ritual action in the presence of mystery supports my claim to identify the play's structure as "religious" in a qualified and generalized sense. Rather than representation, David V. Mason locates the poetic and playful making of performativity—"poesis, not mimesis"—as theatre and

<sup>25</sup> "I take full responsibility for creating the machine. But I give YOU the responsibility for using it. After all, no one puts the inventor of the gun on trial" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 55).

<sup>26</sup> Hart further demonstrates that "Blanchot's thought of the neutral Outside contests the philosophy of neuter" tracks with how Hans Urs von Balthasar and other mid-century Catholic thinkers dismantled the reigning theological *duplex ordo* where 'pure nature apart from grace' proposes some "neutral, indeterminate being that is prior to the distinction between infinite and finite being, between God and creation" (10). Blanchot unequivocally rejects Christian revelation, but joins von Balthasar in resisting any urge to domesticate mystery. (See Hart 2004, pp. 48–49.)

<sup>27</sup> Claire Marie Chambers offers the term "performance apophatics" to "signify the performative operation that traffics through the denial of denial, which can be felt in the restless dynamic of the unknowable that structures performance itself" (Chambers 2017, p. 10). Soleimanpour's emphatic "NOTKNOWING" calls for "critical unknowing" where "By cultivating *learned* ignorance, we might unself ourselves at the same time that we might unworld the world" (Chambers 2017, p. 261). Both performance apophatics and theatricality "insist that what is 'real' is not *only* the real, or that *everything* that is important or true is 'real'" (Chambers 2017, p. 259, emphasis original).

<sup>28</sup> Soleimanpour's play opens ethical questions about integrity like those treated by (Bouchard 2011). Consider, for example, the moment in *Dionysus in 69* where "the performance would pause until the actor playing Pentheus actually felt abused by the taunts of other cast members" (Bouchard 2011, p. 224). For a review of the religious underpinnings to American avant-garde theatre and connections to Gertrude Stein's influential views of theatrical time, see (Tanner-Kennedy 2020).

religion's common root (Mason 2019, p. 156).<sup>29</sup> A performance of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* may very well appear structurally indistinguishable from other "religious" rituals where a sacred text (be it the Bible, Vedas, Qur'an, *Book of Common Prayer*, or L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*) prompts ritual obedience. Here is even time for a monetary collection (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 9). The text features two invocations of "god" (Soleimanpour 2017, pp. 13, 24) and one reference to the writer's face while writing, "straight as the devil's" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 29).

I intend to put Soleimanpour in conversation with a Christian framework, and there is one phrase that might be interpreted as a moment of recognizable revelation: "the [red] rabbit's ears have been EXPOSED. Oh my god!" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 13). A theodramatic reading perhaps hears echoes of the Centurion who notices the Son of God exposed by crucifixion and earthquake (cf. Matt. 27:54) or "Doubting" Thomas' exclamation at the resurrected Christ's exposed wounds (cf. John 20:28). Further, the text invokes God's blessing—"MAY GOD SAVE YOU!" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 24) on the volunteer notetaker who, by freely volunteering, now "is a red rabbit" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 25). But Soleimanpour's most consequential use of something like Christian religious language happens only in the actor's speech just before handing the script to an audience volunteer and enacting their own theatrical-ritual death (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 55ff). The speech is the confession and pre-emptive absolution of the playwright, "Nassim Soleimanpour" whose full name appears twice (Soleimanpour 2017, pp. 55–56). The word "sin" appears twice as well to describe Soleimanpour's own guilty complicity in the actor's death (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 56). Soleimanpour's writing creates the conditions for the possibility of the actor's death, but it is present *action* in obedience to his words that might kill. An indictment of the audience interlaces with Soleimanpour's confession. He further argues how any "PASSIVE viewer of this suicide" will be "more of a sinner than me" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 56). So who is guilty? The confession turns the question of identity back on the writer, whose voice we hear in and through the actor.

Soleimanpour sounds similar to Blanchot by the end of the confession. The question of guilt and sin between author and actor asks about theatrical writing and about revelatory knowing. "In conclusion" the speech shifts into meta-reflection on the affective experience of writing as self-alienation.

I feel what I'm writing is not my writing [ ... ] some OTHER 'ME', lives INSIDE me, and THAT 'me' talks on my behalf—almost as someone to whom I have lent my body. Or maybe I'm reading from someone else's writing, or someone else, some OTHER ME, is loudly speaking ME ... for YOU.

