Performances of Faith:
Post-Vatican II American Catholicism on the Professional Secular Stage

by

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In the United States, Catholicism as a subject matter for theatrical performance was predominantly relegated to amateur, parish, and educational stages prior to the 1960s. From the 1960s through the present day, however, New York City has hosted an influx of representations of Catholicism on Broadway and Off-Broadway stages. In my project, I investigate how productions featuring representations of Catholicism engage with aspects of history to portray Catholicism as lived relationships between humans and the supernatural. My project turns to Broadway and Off-Broadway stages to examine how these lived relationships are recognized in commercial secular theatre. In that Broadway and Off-Broadway highlight artists from a variety of backgrounds and seek to serve diverse audiences, productions in these spaces provide the opportunity to examine how representations of Catholicism are crafted to broadly engage with American society. Insofar as Broadway and Off-Broadway is the center of commercial theatre in the United States, the productions provide opportunities to consider how representations of Catholicism differently resonate with New York audiences. My dissertation identifies common dramaturgical strategies used within productions to craft iterations of lived relationships between humans and the supernatural. It explores how these dramaturgical strategies represent and/or engage with aspects of history to further frame narratives of Catholic experience. Thus, my project illustrates how secular, commercial theatre in the United States gives credence to how Catholics
experience the divine historically and in contemporary life in order to reflect on the acceptance of American Catholicism post-Vatican II.
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Preface

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At the Catholic University of America, I was fortunate to study with Rosalind Flynn whose unwavering dedication to forming well-rounded theatre educators encouraged me to continue to hone my craft as an artist and an educator in order to best serve my students.

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1.0 Introduction

The 1960s marked significant changes with regards to how Catholicism was positioned and manifested in American society. John F. Kennedy’s election in 1961 suggested a shift in American attitudes towards public displays of Catholicism from three decades earlier when Al Smith’s 1928 campaign was met with noted anti-Catholic opposition.\footnote{Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of An American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension*, (Oxford, 2002), 192.} In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, American Catholics were torn with regards to how they should situate themselves within American society. American Catholicism was predominantly practiced among immigrant groups who upon settling, developed small insular communities. The insularity of these groups invited criticism from both the hierarchy of the Catholic Church as well as other groups with regards to whether American Catholics should be required to assimilate to American culture.\footnote{Ibid, 146.} Meanwhile, small groups of American-born Catholics, who were predominantly educated, sought to reconcile the relationship between Catholicism and American culture by encouraging Catholics to engage more publicly with American society with varying degrees of success.\footnote{Ibid, 146-147.} As Catholicism continued to grow in the United States, American Catholicism became increasingly public, if not always accepted, in the public sphere. While Kennedy’s campaign was not entirely free of anti-Catholic opposition, his election was “a symbolic moment that appeared to mark the end of people’s bias
against Catholics.” Kennedy’s election suggested the broader acceptance of American Catholics in public life and invited secular society to engage more freely with public perceptions of Catholic identity with regards to what it means to be both American and Catholic in modern life.

Catholic optics also began to change with the election of John XXIII in 1958. John XIII was noted for eliminating much of the pomp associated with the prior papacy, getting rid of the papal tiara and driving through the streets of Rome, a practice that was unheard of at that time for a pope. His personable nature drew comparisons to John F. Kennedy, and the two men were often linked together as having a common destiny. The public performances of both men warranted significant attention as these Catholic leaders demonstrated that Catholics were able to provide leadership suited to modern society. John XXIII continued to make waves with regards to the image of the Catholic Church when he chose to convene the Second Vatican Council which sought to consider the role of Catholicism in the modern world. Although the public impact of changes effecting American Catholicism, including Kennedy’s election and Vatican II, have been discussed by scholars such as Jay Dolan, Mark S. Massa, Gary Wills, Colleen McDannell, and Robert Orsi, this culture shift also had an impact on Catholic representation in the theatre which has gone unexamined.

As the face of Catholicism began to change in the United States, so too did its representation within the theatre as religious, culturally religious, and secular artists began to turn to New York City professional stages to explore the changing role of Catholicism in contemporary

\[\text{\footnotesize \(\text{\footnotesize \footnotesize \footnotesize \footnotesize 4 \text{ Ibid.}\)}}\]

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American life by engaging with different aspects of Catholic history. In the United States, Catholicism as a subject matter for theatrical performance was predominantly relegated to amateur, parish, and educational stages prior to the 1960s. In the event that professional productions portrayed Catholicism on the stage, they often turned to a generalized iteration of Catholicism that more broadly aligned with the Judeo-Christian tradition or represented figures that were recognizably Catholic, but their religious affiliation had little to do with the plot of the play.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, New York City began to see an influx of representations of Catholicism on Broadway and Off-Broadway, the commercial theatre center of the United States. By the 1980s, Catholic subject matter was receiving unprecedented attention in commercial theatre in New York City. For example, in 1982 newspaper editorial, Fr. Robert E. Lauder notes that in seven months the following plays featuring Catholicism opened on the New York commercial stage: *Mass Appeal*, *Kingdoms*, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, *Agnes of God*, *Catholic School Girls*, *Bella Figura*, and *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* The diverse array of representations of Catholicism was notable on the stages of New York which had no history of paying significant attention to Catholic subject matter in the past. Moving forward into the current moment, Catholicism has continued to be a popular subject matter on Broadway and Off-Broadway stages.

In my project, I investigate how productions featuring representations of Catholicism engage with aspects of history to consider the ways that Catholicism manifests, at least in part, as

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lived relationships between humans and the supernatural. My project turns to Broadway and Off-Broadway stages to examine how these lived relationships are recognized in commercial secular theatre. In that Broadway and Off-Broadway highlight the talent of artists from a wide variety of backgrounds with varying religious affiliations and seek to serve diverse audiences, productions in these spaces provide the opportunity to examine how representations of Catholicism are crafted to broadly engage with American society. Moreover, insofar as Broadway and Off-Broadway is the center of commercial theatre in the United States, the productions provide opportunities to consider how representations of Catholicism differently resonate with New York audiences. My dissertation identifies common dramaturgical strategies used within productions to craft iterations of lived relationships between humans and the supernatural. It explores how these dramaturgical strategies represent and/or engage with elements of history to further frame narratives of Catholic experience. Thus, my project illustrates how secular, commercial theatre in the United States gives credence to how Catholics experience the divine historically and in contemporary life in order to reflect on the acceptance of American Catholicism post-Vatican II.

10 Broadway and Off-Broadway productions serve diverse audiences insofar as they seek to appeal to broad demographics. Notably, these spaces often cater to a wide array of patrons from New York as well as national and international tourists. Given their tourist patrons, these spaces garner more diverse audiences than regional theatres. Although there has been an increasingly diverse audience in recent years, in light of the cost and physical location of these performances, they still serve a predominantly white audience, and their patrons are largely high-income earners (The Broadway League, “The Broadway League Reveals ‘The Demographics Of The Broadway Audience’ For 2017–2018 Season,” The Broadway League, The Broadway League, 2019, www.broadwayleague.com/press/press-releases/the-broadway-league-reveals-the-demographics-of-the-broadway-audience-for-20172018-season/).
1.1 Catholicism & Vatican II

While Kennedy’s election marked a changing point in the public image of Catholicism, the Second Vatican Council- initiated by John XXIII- marked a second turning point in the practice of American Catholicism as the Catholic Church revisited its relationship to the modern world. This event in Catholic history signaled significant changes for American Catholics with regards to how they engaged with Catholicism within the church as well as how American Catholicism manifested outside of the Church. As theatrical representations of Catholicism became increasingly prominent on the commercial, secular stage, these representations predominantly engaged with the shifts in American Catholic identity post-Vatican II.

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) was held from October 11, 1962, to December 8, 1965. During the four years the Council convened, it produced sixteen documents intended to guide the development of the Church in the modern world. Whereas past councils convened solely to define theological doctrines, Vatican II sought to provide better means of pastoral care in contemporary society, seeking to ascertain and strengthen the role of the Church in the modern world.11 It examined the institutional structure of the Church and the manner in which people were called to participate in the life of the modern Church.12 It reconsidered the role of the laity within the church, examining how the laity may become more active in parish life. As a result of the council, a variety of changes were implemented throughout the Church including the following: changing the language of the Mass from Latin to the vernacular, emphasizing


12 Ibid, 296-297.
increasing lay familiarity with the Bible, adapting music to reach a broader audience, and allowing the laity to distribute Communion and serve as lectors at Mass. After the council, many positions in parish life were relegated to the laity rather than the clergy and women religious as they had been in the past, increasing lay involvement in the parish, and contributing to a significant decrease in numbers among the clergy and religious.

Vatican II also marked the beginning of a cultural shift of American Catholicism in which there began a growing disparity between Americans who identified as Catholic and those actively involved in parish life. On the one hand, as mentioned, there was increased opportunity for involvement for the laity in the church. On the other hand, however, self-identifying Catholics increasingly distanced themselves from regular participation in parish life, a trend that has continued through the current day. While the 1950s marked a time in which American Catholicism was at its peak in the United States, representing more than a quarter of the population, post-Vatican II there was a significant decrease in individuals who were actively attending

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16 Regular church attendance in the United States has been reduced almost by half in the last thirty years despite a significant rise in the self-identifying Catholics in the U.S. from 48.8 to 76.7 million between 1965 and 2014. (Michael Lipka, “The number of U.S. Catholics has grown so why are there fewer parishes?” *Pew Research Center*, 6 November 2014, accessed 10 November 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/11/06/the-number-of-u-s-catholics-has-grown-so-why-are-there-fewer-parishes/.)
church.\textsuperscript{17} Jay Dolan notes that along with these changes in Catholic practice, “there has been a massive increase in the number of Catholics living on the margin of the church.”\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, where American Catholicism in the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century was marked by insularity, post-Vatican II Catholicism sought to increasingly integrate its identity with American culture.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, the 1960s points to a unique divide in American Catholicism in which the laity, most often cradle Catholics born pre-Vatican II, involved in the sacramental life of the Church were more actively in parish life while the other half of the laity, often those born after Vatican II, gradually disengaged from parish life. This contradiction in Catholic religious practice has continued to develop significantly over the past fifty years raising questions as to what it means to be an American Catholic after Vatican II.\textsuperscript{20}

As notions of Catholic identity were revisited in the 1960’s, American Catholics grappled with what it meant to be Catholic. In \textit{Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion}, Gary Wills observes that:

In the past, D.H. Lawrence claimed, our civilization’s “dirty little secret” was sex. But the church’s secret, hidden away in official teaching, minimized when it could not be ignored, was \textit{change}. Other things came and went, captive to history. But the gates of hell would not prevail against the church, and the gates of hell often looked like history, or the latest products of history- “modernism,” science, rationalism. We did not deal with such fads. What was sound in them the church had always


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 196.


possessed. [Thus] the experience of change came to Catholics as a form of personal crisis.\textsuperscript{21}

Wills, whose sentiments are later echoed by Jay Dolan and Mark S. Massa, S.J., proceeds to suggest that reconciling with the changes inside and outside of the Church became a notable characteristic of American Catholicism.\textsuperscript{22} The attempt to reconcile changes in the Church with contemporary life was played out not only within the home and parish but also on secular, commercial stages.

\textbf{1.2 Literature Review: Catholicism and 20\textsuperscript{th} & 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Theatre}

Despite its increasing prominence on the professional stage, recent theatre scholarship has paid little attention to the representation of Catholicism on the modern and contemporary stage. With the exception of Kevin Wetmore’s anthology, \textit{Catholic Theatre and Drama}, contemporary theatre scholarship addressing Catholicism is extremely limited. As a whole, the anthology is interested in the long history of Catholic theatre as a genre. In the anthology’s introduction, Wetmore begins to consider how secular theatre engages with Catholicism, acknowledging that the “theatre… serves as a place where issues within the Church can be engaged and discussed outside the Church.”\textsuperscript{23} He notes how plays such as \textit{Mass Appeal, Agnes of God, and Doubt}, trouble

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Gary Wills, \textit{Bare Ruined Churches: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion}, (New York: Paulist, 2014), 22.
\end{itemize}
traditional understandings of Catholic theatre. Wetmore then asks his readers to consider how contemporary representations of Catholicism within secular theatre fit within the history of Catholic theatre. Nonetheless, after drawing attention to the changing representation of Catholicism in theatre, Wetmore’s collection focuses on older performances of Catholic theatre that were produced within a definitively Catholic context, leaving his questions unanswered. The only essay that deals with a contemporary performance in his anthology examine contemporary university productions of pre-modern plays. Accordingly, although Wetmore is aware that Catholicism is being reconfigured on the contemporary stage, his project does not address these changes. Moreover, whereas Wetmore’s project is invested in exploring specifically “Catholic theatre” performed over in various geographies and time periods, my project is not invested in examining theatre that is necessarily defined as Catholic theatre nor is my project interested in defining Catholic theatre. Instead, my project investigates how Catholicism is represented on some of the most prominent secular stages in the United States.

Excluding Wetmore’s work, the bulk of writings on Catholicism in the theatre was written in the middle of the 20th century, primarily by Catholics, both lay and religious. Most of the existing scholarship focuses on performances of Catholicism in parishes, schools, or religiously-affiliated organizations. For example, Sister Mary Michael Keefe addresses the theatrical work of Catholics interested in using theatre as a tool for evangelization through the organization of the National Catholic Theatre Conference. Keefe’s dissertation, “The National Catholic Theatre Conference: Its Aims and Its Achievements,” sought to document the development of the NCTC

24 Ibid, 4.
from 1963 through 1963. The conference specifically sought to develop plays that catered to parish and community theatres to cultivate Catholicism in the United States. Among other aspects of the NCTC, her project addressed how one of the problems facing the Conference was that it was confronted with the “the highly geared competition of the secular theatre.” Thus, Keefe situates her research as distinct from the secular. Interestingly, it is as the NCTC comes to an end that we begin to see an increase in representations of Catholicism on the secular stage rather than in the parish and community theatres fostered by the NCTC. Whereas Keefe situates her research as distinct from the secular, I am interested in the conditions that allow for theatrical representations of Catholicism to become increasingly prominent on the secular commercial stage as they begin to fall out of fashion with specifically Catholic theatre communities. Moreover, I am interested in how presenting representations of Catholicism in secular theatre spaces reflects the ways in which ideas of Catholicism are shifting more broadly within the United States.

Additionally, when scholars do address how Catholicism intersects with the commercial stage, it is in light of Catholic responses to the moral dangers of the commercial stage. The tensions between the moral standards set by the Catholic Church and those challenged on the stage are explored by scholars such as Frances Panchok and Michael Francis Kelly. Frances Panchok’s dissertation, “The Catholic Church and the Theatre in New York, 1890-1920,” chronicles how the Catholic Theatre Movement and the Catholic Actors Guild formed to respond to the commercial theatre. Her project analyzes how these organizations sought to reconcile the relationships between Catholicism with the commercial theatre, because at the time, the Church banned the clergy and


26 Ibid., 168.
discouraged the laity from attending. Nonetheless, her project focuses on how Catholicism and Catholic iterations of theatre were separate from the commercial theatre. Similarly, Michael Francis Kelly’s, “The Reaction of the Catholic Church to the Commercial Theatre in New York City,” addresses how Catholic theology was used to position the Church against the commercial theatre. His project further investigates how specific groups such as the Catholic Actors Guild, the Catholic Writers Guild, the Catholic Drama Guild, the Catholic Dramatic Movement, the Blackfriars’ Guild, and the National Theatre Catholic Conference formed to counter the secular stage.

In contrast to the aforementioned projects, Matthew Powell, O.P. explores how Catholicism begins to interact with the commercial stages in New York City in the 20th and 21st century in his book, God Off-Broadway: the Blackfriars Theatre of New York. In his book, Powell outlines how the Dominicans played a significant role in the development of the Off-Broadway movement. He is interested in how the “Blackfriars was one of the very attempts by a religious group to conduct a professional-level theatre, the only professional level theatre ever conducted by a Catholic organization in the United States.”

Powell thus traces the history of the development of the Blackfriars theatre, focusing on the steps the Dominicans took to establish the theatre. In my project, I investigate, not only the role that Catholics play in developing commercial productions, but also the ways in which artists of various backgrounds and religious affiliations

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use the commercial stage to develop representations of Catholicism to participate in conversations surrounding the changing ideas of Catholic practice. Although Powell begins to explore the ways in which the image of Catholicism is perpetuated on the commercial stages in New York City, my project investigates how artists more broadly use secular stages to craft iterations of Catholicism from a variety of perspectives.

Although secular, commercial representations of Catholicism have received minimal coverage in theatre scholarship, both Jerome Ellison’s *God on Broadway* and Henry Bial’s *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage* explore secular commercial productions that uphold broad Judeo-Christian interpretations of the supernatural. Ellison’s project adopts Jungian psychology to examine how the commercial stage portrays iterations of a God-figure, drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In contrast, Bial’s work focuses on Bible-based plays. With regards to putting the Bible onstage, Bial notes that the Bible is generally held in a place of respect within society, regardless of people’s personal belief in it.  

30 He further acknowledges that, “Secular theatre artists may not fear God’s judgment, but the judgment of public opinion is a powerful motivator, and as newspaper critic James Huneker once wrote, “Blasphemy- alleged or real- does not rhyme with box office.”  

31 Accordingly, in order to gain favor amongst audiences, the Biblical narratives, generally, accord a certain degree of respect from theatre artists as subject matter at the very least in order to sustain profit.  

32 Moreover, representations of religion that do not adopt the characteristics of a specific religious denomination resist offending audience members by avoiding


31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.
representing specificities of their religion; they also resist alienating audience members of other religious denominations by presenting a more general representation that appeals to a broader audience.

Bial and Ellison notably provide a foundation to discuss the performance of the supernatural in the performance of narratives of religion onstage. Nonetheless, while both scholars acknowledge the performance of the supernatural, their studies provide a generalized overview of how the supernatural presents within religious histories that espouse a generally Protestant approach to understanding the supernatural. They do this insofar as both studies look at absent or generalized iterations of God that are not specific to a specific religious denomination. In contrast, my project examines how God is performed on Broadway and Off-Broadway from a strictly Catholic perspective in order to more specifically consider the commercial potential of Catholic representations of the divine in secular spaces.

1.3 Methodology: Presence, Dramaturgy, and History in Performance

One of the most notable elements that shapes productions’ relationship to Catholicism is the ways in which Catholic ideas of presence are recognized within performance. Catholicism’s relationship to presence distinguishes it from other religious traditions. Within Catholic tradition, presence suggests that not only is God working spiritually on earth, but He is able to physically manifest His presence on earth. This idea of presence is best exemplified in the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist which is considered within Catholicism to be “the source and summit
of the Christian life.”33 Unlike other communion celebrations within varying Christian traditions, the premise of the Eucharist is that Christ is made materially present through the wine and bread rather than the wine and bread serving as merely a symbol. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes this understanding claiming that, “In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist, “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.’”34 This idea of presence manifests itself in other elements of Catholic teaching and tradition as well. For example, the Catholic Church believes that Mary, the Mother of God, has appeared and spoken to Catholics throughout the world multiple times over the 2000 years since her death.35 Devotions arising around the cult of the saints in the Middle Ages contend that pious individuals bearing the stigmata displayed the wounds of Christ on their hands and feet.36 Catholic devotions relying upon the intercession of the saints rely on one’s belief that by asking for a saint to intercede for them in the afterlife, their prayers may be answered and yield both spiritual and physical effects on earth.37 The performance of Catholic presence within the burgeoning representations of Catholicism on the secular stage post-Vatican II became a means of establishing the production’s relationship with contemporary practices and understandings of Catholicism. In doing so, these performances do two things. First, they call upon


37 Patrick J. Geary, Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages, (New York: Cornell, 1994).
aspects of Catholic history and contemporary practice to explore the ways in which supernatural presence manifests in lived experience within Catholic history and the present. Secondly, the productions under investigation craft different iterations of the supernatural in order to affirm, destabilize, or reject different notions of Catholic practice. My dissertation identifies and examines how common dramaturgical strategies engage with elements of Catholic history in secular theatre engaged in order to reflect on lived relationships between humans and the supernatural. In doing so, my project highlights how secular, commercial theatre gives credence to how Catholics experience the divine in order to reflect on the acceptance of American Catholicism post-Vatican II.

My project is invested in examining how performances of supernatural presence are crafted onstage to portray lived relationships with presence within Catholic history and contemporary practice. It builds upon the work of Religious Studies scholar, Robert Orsi. In his most recent book, *History and Presence*, Religious Studies scholar, Robert Orsi proposes that the idea of supernatural presence is often overlooked in scholarship, specifically with regards to Catholicism. Orsi proposes that the narrative of religion in modernity is one in which the presence of the supernatural has been made absent. Furthermore, Orsi specifically critiques the fact that the materiality of presence is often overlooked in narratives of Catholicism within scholarship, noting that this has a significant impact on the way Catholics conduct their lives. He suggests that modernity is rooted in a divide between absence and presence.