(Soleimanpour 2017, p. 56)

Here, Soleimanpour inverts what Blanchot calls "the Outside" and erasure of ego approached through writing; instead, some "OTHER" writer emerges from "INSIDE" like inspiration.<sup>30</sup> But where Blanchot's emphasizes the spatial and temporal, the metaphors for writing Soleimanpour's in play are doubly theatrical.<sup>31</sup> Words come into being only through the "loan" of a body. The author loans a body to write; the actor loans a body to read. Soleimanpour's writing these words requires the same sort of kenotic self-surrender as the actor who speaks them. The moment can be depersonalized: the invisible author makes demands of the visible actor. The experience of writing *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* matches

<sup>29</sup> See also the discussion of ways to pursue a correlation between religion and theatre in (Mason 2019, p. 1ff). In another context, Mason explains "The manner in which the theatrical avant-garde necessarily resembles religious doing comes from the way that *performance* sharpens this paradox [glossing what he earlier calls 'yearning for presence that proves never possible'] of being in the world" (Mason 2019, p. 59).

<sup>30</sup> "If to write is to surrender to the interminable, the writer who consents to sustain writing's essence loses the power to say 'I.' And so he loses the power to make others say 'I'" in (Blanchot 1982, p. 27). "This is to say: one writes only if one reaches that instant which nevertheless one can only approach in the space opened by the movement of writing. To write, one has to write already. In this contradiction are situated the essence of writing, the snag in the experience, and inspiration's leap" (Blanchot 1982, p. 176).

<sup>31</sup> Hart explains how "interval" and "space" both may plausibly translate Blanchot's *espace* (Hart 2004, p. 8). I add that both terms also carry theatrical resonance, e.g., "intermission" can also be called an "interval".

its theatrical reading. The conclusion of the quasi-religious confession sees the identity of the invisible author (“ME”) *given over* in the performance of the actor for the audience (“for YOU”). Soleimanpour seems to agree with Blanchot; “Perhaps it is sin” (Blanchot 1982, p. 175). The author and actor align: the written-loaned body offers itself as indifferent and obedient, gift and sacrifice. Both author and actor can now share “MY sin”: “the secret of the red rabbit” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 56). The actor is the author’s “dear red rabbit” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 57) sent to perform death as a revelation.

## 5. Seeing the Form

Revelation anchors von Balthasar’s theology. For von Balthasar, humans interpret the God who has revealed Godself dynamically through loving action in history. *Theo-Drama* occupies the middle panel of von Balthasar’s great theological triptych. Each part, further divided into multiple volumes, correlates reflection on God’s self-revelation according to philosophical transcendentals of being—Beauty in *The Glory of the Lord*, Goodness in *Theo-Drama*, and Truth in *Theo-Logic*. Each part develops an accompanying theological method—aesthetics, dramatics, and logic, respectively, for Beauty, Goodness, and Truth. The unity of the single project across its many disparate parts expresses the philosophical transcendental of Oneness.

Von Balthasar’s writing operates according to what Anne M. Carpenter identifies as a theo-poetic style: “*what he means and how he means it* are central concerns. The ‘what’ is theological truth, and the ‘how’ is a perplexing combination of theological and poetic language” (Carpenter 2015, p. 3, emphasis original). Drama speculates on God in the light of Goodness that prompts considerations of God’s action and the human position in its midst (drama) rather than God’s appearance (aesthetics) or God’s utterance (logic) (Balthasar 1988, p. 18). Good actions *give freely*. Theatre, in its presentation of the drama of human existence, provides analogous structures with which to think theologically: one needs to “play” Christian theology within the givenness of the world of theodramatic play. That is, von Balthasar’s theodramatic approach demands the imaginative assent of the interpreter to God’s initiative: doing theology is like doing improv. My scene partner (or a script) suggests some “given circumstances” and actors need to respond with actions that *fit within* that given world. My impersonation of a bunny making a big, steaming bowl of carrot soup will change rapidly when another actor replies “Yes, and we need to hide it from the hungry bears on the roof!” Without any rehearsal or hesitation, I become responsible to hop to it and play interpretive choices that work here and now with what I have been given.<sup>32</sup> Such acting—often surprising and funny—openly receives and inhabits the world that is given. The improvising actor co-creates the theatrical world by choosing to play along. So too for theodramatics: there can be “no external standpoint” outside the drama of God’s action in history (Balthasar 1990, p. 54ff). God’s drama “so overarches everything, from the beginning to the end, that there is no standpoint from which we could observe and portray events as if we were uninvolved narrators of an epic. [ . . . ] In this play, all the spectators must eventually become fellow actors, whether they wish to or not” (Balthasar 1990, p. 58). Even God’s inner life, the Trinity, becomes the wider drama within which created history unfolds: “our play ‘plays’ in his play” (Balthasar 1988, p. 20).<sup>33</sup>

Much has been written about von Balthasar’s influence on contemporary Catholic and Christian theology, but less work has focused on his theological dramatic theory in dialogue with contemporary theatre and performance.<sup>34</sup> Some Balthasarian resonances with *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* may be already

<sup>32</sup> For Konstantin Stanislavski “the circumstances, which for the dramatist are *supposed* for us actors are *imposed*, they are a given. And so we have created the term Given Circumstances” in (Stanislavski 2008, p. 52), emphasis original. On the “yes and” rule in improv, see (Frost and Yarrow 2007, pp. 144, 219). For von Balthasar on Stanislavski and what is given to the actor, see (Balthasar 1988, p. 279); on the “extemporaneous play”, see (Balthasar 1988, p. 179).

<sup>33</sup> For a challenge to the coherence of von Balthasar’s theological style, see (Kilby 2012, pp. 64–65).

<sup>34</sup> Certainly, drama remains a keyword for Balthasar studies. The most substantial contribution on his dramatic theory remains the German language collection “Theodrama and Theatricality” (Kapp et al. 2000). For the importance of drama to von Balthasar’s philosophy, see (Schindler 2004). Theological dramatic theory gives Todd Walatka room to find greater

apparent, such as how the *singular* conceit of every performance of Soleimanpour's play offers a microcosm of the singularity of salvation history and the deadly high-stakes of free action. At the same time, a Balthasarian reading of the Iranian experimental playwright seems an odd, perhaps exploitative, choice. Soleimanpour does not identify as a Catholic, and the history of Iranian theatre includes far more influence from Islam than Catholicism.<sup>35</sup> As already mentioned, the play presents few overtly religious symbols. But I contend that the play's *structure* might be usefully interpreted in Balthasarian theodramatic terms. He gives us many theodramatic themes to choose, but I will restrict myself to the following five: "theatre of the world", dramatic roles, freedom, obedience, and sacrificial death.

*Theatrum mundi*. Perhaps the most obvious connection between *Theo-Drama* and *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* regards its use of the image of the "world-stage" or "theatre of the world" image, familiar from medieval drama, Shakespeare, Calderon, and others. The first volume of *Theo-Drama* samples the development of the *theatrum mundi* image in an eclectic survey of European dramatic literatures. The stage uniquely presents the predicament of created being: "theatre—expressly seen as 'theatre of the world'—is an image that is substantially more than an image: it is a 'symbol of the world,' a mirror in which existence can directly behold itself" (Balthasar 1988, p. 249).<sup>36</sup> Theological dramatic theory proposes to interpret the entire history of creation as a performance on the world-stage on which God joins. The world-stage metaphor lends *Theo-Drama* what I would call a performative ontology: creation exists only insofar as it plays with and in God. For von Balthasar, the world-stage embraces the Christian theological vision of *creatio continua* (a theme where God *continually* creates the world, and so is present at every moment in its history). Such is also the temporality of performance foregrounded by *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*: "From now on we are ALL present" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 2) when "the actor (me), the audience (you), and writer (me)" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 1) come into contact. What matters is the *event* of performance, not the "mute" script; only in performance, during Showtime, can the actor and writer both be "me". The world-stage metaphor emphasizes the givenness and goodness of creation for Christian theology as well as the spectator-theologian's situation *within* the drama of history. Created time and God's eternity meet in action. Dramatic temporality offers von Balthasar language to name how the Christ enfolds created time into God's very life: God's eternal becoming as an event in what von Balthasar calls "supertime" (Balthasar 1998, p. 32).

*Dramatis personae*. *Theo-Drama* concerns itself not only with dramatic stories and images but also with the phenomenon of theatrical performance. As such, von Balthasar also takes keen interest in human roleplaying and the various roles of the theatrical ensemble: author, actor, and director.<sup>37</sup> I have already mentioned the ways in which any interpretation of God's action emerges from fellow actors on the world-stage. God intervenes in human history by stepping onto the world-stage as its leading player. Jesus quite literally saves the show, and *Theo-Drama* provides tools to think through the Christ's roles. The actor finds identity *in* the mission of playing their role on stage; humans find their identity in their mission to be disciples of the Christ. "The closer a man comes to this identity, the more perfectly does he play his part" (Balthasar 1990, p. 14). Where social roles might become closed loops and traps, sending and mission actualizes identity. So too, every "spectating" audience to Soleimanpour's play gets brought up into the event of its performance, in the image the prototypical actor. Roles prepare for missions; Number 5 makes the poison drink, everyone gets sent forth from the hall. To understand "Who am I?" requires freely acting the role that I am sent to play in the world.<sup>38</sup>

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compatibility between von Balthasar and liberationist themes about preference for the marginalized and concern for economic justice in (Walatka 2017).