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39 Ibid, 6.
Speaking of absence, Orsi refers to how religion is studied in light of symbolism; any material objects within a religion are considered in light of their symbolic relationship to religious belief. With regards to presence, Orsi is speaking of the idea of presence proposed in Catholic theology which allows for the material presence of the supernatural as well as the spiritual. He proposes that this idea entered the narrative of modernity at the time of the Counter Reformation when the Protestants split from the Catholic Church in protest of the notion that Christ was fully present in the Eucharist. Thus, with regards to the differences in Christian belief systems, he argues that Catholicism is characterized by its belief in presence, and Protestantism by absence. Because, however, the material effects of supernatural presence are difficult to prove, ideas of presence are overlooked in the ways religious belief has been addressed in the writing of history. However, Orsi suggests that regardless of whether or not the existence of the supernatural can be proven, the daily lives of individuals practicing religion, speaking specifically of Catholicism, entails a lived relationship with supernatural presence that needs to be taken into account. Orsi begins to grapple with this dilemma by providing an account of modern American Catholicism that is comprised not of accounts of the political, social, and theological precepts that change and effect the church, but rather based on accounts of the lived experiences of members of the laity who claim various relationships with the supernatural over the course of their lives. With my project, I explore how performances use dramaturgical strategies to reclaim narratives that recognize the possibility of presence within the lived experiences of Catholic individuals.

40 Ibid, 25.
41 Ibid, 38.
I argue that contemporary secular theatre On- and Off-Broadway productions engages a variety of dramaturgical strategies that act as key factors in crafting Catholic ideas of supernatural presence, and I illustrate how these strategies inform the ways in which different narratives of Catholicism are performed. Moreover, I suggest that these performances engage aspects of Catholic history and contemporary practice in order to respond to post-Vatican II Catholicism. I draw on Jill Stevenson’s definition of dramaturgy which suggests that dramaturgy encompasses a variety of performative elements including the body, the stage space, the spectators, props, costumes, lighting, sound, staging, and text in order to frame a performative experience. I examine the ways in which these strategies are used to create dramaturgies of presence within the productions. Moreover, I argue that dramaturgies of presence are differently engaged within productions according to whether the production affirms, questions, destabilizes, or absents the divine from Catholic histories and experiences.

Re-examining the role of the supernatural in Catholic histories allows me to further consider how these performances challenge the idea of what can be considered as history. In his introduction to Rethinking History, historian, Hayden White, argues that the difference between history and fiction is that the former is concerned with what is “true” and the latter with what is “real”. What is “true,” he proposes is that which can be confirmed through the remains of documentary records. In contrast, he argues that, “the real consists of everything that can truthfully said about (an event’s) actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could

possibly be.” White observes that a historical account that prioritizes what is true prioritizes a limited view of time and place in that it accounts for only that which can be proven. It neglects to account for the larger circumstances surrounding a historical moment of which historians may no longer have proof. White proposes that a study of the past calls for a both “art and information,” calling for a blend of both what is true and what is real in order to capture the broader reality of a historical moment that extend beyond what is communicated only through archival materials.

In Orsi’s call for a history of presence, he begins to account for different lived relationships with presence by documenting human practices that reflect lived relationships with presence. Nonetheless, his history is still derived from a method of historical inquiry that prioritizes the “true,” in that his examples of lived relationships with presence are still based on human practices that can be witnessed. I am interested in how the divine is manifested in lived relationships with presence, but also the possibility that it might physically manifest independently. Accordingly, I explore how theatre artists engage with aspects of Catholic history and contemporary life in order to craft narratives that reflect both on how people live in relationship to the divine as well as how the divine may manifest in everyday life. The potential to enact presence onstage has the ability to further perpetuate histories of presence insofar as it has the potential to depict both humans and supernatural presence as players within the history of Catholicism and in contemporary Catholic practice, giving further credence to both the “true” and the “real” of history.

Theatrical performance provides an alternative model of crafting histories that allows for a history of presence that has the potential to forefront the ways in which both humans and the


44 Ibid. 149.
supernatural interact within religious experience. As Freddie Rokem observes in *Performing History*, “theatrical performances about historical events are aesthetic adaptations or revisions of events that we more or less intuitively (or on the basis of some form of general knowledge or consensus) know have actually occurred.”45 In that theatrical performances of history seek to perform an iteration of history that is broadly accepted as having occurred, theatrical performances of history are broadly based upon what is “true”. Moreover, given that theatrical performance calls for an approach to history that allows for adaptation it lends itself to incorporating what White referred to as the “real.” Theatrical performances of historical events allow for aesthetic or revisions of events that incorporate the possibilities of what might have occurred in a given circumstance.

Theatre historians and performance scholars already turn to performance to consider how performance serves as a form of history/historiography to highlight how the true and the real function within performances of history. For example, Della Pollock explores how performance serves as a method of historiography that depends on embodied performance to draw attention to the tensions between different historical times and interpretations. Pollock argues that performance participates in the practice of historiography in that, “The body practices history. It incarnates, mediates, and resists the metahistories with which it is impressed. It wrestles with the totalizing and legitimizing power of such historical tropes as *telos* and progress… It performs its differences in and from history and it articulates history as difference.”46 Pollock proposes that an embodied


performance of history draws attention to the nuances of history insofar as the body is able to highlight the ways in which history does not function as a singular metanarrative. Similarly Matthew Cornish is also invested in how performances of history challenge understandings of the true and the real. His project examines how performances of archival material accentuate the possible nuances of written historical documents. Cornish purports that performances of archival material can be used to destabilize notions that archival and written historical material provides a stable version of history.47

The performances under investigation engage with history using a variety of dramaturgical strategies that rethink the ways in which the true and the real in religious practice may have occurred. In some cases, the performances more strictly adhere to the “true”, revising only for the sake of the coherence of the script as is demonstrated in *The Trial of Catonsville Nine*. The majority of these performances, however, take more significant liberties with how they represent aspects of history in their performances. For example, these plays insert fictional characters into a historical moment, re-envision the ways in which a historical figure engaged within a historical event, or revisit a moment in history through the lens of select memories. These plays are not necessarily focused on crafting an iteration of history based on archival evidence, but rather on the broader ways in which individuals might have navigated these circumstances regardless of whether their participation in this moment had an impact on the outcome of the event. Through these approaches the performances engage with aspects of the “true” in Catholic history and contemporary practice-to greater or lesser degrees. However, they also reimagine the different ways in which people might have engaged with that moment regardless of whether there is archival evidence to support

such a narrative. By taking this approach, the performances draw their audience’s attention to the broader spectrum of possibilities of human experience that may have occurred in a given moment. Moreover, in some instances, they also engage with aspects of the present day in order to explore the ways in which historical moments continue to resonate with or impact the current moment. By engaging broadly with history in performance rather than by performing iterations of history based only that which is definitively known about a particular moment, these performances serve as historiographical models that may account for both the “true” and the “real” in Catholic history and contemporary practice.

With regards to crafting histories of Catholic experience, then, performance allows for a broad spectrum of representations. In keeping with documentary theatre, it can capture a history of a religious event based entirely on archival material, emphasizing only what can be recorded and proven. However, it also has the potential to consider the ways that elements of human experience that cannot be proven may be accounted for through the performance of a narrative. In doing so, it can account for lived relationships between humans and the supernatural in human experience. The performed narrative may imitate the embodied actions of an individual to point to the ways in which humanity lives out relationships with supernatural presences. However, it also has the potential to perform a history that allows for the physical embodiment of the supernatural within the production that allows the audience to consider the possibility of supernatural manifestation and intervention in a given historical moment.

My project explores productions that contain representations of Catholicism that debuted on Broadway or Off-Broadway between 1965 and the present. The plays under investigation are ones in which Catholic identity is intrinsic to the plot development rather than plays in which a character merely identifies as Catholic, and their Catholicism has little bearing on the plot. Each
of the five chapters identifies a different *dramaturgy of presence* and demonstrates how these different dramaturgical strategies are engaged to shape narratives that respond to contemporary practices and understandings of Catholicism. I consider how each of these strategies is used in performance to affirm, destabilize, or denounce aspects of Catholic practice and teachings.

Moreover, each chapter considers the commercial potential of these strategies on the secular stage. I specifically focus on productions on Broadway and Off-Broadway, as the cultural center of theatre in the United States, in order to examine the cultural capital of different iterations of Catholicism in the United States. In that the success of productions on Broadway and Off-Broadway has a significant influence on whether plays are given further attention on regional stages, in classrooms, and in anthologies, I am interested in how Catholicism is represented in these spaces and how that impacts the narratives of Catholicism most likely to be circulated via theatre in the United States. Broadway and Off-Broadway stages have predominantly been available to white artists. Thus, the representations of Catholicism crafted on these stages largely reflect experiences of Catholic belief among white American Catholics. In recent years, however, there is slowly starting to be an increase of representations of Catholicism crafted by artists of color that reflect more diverse representations of Catholicism. Although the stages of Broadway and Off-Broadway are beginning to acknowledge other cultural iterations of Catholicism, they still do not account for the increasing diversity within Catholicism in the United States today. A study of the representation of Catholicism on Broadway and Off-Broadway stages provides an opportunity to consider the power dynamics at work within commercial theatre that shape how

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48 I use the term, “cultural capital,” per Pierre Bordieu’s formulation to consider how different iterations of Catholicism were mobilized onstage in light of its economic success or in spite of its economic success (Pierre Bordieu, “The Forms of Capital,” https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Bourdieu-Forms-of-Capital.pdf).
narratives of Catholicism are crafted, performed, and circulated within secular theatre in the United States.

With regards to the dramaturgical strategies under investigation, Chapters One and Two examine plays that affirm the possibility of supernatural presence in keeping with the tenets of the Catholic Church. Chapter One looks at how presence is made physically present within Catholic histories. It looks at Stephen Adley Giurgis’s *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (2005) and Bill Cain’s *Equivocation* (2009) to consider how the *dramaturgies of presence* are engaged in production to uphold the materiality of supernatural presence. Chapter Two analyzes how presence is not made physically present, but is recognized as present in performances of memory set in the pre-Vatican II Catholic schoolroom in John R. Power’s *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up* (1982), Casey Kurtti’s *Catholic School Girls* (1982), and Vicki Quade and Maripat Donovan’s *Late Nite Catechism* (1996).

Chapter Three and Four depart from clear affirmations of Catholic presence. Chapter Three examines how *dramaturgies of presence* are developed that recognize the possibility of Catholic presence without confirming its existence. It analyzes John Pielmeier’s *Agnes of God* (1982), Matthew Lombardo’s *High* (2010), and Martin Zimmerman’s *Seven Spots on the Sun* (2017). It considers the ramifications of lived experiences with presence within Catholic experience while withholding a final judgment regarding whether the presence was truly present in each of the situations. Chapter Four turns to John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt* (2004), Christopher Durang’s *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (1981), and Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* (1998) to explore the ways in which the supernatural is deliberately erased/absented from narratives of Catholic history. The plays within this chapter each begin with an assumption of the divine. However, as the plays progress, the productions increasingly erase/absent iterations of divine
presence that align with the Catholic Church in order to destabilize and critique narratives of Catholicism.

Rather than explore a single dramaturgical strategy, Chapter Five examines the ways in which three different dramaturgies of presence are engaged in productions to consider the impact of lived relationships with presence pertaining to Catholic social justice issues. The chapter studies how James Berrigan, S.J.’s *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1971), Katori Hall’s *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2014), and Bill Cain, S.J.’s *9 Circles* (2017) cultivate performances of presence that reflect how presence impacts both individuals and groups in social justice affairs. Although the ideas of presence performed within the productions resonate with Catholic ideas of the supernatural, the productions also consider the efficacy of presence more broadly in human affairs, crafting histories of civic intervention that account for the divine’s role in the event.

Accordingly, this dissertation is an attempt to analyze how performances of Catholic history are largely shaped around ideas of presence. It seeks to examine how presence is configured within these performances to reflect upon Catholic teachings and practices. It is my hope that it will identify and explain the implications of different dramaturgies of Catholic presence in order to consider how the performance of presence reflects on Catholic history. Furthermore, in light of performance’s ability to re-envision history and explore the relationship between the real and true of history, this project is interested in how performances of Catholic history can expand audience’s understandings of the scope of possibilities within Catholic history and practice. Lastly, this project sets forth to consider how while, on the one hand, commercial secular stages provide the opportunity to disseminate these histories to significant numbers of people, the reach of these performances is still influenced by the commercial nature of Broadway and Off-Broadway theatre.
2.0 The Body of Christ on the Off-Broadway Stage

In *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage*, Henry Bial proposes that there are two primary reasons that people perform religion on the stage. The first reason is for religious purposes. As theatre scholars, Megan Sanborn Jones and Henry Bial acknowledge, the performance of religious figures by a religious group is promoted to pass down religious beliefs to the next generation. The second reason is for theatrical purposes. It is the latter which largely informs the choice to perform religion on the secular stage. In this case, religion is being performed as a means of entertainment rather than instruction. Whereas religious performances are predominantly performed before religious audiences, secular stages cannot assume that their audience espouses homogenous religious beliefs. Therefore, secular stages run risks of turning away audience members or incurring charges of blasphemy if their representations of religion do not resonate with the tradition from which they derive.

It is perhaps of little surprise that general outrage followed a 1908 Chicago production of *A Woman of the West*, written by Father Vaughan, a priest and former actor. The production contained a scene in which three minutes of the Catholic Eucharistic ritual were performed onstage, stopping before the consecration of the host. The performance of this piece warranted a

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significant outcry among members of the Catholic Church in attendance. Catholic authorities eventually denounced the play.\textsuperscript{52} The response to \textit{A Woman of the West} draws attention to the overlaps in the performative nature of both ritual and theatre and raises questions about the specific nature of their performances. Do both forms have the power to bring the supernatural into being? What happens when religious ritual is incorporated into performance?

One of the key distinctions between ritual and theatre is that the former enacts religious beliefs while the latter represents them. Performance theorist Richard Schechner addresses the nuances between ritual and theatre more specifically in his foundational performance studies texts. In “Ritual and Performance,” Schechner suggests that ritual and performance are differentiated based on their relationships to efficacy and entertainment respectively.\textsuperscript{53} He argues that the former emphasizes efficacy whereas the latter emphasizes entertainment. Rituals seek to “effect transformations, to heal, or to appeal to transcendent others... to get ‘results.’”\textsuperscript{54} In contrast, Schechner proposes that theatrical performances do not seek to replicate actual changes. He further differentiates between ritual and theatrical performance with regards to the level of participation asked of participants. With regards to theatrical performance, he notes that, “Theatre comes into existence when attendance is voluntary, allowing enough distance to pass judgment on the latter... If they dislike what they see, spectators may express their dissatisfaction, And if they stay away,

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\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
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or boo, it is the theatre that suffers, not its audience.” 55 Rather, he suggests that for those who participate in ritual “staying away means rejecting the congregation or being rejected by it.” 56

It is important to acknowledge that Schechner does not address the performance of rituals in theatre. Moreover, he holds that the distinctions between ritual and theatre fall within a spectrum. Notwithstanding, Henry Bial’s distinction between the purpose of theatre for religious purposes as opposed to entertainment is useful in understanding this spectrum. Using Bial’s distinction, the performance of ritual in theatre in A Woman of the West is performed for theatrical purposes rather than for religious ones. The performance of the ritual in this context does not seek to enact change by transforming the bread into the Eucharist. Instead the scene stops without completing the entire Eucharistic ritual onstage. A Woman of the West included the ritual within the production as a means of entertainment. The audience was not asked to participate within the partially performed rite, but rather watch it in the context of the larger performance brought about by the combined efforts of arts. Thus, it was performed within an optional setting rather than as a social contract within a religious community. Furthermore, the audience had the freedom to reject the performance. Their rejection was understood not as the rejection of the ritual, but rather the rejection of the theatre. Consequently, although the Catholic authorities cried out against the performance of the scene, this moment served as a mimetic interpretation of religious tradition onstage rather than the performance of the ritual itself. In doing so, the production models not how God can be brought into being for those who believe through the performance of ritual, but instead how God can be made visible in the theatre through the art of representation.

55 Ibid, 626.
56 Ibid.
As Henry Bial and Jerome Ellison acknowledge, there is an increased interest in the performance of religious tradition, specifically with regards to the performance of the supernatural on Broadway in the 20th century. Even so, these performances incur particular challenges that arise when portraying representations of supernatural presence on the secular stage. In Playing God: The Bible on Broadway, Henry Bial notes that two common obstacles that theatre makers encounter pertain to blasphemy and relatability. With regards to the first, Bial acknowledges that because the supernatural is an intrinsic element of Judeo-Christian traditions, representations of the supernatural that violate common theological understandings of the divine are likely to incur accusations of blasphemy. He notes further that, “Adaptations that explicitly represent God are the most prone to charges of blasphemy… Plays that do not attempt to represent the divine presence are less likely to be regarded as blasphemous.” Such accusations are rarely helpful in boosting box office sales. In light of this, Bial proposes that commercial theatre makers tend not to craft an image of the supernatural that aligns with a specific religious denomination’s idea of the supernatural. He argues instead that artists more often gravitate towards generalized, more neutral representations of the divine to avoid accusations of blasphemy and to appeal to a broader audience base.

While Henry Bial and Jerome Ellison are invested in generalized iterations of divine presence, I am interested in how the secular stage crafts theatricalized images of divine presence.


59 Ibid, 25.

60 Ibid, 12 & 25.
that call upon a particular religious tradition. Within my project, I look to theatrical performances of Catholic tradition specifically, because Catholic emphases on manifestations of presence differ from other Christian traditions. In particular, Catholic ideas of presence emphasize the materiality of the supernatural as well as its ability to effect tangible changes within human experience. As I addressed in my introduction, this distinction is at the root of the absence/presence divide in narratives of religion which Orsi convincingly argues began with the Reformation over arguments of whether or not the Eucharist was a symbol or the Body of Christ. The ability to perform iterations of presence onstage within narratives of Catholic history, first, gives credence to histories of presence through performance. Theatrical performances thus have the ability to recognize the role of the divine within the action presented onstage. By acknowledging Catholic presence and its ability to intervene in human affairs, a performance allows presence to become a player within the action of the play. Accordingly, with the performance of presence, histories of Catholicism on the stage are no longer stories of merely human action, but also supernatural action. Although such histories are largely taken for granted within Catholic culture, giving them credence within a secular space allows for the potential to affirm testimonies of lived relationships with presence beyond the religious sphere. In doing so, it broadens the scope of theatre’s ability to testify to a wider range of lived experiences.

Moreover, the ability to engage with specific ideas of religious tradition widens the possibility of secular theatre to serve as a space for the exchange of ideas. While the presentation of a generalized representation of religion allows the theatre to broadly engage with religious


practice, it still distances the theatre from directly responding to specific religious practices—whether positively or negatively. Thus, it serves as either a broad commentary on religion generally or merely as entertainment. However, by crafting performances that respond to specific religious traditions, the theatre opens itself up as space that can be used to engage the practice of religious tradition more directly. An analysis of what is commercially successful further provides an opportunity to reflect on the strategies that are most fruitful in garnering significant audience attention regarding religious topic matter.

In this chapter, I analyze the dramaturgical strategies, which I refer to as dramaturgies of presence, that affirm the Roman Catholic ideas of the materiality of presence on the secular stage. I explore how these dramaturgies of presence are engaged in two plays, Stephen Adley Giurgis’s *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (2005) and Bill Cain’s *Equivocation* (2009). These productions cultivate material representations of supernatural presence through their performance of Jesus and the Eucharist respectively. In doing so, both examples account for the materiality of the divine within human history, giving credence to a history of presence. In both plays, the materiality of the supernatural becomes a definitive element of the production.

*The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* and *Equivocation* engage three dramaturgical strategies to create a dramaturgy of material presence within their productions. First, the narratives of the plots of both plays are developed as “Who done it?” shows, borrowing the phrase from Bill Cain who describes his play as such.63 These plays are interested in the pursuit of historical truth, and thus, the plots each follow the journey of individuals seeking to discern the truth of a historically significant event. In the pursuit of the truth, both plays engage with the idea of the democratic

process in which characters literally and figuratively put the truth on trial within the performance. While both productions ultimately affirm religious belief, they entertain and explore both religious and secular understandings of truth as the characters discern different perceptions of truth throughout the narrative. Second, the productions of these plays each include a specific dramaturgical moment that embodies the presence of the supernatural in material form. Third, the productions rely on a performance of historicity. My use of historicity here derives from Della Pollock’s observation that, “The body practices history. It incarnates, mediates, and resists metahistories with which it is impressed. It wrestles with the totalizing and legitimizing power of such historical tropes as telos and progress… It performs its differences in and from history and it articulates history as difference.” In keeping with Pollock’s definition, the bodies of the actors resist a performance of the historical event as either fully past or fully present in the productions under investigation. Instead, the productions use different strategies that position the bodies of the actors between a performance of the past and present. Thus, the performances of history within the production simultaneously reflect on the past as well as continue to resonate in the contemporary moment. These three tactics form a dramaturgy of material presence by using the secular stage to craft an image of Catholicism that recognizes the materiality of presence as part of Catholicism’s historical and ongoing claim to knowledge of divine truth. In doing so, these productions construct representations of Catholicism that have the ability to affirm the theology of presence upheld by the Catholic Church; thereby the secular theatre becomes a vehicle to legitimize claims that the supernatural manifests materially.

The productions premiered Off-Broadway rather than on Broadway which may suggest an anticipated smaller audience size. Each of the productions had respectable run-times for Off-Broadway shows; both were scheduled to run for a limited amount of time. *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* was originally scheduled to run from March 2 through April 3, 2005. However, it ended up extending its run to accommodate an extra week of performances. Five years to the day after *The Last Day of Judas Iscariot* made its Off-Broadway debut, *Equivocation* debuted on March 2, 2010 at the Manhattan Theatre Club and ran through March 28, 2010. Despite their relative success during their limited runs on Off-Broadway, however, these productions have not gained the same attention and success among New York audiences attained by productions that perform more generalized iterations of Catholic presence that I will discuss later in my project. While there are a variety of factors that impact the success of an Off-Broadway show, Bial’s observation that more generalized productions of divinity are more popular with the box office also bears merit when applied to representations of religion. Bial notes that with regards to Biblical dramas, generalized iterations of God have more selling potential and less ability to incur blasphemy. This same premise applies to performances of the divine that adhere more closely to a specific religious tradition. While the productions throughout my project solely address performances of Catholic ideas of divinity, the productions that are more commercially successful are those that present a more generalized image of the supernatural. Commercially successful productions are more likely to recognize the supernatural as present, but physically absent with the performance, rather than


recognize the material manifestation of God within a production. Thus, with regards to narratives of Catholicism, New York theatre audiences are more likely to commercially support a religious history of absence rather than presence onstage.

2.1 Case Study: The Last Days of Judas Iscariot (2005)

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot, written by Stephen Adley Giurgis, debuted Off-Broadway at the Public Theater in New York City in April 2005 under the direction of Philip Seymour Hoffman. In The Last Days of Judas Iscariot, Giurgis puts the question of Judas’s eternal damnation on trial. The Catholic Church does not officially teach that Judas, nor anyone else, has ever been damned to Hell.\(^67\) Within Catholic theological tradition, the only two things unequivocally known about Judas are that he was one of the twelve apostles and he betrayed Jesus in his final hours.\(^68\) Nonetheless, within Catholic culture, it is commonly held that Judas went to Hell either because he betrayed Jesus or because he committed suicide. As a student, the playwright was informed by Dominican nuns that Judas was sent to Hell.\(^69\) Judas’s eternal damnation did not resonate with Giurgis’s image of an omnipotent and forgiving God. If God is merciful, why do Catholics presume that Judas went to Hell?\(^70\) Giurgis says that it was this belief


\(^68\) Ibid, 7.


\(^70\) Ibid.
that eventually turned him away from the Catholic church. Although The Last Days of Judas Iscariot deals with a question that resonates broadly throughout Christianity, Giurgis frames his project largely in light of Catholicism in keeping with his upbringing. Furthermore, he brought on Jesuit priest, James Martin, S.J., to serve as his theological adviser as he developed the project. The question of Judas’s status in the afterlife drove him to develop this play to explore how to interpret Judas’s final judgment.

In the 2005 production of The Last Days of Judas Iscariot, the play begins with an assumption that the supernatural exists, although it is uncertain to what extent the powers of the supernatural extend. The supernatural appears twice in the production—once at the end of the first act and then once at the end of the second act. In this production, the divine is made manifest through the body of the actor playing Jesus. He does not talk in his first appearance. Rather, his divinity is only affirmed in his second appearance. Even then, however, the performance of Jesus’s being with the production develops within the scene from an emphasis on his humanity to his divinity. Through the performance of this moment, The Last Days of Judas Iscariot reveals the answer that has been sought throughout the production, and Jesus’s divinity is confirmed. Hence, throughout the production, the dramaturgy of material presence gradually develops from an assumption of the divine into an embodied confirmation of its material existence.

The production couches its performance of divinity explicitly within a, “Who done it?” narrative that queries the power of the human and the divine in the afterlife. In the case of The Last

\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{Zinoman2005}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize In this case study, I use the words, “Catholicism,” and, “Christianity,” interchangeably. The play explores broadly Christian questions. However, it does so based on debate within Catholic tradition and through the performance of historical figures particularly associated with Catholicism.}\]
Days of Judas Iscariot, the query takes place through the performance of a literal trial to determine who is responsible for Judas’s final damnation. Through the literal trial of Judas, the play explores whether Jesus has power in the afterlife. Did Jesus condemn Judas to hell for all eternity or did Judas refuse Jesus’s offer to Heaven? The play asks the audience to consider whether Jesus could send Judas to Hell, and if so, why he would do that.

The setting of the play establishes the religious affiliation and assumptions that shape the world of the play. It is set in a subset of Purgatory, named Hope. Given that the play is set in Purgatory, it immediately places the audience in a world in which there is an afterlife. Furthermore, in that the play takes place in Purgatory, the production draws attention to the religious tones underscoring insofar as Purgatory is generally associated with the Catholic faith. The Public production hosted the trial on a thrust stage, surrounding the stage with audiences and actors alike, implicating the audience in the trial.73 The physical arrangement of the space positions the audience not only in the theatre, but also within the makeup of the courtroom.

Lest there be questions as to whether God exists in the world of Hope, the opening scene between the opposing attorneys who are trying the case addresses these questions. Judas’s lawyer, Cunningham, presents Judas’s case to Judge Littlefield. In response, El-Fayoumy rises and presents himself as the lawyer defending God and the Kingdom of Heaven.74 Shortly after in his defense, El-Fayoumy raises the question, “But, if God feels so sorry, why not bring the “damned” upstairs?”75 Throughout his defense, El-Fayoumy draws the audience’s attention to the driving

75 Ibid, 418.
questions underscoring the play. El-Fayoumy’s defense serves two functions: First, his question once again reiterates the assumption that God exists. Secondly, the question draws attention to the overarching question that informs the drive for truth within this play: If God exists, why does he allow people to suffer in Hell? This becomes the guiding question of the production that the characters in the world of the play seek to answer through the democratic judicial process.

As the play proceeds, witnesses testify to Judas’s humanity and his potential for redemption. They also testify to the different factors that allow Judas’s case to be addressed from diverse perspectives. These witnesses represent a broad range of interests and backgrounds. Some of the witnesses are notably Catholic while others are conspicuously associated with a more secular, worldly point of view. The witnesses include characters such as his mother, Pontius Pilate, St. Monica, Mother Theresa, Sigmund Freud, and Satan. While some of the witnesses knew Judas on earth, others met him only in the afterlife or still have not met him at all. It is clear throughout the production that none of the saints were sinless; nonetheless, they made it through the pearly gates. Their fallibility further raises questions as to how they managed to make it through while Judas remains unforgiven.

Through the performance of the witnesses, the production engages the democratic judicial process to consider the various ways in which truth is constituted from a human perspective. Witnesses present their arguments, demonstrating their own unique understandings of Judas’s situation. For example, one attorney asks Mother Theresa to discuss why God would preclude someone from going to Heaven. She observes that while God offers everyone the option of eternal salvation, not everyone acts according to God’s rules. Thus, they stand in the way of their own
happiness. Therefore, she believes that Judas’s fate is a result of his refusal to follow the Will of God. In contrast, Simon the Zealot argues that Judas was not responsible for his actions. He claims that as Messiah, Jesus was sent to help people, and Judas’s actions forced Jesus to fulfill his destiny. He further observes that at the Last Supper, Jesus told Judas to “do what you gotta do” which Simon posits sounded like approval. Accordingly, Simon acknowledges Judas’s betrayal, but he argues it was necessary for Jesus to live out his destiny. Lastly Cunningham brings Sigmund Freud to the stand. Cunningham hopes to argue that Judas was psychotic and thus not morally culpable for his suicide. After disclaiming any affiliation with religious belief, Freud testifies that Judas must have been psychotic, because sane people value self-preservation at all costs, and therefore, sane people do not commit suicide. Freud contends that someone would only commit suicide if his mind failed him. Although each of the arguments bears merit, the witnesses’ testimonies offer no clear answer as to whether Judas rightly suffers in Hell. Despite their best efforts, the witnesses are unable to account for Judas’s fate, and it becomes clear that only the divine can reveal the truth of Judas’s damnation. Accordingly, within the narrative of the production, the truth ultimately rests in the divine.

The production thus uses the quest for the truth to drive the plot forward, and it engages the democratic judicial process to consider how different people arrive at their understanding of the truth. However, at the climax of this quest, human constructions of truth do not suffice, and the production relies on the divine to reveal the truth of the matter. Accordingly, the much sought-

76 Ibid, 419.
77 Ibid, 508.
78 Ibid, 702 & 741.
after truth is revealed when the material presence of the divine is made manifest onstage through the dramaturgy of a single scene in which Jesus reveals himself and his power in the flesh. The production uses the physical embodiment of the character as well his actions in relation to Judas to portray the materiality and divinity of Jesus. Until this point, the existence of the supernatural has been gradually introduced to the audience. It was introduced first through the assumption of divine presence within the world of the play. However, physical proof of a divine figure remained absent throughout the majority of Act One. At the end of Act One, when Judas was testifying on the stand, the stage directions note that Jesus is seen with an empty bucket in Judas’s cell.\textsuperscript{79} At this point in the production, his material existence is made present to the audience through the body of the actor although there is nothing in his embodiment or his actions to point to his divinity.

Jesus does not come onstage again until the last scene of the production in which the audience finally sees him interact with Judas. At this point, Jesus’s divinity manifests when Judas’s eternal status is to be determined. At the end of the trial, it becomes evident that Judas’s fate does not depend on the judge’s verdict. Judas’s lawyer argues that Judas succumbed to despair in God which is what doomed him to Hell. However, El-Fayoumy further observes that, “If Human Despair is so powerful as to render God powerless over it, then what does that say about God?!! Either God’s not All-Powerful and therefore useless- or- God’s Love is Conditional, which renders that Love false and Unworthy!”\textsuperscript{80} El-Fayoumy’s argument suggests that if God is truly divine he should have the power to allow Judas to enter despite Judas’s despair. However, the

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\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, 663.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid, 1180.
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judge cannot explain why God has allowed Judas to suffer. This is a question that can only be answered by the supernatural, and thus the scene switches to focus solely on Judas and Jesus.

If Jesus is divine, Judas’s fate ultimately rests in Jesus’s hands according to the logic proposed in the previous scene. Through this turn in events, the narrative begins to recognize Jesus’s divinity and suggests that Jesus has powers that surpass those of the mortals who rest in the courtroom. Despite the well-intentioned human interventions of the judge and his witnesses, it is Jesus, and not the judge, who has the power to change someone’s entire trajectory in the afterlife. Thus, only the figure with the power to override human decisions can change the status of Judas’s eternal life. Accordingly, as the trial ends, Jesus visits Judas in his cell. The two meet alone. During their meeting, Jesus offers Judas the opportunity to join him in Heaven, an offer which he has clearly made before.81 Their early interactions are informed by an understanding of Jesus’s human side, and Jesus’s humanity receives more emphasis through the expression of human emotions. Giurgis takes liberties with the humanity of Jesus’s character early in the scene for the sake of presenting a more nuanced reflection of this composite of humanity and divinity.82 Giurgis said that, “There needs to be a counterpoint to Jesus’ love and patience… There’s another side of me which wants to say, “Fuck you! You’re full of shit. Go home and feel bad and do better.”83 Giurgis believed that Jesus was human and in his humanity he could get frustrated with people’s choices. He believed that Judas rejected his calling to live like Christ which frustrated the human part of Jesus.

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This side of Jesus becomes evident in their earliest interactions in Judas’s cell. Jesus tells Judas that he misses him, and he still loves him. Rather, than hear Jesus out, Judas tells him Jesus to leave. Jesus responds, “You think your suffering is a one-way street?! It’s not! It’s the exact opposition of not! … -and you’ve got no never at all! Where’s your heart in all this, Judas?”

In his interactions with Judas, Jesus resists characterization as a purely peaceful image of the divine. He gets frustrated. He gets angry. He yells. He calls Judas out for rejecting him and challenges him to see that the division between the two causes both to suffer; the suffering does not rest solely with Judas. This early characterization of Jesus thus draws attention to the fact that Jesus has offered Judas salvation, suggesting that he has the power to do so. However, it also reminds the audience that Jesus is human.

Nonetheless, the performance of their relationship reminds the audience that this is not merely the relationship between two men, rather, one man- in his divinity- has the ability to offer the other eternal happiness. The production presents the relationship between Judas and Jesus as the definitive marker of Judas’s identity as a Christian, a relationship which both beings must enter into of their own free will. Jesus has the power to save Judas, but he will not do so unless Judas also wants to maintain his relationship with the divine. Judas knows that severing this relationship will not change his current fate. His redemption as a Christian is entirely dependent on his relationship with the manifested divine being who has the power to mediate his fate.

In the play, Jesus once again offers Judas the opportunity to repent saying, “Judas, don’t you know what would happen the very instant you got down on your knees? ...Please love me,

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Judas.” He affords Judas the opportunity to enter into a relationship with him. He suggests that if Judas chooses to do so, Jesus will bring Judas with him to Heaven. Nonetheless, Judas declines Jesus’s offer. Ultimately, it is neither judge nor jury nor Jesus who sends Judas to Hell. Rather, Judas himself is unable to accept the opportunity to renew his relationship with the divine. Judas does not question Jesus’s divinity; he just rejects it entirely and dooms himself to his fate. The play thus confirms the teachings of the Catholic Church, acknowledging that human beings choose whether or not they want to cooperate within God’s plan for them, as well as also confirming that the divine does have the power to ultimately decide the fate of those who enter into the afterlife. The production ends with Jesus praying over the seemingly comatose Judas and washing his feet. In doing so, the production once more reimagines how the divine manifests and seeks to remind audiences that there is no single interpretation of the physical manifestation of the divine. Rather, in his divinity, Jesus is the culmination of all things: human and divine, pleading and forgiving, angry and merciful, adjudicator and friend. This production thus suggests that Jesus is a merciful and forgiving God despite the temper he revealed earlier in the play.

The use of historicity within the production is the other dramaturgical strategy that informs how the divine is understood with *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. The play is not a typical history given its setting in the afterlife. However, in keeping with Freddie Rokem’s proposal that “theatrical performances about historical events are aesthetic adaptations or revisions of events


that we more or less intuitively… know have occurred,” the play performs a historical event insofar as Judas’s eternal damnation is an oft-presumed event in Catholic tradition. Moreover, Catholic tradition generally assumes that people continue to exist in the afterlife. Thus, the play can be construed as historical in that it provides a theatricalized representation of a specific moment in the afterlife. Furthermore, through the performance of the afterlife, the play presents a variety of historical figures who are also understood to be in the afterlife according to Catholic tradition. Accordingly, The Last Days of Judas Iscariot broadly performs history as a result of the ways in which it recalls the history of notable figures from the past and as a result of the ways in which it presents a historical moment in eternity in keeping with Catholic beliefs in an afterlife.

The use of historicity throughout the play draws attention to the gap between the here and now of the performance. The performance of actors’ bodies accentuates the resonances between the other world of the play and the here and now of the moment of performance, reminding that the audience that this production has continuing resonances in contemporary society. The performance of historical figures in the present of the play highlights the long history of interactions between humans and divine, and it asks the audience to contend with how contemporary society positions the relationship between the individual and the divine.

The production depends on the performance of historical figures of the past. Nonetheless, the bodies of the actors perform these historical figures in the present moment, using contemporary language and habits. Moreover, the characters dress in contemporary clothing. The characters thus, bear noticeable resonances to contemporary figures in production. For example, the performance

87 Freddie Rokem, Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre, (University of Iowa, 2006), 6.

88 Ibid.
of St. Monica does little to directly reenact the image of a 4th century saint described in Catholic hagiographies. Instead, her character is rough around the edges and reflects a more contemporary re-imagination of her figure. In production, Monica, played by Elizabeth Rodriguez entered the space wearing dangly earrings, loose sparkling pull-over blouse, slacks, and silvery high-heeled boots.\textsuperscript{89} St. Monica is renowned historically for praying for the conversion of her son which led to him eventually becoming a Church Father. Although her story does not change, when Monica tells the audience about her role in her son, Augustine’s, conversion, her story takes on modern tone and dialect. St. Monica describes herself, not as a saint, but as “a Nag” of the Church and shares her story saying that:

If I wasn’t a a Nag, I wouldn’t never made it to be no Saint, and the church wouldn’t a had no Father of the Church named agustine- ‘cuz I birthed the mothafuckah, raised him, and when he started messin’ up… I nagged God’s ass to save him… till God got so tired of my shit that he did save my son, and my son- Saint Augustine- he stopped bangin’ whores and sippin’ on some wine and he became learn-ed, so fucking’ learn-ed that he’s known as one of the Fathers of the Church\textsuperscript{90}.

Her contemporary clothing and modernized, curse-ridden vocabulary do little to draw to mind a historical figure, but the story of both her and her son’s conversions to saintliness anchor the character to her historical predecessor. Nonetheless, St. Monica may be a figure of the past, but her performance calls to mind a far more contemporary woman praying for her child, reminding the audience that women praying for their wayward children are not only remnants of the past.

\textsuperscript{89} James Martin, SJ, A Jesuit Off-Broadway, (Chicago: Loyola, 2007), 204.

The production takes similar liberties with the clothing, speech patterns, and conversation topics of each of the following witnesses. Eric Bogosian, performing the role of Satan, notably arrives onstage clad in Gucci. Bogosian’s Satan suggests that the devil continues to thrive in the modern material world. The actress playing Mother Theresa, Liza Colón-Zayas, performed the character of Mother Theresa with a Puerto Rican accent, raising questions as to where else in the world other saintly individuals continue to go about their work in the current moment. Simon the Zealot’s testimony draws upon a detailed analogy between contemporary Manhattan and ancient Rome. Simon’s comparison reminds audiences that the politics that shaped ancient Rome are not so different from debates occurring in contemporary society. The performance of each of these characters in this manner highlights the tensions between the past and present, asking the audience to consider the relevancy of the lives of those who have gone to the afterlife before them.

Furthermore, the space further engages the bodies of the audience members in their own performance of historicity within the production. The audience’s bodies are also implicated as participants within the world of the play in that they are physically situated within the audience of the theatre but also situated as the audience of the courtroom. Depending on the degree to which each audience member enters into a suspension of disbelief, he or she may be positioned as either audience member or member of the court. In doing so, the bodies of the audience are also torn between two time periods, the afterlife and the present moment, depending on their relationship with what they are watching. The tension in how the audience is asked to function within the world


of the play and the world of the theatre simultaneously asks the audience to consider the resonances between the two worlds, once again highlighting the continuing nature of the relationship between the human and the divine.

The combination of the overarching narrative, the performance of material presence, and historicity engaged throughout the production models a dramaturgy of material presence that gives credence to the possibility that Jesus has the power to determine one’s fate in the afterlife. Moreover, the performance of the trial within the play accounts for the long history of Christianity by highlighting the historical trajectory and implications of debates that began with Jesus’s death and continue into the current moment. Through the use of historicity, the play thus draws attention to the longer history of Christianity, accounting for both the past and present and future of human and divine relationships within its performance.

2.2 Case Study: *Equivocation* (2010)

*Equivocation* made its Off-Broadway debut in 2010 at the Manhattan Theatre Club under the direction of Garry Hynes. *Equivocation* presents the fictional story of William Shagspeare, or Shag, as Cain calls him. In the play, the king asks Shag to create a play chronicling the Gunpowder Plot, the early 17th century conspiracy led by English Catholics that sought to end Catholic persecution in England by blowing up Parliament. The conspirators sought to replace the Protestant monarchy with a Catholic monarchy. The king demands that Shag produce a play that reflects the official history of the event, and he demands that Shag write the play over a period of three weeks so that the King’s Men, a government-controlled theatre, be able to produce it for the public. Shag seeks to discern the true story behind the development of the plot, but he finds himself
troubled by the differing accounts that he receives. Accordingly, he is forced to grapple with what it means to tell the truth.

Whereas *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* explores manifestation of material presence through the embodiment of Jesus, this production cultivates a performance in which material presence manifests through an object in the performance of the Eucharist rather than a human body. Like *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, the world of the play assumes the presence of the supernatural. However, while it assumes that the supernatural exists, this world harbors various assumptions regarding what form it is likely to take. The play takes place in England in 1605, a time period that call to mind changing ideas of Christianity as well as its relationship to the nation. Approximately a century earlier, the Protestant Reformation occurred, changing the ways in which different Christian denominations understood divine manifestations of presence. Moreover, in the middle of the 16th century, the English Reformation began, reconfiguring the relationships between Church and state. Accordingly, the religious landscape of this play draws attention to changing ideas of Catholicism within English society as England navigated its changing relationship with the Catholic Church. Given popular debates surrounding Shakespeare’s religious background, the performance further highlights different understandings of the Christian God within English culture. Nonetheless, the play assumes that God is present within the world of the play; rather, it is the form that presence takes that remains a matter of debate.

This play is not explicitly about religion. The religious landscape of the world of the play informs the plot, but it is not the central focus of the plot. The play leads to a gradual reveal of the supernatural in material form and performs presence in material form in only one scene. This moment is not the climax of the production, but it is a crucial point in which Shagspear is finally given the answer that he is looking for from the conspirators although it is not the answer he
wanted. Thus, the dramaturgy of material presence within the *Equivocation* develops throughout the play from an assumption of the divine that gradually evolve into a physical confirmation of its material existence within the production.