<sup>35</sup> (See Floor 2005) In an e-mail interview, Soleimanpour avers, "I think I have stronger roots in Iranian Literature [than Ibsen or Beckett]" (Mapari 2017).

<sup>36</sup> The phrase perhaps includes an uncited allusion to Hamlet's mirror held up to nature (Shakespeare 2006b, III.2) as well as the quoted reference to the title of Eugen Fink's *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Fink [1960] 2016).

<sup>37</sup> (Cf. Balthasar 1988, p. 481ff) on everyday roleplaying founds in dramaturgical psychology and sociology; von Balthasar begins this section by quoting (Goffman 1959).

<sup>38</sup> This question organizes the section on the transition from role to mission in (Balthasar 1988, p. 493ff).

At the same time, von Balthasar finds a trinitarian analogy in the logical *procession* of the theatrical roles of author, actor, and director.<sup>39</sup> Chronologically, too, the practice of a separate, off-stage director emerged rather late in theatre history.<sup>40</sup> But the logical procession of theatrical roles demonstrates by analogy points of Christian doctrine and its speculations on the eternal movement of the Trinity. None of the co-equally divine persons can be “older” than another, but their relationships might be logically ordered. I cannot offer a detailed summary of von Balthasar’s trinitarian theology here as it is so central to his theological project; I will restrict my comments to the triad of author, actor, and director as an analogue to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup> For von Balthasar, understanding the movement of these roles *within* God’s triune life (processions) provides the clue as to how to understand their work on the world-stage (missions).<sup>42</sup> The invisible Author-Father acts as the first principle of theatrical movement that *sends* the visible Actor-Son into the world (Balthasar 1988, p. 279). Because God so loves the world, God the Father sends God the Son in a revelatory and free gift *pro nobis*, “for us”. The procession-mission functions like the *sending of the word* from the author to the actor in Soleimanpour: “loudly speaking ME . . . for YOU” (56).<sup>43</sup> But the Author-Father and Actor-Son share a common will aligned by the Director-Spirit.<sup>44</sup> The Director-Spirit *proceeds* from the ultimate unity of the Author-Father and Actor-Son and assures co-identity between the author and the actor in the performance event. Obviously, the analogical triad of author, actor, and director differs significantly from the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Christian theology.<sup>45</sup> The former theatrical triad ordinarily implies three persons in three distinct people; the latter theological mystery remains three divine persons who are always already *one* God. In *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*, the author, actor, and director *unite* in the single performance of the play, revealed to and for the audience exclusively in the visible *action* of the actor “for us”. Soleimanpour provides another “dramatic resource” for Christological-Trinitarian theodramatics beyond the stylings of theatrical naturalism.

*Freedom.* Drama stages conflict including a contest of wills. The dramatic tension at the center of Christian theology consists in the confrontation between divine and human freedom: God’s absolute decision to be in faithful, covenant relationship with the world and the potential for a free human refusal of God’s good gifts (Balthasar 1990, pp. 252–53, 301–2).<sup>46</sup> Soleimanpour makes similar space for rejection in his instructions to the actor: if an audience member refuses to play along that role simply changes to another *free* volunteer, “But it is important to maintain the SAME NUMBER!” (Soleimanpour 2017). Freedom expresses itself through interacting roles. Von Balthasar’s dramatic

<sup>39</sup> The analysis of authors, actors, and directors appears on (Balthasar 1988, pp. 268–305). Note phrases throughout that resemble trinitarian theology as “This primacy of unity in the author is ontological” (Balthasar 1988, p. 269).

<sup>40</sup> See (Balthasar 1988, p. 298n1), where von Balthasar shows his awareness of this *chronological* procession but chooses to leave it untreated. Similarly, von Balthasar does not theorize other members of the theatre company that stretch beyond the triad: designers, managers, dramaturgs, stagehands.

<sup>41</sup> Von Balthasar’s trinitarian imagery is always subtler and rarely so blatant as I here imply. Some moments are more explicit, see (Balthasar 1988, pp. 268–69, 280). I have elsewhere argued that one can map his theatrical triad from *Theo-Drama* first volume directly onto the trinitarian theology that appears in volume three and five. (See Gillespie 2019.)

<sup>42</sup> The principle that the *procession* gives a clue to *mission* is Thomistic, and it allows von Balthasar to further analyze the coincidence of *person* and *mission* in Jesus the Christ. (See Scola 1995, p. 58.)