Like the previous play, the performance presents the material manifestation of God within the context of a, “Who done it?” narrative as Shagspeare sets forth to discern who is responsible for the Gunpowder Plot and whether he can accurately depict the history of the event. Because the play takes place amidst the events surrounding the Gunpowder Plot, the play addresses the role of the Jesuits with regards to their complicity in the event, specifically Henry Garnet, the Jesuit accused of being a conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot. The title of the play, *Equivocation*, references a document written by the actual Garnet at the time of the plot. At the time of the plot, Henry Garnet wrote the original pamphlet to “help captured priests- and cooperating Catholics- to equivocate without actually lying when caught in king’s snares.” The monarchy eventually imprisoned Garnet for his suspected participation in the plot. Throughout the play, Shagspeare seeks to determine whether or not Garnet actually knew of the event. In keeping with his famous document, however, Garnet equivocates, refusing to provide authorities with a clear answer.

The relationship between equivocation and truth thus runs throughout the play. According to Cain, equivocation is best understood as telling the truth in difficult times. He cites the oft-cited dilemma in which a person is hiding a Jewish person during World War II, but asked whether they are hiding someone by a member of the Gestapo, they must consider what the best answer is to

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that situation. He suggests that in such moments, “You must consider what is really being asked, and you must answer it with your life.” The idea of equivocation runs throughout the play with regards to questions of the truth. What is the truth? Are there ways to tell the truth without compromising it that will also keep one safe in difficult times? Throughout the play, Shagspeare must grapple with what the king asks of him when he asks for a play about the Gunpowder Plot, and he must further consider what it means for Garnet to continue to deny involvement.

As the play progresses, however, Shagspeare learns that the truth is not always easily discernible and what may appear to be true for one person may not appear as truth for another. Joan Lord Hall describes Equivocation as a show “largely concerned with… the juggling of truth and lies within politics, religion, artistic endeavor, and family.” Rather, than exploring the ways in which truth manifests in light of a singular topic, the play explores the ways in which the idea of truth is navigated in multiple capacities. As the play progresses, the circumstances of the plot force Shag to consider the King’s motivation in wanting the story told as well as the conspirator’s motivations in wanting to have their stories told. The production thus considers the political motivations that inform how the truth is told, what constitutes religious truth, how truth is conveyed through art and the responsibilities of the artist, and the ways in which variations of the truth inform family dynamics throughout the performance.

Throughout the story of Shag, Cain grapples with the ways in which theatre artists’ desires to present truth onstage may be compromised. Shag seeks to portray the truth onstage. Similarly,


96 Ibid.

one of the things that Cain, a Jesuit priest, attempts to depict within his play is what is considered the ultimate truth within the Catholic Church, God made present in the Eucharist. Cain portrays this iteration of truth in its incarnational sense, presenting God in his physical manifestation onstage as discussed within the framework of Catholicism. He cultivates this portrayal of Eucharistic presence amidst his portrayal of the Jesuits involved in the Gunpowder Plot. Thus, Cain crafts a history, though fictionalized, that acknowledges the ability of the supernatural to become present materially.

With regards to Catholicism, the question of truth that is under investigation throughout the play is the idea of the incarnation, the idea that God makes himself manifest in this life. Cain first subtly draws attention to the incarnational nature of Catholicism through a conversation that Shag has with his actors. In this scene, Shag says to his actors, “God’s truest name is I am. Each time an actor steps out on a stage, his very being proclaims “I am.”... When they (the audience) see Sharpe here...they know in him infinite possibility. For a moment, his body becomes their soul. Our bodies become their souls made visible.”98 Here Cain emphasizes the idea that within Christianity there is an idea of God as incarnational, referring to the fact that God became man and took material form. Moreover, he draws the comparison between the incarnational nature of the theatre and that of God in that both make the invisible visible. Thus, early in the play, Cain uses the idea of truth to ask his audience to consider how truths are made present both through religion and theatre. At this point, however, he does not suggest that God continues to be made visible. Rather, he uses this moment to set the stage for the idea that God can be made visible through performance.

As mentioned in my introduction, the idea of presence is best exemplified in Catholic tradition in the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Accordingly, the dramaturgy of material presence in *Equivocation* is fulfilled with the materialization of the supernatural through the Eucharist in the play. Cain’s exploration of the incarnation culminates when Shag goes to see Henry Garnet in jail. At this point in the play, Garnet has been arrested for his suspected participation in the Gunpowder Plot although Garnet has said nothing to implicate himself in the treasonous activity. Shag visits Garnet, because he believes that Garnet can teach him the art of equivocation. Although Shag is not facing the same pressures as Garnet, he is nonetheless trying to navigate his own political relationships as he tries to best discern how to use his art to share the true story of the Gunpowder Plot while also acknowledging that he is being paid by the king which presents certain pressures to narrate history in a particular manner. Shag thus goes to Garnet after observing the ways in which Garnet navigates the accusations levied at him with relationship to the Gunpowder Plot. When Shag arrives at Garnet’s cell, he views equivocation as a means of lying. Garnet corrects him, emphasizing that, to the contrary, equivocation entails delivering a truth in equivocal form. For Garnet, it means to tell the truth in difficult times.\(^9\) Garnet does not encourage lying, but he suggests that there are times when the common good will be better served with an answer that is vague and perhaps misleading, although not untruthful. Thus, to equivocate for Garnet means to provide an ambiguous answer that is not necessarily untruth but which might be misleading for the sake of the greater good.

Although the interaction is at first motivated by a desire to learn how to navigate political tensions, it is during this interaction that Cain explores the idea of presence within Catholic

\(^9\) Ibid, 82.
tradition in light of Eucharistic presence. When Shag enters the jail, he sees Garnet praying with a cup of wine. Upon Shag’s entering the cell, Garnet offers Shag the wine, but Shag hesitates to drink it. Shag instead asks whether what he is holding is wine or the blood of Christ although he did not hear the words the priest uttered. When Garnet questions what Shag really means with his questions, Shag reiterates his question saying:

Shag: I’m asking you if this is God’s fucking blood. Is it?
Garnet: You’re asking- if there’s anything left in you that can believe you hold God’s blood in a cup…
Shag: I don’t believe in your hocus pocus.
Garnet: No? Then why- in this bone-chilling damp cell- have you left a perfectly good, full, warming cup of wine untouched? Well, if you wish to leave that heavy burden behind, I will be here for your confession.  

Although the play does not explicitly identify Shag’s much-debated religious affiliation, it portrays Shag as intimately familiar with the significance of receiving the Eucharist within Catholic tradition. The play never directly reveals Shags’s religious leanings, but the final moment of this scene suggests that Shag had a respect for the potential of the wine to transform into the Blood of Christ. In that the Gunpowder Plot was orchestrated to rebel against the persecution of Catholics under a Protestant rule, Shag’s religious leanings will inevitably play a part in the ways in which he sees the events. If on the one hand, he dismisses the truths of the Catholic faith, it should be easier to defend, if not the persecution of Catholics, but at least the defense of the Protestant faith in England. On the other hand, to espouse the truths of the Catholic faith implicates Shags as an individual potentially at risk for persecution at the hands of the king if his religious leanings are revealed. Furthermore, the Protestant King James I has funded Shag’s entire venture until this point. Although Shag has been asked to write a true history of the Gunpowder Plot, this

100 Ibid, 84.
moment draws attention to the ways in which the different religious leanings of those impacted by the plot narrate the story of the Gunpowder Plot as true. In being asked to reconcile with whether the wine in the cup is the true blood of Jesus, Shag is also being asked to take a stake in the larger argument that underlies the Protestant/Catholic tensions in England. The moment raises the question of whether Shag can truthfully write this history and fully give credence to both the story of Parliament and the Catholic Church in England.

Accordingly, this interaction places the heart of the religious and political tensions immediately before Shag, and it asks Shag to discern his positionality within the larger debate. The priest neither confirms nor denies Shag’s assertions. Because of his lack of response, this moment could be interpreted in one of two ways: either the priest did not perform the Eucharistic rite, or he is not going to foist doctrinal teaching upon someone. Under the principles of Catholic theology, however, the priest need not necessarily provide an answer in order to justify Eucharistic presence. According to the precepts of the Catholic faith doubting the truth or a lack of confirmation that something is true does not make it any less real. This understanding of truth rests on the premise that the truth, although created to be known by humanity, exists independent of humanity and does not need humanity to validate it in order to exist. Garnet’s very action of choosing not to confirm that the wine is the Blood of Christ does not undermine an interpretation of the wine as part of the Eucharistic meal since the Eucharist exists independently of man’s individual beliefs.

Garnet’s final statement that, “If (Shag) wishes to leave that… burden behind, (he) will be here for (Shag’s) confession,” further suggests that truth exists independently of human definition. He implies that truth is not a human construction, but rather, it exists a priori as established within

divine law. Garnet proposes that those who wish to come to better know this truth have only to take responsibility for their knowledge. Moreover, the actions at the end of the scene seem to suggest that this production recognizes that the wine is the Eucharist rather than a mere cup of wine. When Shag leaves Garnet, he leaves the wine untouched, suggesting, despite his doubts, that the wine in the cup is the material presence of God made present on earth. If the wine in the cup were merely wine, he would have no reason to not drink it. However, his unwillingness to partake in it despite his alleged doubts confirms the possibility that the priest’s quiet words could turn water into wine and that he believes that the priest did just that. Thus, his departure from the stage affirms the reality of the presence of the supernatural in the form of wine.

The play thus gives credence to the materiality of Catholic beliefs in this dramaturgical moment through the combination of the use of the wine and the performed actions of both Garnet and Shagspeare. This moment presents the possibility that through the consecration rituals, wine becomes not only a signifier of God’s blood, but it embodies God. Although the characters do not verbally affirm the presence of God, Cain calls upon the idea that God does not need to be verbally confirmed nor understood to exist. By refusing to drink what would otherwise be a harmless cup of wine, Shag’s actions suggest that the contents of the cup are far more than a symbolic beverage. This scene challenges general representations of Christianity onstage, presenting God’s presence specifically as it is conceived within the Catholic tradition of the Eucharist. This presentation recognizes God in both the substance and accidents ascribed to him in Catholicism.


103 Following the example of Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic Church espouses Aristotelian language to describe the doctrine of the Eucharist. The Church uses the word “substance” to point to the essence of a thing, whereas “accidents” refer to the incidental characteristics of a thing. In the case of the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ is recognized as the substance, and the bread and wine are recognized as the accidents. While traditionally the substance of something remains unchanging, the accidents may change. However, in the case of the Eucharist, the
refusal to drink the wine which suggests that Shag believes the substance of the wine is the Blood of Christ. In doing so, the performance also suggests that God’s presence manifests through the physical accidents of wine.

Like The Last Days of Judas Iscariot, the 2010 performance of Equivocation also engages historicity within the production to ask audiences to reflect on the relevance of the play to contemporary life. In that the performance takes place in the past and outside of the United States, it seems at first to have little bearing on contemporary culture. Moreover, the characterization of the historical figures within the play largely relies on a historical interpretation of their characters instead of a modernized one. In maintaining its emphasis predominantly on Elizabethan England, the performance further distances its American audiences from the world of the play. In doing so, it relegates the types of interactions explored within the play to a distant time, a distant location, and to figures who are no longer alive.

As was the case in The Last Days of Judas Iscariot, Equivocation draws attention to overlapping cultural resonances in performance predominantly through costuming, using the clothing covering the actor’s body as the meeting place between past and present. In the Off-Broadway production of Equivocation, the costuming in Equivocation is anachronistic, blending both Elizabethan and contemporary clothing in performance. The actors are mostly clothed in t-shirts and dark jeans that they cover with period pieces to distinguish between characters; the period pieces are especially important for those actors portraying more than one character.  

accidents of the bread and wine remain the same, but the substance changes from bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ which the Church has named the transubstantiation.

Furthermore, some, but not all actors engaged an English accent, and the language within the script had the actors navigating between more historical iterations of the English language and contemporary colloquialisms. The costumes and language thus highlighted the historicity performed within the production. The costumes and language root the performance in neither the past nor the present. Instead, they position the performance as both historical and contemporary, but never fully one or the other. The costuming of the characters, anchoring the contemporary body as the foundation of the performance uses the actors to literally try on the questions of the past. As the actors take on the clothing and persona of different historical figures, their bodies engage with the tensions and overlaps between the historical past and the present moment of performance.

With regards to the potential performance of the Eucharist, the blend between past and present as performed by the actors’ bodies draw attention to ongoing divides in contemporary culture between Protestant and Catholic tradition that date back to debates over the ways in which Christianity understands the presence of God in the Eucharist. In performing the interaction between Shag and Garnet for the audience amidst a blend of past and present, the audience are asked to reconcile with their own understanding of the Eucharist in the current moment of performance. Shag’s questions ask not only the priest, but the audience to engage with how they understood the opening moment of the scene with the priest praying over the wine. Moreover, the priest’s lack of answer and Shag’s final avoidance of the cup asks the audience to determine how they interpret the moment. It leaves the audience to ask if the wine is the blood of Christ. If they interpret it as the blood of Christ, the production then asks the audience to think if we can still

\[105\] Ibid.
recognize the prayers over wine as having the ability to transform the wine today. If the audience chooses to dismiss the wine as a mere symbol, they are still left to reconcile with why Shags would leave the cup alone despite its status as a symbol. In doing so, the production presents the audience with the opportunity to reflect on the ongoing belief of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist in contemporary society and to consider why it continues to be a matter of debate today.

Although my project focuses on the ways in which the production explores the continued relevance of religious truth within the production it is important to acknowledge that this plot is just one plot of a nuanced piece. Throughout the production, the play also draws attention to the ways in which questions about the truth of other issues, such as politics and art, continue to circulate throughout time. With regards to politics, Shag’s journey to discern the truth of the Gunpowder Plot reveals the various perspectives that inform the reception of a single political moment. Similarly, in his attempt to seek to portray the true story of the plot through art, he reveals the challenges inherent in telling the true history of any event. Although the production explores the ideas within the context of Shagspeare and his relationship to the Gunpowder plot, the performance of history within the production draws attention to the ongoing relevance of these questions just as it does for the continued relevance of religious ones.

Therefore, like Giurgis’s play the overarching narrative that emphasizes the search for truth, the dramaturgy of material presence in a particular moment, and the use of historicity in *Equivocation* informs a dramaturgy of material presence that lends credence to the possibility of supernatural manifestation through the Eucharist. Unlike the prior play, however, this production develops its dramaturgy of material presence in a more subtle manner, depending upon the single choice not to drink the wine to confirm the possibility of material presence. Furthermore, it crafts this moment in a manner that is even more specifically associated with Catholicism by performing
the Eucharistic rite in production. In doing so, the production participates within the ongoing debates among various Christian denominations regarding the potential of presence to manifest in everyday life through the performance of the Eucharistic rite.

In conclusion, both The Last Days of Judas Iscariot and Equivocation engage a dramaturgy of material presence through their use of narrative, materiality, and historicity on secular stages on Off-Broadway. These productions affirm the possibility of supernatural presence in material form according to Catholic tradition. In doing so, these productions provide models with regards to how materiality of presence is accounted for within historical narratives of Catholicism. Thus, they not only point to the possibility of the lived relationships between the human and divine, but they perform these alleged experiences between the human and divine, and in doing so give credence to the potential for these experiences to be recognized as lived. Nonetheless, although the plays in this chapter acknowledge the materiality of presence within Catholic tradition, performances of Catholicism that acknowledge God’s presence without entirely affirming the materiality of presence are arguably more likely to incur larger audiences on the New York stages. While there are various factors that determine a show’s success on Broadway or Off-Broadway, the productions that boasted the most success relied on alternative dramaturgies of presence that arguably gave credence to the possibility of supernatural manifestations of presence without affirming it.
3.0 Transitions in Faith: Performing Presence through Memory

“You’re so lucky to be a Catholic, my boy/ Your schooling is an honor/ It’s a privilege, it’s a joy so cherish you’re parish and be true to your school,” Eddie is told by his teachers and peers as he arrives on his first day at St. Bastion’s High School for Boys in John R. Power’s *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* Similar scenes become increasingly frequent on professional stages throughout the United States approximately a decade after the close of Vatican II as a budding repertoire of plays featuring the Catholic school classroom debuted in quick succession. Playwrights who grew up in the Catholic school classroom turned to the secular commercial stage to share their memories of their days in the schoolroom. These plays led to a fruitful tradition of performing the Catholic schoolroom onstage that continues to remain popular through the present moment. This growing tradition led to the production of plays such as Mary O’Malley’s *Once a Catholic* (1979), John R. Power’s *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* (1979), Christopher Durang’s *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All to You* (1979), Casey Kurtti’s *Catholic School Girls* (1982), Dan Goggin’s *Nunsense* (1985), Vicki Quade and Maripat Donovan’s *Late Nite Catechism* (1993), and John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt* (2004).107


107 Unlike the rest of the shows, *Once a Catholic* was written by an English woman and debuted in England in 1977 before its United States debut. It made its Broadway debut in 1979 at the Helen Hayes Theatre where it had nine previews and ran for six performances. (The Broadway League, “Once a Catholic,” IBDB, 2010-2019. Accessed April 16, 2019, https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/once-a-catholic-3813/); Dan Goggin’s *Nunsense* has since led to the development of a notable six sequels that have had varying success throughout the country. Similarly, *Late Nite Catechism* has also led to multiple spin-off one-woman shows featuring nuns.
These productions predominantly returned to the Catholic school classroom prior to Vatican II. The few plays that do not return to the pre-Vatican II classroom still perform versions of a classroom that continues to bear the influences of pre-Vatican II education. The Catholic schoolroom was and continues to be, albeit to a lesser extent than decades past, the place where many young Catholics learn the principles of what it means to embody the tenants of Catholicism. It serves as a primary nexus for the transmission of the faith for adolescents. The Catholic school classrooms of the ‘50s and ‘60s coincided with the height of Catholic school enrollment in the United States. When it reached its peak in 1966, a year after the end of Vatican II, the Catholic school system served almost half of the Catholic school age population in the United States, serving over 5.5 million students nationally. The plays in this chapter explore the legacies of the Catholic School system, considering how the influences of the Catholic schoolroom manifest far beyond the classroom. The representations adopt a variety of perspectives to reflect on the American Catholic classroom of the ‘50s and ‘60s: nostalgia, drama, satire, farce, black humor, etc. One of the elements that manifests repeatedly is the performance of memory.

In this chapter, I examine three performances of the Catholic schoolroom that rely on the performance of memory to cultivate a dramaturgy of presence within their productions. This chapter explores how the performance of memory reflects upon changing relationships between human and the divine in John Power’s *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up*, Casey Kurtti’s *Catholic School Girls*, and Vicki Quade and Maripat Donovan’s *Late Nite Catechism*. Each play ventures into the memories of Catholic school students, reminiscing about the

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idiosyncrasies of the Catholic culture of their childhoods. My case studies call upon a dramaturgy of presence through performed memory that allows audiences to engage with the realities and possibilities of the past, present, and future of lived relationships with Catholic presence that develop over the course of an individual’s life.

The performance of memory serves two functions within the production. First, it privileges the perspective of a single individual within a historical moment. The opportunity to share memories gives agency to the person sharing it; the ability to share memories allows the sharer the power to shape her history by controlling what memories she chooses to share. This power enables the sharer to memorialize certain memories while neglecting others, an idea that Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik explore in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*. Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik suggest that the performing memory can be a means of memorializing it.109 Avishai Margarit further proposes that, “The politics of memory are also the politics of forgetting; creating social amnesia by political agencies.”110 The performance of memory thus entails a political choice that some memories are remembered while others forgotten. Although the privileging of perspectives always has political ramifications, the performance of memory allows for a history of Catholicism that accounts for the voices of individuals by prioritizing their personal perspectives.

Second, the performance of memory allows for the exploration of the individual’s lived relationship to presence both in the past as well as the present. Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik


suggest that, “Memory bridges the gap between the lived past and imagined future.”\footnote{Ibid.} It acknowledges both what has happened in the past as well as what continues to happen in the current moment. It allows the performance to acknowledge the changing relationships with presence in the life of the subject. Accordingly, this approach allows for historical narratives of lived relationship with presence that do not focus on a single event, but instead, focus on how these lived relationships are developed over a series of events. The use of these tactics to create a dramaturgy of presence crafts an image of Catholicism that affirms the lived experiences of presence that are subject to change. By putting this narrative in conversation with the changes that Vatican II brought to the institutional church, the productions also draw attention to the fact that neither personal nor institutional relationships with the divine are ever stable; they are always subject to change.

Each of the productions under investigation accounts for the “true” in history to various degrees in that they represent common elements of the Catholic school experience of the 1950s and 1960s. However, in keeping with Freddie Rokem’s understanding of theatricalized performances of history, these productions nonetheless take aesthetic liberties with these representations. Two of the three productions- \textit{Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?} and \textit{Late Nite Catechism}, respectively- call loosely upon the playwright’s and audience’s lived experiences within the Catholic school system to frame the production’s narratives. The plots of these plays more closely teeter between the performance of what is “true” and what is “real” of history insofar as they not only perform generalized iterations of a historical moment, but also in that their performances are crafted, in part, to account for people’s lived experiences.
The plays in this section achieved varying degrees of success on the stages of New York City. The Broadway debut of *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* (1982) ran for fifteen previews and only five performances.112 Casey Kurtti’s *Catholic School Girls* (1982) did slightly better, running for thirty performances during its Off-Broadway debut at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre.113 Of the three plays, *Late Nite Catechism* (1996) was by far the most successful with New York crowds. The play debuted Off-Broadway in 1996 where it was an immediate success. In January 1998, the show expanded the number of productions it performed by adding a Saturday night Spanish performance each week. In doing so, it sought to broaden the audience base in an attempt to reach the Latinx Catholic community in New York.114 With the addition of the Spanish performances, *Late Nite Catechism* became the first Broadway or Off-Broadway show to produce an English-language play in Spanish at the same time.115 If there was significant interest in the Spanish production, the producers planned to expand the number of Spanish performances although there is no evidence to suggest that this plan came to fruition.116 *Late Nite Catechism* ran for two years before leaving the Off-Broadway stages, but it later returned


115 Ibid.

116 “‘Late Nite Catechism’ To Add Spanish Language Performances,” Backstage (New York City), May 28, 1982, 49.
again in 2017. As of 2004, the production holds the record for “the longest running off-Broadway one-person show.” Each of the plays’ runs suggests that the performance of memories of the Catholic schoolroom has significant potential on the commercial stage. However, *Late Nite Catechism*’s success suggests that regardless of their affiliation with Catholicism, New York audiences were more excited to participate in the performance of memory by sharing their own experiences with Catholicism rather than watching the performance of fictionalized characters. Although each of the productions calls upon the performance of memories of the Catholic school, the success of *Late Nite Catechism* rests in its ability to explicitly incorporate a broad array of memories and experiences within its production.

Although my project focuses on Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, the success of a production is not solely defined by its success on New York stages. In the case of the shows in this chapter, *Catholic Schools Girls* had some success with productions outside of New York City. Interestingly, *Catholic School Girls* greatest commercial success took place outside of the United States over the course of a three-year tour in Australia. However, both *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* and *Late Nite Catechism*, had significant success on regional stages throughout the United States. In particular, Chicago theatres have served as a hotbed for positive receptions of productions featuring the Catholic schoolroom, likely as a result of its large Catholic

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population. \(^{120}\) *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* had a highly successful touring career, debuting at the Forum Theatre in Chicago before touring throughout the United States. The play was immediately popular among Chicago audiences. In its second year at the Forum, the play continued to run at 93% to 95% capacity, and its investors received unprecedented returns for a Chicago premier. \(^{121}\) Its success continued as it moved into production on other regional and professional stages. After leaving Chicago, the show travelled to the Birmingham Theatre in Birmingham, Michigan where it boasted a successful eight month run, surpassing a touring production of “Annie” to become the longest running musical at the theatre. \(^{122}\) It played next at the Walnut Theatre in Philadelphia where it was offered the opportunity to extend its run, but it decided to try to move to Broadway where unfortunately it lost its momentum and received little attention. \(^{123}\) Nonetheless, after its failed Broadway attempt, the show returned to Chicago where it once again was a booming success, reminding producers of its commercial potential among cities with prominent Catholic demographics. \(^{124}\) As it neared its second anniversary in Chicago, newspaper reviews note that the show was earning a 400% return to its investors. \(^{125}\) The show’s

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123 Harry Harris, “Philadelphia,” *Variety* (New York City), November 18, 1981, 93.


continual financial success throughout its tours points to its popularity among audiences outside of New York despite its lack of success on Broadway.

Productions of *Late Nite Catechism* outside of New York City also testify to the commercial potential for the performance of Catholic school memories. Not only did the show surpass other solo acts on stages in New York, it continues to run in Chicago at the Royal George Theatre where it first debuted in 1993, and it currently holds the record for the “longest running religious comedy in (Chicago’s) history.” The upstairs of the Royal George was converted into a classroom space that is specifically designated for productions of *Late Nite Catechism*. The show continues to run multiple times each week throughout the year. Furthermore, the play has also had extensive tours throughout the United States since it’s 1993 debut in Chicago in which it has been performed in regional theatres as well as parish halls. Although my project focuses on Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, the success of a production is not solely defined by its success on New York stages. With regards to dramaturgies of presence, in some cases, audiences in regions outside of New York were and continue to be more receptive to these performances, arguably because other areas of the country have larger Catholic populations more likely to attend the theatre who can more directly relate to the performances of the Catholic schoolroom. Nonetheless, for the sake of my project, I continue to focus on the New York productions in order to consider how Catholic dramaturgies of presence operate in predominantly secular spaces.

The ongoing appeal of *Late Nite Catechism* in New York and throughout the country testifies to the effectiveness and popularity of the performance of memory in recalling one’s relationship to the Catholic faith both in secular and religious spaces. In particular, Catholic

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audiences are drawn to plays that allow them to continue to remember and engage with their own memories of their childhood within the culture of the Catholic Church. Although not as commercially successful as the other two plays in this chapter, Casey Kurtti’s *Catholic School Girls* engages the similar techniques with regards to the performance of memory. Moreover, while the play was not a commercial success, producers recognized the potential of the performance of memory in that this was the first of Kurtti’s plays given the opportunity to debut on Off-Broadway. The notable success of *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* and *Late Nite Catechism*, in particular, demonstrate the commercial potential of Catholic school plays that espouse a dramaturgy of presence in which the performance of memory crafts an image of relationships as continually changing according to one’s status in life.


*Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* is based on a memoir by the same name written by Chicago native, John R. Powers. The music is written by James Quinn with lyrics by Alaric Jans. After successful runs in Chicago, Birmingham, Michigan, and Philadelphia, the musical debuted on Broadway at the Alvin Theater in 1982. The show takes the form of a memory play. It portrays the memories of Eddie, a young boy, who in his own words grew up in a world where there were only two religions: Catholic and Public. At the beginning of the musical, Eddie, who is now an adult, has a flashback to the days of his childhood. As a Catholic boy, Eddie

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was educated and grew up within the Catholic school classrooms in the 1950s. The story chronicles Eddie’s attendance in Catholic schools from first grade through high school.

Although the play laughs at the idiosyncrasies of the performances of belief enforced in the Catholic school classroom, it does not criticize this moment in church history nor does it seek to put it on a pedestal. Playwright and author, John R. Powers, claims that the musical neither promotes nor criticizes the Catholic Church. Rather, Powers says he wants “people to go away thinking about their childhood.”

For the most part, reviews of the show suggest that productions fall largely in line with Powers’ intentions. Reviewers almost unanimously agree that the production crafts a positive and respectful image of the Catholic Church.

In this production, the divine is never made physically present. The closest physical reminder of the divine within the production is a cross- not a crucifix- that rests over the main doorway. The use of the cross and not a crucifix in the Broadway production further subdues Catholic ideas of presence in that it broadly hearkens Christianity, but removes any reminder of the divine’s physical form from the stage. Despite the lack of any tangible reminder of the divine, however, the production assumes that the supernatural is part of the lived experience of the Catholic school system from Eddie’s first entrance into his former school. As he enters the building, Eddie is immediately reminded that, “Mother Mary and Our Savior/ Will demand your best behavior.”

Similar comments persist throughout the production as Eddie and his peers are

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reminded by the nuns and priest that every action that they make reflects upon their faith. Accordingly, the assumed relationship to the divine guides everyone’s actions throughout the musical. Thus, the *dramaturgy of presence* within *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* assumes the presence of the supernatural throughout the performed memory of Eddie’s adolescent years.

In contrast, the production reflects a changed relationship with the divine as Eddie returns to the present of the performance. Through the switch from the past into the present the production presents lived relationships with the divine as unstable and open to change. The transition from past to present within the production highlights how in his adulthood, Eddie has outgrown the practice of Catholicism that he learned as a student. Neither Eddie’s words nor actions suggest the supernatural continues to be a guiding force in his life. As he leaves his childhood behind him, so too, does he leave this understanding that the supernatural is perpetually present to him.

At the beginning of the musical, Eddie returns to his alma mater as an adult, attempting to get contact information for his former classmate and childhood sweetheart, Becky, who joined a convent after high school. Eddie continues to be in love with Becky after all these years, and he hopes that his former teacher, Sister Lee, can provide him with Becky’s contact information. Upon entering the school office, however, Eddie is flooded with the memories of his time at the school. The setting quickly shifts from the present to the past as Eddie recalls his journey from first grade through high school in the Chicago Catholic school system. As the production journeys through Eddie’s childhood memories, it adopts a lighthearted tone as it portrays experiences within the Catholic classroom that were intrinsic to Eddie’s journey from adolescence to adulthood. The show broadly remembers the culture of the Catholic school classroom by calling attention to the structure of the Catholic school system, the predominant teachings emphasized in the classroom, and the
ways in which these teachings manifested culturally within Eddie’s K-12 education. It recalls the idiosyncrasies of the Catholic school classrooms between the sweet appearance of the nuns and their renowned discipline systems, the absurdities of sex education classes under the guidance of the nuns and priests, the unique pedagogical strategies used to educate students regarding church teachings, and the general insecurities that accompany falling in love for the first time.

Eddie’s relationship to the Catholic Church and God is unclear at the beginning of the play. His only motivation for being at his alma mater is his quest for his former love’s contact information. The only context given to the audience is that he was raised Catholic and went to Catholic schools. As the show quickly brings Eddie’s memories of his schooldays to the forefront of the performance, it becomes evident that all his childhood memories within this space are constituted within the context of Catholicism. During his childhood, Eddie’s relationship with the divine was not lived through interactions with physical manifestations of God or even private conversations with an invisible God. Instead, his relationship with the divine was constituted based on how Eddie embodied the practices that the priest and nuns said best exemplified the embodiment of the Catholic faith. Thus, Eddie’s relationship to the supernatural is predominantly configured in his memories through the ways in which he chose to adhere to the idiosyncratic practices often associated with pre-Vatican II Catholicism that were encouraged by the nuns as an expression of faith.

This performed relationship with the divine reflects Gary Wills’ observations of pre-Vatican II Catholicism in which he suggests that Catholicism manifests as series of intermeshed habits. In some cases, the practice of certain embodied habits are directly linked to spiritual

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practices and disciplines within the church. For example, in one of his early memories, Eddie goes to confession for the first time and admits his sins to the priest.\textsuperscript{132} Eddie’s confession is one of the earliest moments in the production in which the audience sees him attempt to live out his relationship with the divine. Prior to confession, the nun warned Eddie and his peers that if they do not tell their sins to the priest, they will go to Hell for eternity.\textsuperscript{133} The performance of Eddie’s first confession portrays his lived relationship with the divine insofar as he attends confession to attain a positive standing in the afterlife. Accordingly, the performance of confession assumes that Eddie’s participation in this act will mediate his relationship with the divine, suggesting to the audience that this relationship bears significance to him.

In most of the cases presented throughout the play, however, the habits performed as an expression of faith are cultural practices that have been broadly promulgated by members of the religious as a means of living out their faith although they are not directly connected to religious rituals or devotions. Throughout the play, the nuns and the priest deliver (now) outdated lessons pertaining to how the practice of these different habits are iterations of religious belief. Regardless of whether the religious offer a rational for their teaching, the underlying assumption that guides each of these teachings is that one lives in obedience to God if one engages in the specific practices prescribed by the teachers.

The title of the play suggests that this is a key theme throughout the production in that the title refers to the fact that nuns used to teach girls to avoid wearing shiny shoes. The practice of wearing patent leather shoes was thought to tempt boys by allowing them to see what was under

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\footnote{133} Ibid, 17.
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the girls’ skirts, and according to the nuns, tempting boys in this way was sinful. Thus it went against what God wanted for them. The cover of the playbill for the production draws attention to this trope. The playbill portrays four characters. On the far left, a girl sits on the floor looking at her patent leather shoes. In the center of the playbill, a boy writes, “Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?” on the board. On the right, a young boy looking down at a second girl’s shoes; these shoes have lines coming from them, suggesting that they are reflecting back towards the boy. While the boy looks at the shoes, the girl looks out from the playbill cover smiling. The first girl, who stares at her shoes dejectedly, does not have a halo over her head. Her dejection suggests that she is aware of the dilemma presented by wearing her shoes and chooses to wear them anyways. In contrast, the second girl who stares out at the audience appears blissfully unaware of her dilemma. A halo crowns the second girl’s head. By portraying the images of the two scenarios on the cover of the playbill, the production uses the promotional materials to hearken the interplay between the embodied practices of the students as a manifestation of Catholicism. The halo on one girl as opposed to the other raises questions as to what saintliness looks like in practice. Accordingly, the playbill situates the characters’ interactions in relationship to an unseen supernatural figure before the musical even begins.134

In the play, Sister Lee presents this topic, stressing the significance of wearing dull shoes, to the girls in the context of a chastity talk. Sister Lee delivers the chastity talk while the girls are on retreat. The delivery of this lecture while on retreat reminds the audience that this talk is not merely educational. Rather, Sister Lee intends to help the girls grow closer to God. In her talk,  

Sister Lee tells the girls to avoid “black patent leather shoes because they reflect up… pearls because they reflect down… and never go to a restaurant with white tablecloths because that reminds the boys of beds.” Sister then hands the girls a sheet of paper which she leaves the girls to read independently which tells them to avoid petting, necking, and French kissing, passionate kissing, and going all the way. Sister does not cover the practical ramifications of what happens if a girl engages in any of the aforementioned acts. Such details are not important. The only ramifications addressed in the talk are those that will impinge upon the girls’ relationship with the divine.

Sister later quizzes the girls on what they have learned. Each of the aforementioned, clearly delineated habits are thus identified by Sister as practices that the girls should carefully follow in order to live out their faith. During their review of these teachings, Sister explicitly outlines the ways in which trespassing the boundaries she delineated earlier in the scene effects one’s relationship with God. The following question and answer scene demonstrates the ways in which these teachings are constituted in light of Catholic morality:

Sister: If you think of doing it, then it’s called?
Girls: An impure thought.
Sister: If, God forbid, you go ahead and do it anyway then it’s called?
Girls: An impure act.
Sister: If you do it with your husband…
Sister Lee: If you do it with someone other than your husband, then it’s called?
Girls: Adultery.
Sister Lee: If you don’t do it at all?
Girls: Holiness.  


136 Ibid, 40.

137 Ibid, 43.
Through the inclusion of this scene, the audience sees how sexuality is entirely configured within the production as a way of living out one’s faith in the divine. In the world of the play, the performance of chastity is the ultimate embodiment of one’s religious devotion. Any breach in chastity has dire consequences for the girls’ eternal relationship with the divine. Sister ends her review session with the girls warning them that, “If you go too far you will lose your immortal souls to the eternal fires of Hell.”\textsuperscript{138} Thus, she concludes by forcefully addressing how overstepping the aforementioned limits causes irreparable damage to one’s relationship with God. Accordingly, the world of the play assumes that one’s obedience to the divine is manifested not through prayer but rather the ways in which the women dress and interact with men. Moreover, the only thing women need to know about these habits is that they have eternal consequences. The play neglects to address the consequences such infractions might garner on earth.

Meanwhile, the girls’ male counterparts, who are also on retreat, are given a similar lecture by the parish priest. Delivering his talk, Fr. O’Reilly dutifully reminds the boys that one aspect of living as Catholics means that they should not look at inappropriate pictures, and they should altogether “ignore the urges of (their private parts).”\textsuperscript{139} Like Sister Lee, Father O’Reilly warns the boys that engaging in such acts has dire consequences with regards to one’s relationship with God. In the song, “Private Parts,” Father O’Reilly cautions the boys to, “Imitate the saints/ And purify your hearts/ And ignore the urges of your private parts/ Don’t think lewd thoughts/ About a woman’s form/ Eternity’s a long time/ And hell gets awful warm.” Once again, the talk does not address any earthly ramifications, but it instead reinforces the narrative that the practice of chastity

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, 41.
is an important marker of one’s obedience to God. Accordingly, for both male and female students, their lived relationship with the divine manifests throughout the production under the auspices that the supernatural has certain expectations for how you practice your sexuality through your dress and actions.

The 1982 production at the Alvin Theatre parodies these teachings but nonetheless performs them as an iteration of lived belief in the supernatural as was enforced within the Catholic education system. Leading up to the end of Act I, the audience watches the students sitting through their sex education classes taught by Sister Lee and Fr. O’Reilly respectively. At the end of their lessons, both male and female students are left with the question, “How far is too far?”140 The scene ends when the entire company comes onstage wearing oversized black patent leather shoes and waving them towards the heavens.141 In doing so the production returns to the guiding trope of the play. It parodies the emphasis on the practice of idiosyncratic habits such as avoiding patent leather shoes while also remembering the reality that this practice was intrinsically linked to the Catholic school classroom. Moreover, by pointing their shoes to Heaven, the production stresses that the ways in which one dressed constituted part of one’s performed obedience to the divine.

The production further draws attention to how the performance of chastity is constituted within the culture of the Catholic school as part of one’s contract with the divine during the prom scene. Prior to the prom, the students sing a song called, “Mad Bomber” (which later has a reprise during the actual prom montage) in which the boys verbally anticipate the sexual possibilities that await them on prom night. In response to their musings, however, the girls sing, “We’re the kind

140 Ibid, 43.
that won’t/ No matter how you woo/ the kind that don’t/ Until you say I do/ Cause we know you’ve
got a filthy mind/ and you only want one thing… We’re saving ourselves for marriage.”

As the girls respond, they remind the boys that within the Catholic faith, sex is saved for marriage only.

During the prom scene, in order to counter any possible breeches of chastity that might occur at the prom, the nuns peruse the room of young men and women, ready to call them to task if they attempt to go too far. Some nuns prowl the stage with yardsticks, using them as reliable tools to measure the distance between the young men and women as they danced together at the senior prom. Meanwhile, another sister patrols the space with a whistle, prepared to enforce order and call out any shenanigans that might not be in accordance with the sisters’ teachings.

As the sisters serve as arbiters of chastity among their young pupils, they hold a position of authority within the school that allows them to enforce the practice of these habits as is fitting according to their understanding of the faith. Of course, it is notable that within the world of the Catholic school, it is the women who choose to live out their entire relationship with the divine through their perpetual embodiment of chastity that dictate what all manifestations of faith should look like. Nonetheless, within the world of the play, the model Catholic child who is assumed to have the best relationship with God is thus the child who follows each of the precepts set forth by the nuns and maintains a respectable distance from his or her dance partner.

As the production continues, the prom scene fades into a hospital scene which performs a different iteration of young love. While their peers are at the prom, Eddie visits Becky, who is


unable to attend prom, because she had her appendix out. He originally planned to go with another classmate, Nancy, who decided not to go with him on the day of the prom. When Eddie goes to visit Becky, he decides to tell her how he feels about her, but she, in turn, reveals that she wants to be a nun. While the prom scene reflects the ways in which the students were encouraged to remain chaste for the sake of their religious beliefs, Becky’s statement and her choice to join the convent speak to her desire to live out her relationship with the divine by taking a perpetual vow of chastity. In doing so, she ultimately embodies the ideal practice of holiness as set forth within the world of the Catholic schoolroom.

In that the show calls upon the politics of memory to both remember and forget, the production functions as an act of memorialization. The musical recognizes particular cultural habits inculcated in Catholic school students in the pre-Vatican II classroom. It memorializes these habits as those that are assumed to most likely aid someone’s relationship with God. At the same time, however, the performance does not suggest that the relationships between humans and divine continue to manifest in the same way in the current moment. In fact, at the end of the musical, Eddie is happy to leave his Catholic school days behind him. There is no suggestion that he continues to engage in any relationship with the supernatural whatsoever, regardless of whether that relationship reflects habits of the past or not. Rather, Eddie’s priorities have changed as have Becky’s. As Eddie returns to the present, his only concern is finding his childhood sweetheart who left the convent to become a teacher. Eddie’s priority in the current moment is to rekindle his love for Becky far away from the Catholic culture of his youth. The performance of memory within the production thus allows the musical to navigate the past and the present of his relationship with

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Catholicism. In his journey down memory lane, Eddie looks with fondness at the positive experiences and friendships, particularly with Becky, that he cultivated within the Catholic school classroom. Nonetheless, as the audience sees in the final song, this performance of faith is one that Eddie readily relegates to the past.

The musical ends with the song, "Thank God," a song that pays tribute to the ways in which the Catholic school classroom both helped him grow as well as notes Eddie’s gratitude for his experiences in Catholic school. As he reflects on his experiences, Eddie is overall thankful to have grown up with this world. For example, after paying homage to his memories of his Catholic school experience, Eddie sings, “Thank God/ We can smile when (the good old schooldays) are brought to mind/ For the memories all amuse me now/ That used to just annoy/ I was slowly growing wiser/ It was torture mixed with joy/ With respect and understanding/ For the man inside the boy.”

He acknowledges that in retrospect, his childhood was good. Nonetheless, he does not desire to replicate them. As he mentions at another point in the song, “Sometime I reflect on what might have been/ If only I knew then what I know now,” suggesting that given his present understanding of the world, he might not have navigated his childhood the same way. Eddie is happy to have moved beyond his childhood. He nonetheless acknowledges that the experiences he and his peers underwent shall not be forgotten, and there is a place for remembering them with a smile, because they informed the person he is today. Although he is grateful for his memories, he demonstrates no desire to engage in that world in any respect at this point in his life.


147 Ibid, 75.
Accordingly, the production cultivates a dramaturgy of presence in light of an assumed presence. The characters live out their relationships with this presence by adhering to the teachings passed down by authority figures within the Catholic Church. The performance of memory within this production allows the audience to witness the shift in Eddie’s journey with God. In his early life, he adheres to the teachings of the priest and nuns unquestioningly. As an adult, however, this relationship has changed, and there is no evidence that the divine is a guiding force in the performance of his day-to-day life. Thus, the performance of memory allows the production to explore how lived relationships with God manifest through the practice of these habits, giving credence to these relationships with the God regardless of whether supernatural presence can be proven. However, the show explores how although these relationships were lived at some points during an individual’s life does not ensure that they will continue.