<sup>43</sup> See also the way Soleimanpour muses about the “private world” of writing “something SIMILAR to a play” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 3). Drama only becomes a play in its performance by the actor.

<sup>44</sup> “Between the dramatic poet and the actor there yawns a gulf that can be bridged only by a third party who will take responsibility for the play’s performance, for making it present here and now” (Balthasar 1988, p. 298). The director’s role will be to integrate the author and actor: “its whole raison d’être consists in the way it mediates between them” (Balthasar 1988, pp. 298–99).

<sup>45</sup> Difference, especially sexual difference, is a key theme in von Balthasar’s theology. Trinitarian procession later becomes explicitly gendered in von Balthasar’s *Theo-Drama*. Linn Marie Tonstad finds problems in von Balthasar’s active-passive hierarchy that becomes his symbolically sexualized Trinity. For Tonstad, von Balthasar’s theology is not only flawed in its construal of the hierarchical relationships between Trinitarian relations, but these missteps concretize in the potential divinization of (worldly) masculinity vis-à-vis the exclusive creatureliness of (worldly) femininity (Tonstad 2016, p. 45).

<sup>46</sup> Theological dramatic theory gives space for the realization of a real encounter between divine-infinite and human-finite freedom: “we must assert that unconditional (divine) freedom in no way threatens the existence of conditional (creaturely) freedom, at whatever historical stage the latter may find itself—whether it is close to the former, alienated from it or coming back to its real self” (Balthasar 1990, p. 119). For a major discussion of these themes (Dalzell 2000).

language shows this contest playing out across the drama of history to be *freedom-in-relationship* and not some mechanistic tragedy binding God and world to a pre-determined “fate” (Balthasar 1990, p. 196). Human freedom operates like the relational quality of the Trinity; true freedom makes room for others.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, God’s will for the world is not like the “fate” of the Greek tragedies but, rather, a call to intimate fellowship, bolder action, and unique importance in the role for each person (Balthasar 1990, p. 296). But where ordinary social roles might become closed loops and traps, missions actualize identity in freedom. Dramatic language highlights the particularity and importance of each human response because freedom, understood theodramatically, reflects the act-quality of God’s Triune inner life (Balthasar 1990, p. 256). Freedom becomes dramatic only in action, hence why theodramatics help von Balthasar understand and interpret the God who is an eternal free act of love. Theatre-making requires similar room for free improvisation. A balance between infinite and finite freedom appears in how the actors in *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* make their own free choices that could never have been intended or fated by Soleimanpour’s script. The play depends on the freedom for improvisation of its actors: “Honestly, I don’t know WHAT this actor is doing” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 3). The play’s author also expresses something that “tastes like FREEDOM” from political and temporal fixedness: drama escapes ordinary finitude insofar as the play and its “timeless travel” through space and time “with no need for a passport” in ways the historical Soleimanpour could not (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 21).

*Obedience.* Divine-infinite freedom calls for human-finite freedom’s obedience. So too on stage. The free improvising of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*’s theatrical realization points to its structural and thematic emphasis on obedience. The play anticipates and requires obedience to the mission of the script. Disobeying the script stops the performance, even though Soleimanpour makes room for improvised jokes and commentary that divert from the printed word. To continue, the text must be freely obeyed. The instructions to the actor include how “You might think you want to add something. If so, that’s fine. But tell the audience its yours” (Soleimanpour 2017). (This might be signaled with a physical choice: at the performance I saw, the actor raised a hand whenever deviating from Soleimanpour’s script.) So too, von Balthasar’s theology hinges on free obedience to mission. Obedience is “becoming transparent to one’s mission” (Balthasar 1988, p. 289). In another sense, however, von Balthasar sees theatrical obedience to be reciprocal: “We must reject any suggestion that would make the actor into the author’s servant and equally any that would degrade the author to the level of a mere cobbler of plays for the actor” (Balthasar 1988, p. 283). The Director-Spirit holds freedom and obedience together and works to make the performance interpretation relevant for the present audience.<sup>48</sup> The Actor-Son performs in perfect obedience to the will of the Author-Father. Freedom, then, finds expression in the kenotic obedience of the Christ or Soleimanpour’s actors. Even bracketing theological overtones, Soleimanpour’s play confounds the assumption that freedom and obedience are contradictions in terms. The improvisatory play of such red rabbits will be both free and obedient at the same time: “MAY GOD SAVE YOU!” (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 24).