3.2 Case Study: Catholic School Girls (1984)

Casey Kurtti’s Catholic School Girls debuted Off-Broadway at the Douglas Fairbank Theater in Times Square in 1984. Like Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?, the story explores the longer trajectory of Catholic school education, following the journeys of four girls as they progress through from first through eighth grade at St. George’s School in Yonkers, New York. The play features four female actresses who double as both schoolgirls and the nuns who head up St. George’s. In each scene, one actress rotates out of the role of a schoolgirl and into the role of one the nuns. As the actresses present the experiences of the schoolgirls and nuns onstage, they change their hairstyles and behaviors, but their uniforms remain the same throughout
the performance. Like *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?*, *Catholic School Girls* depends on the performance of memory, following the memories of Elizabeth as she recalls her Catholic school days. The play follows Elizabeth as she gradually grows in her relationship with Catholicism throughout the production, and like the previous play, the audience sees how Elizabeth’s relationship with her faith has traveled with her from the past into the present moment.

*Catholic School Girls* also assumes that the world of the play is constituted on the assumption that God exists, and thus the play also reflects the embodiment of practices promulgated by the priests and nuns as one element of living in relationship to the divine. The divine may have been represented materially once in production during the scene of the girls’ First Communion although it is unclear if the performance actually used bread to signify the Eucharist. Moreover, this encounter, as I will discuss later, has very little to do with the recognition of the Eucharist as a supernatural manifestation. Instead, the most meaningful interactions between Elizabeth and the divine take place without any physical manifestation of God. The performance of prayer becomes a means of constituting a relationship with divine presence throughout the production. The dramaturgy of presence within *Catholic School Girls* assumes the presence of the supernatural within the world of the Catholic schools, and this is reflected through the girls’ interactions with both each other and the divine. As in the previous production, there is a switch in this relationship when the protagonist moves from the past into the present moment of the play. In this play, however, the protagonist reflects a changed, but continued relationship with God that has tenuously carried forth into her adulthood.

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The set of the production at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre first draws attention to the priorities of the Catholic schoolroom before the play even begins. A teacher’s desk rests up center with a blackboard behind it. To the right of the blackboard is a bulletin board. Six student desks are also placed stage right. To the immediate left of the blackboard, an American flag stands, reminding the audience this is not just any Catholic school, but an American Catholic school.  

The only other items in the space are two small statues of Jesus and a female saint that rest on each corner of the teacher’s desk. The space is otherwise largely empty of additional décor. Before the play even begins, the presence of the statues informs the audience that the world of the play is constituted in relationship to the divine and that God is a key figure within the world of the play.

The play is divided into two acts. Each act contains scenes that reflect a particular year in Catholic education, and each scene ends with a schoolgirl delivering a monologue that expresses how she is experiencing that particular moment in her life in light of her home life, her school life, and her personal queries about God, family, and school. Unlike *Patent Leather Shoes*, this play does not begin with a flashback from the present to the past. Rather, it begins by immediately entering into the world of Sister Mary Agnes’s first grade classroom. Within the Catholic school classroom, students are given clear guidelines with regards to what it means to live in accordance with God. For example, in the second grade classroom, the students learn the difference between original, venial, and mortal sin according to the catechism of the Catholic church. In order to differentiate between the three, the girls draw jugs on the chalkboard, shading in the jug allegedly

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150 Ibid.

filled with mortal sins to represent how the soul is stained after committing mortal sin. As the students draw these images in the play they provide a visual image for the audience of how they envision their relationship with God depending on their state of sin. The darker they color in their jug, the further removed they are far from God. At this point, the girls’ begin to develop gradual understandings of sin, but they are still unclear as to what it means.

Later, in the same scene, the students receive their first Holy Communion, kneeling with their hands folded, eyes closed (with the exception of one rebellious student), and tongue out. It is unclear whether or not bread is actually used within the performance to signify the Body of Christ. However, the reception of the Eucharist in this scene is reconfigured as a performative moment. As the girls’ prepare for their First Communion, Colleen tells her peers that she cannot wait to consume the host, because she is hungry. In response, Wanda accuses Colleen of being in a state of sin for her remarks and tells her she cannot receive the Eucharist. Colleen retorts that it does not matter, because she no longer plans to become a nun. (Apparently, the young Colleen was under the impression that only nuns had to be in a state of grace to receive Eucharist, suggesting that she had little understanding of the significance of the Eucharist.)

Meanwhile, their peers, Elizabeth and Maria Theresa discuss the new clothing and accessories they got specifically for this occasion. In doing so, the two emphasize the performative nature of their first alleged encounter with the divine through the reception of the Eucharist. The four girls then kneel down in front of the priest, and shortly after one of the girls panics, because Elizabeth claims that she bit the host. The girls then begin to conjecture about what part of Jesus

153 Ibid.
Elizabeth bit. 154 Although theologically the reception of the Eucharist should point towards a developing relationship with the divine in the practice of their faith, the ways in which the girls’ perform on this occasion undermines the relationship between each girl and God. Instead, this scene predominantly emphasizes the ways in which each of the girls responds to the assumed presence of God through their physical participation within the rite. Rather than portraying the moment as a step forward in their relationship with God, the girls’ First Communion is reconfigured in light of how they perform the expected behaviors for their families and one another according to the instructions they were given.

Despite the seemingly superficial performance of faith during their First Communion, however, Elizabeth demonstrates during her early years of school that she does believe in a divine presence and that she believes it has the power to make itself manifest in her life. For example, during one of her early monologues, Elizabeth introduces the audience to the church space. During this scene, Elizabeth reminds the audience that you must bow your head at the name of “Jesus,” doing so herself. 155 This gesture points toward the fact that she acknowledges God’s presence. Moreover, during this same monologue, she recounts the story of an older student who said the statue of the Virgin Mary started to cry while she was praying. Elizabeth ends the story telling the audience that, “I believe it too… I’m going to get a miracle too.” 156 Elizabeth’s monologue points to a naïve acceptance of the existence and powers of the divine. She assumes that supernatural presences can have tangible effects on earth and that these are accessible to those who believe in

155 Ibid, 15.
156 Ibid.
them. This naïve faith manifests once again right before the end of the Act I as Elizabeth and her friend, Maria Theresa, pray to God to allow Sister Mary Thomasina, a rather dictatorial nun, and Maria Theresa’s father, who has been abusing Maria Theresa, to get injured so that they may be hospitalized through the end of the girls’ time at St. George’s School. Although this is perhaps not a typical prayer, this prayer in performance enacts a moment in which the girls’ directly engage God. The performance of the girls’ plea for God to intercede in their lives recognizes their lived relationship between themselves and the divine. This scene then again gestures to the different ways in which the divine is present to the girls during their coming of age stories.

In the second half of the play, there is an increased focus on the embodiment of practices that allegedly suggest one’s devotion to God through their performance. As is the case in Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?, the girls also demonstrate their performed adherence to the alleged dictates of God by performing specific practices that the nuns have taught them are means of living in obedience to God. Like Black Patent Leather Shoes, the focus on sex education in the Catholic schools becomes a primary trope in the production; the ways in which students understand and embody their sexuality becomes a defining marker of one’s holiness according to the dictates presented in the schoolroom.

As the girls enter their Middle School years, their classroom experiences frequently reflect how the classroom became a space that taught them how to navigate puberty and informed their understandings of sex. The Sister presents her lecture in the context of religious history. She begins by asking the girls to name any saints that were identified in the “Little Pictorial Lives of the

157 Ibid, 37.
“Saints” as virgins and martyrs. This introduction thus connects Sister’s later lessons to different people who embody holiness within Catholic tradition who are recognized for their sexual purity. Meanwhile, the scene transitions to portray the girls learning how to use tampons for the first time although Sister Mary Germaine cautions that they should use sanitary napkins to maintain their virginity, offering little rational for her logic. As the girls’ conversation progresses they then begin to discuss sex further in depth, discussing the meaning of sixty-nine in a small group and debating how pregnancy occurs. Although the girls offer their own interpretations of the subject, none of them has a firm grasp on the subject matter. Rather than address the girls’ budding and misguided interest in the practical aspects of their sexuality, however, Sister Mary Germaine returns the conversation to the lives of the saints. She thus lectures them on the lives of St. Agnes and Agatha who gave their lives in order to maintain their virginity. In doing so, she seeks to provide the girls with cautionary tales with regards to how they should embody their sexuality as they grow up. In doing so, the production configures chastity once again as the epitome of religious practice and emphasizes it at the expense of any practical information that might be helpful to the girls’ physical development.

In the second act, the practice of habits that are allegedly markers of chastity become an increasing focus in the production. Sister teaches the girls to cross their legs and maintain appropriate skirt lengths, teachings which the girls choose to embrace to varying degrees.

158 Ibid, 43.
159 Ibid, 38, 44, 48.
160 Ibid, 40.
162 Ibid, 45.
Although the girls question the nun’s teachings, they do as they ask. The embrace of these practices suggests that the girls truly did believe that God was present, and he could see and punish them if they violated his rules. Their knee-length skirts and crossed ankles become a subtle testimony to their belief in the divine.

It is not until the end of the play that any of the girls truly questions whether this is what God wants for them and whether God exists. At the end of the play, however, Sister Lucille tells Elizabeth that her grandmother died. Sister Lucille says that this news is a sign of God’s disapproval for Elizabeth’s disobedience, stating that, “Elizabeth, you continue to disobey my will, which is God’s will, and therefore, he has sent you a personal message of disapproval that I have been entrusted to deliver. Your mother called in to Sister Rose Gertrude and I am sorry to tell you this; but your grandmother passed away this morning.” Until this point, the girls have questioned the sisters, but never rejected their teaching. However, following Sister’s pronouncement, and Elizabeth goes home where she delivers one final monologue which she directs at God. In this final monologue, Elizabeth declares, “Don’t you ever lay your hands on me, cause if I ever see you, you can strike me dead… try… I will spit all over your face, whatever it looks like. Because you and everyone else are a bunch of liars. And I really think I hate you. Oh, and one more thing: You don’t exist.” Even as she denounces the divine, she talks to God as though he is real. The scene shifts immediately to the girls waiting to receive their Catholic high school acceptance letters. Elizabeth reveals that she no longer believes in God, because he takes everything people love from them, and she wants nothing to do with him anymore. Although the other girls agree

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163 Ibid, 64.
164 Ibid, 66.
with some of her concerns, they are each delighted to find out that they will continue with their Catholic school education in high school, because that is part of what constitutes their Catholic identities.

The fact that what is performed throughout the bulk of the play is a series of memories is only discovered at the end of the play. Right after the schoolgirls declare that they are moving on to the next phase of their education, Elizabeth says, “So that’s it,” \(^{165}\) wrapping up the abbreviated recall of her childhood years. In the final monologue, Elizabeth then reveals that she put her Catholic schooldays behind her long ago. \(^{166}\) She divulges to the audience that she had not thought of those days until recently when she was at a party. At the party, Elizabeth began to share her memories of her Catholic school experiences when someone asked her what she thought about God. \(^{167}\) Through the delivery of her monologue, Elizabeth thus calls the audience to recognize that what they just saw was a performance of the past. Elizabeth observes that she forgot much of what she learned during her days as a Catholic school student suggests that these teachings bear little relevance to her present identity. This observation to her audience points to a changed relationship with God. Elizabeth’s relationship to God is no longer defined by whether she uses pads or tampons or how long her skirt is, but it is also unclear whether Elizabeth even has a relationship with God at this point in her life. It would seem that she has predominantly lived according to her rejection of God following the death of her grandmother in eighth grade.

\(^{165}\) Ibid, 71.

\(^{166}\) Ibid.

\(^{167}\) Ibid.
Interestingly although Elizabeth seems to have little relationship with God in the present of the play, the moments that Elizabeth chose to memorialize through her retelling of her Catholic school years chronicle her persistence in better understanding what it means to be Catholic. Although she claims to have left her Catholic school days in the past, the moments that she remembers and thus chooses to memorialize suggest that her journey of faith continues to remain important to her. Thus, despite changes in her beliefs, her relationship with God does not appear to be entirely over. In the very last moment of the play, she acknowledges that her belief in Catholicism is not entirely a thing of the past. Rather, she says that the evening that she recounted her stories of her Catholic school days, she went to sleep asking into the dark, “Are you there, Are you there?” 168 In this moment, Elizabeth acknowledges that much of her Catholic identity and her relationship with God has fallen by the wayside. Nonetheless, in this final moment, she admits that this relationship is not entirely ended although she is at a different step. Her final question into the darkness suggests that while the cultural practices of her childhood are no longer relevant to her, perhaps her belief in God may still have relevance.

The dramaturgy of memory within this production reiterates the idea that the journey of Catholicism continues to perpetuate throughout one’s life although it might be more relevant in one moment as opposed to another. In Do Black Patent Leather Shoes, the dramaturgy of memory beginning with a flashback and ending in the current moment positions the performance of Catholicism as firmly in the past. Moreover, when he returned to the present moment, Eddie reiterated that he was happy to leave those days behind him. In contrast, from the beginning of Catholic School Girls it is not clear that the play takes place in the past. Instead, the audience is

168 Ibid.
likely to assume that the play is reflecting the present of the characters until Elizabeth’s final reveal that everything that the audience just saw was a memory. This sense of present-ness throughout the performance crafts a narrative of the practice of Catholic belief as perpetually growing and developing in new ways. As Elizabeth enters each grade, her understanding of Catholicism shifts according to the teachings she encounters as well as the way that her own lived experiences inform her understanding of God. When the performance reveals that these moments were all from the past and yet her relationship with God continues to haunt her, it crafts a *dramaturgy of presence* that reflects how one’s relationship with the divine has the ability to continually manifest in different ways over the course of one’s life. It performs a narrative of this relationship with the divine that is a perpetual journey rather than a remnant of past memories.

Consequently, the performance of memory allows the production to affirm the ebbs and flows of lived relationships with the divine. The performance of the past allowed the production to recognize those experiences with presence that were largely recognized through the performance of idiosyncratic embodied practices as well as those that were reflective of a more intimate, if naïve, relationship developed through prayer. Furthermore, the change from the performance of past memories to the present moment allowed the production to explore the present and the future of this relationship.

### 3.3 Case Study: *Late Nite Catechism* (1993)

*Late Nite Catechism* initially premiered as a late-night show at Live Bait Theater, a commercial theatre in Chicago in 1993 before moving to Off-Broadway in 2004. *Late Nite Catechism* is a one-woman show that relies on the trope of the Catholic school nun; it recalls the
discipline and teachings of the Catholic school classroom prior to Vatican II. The play features a single character, Sister, who is a member of the fictional religious order of the Sorrowful Sisters of the Weeping Nun. In the show, Sister holds a catechism lesson which she facilitates in question-and-answer format. Interactive in nature, the production requires the participation of the audience members to serve as Sister’s students. Sister focuses her catechism lesson primarily around the lives of the saints, debating the merits of various saints and whether the saints should continue to be recognized as such. Sister also quizzes her students on basic Church teachings, their own behavior as a Catholic school or CCD student, and their current affiliation with the Church.

The script has undergone numerous revisions over the course of its twenty-five year run. Moreover, its interactive nature leaves room for flux in what is exactly performed based on the actress playing the role of Sister, who is in the audience each night, and how the audience responds to Sister’s prompts. Nonetheless, despite its interactive nature, playwright, Vicki Quade, notes that over the years, she has developed a script of potential responses for common scenarios that often arise in performance. Overall, there are 65 pages of material, and the rest is improvised as necessary; however, even for the improvised moments, the actresses playing Sister also prepare a series of responses to respond to common audience responses within production.

As was seen in the prior productions, the presence of God is assumed within the world of the play. Throughout Late Nite Catechism, Sister insists that one’s relationship to the divine is established through the performance of rote recitation of church teachings and devotional practices. Because of the interactive nature of the piece, however, other relationships with the

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169 Vicki Quade, "Late Nite Catechism Research," E-mail message to author, November 30, 2018.

170 Ibid.
supernatural manifest differently throughout each performance based on audience responses. While Sister has a standard set of questions that she uses to test her audience’s memories, the actress playing Sister is also trained to improv throughout the performance. Thus, how individuals answer the questions allows each production to highlight people’s different experiences with Catholicism in the current moment. The performance of memory within *Late Nite Catechism* also functions differently in that the production requires audience members to recall their own memories as they engage in their remedial catechism. Accordingly, throughout the performance, audience members are exposed to a wide variety of perspectives on the ways in which individuals experience the divine that depends entirely on who is in the audience. Nonetheless, the culture of the Catholic classroom binds them together despite their differing relationships with God.

The theatre space in which *Late Nite Catechism* was performed incurred ideas of religious belief before the audience even entered the theatre as a result of the production’s location, the basement of St. Luke’s Church, a Lutheran Church on West 46th street.\(^{171}\) Entering the space, the image of a traditional Catholic school classroom with a blackboard and a desk confronts the audience.\(^{172}\) Religious posters line the walls, and a statue sits on Sister’s desk. Thus, both the outside and inside of the space hearken to mind the existence of the divine based on the set design that incurs an easily recognizable Catholic school classroom. Accordingly, the space itself incurs a specific relationship with the practice of religion, calling upon the history of practiced religious beliefs within the building itself and then further hearkening a particular religious tradition with the set.


Unlike the previous two plays, *Late Nite Catechism* is not set specifically before or during Vatican II. Rather, the play takes place in the present of the performance as Sister holds a remedial catechism class for her students who need to review their knowledge of the Catholic faith. On the one hand, the play presumes that regardless of one’s religious affiliation or educational upbringing that audience members are familiar with stereotypes of the Catholic school classroom and what participation within that environment entails. Thus, from the beginning of the show, there is an underlying assumption that the audience acknowledges a belief in the presence of God regardless of whether they believe in him. Moreover, the play assumes that audience members have some knowledge of the teachings and behaviors associated with the ways in which Catholics manifest their belief in God. These assumptions model a dramaturgy of presence that rest on two assumptions: God exists, and there are certain embodied behaviors that need to be performed within the Catholic school classroom that can account for one’s status as a good Catholic.

When Sister, played by MaryPat Donovan, enters the stage, she does so dressed in a habit that actually belonged to a Benedictine nun.173 Upon introducing herself, Sister tells her students that she has been a nun since before Vatican II impacted the Church and that she taught in the pre-Vatican II classroom. Accordingly, Sister’s religious vocation, her clothing, and her history within Church incur a sense that she has some sort of relationship with God. However, throughout the performance it is unclear what that relationship is or to what extent it is important. Rather, her performance of faith seems to be founded on her knowledge of teachings of the Church rather than her actual practice of them. Thus, although the audience likely presumes Sister has a relationship with God it remains unclear throughout what that relationship is. Instead, her devotion to a

supernatural presence is suggested through how she holds her students accountable for learning more about the Catholic faith.

Throughout the performance, however, there are moments that allow the audience to witness the ways in which their fellow audience members relate to the practice of the Catholic faith. When Sister calls upon audience members, she asks them first to identify themselves by their Confirmation name. Sister, of course, acknowledges that if a student forgets or does not have a Confirmation name, girls should say, “Mary,” and boys may choose either, “Joseph,” or, “Patrick,” since those are strong traditional Catholic names. Inevitably, when a student chooses one of these names, Sister is quick to ask whether that is actually their Confirmation name or whether they forgot. In some cases, the audience member confirms that in they did in fact choose Mary or Joseph or Patrick. In other cases, however, students acknowledge that they chose the name based on Sister’s earlier prompts. Although these moments provide entertainment for the audience, they also draw attention to the ways in which different audience members have privileged their relationships with God over the course of their lives. According to Church teaching, the sacrament of Confirmation is a rite of passage in which a young adult officially becomes an adult within the Catholic church. As part of the sacrament, the individual chooses to take a name of a saint as a role model of the faith. As members of the audience acknowledge they do not remember what saint they chose, these encounters draw attention to both the pasts and presents of people’s lived relationships with religious belief. The performance draws attention to the changing roles the sacraments play in the lives of audience members at different points in their lives.

Many of Sister’s questions encourage the audience to recall their own days in the Catholic classroom and knowledge of Catholic teachings. In framing her questions, Sister calls upon a pre-Vatican II framework for understanding the Catholic faith, assuming that many in the audience are
able to demonstrate a familiarity with the precepts of Catholicism prior to Vatican II changes.\footnote{D.J.R. Bruckner, “Sister Makes the Audience Jump Through Hoops,” The New York Times, 9 October, 1996, http://www.latenitecatechism.info/latenitecatechism/newyork/} For example, the catechism questions that Sister uses to test her student’s knowledge of the Catholic faith are not drawn from the most recent version of the Catholic catechism. Rather, her questions come from the \textit{Baltimore Catechism}, a catechism issued by American bishops in 1885 and used in Catholic education through Vatican II.\footnote{Matthew D. Ingold, “American Initiative in the Modern Catechetical movement: From the Release of the \textit{Baltimore Catechism} in 1885 to the Publication of the \textit{General Catechetical Directory} in 1971,” Master thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2006.} Although the \textit{Baltimore Catechism} is no longer in use in contemporary catechesis, Sister takes questions about the Catholic faith directly from this version of the catechism and expects her students to provide responses verbatim from the catechism. Within the production, the ability to answer these questions is recognized as affirming one’s knowledge of God. When students answer questions correctly, they receive prizes such as miniature saint statues, glow in the dark rosaries, religious kitchen magnets and medals of Jackie Kennedy, presumably to further their devotion\footnote{D.J.R. Bruckner, “Sister Makes the Audience Jump Through Hoops,” The New York Times, 9 October, 1996, http://www.latenitecatechism.info/latenitecatechism/newyork/; Joseph Hurley, “Hilarious, Emotional ‘Catechism’ Is Habit Forming,” \textit{Irish Echo}, October 23-29, 1996, http://www.latenitecatechism.info/latenitecatechism/newyork/}. The use of rewards thus establishes these performances as alleged affirmations of knowledge of the divine. Moreover, they reflect a presumption that rises from within the performance that members of the audience continue to engage with the supernatural outside of the world of the show.

Similarly, Sister quizzes her students with regards to their knowledge of the saints. However, Sister’s lesson does not merely test students’ individual knowledge of saints. Rather, her assessment takes the form of a game that she calls, “Saint-or-not-a-Saint.” Sister prefaces this
game noting that during Vatican II, the bishops revisited the observance of saints’ feast days and eliminated saints from the liturgical calendar for whom there was little evidence. For example, as Sister notes, the much-loved St. Christopher, patron saint of drivers, is now Mr. Christopher. Sister then asks the students to engage in an exercise in which they review each of the saints’ stories and decide with Sister which saints should be allowed to remain a saint and which saints should be eliminated. In the exercise, Sister writes the names of five saints on the board, including names such as St. Gemma, St. Veronica, St. Simon Stylites, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Joseph, and St. Patrick. She then asks students to recall the details of each saint’s life, and then the class takes a vote on who should remain a saint and who should be demoted from their heavenly status. As students reveal their varying knowledge of the saints, these answers further serve as testimonies to their lived relationship with Catholicism in the current moment according to Sister’s matrix of Catholicism. A good Catholic, according to Sister, is able to identify the different saints.

The play not only asks the audience to remember theological teachings and devotions, but also to remember idiosyncrasies of the Catholic school classroom. For example, upon her initial entrance into the classroom, Sister surveys the room for women in the audience dressed immodestly. Taking tissues from a box on her desk, Sister is known to cover up bare shoulders, low necklines, and exposed knees with tissues in an effort to remind women of the need to dress modestly. She also chastises audience members who arrive late or who have the audacity to

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177 According to the playwright, references to St. Christopher were in all the early performances and have since become a bit that the actresses can choose to include or disregard in more recent shows. (Vicki Quade, "Late Nite Catechism Research," E-mail message to author, July 9, 2019.)


179 Vicki Quade, "Late Nite Catechism Research," E-mail message to author, November 30, 2018.; Vicki Quade and Maripat Donovan, Late Nite Catechism, Live Performance, May 2017, Royal George Theatre, Chicago.;
chew gum within her classroom.\textsuperscript{180} Early in \textit{Late Nite Catechism}, Sister also surveys her students to ascertain who among them participated in fundraisers to raise money for pagan babies in other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{181} She reminds audience members of how it used to be common in Catholic education to raise money for children in other parts of the world and for students to then name and pray for their pagan baby. As Sister transitions into quizzing her students on their knowledge of the catechism, she makes each student stand to answer the question, and she requires students to answer with complete sentences, engaging correct grammar.\textsuperscript{182} Although dress codes, fundraising for foreign children, and correct grammar are not theologically intrinsic to the performance of Catholicism, the observance of these practices throughout the show serve as further markers in how audience members perform their Catholicism. As with the previous case studies, within the world of the Catholic school classroom portrayed in these productions, these practices are just as much a display of obedience to God as prayers and sacraments. Sister points out any transgression of these practices on the part of the audience, and in doing so, once again, constitutes an idea within the performance that these practices signify one’s devotion to God.

\textit{Although \textit{Late Nite Catechism} does not perform memories in a manner similar to the previous two plays, it still relies upon the performance of memory to revisit how adults develop...}


\textsuperscript{181} According to the playwright, the reference to pagan babies is part of the optional material provided to the actresses playing Sister. (Vicki Quade, "Late Nite Catechism Research," E-mail message to author, July 9, 2019.)

\textsuperscript{182} Vicki Quade, "Late Nite Catechism Research," E-mail message to author, November 30, 2018.
their understandings of what it means to be Catholic. Members of the audience are asked to call upon their memories with regards to what they remember of Catholic culture as Sister calls on each of them to answer what they know of the Catholic faith. The production thus relies not only on Sister’s script that informs how she runs her classroom, but it relies on the audience’s memories of their Catholic school days or their observations of Catholic culture to inform the performance of Catholicism. According to one review, a poll of audience members that Sister incorporated into the production reflected that approximately half of the audience attended Catholic schools.183 Thus, a significant number of audience members are answering based on their lived experiences. For students who did not experience the Catholic schoolroom, they are expected to call upon cultural memories in order to ascertain how to navigate within Sister’s classroom. If cultural memory does not serve them, then, they are expected to pick up on cues provided by Sister within the performance.

Much of the laughter in Late Nite Catechism derives from the reality that many of the audience members called upon to respond to Sister’s questions are unable to answer the questions that Sister puts to them. For example, the question of what is the Immaculate Conception is often answered with the misconception that the term applies to Jesus’ conception rather than Mary’s.184 Other prompts to identify the seven sacraments or the holy days of obligation similarly draw incorrect answers. Although Sister takes her students to task in a manner that elicits laughter, these moments also draw attention to the reality that although Catholicism is taught, in part, as a series of incontrovertible truths, the teachings do not always serve as hallmarks of a person’s faith. As


184 Vicki Quade, “Late Nite Catechism Research,” E-mail message to author, July 9, 2019.
audience members bashfully acknowledge that they do not necessarily remember the teachings and practices of their faith that they learned as children, the show draws attention to the ways in which the teachings of the Church define one’s relationship with Catholicism in later life.

At the end of Late Nite Catechism, Sister looks back at her days in the Catholic schoolroom with an air of nostalgia, remembering the idiosyncrasies of Catholicism that are no more.\textsuperscript{185} Regardless of where they are in the practice of Catholicism today, the audience members are asked to remember the idiosyncrasies of Catholic culture that bring about laughter rather than remember painful memories of the church. In this moment of reflection, the performance thus asks the audience members to take a moment in order to reflect upon their own journey with Catholicism and consider the different ways in which their relationship has changed over time. For some members of the audience, their relationship may purely be observational, never having practiced Catholicism. For others, this may incur a history akin to the protagonists of the previous plays in which their relationship to God was intrinsic to their childhood but is no more. For others, they may continue to participate in growing their relationship with God within the Catholic faith although their practice may take on different forms.

The show allows the audience to experience a broad array of relationships with Catholicism as a result of the different ways that audience members engage with Sister. Moreover, it proposes that one’s Catholic identity is not only dependent upon the recitation of facts or the practice of particular habits but also one’s participation and familiarity with Catholic culture more broadly. Actress and co-creator, MaryPat Donovan, claims that, “Being Catholic is like being Jewish. You don’t have to set a foot in the synagogue to be Jewish. You have that whole cultural

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
thing that surrounds you.” In *Late Nite Catechism*, then, the performance cultivates an idea of what it means to be Catholic in terms of one’s relationship with the divine, one’s knowledge of particular teachings, the practice of habits associated with these teachings, or broad participation within the culture of Catholicism. The play literally tests audience members’ knowledge of both the teachings and habits, calling into question many of the different ways in which Catholic identity might be constituted. The performance never seeks to establish a single representation of a lived relationship with God. Instead, belief in the supernatural is recognized and manifests in a variety of manners that present various histories of relationships with presence within the performance.

In conclusion, each production under investigation in this chapter calls upon the performance of the Catholic schoolroom to consider how belief in God is taught and manifested throughout the Catholic educational system. Within each of the productions, there is an assumption that God exists although in what form he does so is tentative at best. Accordingly, the productions highlight the different ways in which people live in relationship to assumed presence within Catholic tradition whether that be through the sacraments, prayer, their ability to recite facts about God, or their practice of habits that presumably honor God’s word. Through the actions of each character throughout the performance their unquestioned obeisance to a divine being reflects how the presence of the supernatural informs the world of the play. This presence is made present to the audience despite its absence through the performance of people living in relationship to it. Lastly, through the performance of memory, each of the productions draws attention to the flux in individuals’ relationships with the divine. The performances suggest that although God might be

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ever-present in the lives of people and his existence might inform the way they live, the nature of these relationships changes according to one’s circumstances.
4.0 A Question of Faith: Querying Catholic Faith

MOTHER SUPERIOR: Two thousand years ago, some people believe a man was born without a father. Now no intelligent person today accepts that without question…

DOCTOR: The virgin birth was a lie told to a cuckolded husband by a frightened wife.

MOTHER SUPERIOR: Oh, that’s a plausible explanation. That’s what you’re looking for, right? Plausibility! But I believe that it is also the nature of science to wonder, and we can only wonder if we are willing to question without finding all the sciences.¹⁸⁷

The above interaction is an excerpt from John Pielmeier’s *Agnes of God* which made its New York debut in 1982. In *Agnes of God*, faith and reason come face to face amidst unthinkable circumstances. In doing so, the play asks the audience to consider the possibility of divine presence in a secular society that neither seeks to uphold presence nor appears to lend itself to the possibility of divine manifestations. The first two chapters of my project consider how relationships between humans and the divine are recognized as definitive- albeit to different degrees through performance. In contrast, this chapter explores how performance gives credence to alleged manifestations of presence. Characters claim that God is made present in different ways in their lives. However, the circumstances surrounding the allegations appear to be seemingly incompatible with manifestations of the divine. Accordingly, I analyze how dramaturgies of presence are engaged to suggest the potential of presence without confirming its existence. I explore how these dramaturgies of possible presence are engaged in three plays: John Pielmeier’s *Agnes of God* (1982), Matthew Lombardo’s *High* (2010), and Martin Zimmerman’s *Seven Spots on the Sun* (2017).

These plays engage three dramaturgical strategies to create a dramaturgy of possible presence within the productions. First, within each play, there are characters who explicitly claim that the supernatural is present in their lives. In some of the examples, the productions further these claims by creating moments in which the possibility of presence is reiterated through the performance of possible material and/or immaterial manifestations of presence. Second, the performances engage contentious histories within their plots to inform how the narrative of presence is received. The histories demonstrate historical accuracy to different degrees in that some productions call upon a very specific event in history whereas others call upon a broad understanding of a historical moment per Freddie Rokem’s understanding of performing history.¹⁸⁸ Even plays invested in reflecting an actual historical event are highly fictionalized in the productions in this chapter. Nonetheless, each of the plays engages a historical narrative that gives rise to doubts regarding the legitimacy of any claims to presence. Lastly, the plays each end with one of the characters making a distinct claim that acknowledges the possibility of presence. However, while the character allows for the possibility of presence, she also simultaneously suggests that she cannot fully endorse it.

The productions that demonstrate dramaturgies of possible presence achieved differing degrees of recognition and success in New York City. Notably, all three of the productions received mixed reviews. In many of these instances, the productions were lauded for their production qualities. All three of the scripts, however, received significant criticism, predominantly for tackling too much material and taking on sensational tones. The reviews each suggest that the productions had commercial potential. Moreover, in some cases, the length of the

show’s run was also a testimony to the commercial potential of the ideas explored within the production. Furthermore, such an investigation offers the opportunity to consider the ways in which playwrights and producers may craft their productions in order to both suggest the possibility of presence while also avoiding the most common critiques levied at the playwrights in this chapter.

John Pielmeier’s *Agnes of God* was substantially more successful than the other plays in New York. In fact, after *Late Nite Catechism*, *Agnes of God* boasts the longest run of any production in this project. Before even entering production, Pielmeier received six offers from different New York theatres to produce his play after it debuted in regional theatres, testifying to the fact that theatre professionals recognized its dramatic potential long before opening. 189 *Agnes of God* debuted on Broadway on March 30, 1982 at the Music Box Theatre where it ran through September 4, 1983. The production held twelve preview performances and then ran for a total of 599 performances. 190 In contrast, the second two productions in this chapter experienced significantly shorter runs. Matthew Lombardo’s *High* debuted on Broadway on April 19, 2011 at the Booth Theatre where it ran for twenty-nine preview performances and seven performances before closing. 191 Meanwhile, Martin Zimmerman’s *Seven Spots on the Sun* made its Off-Broadway debut at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre on March 10, 2017 where it ran at the


Rattlestick Theatre for a predetermined limited period of six weeks. The production debuted as part of the Sol Project, a national theatre initiative based in New York that is dedicated to giving a platform to Latinx playwrights. The differing success of these plays, especially *Agnes of God*, suggests that productions containing dramaturgies of possible presence have significant commercial potential in New York. However, as is the case with all theatre, the success of the production will depend on a variety of factors. The execution of the written narrative was key to critics’ responses to the productions. All three of the productions received mixed reviews.

Matthew Lombardo’s *High* came under the most significant scrutiny. Reviews for *High* repeatedly noted that it had dramatic potential but suggested that the production fell short. The most effective element of the production was not related to the script itself, but rather Kathleen Turner’s performance in the lead role. The byline of Marilyn Stasio’s *Variety* review reads, “Kathleen Turner is bigger—and far, far better—than “High,” a trashy melodrama by Matthew Lombardo.” This sentiment is highly representative of sentiments expressed throughout reviews of the production. While Turner’s performance received positive accolades, however, Lombardo’s writing was the subject of significant criticism and undermined the success of the

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performance according to critics. Joe Dziemianowicz of *The Daily News* described Lombardo’s writing as “a twisty melodramatic hand-wringer,” and he argued that Lombardo’s plot devices were a “a buzz-kill.” Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* wrote that *High* was a “sensation-stuffed drama.” He further noted that the play was not “a particularly subtle or deep drama… It’s about on the level of “Looped,” Mr. Lombardo’s formulaic play about Tallulah Bankhead.” Marilyn Stasio of *Variety* wrote that the play was “contrived” and “hollow,” and “(it) is essentially a high-toned version of one of those addictive series about addiction that have become a subgenre of the reality television boom.” Each of the reviews suggest that the religious content of the play had commercial potential, but Lombardo’s melodramatic and formulaic approach in delivering the content undermined the success of the production. Almost unanimously, the critics agreed that Lombardo over-emphasized the drama at the expense of the topic matter, and while Kathleen Turner’s performance was noteworthy, it was not enough to rectify the problems with the script itself.

Similarly, Martin Zimmerman’s *Seven Spots on the Sun* received varied reviews in which the negative reviews focused predominantly on Zimmerman’s writing. Unlike *High*, positive recognition for the show rested in the potential for the story rather than the performance itself. The production was well-received, but critics did not take note of any particularly notable production elements. Instead, praise for Zimmerman’s play suggests that critics believed that the potential

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198 Ibid.

199 Ibid.
significance of the show lay in the subject matter which critics argued drew attention to significant topic matters and raised valuable questions. Nonetheless, as in the case of High, reviewers noted that Zimmerman’s writing stood in the way of its overall success. Zachary Stewart of Theatre Mania observed that, “The play would land with more impact if Zimmerman’s work didn’t feel so much like a throwback to past literary triumphs.” Jesse Green of The New York Time purported that the plot took on too many difficult topics and thus the storyline was chaotic and confusing at different points. Similarly, Raven Snook of TimeOut wrote that, “We already know that war is hell. It’s also messy, which may explain why Martin Zimmerman’s new antiwar play… is also such a jumble. Characters wax poetic one moment, then hit us with blunt subtext the next. Narrative gaps are patched with awkward direct address…It’s a minor miracle itself, perhaps, that this too-ambitious work doesn’t implode.” As with High, reviewers suggested that the religious content of the play had potential on New York stages. In fact, reviewers are more fervent in their praises of the possibility of the subject matter of Seven Spots on the Sun in light of how it deals with the aftermath of war. However, as with High, they suggest that the narrative structure used to communicate this material is intrinsic to the play’s reception. Whereas High was largely


considered too formulaic and dramatic, *Seven Spots on the Sun* errs in the opposite direction, boasting a plot that is unwieldy.

Even John Pielmeier, whose play was by all accounts commercial successfully, received diverse reviews for *Agnes of God*. Although the play did well in production, reviewers were skeptical of the script itself. For example, in his 1982 review for *The New York Times*, Frank Rich noted first that the actresses were highly effective in their performances and, “The author of “Agnes of God does show promise.” He then proceeded to observe that, in his opinion, “While Agnes of God” aspires to be both a chilling thriller and a stirring reaffirmation of the power of faith, it fails on both counts.” Similarly, Edwin Wilson of the *Wall Street Journal* observed that, “Mr. Pielmeier has written several emotionally charged scenes and has a director… and actresses to carry them off… In spite of the performances, though, the play is defeated by Mr. Peilmeier’s manipulations… The result of these arbitrary moves is that it becomes impossible to believe the whole affair, miracles or no miracles.” Meanwhile John Beaufort’s review for the *Christian Science Monitor* similarly acknowledged the notable acting and directing talent displayed within the production, but added that, “For all its pretentions to serious analysis of psychiatric vs. ecclesiastic dogmas, “Agnes of God” amounts to little more than old-fashioned sensational melodrama.”

Thus, as was the case with the previous two plays, the reviews each suggested the

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205 Ibid.


productions had potential, but the written script received significant scrutiny. Pielmeier’s reflections on *Agnes of God* suggest that the aforementioned reviews are somewhat indicative of his experience as a playwright. Rather, addressing reviews of *Agnes of God*, he describes his own experience with reviewers claiming, “I have never been a darling of the critics, to put it mildly.”

Acknowledging that his play was not an uncontested success on Broadway, John Pielmeier attributes the success of *Agnes of God* to Amanda Plummer’s success in the role. Pielmeier writes on his website that, “(*Agnes of God*) received rather mixed reviews… but word-of-mouth spread, and once Amanda Plummer won a Tony for her performance, its future was assured.”

Despite the criticisms that he received, however, later reviews of the play in other locations would suggest that the show’s continuing success depended not only on the actors, but also on Pielmeier’s writing. In a 1984 review of the play at Studio Theatre, Leah Frank of *The New York Times* describes the play as a “challenging, thought-provoking drama,” and she further adds that, “this particular production is one that would be outstanding anywhere it was presented.” In his review of the 2011 production at the Greenhouse Theatre in Chicago, Tom Williams writes that, “Strong acting propels a powerful script in *Agnes of God*,” acknowledging Pielmeier’s craftsmanship as a writer. In her review of *Seven Spots on the Sun*, Variety’s Marilyn Stasio compares Zimmerman’s play to *Agnes of God* and credits the superiority of *Agnes of God* to its

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209 Ibid.


treatment of “a substantial issue like… (a) miraculous stigmata.”\textsuperscript{212} These later reviews of other productions of \textit{Agnes of God} suggest that the merit of the show was rooted, at least in part, in the narrative of the topic matter as well as the production of the dramatic text. Therefore, while the success of the Music Box Theatre’s production of \textit{Agnes of God} certainly owed credit to Amanda Plummer’s notable acting, the success of the production was likely also a reflection of the nuance and clarity that Pielmeier used to develop the narrative. Accordingly, the differing levels of success achieved by the plays in this chapter suggested that dramaturgies of possible presence do have the potential to succeed on New York stages. However, these narratives need to be carefully crafted in order to explore the nuance inherent within narratives of religious belief.

\textbf{4.1 Case Study: \textit{Agnes of God} (1979)}

\textit{Agnes of God} portrays the story of a young nun who is found with a dead baby in her room; the baby is found in a wastebasket with the umbilical wrapped around its neck. Accordingly, the play first serves to put the nun on trial and examine whether she is culpable for the murder of the child. The play, however, is not simply invested in exploring the human elements of the story. Rather, it is also invested in considering whether any credence can be given to the nun’s claims to a relationship with the supernatural amidst these horrific circumstances. \textit{Agnes of God} explores the ways in which humanity’s potential to sin clouds how someone is perceived as religious. It considers whether one can truly both maintain a relationship with the supernatural and commit


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unthinkable acts. In doing so, the play raises a number of questions with regards to the supernatural: Does the supernatural exist? How does it manifest? Is it possible to both maintain a connection with the divine and commit horrific crimes? In order to explore both the culpability of the nun as well as questions about the supernatural, the production presents a narrative model that simultaneously gives credence to the potential of the supernatural to manifest without presenting this presence as a confirmed reality nor undermining the depravity of crime committed.

The play takes place over the course of three acts, featuring three characters: Agnes (Amanda Plummer), Dr. Martha Livingstone (Elizabeth Ashley), and Mother Miriam Ruth (Geraldine Page). The play is set in a convent. At the opening of the play, Martha, a psychiatrist, has been asked by the court to evaluate Agnes, a novice nun, after a newborn baby is found strangled to death in Agnes’s room. Martha has been sent by the court to assess Agnes’s mental state and determine whether she is responsible for the death of the child. From the beginning of the show, Martha, who was raised Catholic but fell away from the Church, is skeptical of Catholicism. Shedefiantly tells Mother Superior that she turns to science and reason over faith for her answers. Mother Superior is reluctant to let Martha evaluate Agnes.