*Sacrificial Death.* As von Balthasar writes, “It follows quite naturally that if, obedient to his mission, a person goes out into a world that is not only ungodly but hostile to God, he will be led to the experience of Godforsakenness” (Balthasar 1988, p. 647). The Christ, the Actor-Son, plays a human script that ends in sacrificial death. Like the finale to *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*, obedience to the will of the Author-Father includes the real possibility of death: “infinite freedom appears on the stage in the form of Jesus Christ’s ‘lowliness’ and ‘obedience unto death’” (Balthasar 1990, p. 250). The final volume of the *Theo-Drama* makes much of the Christ’s willingness to endure the Godforsakenness of

<sup>47</sup> The finite freedom of existence consists in the ability to say “I am unique, but only by making room for countless others to be unique” (Balthasar 1990, p. 209).

<sup>48</sup> The director guides the play like the Holy Spirit guides the modern church toward a “valid *aggiornamento*” (Balthasar 1988, p. 303).

rejection on the cross, death, and in descent into hell.<sup>49</sup> The interpretive key for von Balthasar is always the Christ's cry of dereliction and abandonment: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (cf. Psalm 22:1, Mark 15:34, Matt. 27:46). This "total self-giving" over into Godforsakenness by God the Son becomes a divine "super-death", a "radical 'kenosis'" that lets go without holding onto any remainder (Balthasar 1998, p. 84).<sup>50</sup> Theodrama always happens against the horizon of the final act, of sacrifice and death.

For von Balthasar, the Christ's obedience unto death occurs *without* any consoling knowledge of future resurrection. The Christ, as the incarnate Son of God, freely surrenders divinity back to God in solidarity with creatures. Von Balthasar calls this the Christ's "laying up" of his "divine power and glory" with God the Father where he says "this concept only summarizes" the kenotic hymn in Philippians 2 (Balthasar 1998, p. 257).<sup>51</sup> Kenotic "laying up" permits von Balthasar to talk about the Christ's absent foreknowledge of the resurrection because "the Father's presence was so veiled that the Son experienced God-forsakenness" (Balthasar 1998, p. 257). The horror of crucifixion and abandonment and travel into unknown hellish territory would be truly human experiences.<sup>52</sup> Like the actor in *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* who obediently drinks a poisoned draught in deference to the will of the writer, so too does the Christ obediently defer to God the Father's will and drink from a cup that leads to death (cf. Matt. 26:39, Mark 14:36, Luke 22:42).<sup>53</sup> Parallels abound between the obedience and suicide plot in *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* and the Passion narrative of the Christ's kenotic self-sacrifice. Theodramatics give language to the play's mysterious and risky encounters with the unknown. Like von Balthasar's Jesus, Soleimanpour's actors "lay up" theatrical foreknowledge in solidarity with the audience. The audience disperses like the disciples, newly formed "red rabbits". Soleimanpour's play ends on the Balthasrian "Holy Saturday", and, like von Balthasar, we can only speculate about the actor's inner experience of theatrical forsakenness and "super-death". Even the script suggests that the actor may want to linger and reflect for a moment in the liminal space at the end of the show.

## 6. Whose Line Is It Anyway?

With these themes in mind, I conclude with a brief analysis of the unique instance of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* where I performed as a member of its audience. As part of a gift to a friend, I attended a performance of its off-Broadway run in 2016.<sup>54</sup> This run featured celebrities playing the role of the actor on stage. The contradiction of a singular event in an ongoing commercial run off-Broadway confirms the importance of the play's production history. A single "production" (that is, the same producers—Tom Kirdahy and Devlin Elliott—with the same scenic design and props) could be realized through as

<sup>49</sup> Rejecting God is sinful, so the forsaking of the Son *as sin* by the Father could only be done by God. "This is the central mystery of the theodrama: God's heightened love provokes a heightened hatred that is as bottomless as love itself (John 15:25)" (Balthasar 1998, p. 285).

<sup>50</sup> Critics, on both von Balthasar's right and on his left, have cautioned against such swift movement from divine love to trinitarian generation to kenosis to death to descent into hell and its theological and ethical implications, as in (Tonstad 2016, p. 38).

<sup>51</sup> Here, von Balthasar, somewhat controversially, follows language drawn from Adrienne von Speyr's visionary writing. The confusing phrase "laying up"—presented in scare marks in both English and German—is a literal translation of "*Hinterlegung*", a word that carries a range of economic connotations: deposit, escrow, filing, lodgment.

<sup>52</sup> Kenotic "laying up" also refers to the Christ's veiled God-consciousness (in Friedrich Schleiermacher's turn of phrase), including von Balthasar's position that Jesus the Christ did not have access to perfect self-knowledge of himself as the Son of God throughout the experience of the Passion. On Christ's knowledge and mission, see (Balthasar 1992, p. 149ff).

<sup>53</sup> Theodramatic structures, whether in von Balthasar or Soleimanpour, are dangerous precisely in the ways they might be misread in praise of suicide. A poisoned cup also recalls the double suicide at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, but kenotic self-sacrifice gives over for the sake of another. *Romeo and Juliet's* ending, some "reconciliation of the hostile families over the dead bodies of their children", receives no endorsement (Balthasar 1988, p. 472). A more theodramatic conclusion—and one that follows Soleimanpour's warning to audience-rabbits who mindlessly obey political and social pressures—includes the mission to *act* differently. Such a take on theatrical suicide appears at the end of Shakespeare's play in the version described in (VanZandt Collins 2020, p. 7).

<sup>54</sup> Thanks to Jewelle Bickel for the tickets and to Justin E. Crisp with whom I saw the play and enjoyed much conversation that first formed the ideas in this essay.

many different interpretations of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* as there were performers and performances. I attended on 4 April 2016, with master improviser Wayne Brady as our actor. I cannot remember my number (perhaps 34?), but Brady complimented the gusto and volume in my vocal projection.

Meaning cascaded onto the play through free obedience to coincidences unimaginable to the writer. When the day's date was correctly given as 4 April 2016 by a member of the audience, a voice rapidly followed proclaiming something like "the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination". The date changed the meaning of the play. The Blackness of the actor's body bestowed layers of significance onto Soleimanpour's text previously illegible (at least to me) as racialized. Should the colored rabbits of the title—white and red—point toward something about race? Do its scenes of playful cruelty to animals evoke systemic racism? Brady paused and took stock of the situation. The play (billed as a comedy) generates all sorts of what Ricoeur might call "surplus meaning" in its performance. Brady balanced a night of improvisational silliness with palpable reverence for the play's themes about the *spectacle* of death, self-sacrifice, playful freedom, and obedience. Following the production's established convention to signal when breaking from the script, Brady raised his hand to ask "Do you see what he's saying here?" The play never stopped being funny, but its meditations about the danger of absolute obedience took on specificity in surplus meanings created by the interpretive work of a famous Black actor in the United States guiding his room full of players on *this* anniversary.

One section of Soleimanpour's script enumerates seventeen "ways to commit suicide", perhaps meant to be improvised (Soleimanpour 2017, pp. 46–47). The page can be elongated and played for laughs by miming each item as a theatrical prompt. In some ways, that suicide list in *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* (far from its only reference to self-sacrifice or self-caused death) recapitulates rehearsal improvisation games that heighten melodrama to the point of absurdity. Brady refused to play the suggestions in order to underscore the seriousness of the play's questions. (He made one exception for a slip of the tongue—I cannot remember exactly, perhaps from "hunger strike" to "hunger shark" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 47)—and consented to improvise death by shark attack. Brady made a hilarious squeaking noise as he donned a mimed "swimming cap".) Brady made no special emphasis to the phrases "hanging" or "provoking the police" in his performance (Soleimanpour's suicide options number seven and seventeen, respectively). But the spectacle of a Black man's death (even if it is "very probably FAKE") to entertain the (predominantly) white audience can turn the focus of theodramatic interpretation. The text connects this singular performance with the moment of composition, but the context of the memory of King's assassination and the persistence of anti-Black racism and violence in the United States situated the play's Showtime in a third crosscurrent of history. As James H. Cone puts it, "The lynching tree is the cross in America" (Cone 2011, p. 158.) The play's freedom for interpretation beyond its textual boundaries finds in this actor, theatrically "poisoned" and sacrificed in obedience to the plot, an image of the lynched Christ.<sup>55</sup> Brady's performance brought, in M. Shawn Copeland's term, enlashed theological meanings to rupture expectations about the play's theodramatic form (Copeland 2009).

Performance generates meanings beyond what might be presumed to be intended. These include von Balthasar's presumptions about directors that impose the politics of the present onto drama (or theology).<sup>56</sup> "Now our creaturely becoming has a share in the ineffable 'becoming' of the Divine Being" (Balthasar 1998, p. 131). The play performs its own theatrical inverse of theodramatic reality: the play stages what one dares to hope is a *virtual* (Soleimanpour's "fake") manifestation of the actor's

<sup>55</sup> Dolores Williams, by contrast, calls into question the notion of kenotic substitution of the Christ's death for the sake of the world as "surrogacy". Williams critiques the image of surrogacy that rhetorically connects the historical experience of Black women in the United States with Christian theologies of substitutionary atonement. (See Williams 1991, p. 9ff.) See also Williams discussion of the rhetorical power of theological symbols in (Williams 1993).

<sup>56</sup> "Here the director meets his hardest task: he must be committed enough to make the play relevant and at the same time civilized enough not to equate this here-and-now relevance with a narrow doctrine of society. The theatre is a political reality, in a lofty and noble sense, but it should not be misused for political party propaganda" (Balthasar 1988, p. 303, emphasis original).

forsakenness by the playwright in *potential* self-sacrifice. Dramatic art operates in Soleimanpour to disclose reality in the drama of history. *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* makes present a threat for theatre's madness and violence to become real. But such is the threat of free obedience to *any* script. One never knows for sure until after making choices. The play concludes with an audience exiting while the actor lays *and* lies "dead". Brady remained still, and the room of audience-players departed in a reverential silence usually reserved for the sacred.

Alejandro Garcia-Rivera argues that theological aesthetics in the tradition of von Balthasar can become a means for "lifting up the lowly" (García-Rivera 1999, pp. 187–96).<sup>57</sup> Time and bodies confront Soleimanpour's text to tell complex and ambiguous stories: Iranian political oppression, anti-Blackness in the United States, a cosmic theodrama. *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* questions the closure of theatrical or theological interpretation in obedience to a singular vision of possibility. Brady's improvisation can be one way of enfleshing what Ashon T. Crawley calls "otherwise possibility" (Crawley 2017).<sup>58</sup> But the singularity of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* carries with it the melancholy of a loss. Like von Balthasar's notion of the history of the world illumined by the fact of the Christ's incarnation, the play can only be played once as an actor without knowledge of what comes next. Now, with awareness and dramatic irony, the play opens for participation in infinite numbers of *other* credible interpretations. Players return to participate in yet another instantiation of its "eph-hapax" meaning. Anyone who has seen or read the play now can produce it with Soleimanpour's permission included in the script (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 55).<sup>59</sup>

*White Rabbit Red Rabbit* aims for some real connection via the timelessness and spacelessness of words made present. Even after its performance, *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* gestures toward creaturely invitation to resurrected life as something akin to von Balthasar's theology of all creature's ability to participate in the Christ's, the Actor-Son's death. Death's "non-time" has been engulfed by God's eternity.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps it can be better put in the language of Blanchot's "feeling of lightness" of "the infinite opening up?" when writing the experience of a halted execution: "I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. 'I am alive. No, you are dead'" (Blanchot 2000, pp. 8–9). Blanchot's phrase now applies to Brady (still alive and still working as an actor, at least at the time of my writing, still alive and still working on this essay) and to everyone else complicit in a production of *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*. So too is the confrontation between Blanchot's phrase and the work still left to do for every player in a social drama so tacitly complicit in anti-Black violence. *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* calls attention to present and active bodies, especially those whose surplus meanings fail to obey arbitrary genre expectations. The play's theodramatic Showtime displays religious and theatrical co-present and co-presence to be freeing even if already written: "I did not see you, but in a way, I met you. And I am happy. The end" (Soleimanpour 2017, p. 63).

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<sup>57</sup> An experience of the Beautiful—in community—lifts up the lowly because "The aesthetic sign 'calls' the heart to discern original Beauty so that it may orient itself towards a Beautiful end" (García-Rivera 1999, p. 190).

<sup>58</sup> For Crawley, "enfleshment [is] distinct from embodiment . . . enfleshment is the movement to, the vibration of, liberation and this over and against embodiment that presumes a subject of theology, a subject of philosophy, a subject of history" (Crawley 2017, p. 6).

<sup>59</sup> There can be no easy *legal* identification of the play's writer, called Nassim Soleimanpour, and the owner of the play's intellectual property, presumably the same Nassim Soleimanpour. The print version contradicts the play's text; its copyright page asserts "All rights whatsoever in this play are strictly reserved and application for performance etc. should be made . . . to Nassim Soleimanpour c/o Oberon Books. No performance may be given . . . and not alterations may be made . . . without the author's prior written consent". But is such consent not already contained within the play's text?

<sup>60</sup> "In his Resurrection, Jesus has already taken the whole of transitory time (including life and death) with him into eternal life which was the source of his constant obedience to the Father's commission. This means he also recapitulated the 'non-time' of the dead. It also means that the Risen One does not live in some 'intermediate time' before the 'end of the world'" (Balthasar 1998, p. 128, with internal references to Adrienne von Speyr). Due diligence notes that while von Balthasar also appeals to the poetics of wideness, he more frequently invokes military-sexual metaphors for God's relationship to the world and its time. For example, "God intends not only to dominate creaturely time from above but to embed it, with all its created reality, in his eternal time" (Balthasar 1998, p. 127).

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