As Martha questions Mother Superior and Agnes, Mother Superior seeks to protect Agnes. She asks Martha to be careful with Agnes claiming that Agnes is fragile. Moreover, she suggests that Agnes has had experiences in which the supernatural has manifested itself in her life. Mother Superior reiterates throughout the play that Agnes is “an innocent. She’s a slate that hasn’t been touched, except by God.” She presupposes that Agnes’s seeming innocence and relationship with the divine precludes Agnes from being responsible for the death of the child. Mother Superior

argues that the supernatural can manifest itself in the physical realm and believes that the supernatural has made itself present in Agnes’s life. Mother Superior and Agnes present Martha with stories supporting Agnes’s claims to innocence and interactions with supernatural to defend Agnes’s image of purity- both spiritually and physically. At one point, Agnes goes so far as to claim that her child was divinely conceived. Throughout the show, Agnes’s purity is thus under investigation. How did she get pregnant? Who is the father? Is Agnes capable of murder? Despite her skepticism, Martha probes into each of Mother Superior and Agnes’s claims to better understand the larger circumstances informing the world in which the child’s murder took place. The play treads a careful line in which it alternatively suggests the reality of supernatural presence and then casts doubts on it as the reality of the frailty of humanity is revealed.

The play broadly recalls the shocking circumstances that led to the trial of a thirty-seven year old nun in New York five years prior to the opening of the production. In 1977, Sister Maureen Murphy, a Catholic school principal, was put on trial in Rochester, N.Y. for killing her child. Unknown to the rest of her convent, Sister Maureen became pregnant and delivered her child alone in her convent in 1976. The sisters returned to find her bleeding and rushed her to the hospital; only later did they find a dead baby hidden in a wastebasket behind a bookcase. Sister Maureen was accused of suffocating her child. Sister Maureen was eventually acquitted. The defense suggested that Sister Maureen was emotionally unstable as a result of her pregnancy. Moreover, they suggested that the blood loss following the birth of her child further made her incapable of intentionally murdering her child. She never revealed who the father of her child was. The play is loosely based on Sister Maureen’s trial insofar as the premise of the story is the same; however,

Pielmeier took significant liberties in creating his own version of the story. Nonetheless, although Pielmeier creates his own characters and fictionalizes many of the circumstances, the resonances of the play were likely not lost on New York audiences at the time of its debut. For audience members familiar with Sister Maureen’s story, their understanding of the dilemmas presented in *Agnes of God* was likely informed by the fact that they knew Sister Maureen had been found not guilty of killing her baby. Thus, although the circumstances presented within the play are seemingly incongruous with claims to divine intervention, their knowledge of the trial already offered the possibility for the innocence of the defendant despite alleged evidence to the contrary.

Agnes’s culpability is put on trial within the play when Martha is brought to the convent to investigate Agnes’s mental health. Martha comes to ask Agnes and Mother Superior questions to determine if Agnes is responsible for the death of the child. However, it is through this evaluation process that *Agnes of God* simultaneously puts the possibility of the physical manifestation of the supernatural on trial as Martha and Mother Superior explore the circumstances surrounding Agnes’s pregnancy and the death of her child. As Martha evaluates Agnes’s culpability she is forced to grapple with the two primary narratives that inform the overall inquiry. First, Mother Superior claims that Agnes is touched by God. In the first scene of the play Mother Superior first introduces this narrative telling Martha that, “Agnes is different… From other people. She’s special. She’s gifted. She’s blessed.” As the play progresses, both Agnes’s and Mother Superior’s later testimonies suggest that Agnes has interacted with the divine. Second, the legitimacy of these testimonies is undermined by the event that led to the evaluation. Agnes’s story


maintains that she has been the recipient of divine intervention; nonetheless, her claims are revealed amidst a murder inquiry raising questions with regards to their legitimacy. Accordingly, the play raises the question of whether the divine could and/or would manifest in the life of someone who is under scrutiny for killing her child. The juxtaposition of these two narratives asks the audience to consider whether it is possible and under what circumstances the divine can manifest itself in everyday life.

From the beginning of the show, Agnes’s story demonstrates parallels akin to other claims of supernatural presences within Catholic tradition. Her claims that her child was divinely conceived, immediately hearkens back to the story of the Nativity and the Virgin birth. Her later explanations for her pregnancy draw this comparison more sharply to mind in that she states explicitly that her baby came from God. The claim to a virgin birth is never substantiated within the show, but other elements of Agnes’s story appear more difficult to disregard. According to the testimonies of Agnes and Mother Superior, Agnes is not only blessed, but she has a specific history of living in relationship to divine presences. For example, Agnes claims that at the age of ten, a lady appeared to her on a cloud. When the lady appeared, she told Agnes that God loves her and then, the lady began to manifest the wounds of the stigmata.

Within Catholic tradition, the stigmata represents the five wounds of Christ. According to Catholic tradition, saints have received the stigmata on their bodies for various amounts of time, bleeding from the same places that Christ was pierced by nails and the sword when he was crucified on the cross. Mother Superior claims that Agnes later received the stigmata, bearing the

\[\text{217 Ibid, 23 & 24.}\]

\[\text{218 Ibid, 24.}\]
wounds of Christ on her body, during her time in the convent. As Mother Superior recounts this story, Agnes and Mother Superior reperform the moment in which Agnes first revealed her own stigmata to Mother Superior in the present of performance. Agnes comes to Mother Superior to tell her that she thinks she is being punished, but she does not know why. As she talks, she clenches a handkerchief in her right hand, as if to stifle the blood, while her left hand remains empty. When Mother Superior asks why she thinks she is being punished, Agnes reveals a bleeding hand to Mother Superior, and tells her that the bleeding started that morning. Mother Superior responds, “Oh dear Jesus. Oh dear Jesus.” As the scene between the two ends, Mother Superior returns to the present moment of the play and informs Martha that the bleeding stopped the next morning. Although the scene reperforms an alleged memory of the past, the production forces the audience to consider that the stigmata might be possible through the ways in which the dialogue as well as the inclusion of the handkerchief and blood are used in the present of performance. The performance of this past interaction in the present of the production reiterates the potential of the stigmata insofar as it suggests that it is possible that Agnes might have been the recipient of the stigmata.

In addition to Agnes’s alleged encounter with the lady and Agnes’s alleged stigmata, Agnes’s singing functions within the production as an example of how Agnes is allegedly blessed

219 Ibid, 34.

220 Ibid 34


223 Ibid.
by the divine. Throughout Agnes of God, the audience hears Agnes singing offstage in a beautiful voice. When Mother Superior first claims that Agnes is blessed, her statement is followed by the sound of Agnes’s voice singing offstage. Mother Superior immediately attributes the quality of Agnes’s voice to her relationship with the divine.\textsuperscript{224} Mother Superior and Martha describe Agnes’s singing tone as highly notable. Mother Superior goes so far as to say that the first time she heard Agnes sing she thought, “That voice belongs to someone else,” suggesting that Agnes’s might be inspired by a figure beyond the mortal world.\textsuperscript{225} The sound of Agnes’s angelic voice, however, is not only seen as a sign of her holiness, but as a tool that brings other closer to the divine. Mother Superior later tells Martha that before Agnes came to the convent, she had lost her faith. She claims that as a child she felt in touch with her guardian angel, but as her personal doubts grew she became “a nun who was certain of nothing. Not even of Heaven… Not even of God.”\textsuperscript{226} She said it was only after hearing Agnes sing that her beliefs returned, because Agnes’s voice was so beautiful it was proof of God’s existence.\textsuperscript{227} Accordingly, within the play, Agnes’s voice is also attributed with the power to restore someone’s faith in God, and thus, it is a testimony of Agnes’s special lived relationship with the divine. Agnes continues to sing beautifully offstage throughout the rest of Agnes of God, her voice a reminder to both Martha and the audience that Agnes appears to have been given an inexplicable gift. Agnes’s offstage singing the production is used within production to corroborate the narrative presented through dialogue. The audience is faced with the reality that

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid, 11.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid, 12.

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid, 69.

\textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
Agnes does have a beautiful voice and one that she devotes to singing songs of praise. Accordingly, the audience is once again presented with the possibility that Agnes might truly be blessed by God.

Despite the circumstances that suggest that Agnes’s life was touched by the divine, however, the histories that inform the reception of Agnes’s narrative challenge the legitimacy of her claims. First, the possibility that Agnes might have killed her child looms like a harbinger of doom in the background. Any claims to Agnes’s sanctity are undermined by the potential that she might be a murderer, raising questions of whether this girl can be both blessed and a murderer. Moreover, both Martha and Mother Superior have undergone personal circumstances that inform how they form their understandings of the events. Thus, their personal subjectivities, based on their own experiences inform the ways in which they choose to honor both Agnes’s individual claims to her relationship with the divine as well as the Catholic Church’s larger claims to the truth.

Martha enters the performance with doubts about the church which lead her to be resistant to Agnes’s claims to a relationship with divinity from the beginning of the performance. Martha observes early in the play that she always had her doubts about the faith, but that she began to doubt the teachings of the church at the age of six after a nun told her that her friend died, because she did not pray enough.228 From that moment on, Martha’s interactions with the nuns who stood as the face of the institution did little to help reconcile the faulty nature of human claims with the belief in the Catholic Church. A nun later made fun of Martha’s appearance, calling her, “PolkaDot Livingstone.”229 Martha tells Mother Superior that she finally left the church after her sister died

228 Ibid, 40 & 68.
229 Ibid, 68.
in a religious convent. 230 The Mother Superior in charge of Martha’s sister’s convent refused to send her sister to a doctor when she was ill, and her sister thus died from appendicitis. 231 Each of the instances that Martha recalls not only serves within the performance as background into Martha’s character, but they raise questions with regards to both Martha’s personal biases as well as the flaws in the institutional church. Can Martha fairly evaluate Agnes’s claims despite her own skepticism? Moreover, given that the institutional church clearly does have it flaws, can the nuns be trusted to provide an accurate history?

Meanwhile, Mother Superior, who has fought so hard to defend Agnes’s connection with the divine, also reveals circumstances in her own life that make it difficult to believe Agnes’s story. As she reveals her story, it becomes clear that Mother Superior’s account of the events supports a narrative of presence that she needs to bolster her own faith. From the beginning of the play, Mother Superior serves as Agnes’s staunch defender. As the play progresses, she reveals that she was struggling with her own faith, and it was not until she heard Agnes sing that she began to believe again. 232 Her testimony raises the question of whether Agnes was touched by the divine or whether Mother Superior had personal motivations for maintaining claims of Agnes’s holiness. Did Mother Superior truly believe Agnes’s story based on what she witnessed of Agnes? Or was Mother Superior so desperate to believe anything to boost her faith that she convinced herself it was true, because she needed something to give her hope? Moreover, halfway through the play that Mother Superior reveals that Agnes is her niece. 233 That it took her so long to reveal these

230 Ibid, 18 & 40.

231 Ibid.

232 Ibid.

233 Ibid, 64.
circumstances to Martha raises the question of why she would hide this fact. Did her relationship cause her to substantiate Agnes’s story in defense of Agnes as a family member? How reliable is Mother Superior’s testimony?

Furthermore, Agnes’s story itself raises questions as to the credibility of the claims. Yes, her singing is beautiful, and according to both Agnes’s and Mother Superior’s testimonies, her hands inexplicably bleed. However, as Agnes’s story unfolds her testimony remains dubious. Agnes seems naïve to the facts of life and is unable to articulate where babies come from other than that they come from Heaven. Is it possible that she really did not know where babies come from? Does she really believe they come from the angel? In the second half of the play, it is further revealed that Agnes was abused her by her mother as a child. Her mother would burn her with a cigarette and tell her that if she did not behave she would get pregnant. Agnes was eventually put in the care of Mother Superior after her mother died. Thus, there is trauma in her past raising questions such as: To what extent, does this trauma continue to impact her everyday life? To what extent does it impact the ways in which she interprets her reality?

The ultimate reveal that might undermine Agnes’s testimony arrives in the final scene. Martha has determined that she wants to try to prove Agnes’s innocence. At this point, however, Agnes is put under hypnosis. When under hypnosis, Agnes reveals she killed her baby. Agnes’s revelation ultimately provides insight into what she is humanly capable of and thus calls into question whether she could ever be in touch with the divine. Even in this final moment of the

234 Ibid, 21.
235 Ibid, 59 & 60.
236 Ibid, 61.
performance, however, Agnes’s relationship with the divine remains unclear. As Mother Superior rocks Agnes in her arms, Agnes confesses to killing the baby, and Mother Superior turns to Martha saying, “And all this time I thought she was some unconscious innocent. Thank you… We need people like you to destroy those lies that ignorant folk like myself pretend to believe.”

Thus, Mother Superior’s faith is once again been shaken, and she loses all faith in the credibility of the Agnes’s story.

Meanwhile, in the Broadway production, as Agnes admits to her role in the death of the child, blood begins to appear on Agnes although the origin of the blood is unclear. Its final manifestation in performance, which is not suggested in the script, raises the questions of where it came from and what it represents. Nonetheless, the bleeding reminds the audience to recall the earlier use of the handkerchief that suggested that Agnes might have experienced the stigmata.

Is it representative of the blood of the child Agnes shed? Or is it meant to recall Alice’s earlier bloodshed, representing the wounds of Christ, signifying an innocent who has been forced to do the unbearable? The production offers no explanation as to the origin of the blood, but its inclusion within the production allows for it to be read as a both/and situation. On the one hand, the blood manifests as Agnes reveals that she is responsible for the death of the child. At the same time, the origins of the blood still remain unexplained in that it manifests without any physical cause. In doing, the production simultaneously points to the idea that, even amidst the most devastating circumstances, the inexplicable can still occur.

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238 Ibid, 108.


240 Ibid.
The ways in which the characters respond to these circumstances further underscores the ways that Catholic understandings of the supernatural can be differently affected as a result of how the supernatural is perceived to have manifested under trying circumstances. For Mother Superior, her faith is lost. Agnes’s admission of guilt shatters any illusions that she had. She sends Agnes away and is never heard from again. Agnes is sent to a hospital where stops singing and eating, and eventually she dies. Despite all that occurs throughout the performance, however, Martha’s performance suggests a return to some of the premises of the Catholic faith, particularly with regards to her belief in supernatural presences. Martha’s faith was originally shattered by the ways in which the institution manifested itself through women religious in her young life. Interestingly, it is by observing the highly incredible alleged interactions with the supernatural that Martha seems to have returned to her faith. Describing her experience leaving the church as a youth, Martha claims, “I never forgave the Church. But I learned to live with my anger, forget it even… until she (Agnes) walked into my office, and every time I saw her after that first lovely moment, I became more and more… entranced.”\[241\] Martha admits this to the audience in a monologue. At this point, she has spoken to Agnes and has repeatedly questioned both Agnes’s and Mother’s story. Despite her doubts, however, she becomes more invested in it.

Martha’s growing fascination with Agnes’s situation is reflected through the performance of her cigarette habits. In the opening act, Martha lights her cigarette and continues to smoke a cigarette during her initial exchange with Mother Superior.\[242\] She later explains her smoking habit to Agnes, telling her that, “Smoking is an obsession with me… I suppose I’ll stop smoking when


I become obsessed with something else."243 After Agnes reveals under hypnosis that her mother used to abuse her, physically burning her with a cigarette, Martha puts out her cigarette and never lights up another one.244 By discarding the cigarette, Martha completely invests in Agnes’s story, first, by recognizing the roll cigarettes made in shaping Agnes’s life, and secondly, her action suggests that Agnes is her new obsession. In the final moments of the play, she reveals in a monologue that far after these events occurred she remained a non-smoker.245

Furthermore, in her final monologue, Martha admits she does not know what to believe. She says that she does not know why all these events had to take place, but she admits that it led her to go to confession. She questions whether this was what had to take place in order to lead her back to the confessional.246 In doing so, Martha configures Agnes as a Christ-like figure who had to suffer in order to return to force Martha to revisit her faith. In her very last words of the play, Martha ends proclaiming, “I don’t know what I believe anymore. But I want to believe that she was… blessed. And I do miss her. And I hope that she has left something, some little part of herself, with me. That would be miracle enough.”247 Despite extraordinary odds, Martha appears to be slowly returning to the church and beginning to participate within the sacramental practices of Catholicism as evidenced by her return to confession. Moreover, her final claim to want to believe that Agnes left a part of herself with Martha suggests that Martha did believe that the


247 Ibid, 110.
supernatural was, at least in part, active in Agnes’s life. Thus, Martha’s final monologue gives credence to the possibility of presence within the world of the play despite the circumstances without fully giving credence to presence.

In considering the relationship of Agnes of God to narratives that responded to Sister Maureen’s lived experiences the play raises questions with regards to how religious belief and the supernatural is or is not taken into consideration within the narratives of historical events. Sister Maureen’s testimonies do not maintain that she experienced the same interactions with the divine that Pielmeier suggests Agnes experienced. Nonetheless, the play does raise questions with regards to how her story will be remembered. Newspaper articles chronicling the event identify Sister Maureen’s relationship to the Catholic Church insofar as they recognize that she was a nun. Beyond that, they are invested in her life from the point of the discovery of the child to the final verdict. In court, Sister’s circumstances were tried on the premise of what could or could not be proven definitively.

Although Agnes of God is fictional, its performance a few years after Sister Maureen’s trial presents an alternative consideration of the event in that it asks the audience to consider the circumstances of a woman in a similar situation. However, in the case presented in Agnes of God, the audience is confronted not only with evidence that would be considered concrete in a court of law, but circumstances that cannot be proven. The play asks the audience to expand the narrative of what it even means to be Catholic and to consider the lived relationships within the narrative that the law and science might not give credence to. The historical records of Sister Maureen’s life will inevitably largely recall her life in light of her role in the death of her child. Nonetheless, the play asks us to consider a person in a similar situation and ask whether this one moment accurately reflects the scope of an individual’s history. Within the play, Agnes is found guilty. Presumably
she will thus always be remembered as the nun who killed her child. Nonetheless, the play suggests her life is not only defined by her participation within this event. Instead, it addresses her longer history and reveals the broader circumstances of her life. Moreover, it suggests that perhaps she did leave a positive legacy in some respects in that she may still have been instrumental in Martha’s return to religion. The play thus considers what it means to be religious when one has perhaps committed the unthinkable. It explores the potential of a relationship with the divine in accordance of the beliefs of the individual under investigation and in doing so suggests that narratives grounded in only that which can be proven may be incomplete.

4.2 Case Study: High (2011)

Like the previous case study, Matthew Lombardo’s High explores the doubts and uncertainties that arise in trying to live out one’s faith in the supernatural despite challenges in one’s personal life. High asks the audience to consider how one rectifies the day-to-day human failings of individuals with their alleged belief in the supernatural. Moreover, whereas Agnes of God was invested in iterations of personal belief, High is invested in the ways in which belief in the supernatural coincides with the practice of religion. The play asks the audience to consider what it means to believe in a supernatural figure who is upheld by a highly flawed institution. It specifically critiques the gendered hierarchy of the church as well as the ways in which the church ministers to the gay community. The play crafts an image of the church as both flawed and redemptive and explores the ways in which the faith is a source of strength for people as they cope with the imperfections of humanity. The production relies on a narrative that seeks to create an image of the Catholic church in which the institutional in and of itself is inherently flawed and yet
nonetheless Catholicism still offers the potential for redemption as a result of the continued embrace of lived relationships with the supernatural. Thus, *High* simultaneously captures the flaws of lived religious practice and locates many of its flaws within the institutional structure of the Church, while maintaining that the Catholic Church still potentially offers insight into transformative relationships with the divine.

*High* tells the story of Sister Jamison Connelly. Sister Jamison (Kathleen Turner) is a therapist at a Catholic rehabilitation center. At the recommendation of her pastor and boss, Father Michael (Stephen Kunken), she takes on the care of a 19-year-old boy, Cody (Evan Jonigkeit), who is trying to break free of a crystal meth habit. As a result of Cody’s addiction, he has turned to prostitution. Cody is surprised by his new mentor. Shattering the stereotypical ideas that informed his understanding of how a nun should act, Sister is a foul-mouthed woman who admits to her patient that she is a recovering alcoholic. In the meantime, Sister Jamison struggles to balance to meet the particular needs of the boy while dealing with her own personal doubts in her faith. Although Sister thinks that the case is too difficult for her, Father Michael will not release of her duties, because he says the center needs money. Later in the play, however, the audiences learn that Father Michael is not motivated by money. Rather, unbeknownst to Sister Jamison, the boy to whom she is ministering is Father Michael’s nephew.

While not strictly autobiographical, the play bears close resonances to playwright, Matthew Lombardo’s personal experiences with the Catholic Church. Lombardo was raised in an Italian Catholic family, but he fell away from his faith later in life. In his 30s, Lombardo began to struggle with alcohol and drug addiction. During his mid-30s, Lombardo was living in LA when he began

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a relationship with a meth addict. Lombardo subsequently became addicted, an addiction that he struggled with for seven years. During that time, he maintained a close relationship with his mother who prayed for him throughout this time. After a particularly bad night, Lombardo claimed that he finally prayed, “If you can get me into a cab and to the hospital, I will fight this.” Lombardo ended up entering into a recovery program and developed a renewed faith in the God of his childhood. High thus reflects many of Lombardo’s personal occupations and draws attentions to the struggles of both drug addicts and the gay community. Furthermore, Lombardo notes that when he first began writing the part of Sister Jamison, he wanted to make her a woman like Kathleen Turner. Later, he decided, he did not want the character to merely be like Turner, he wanted her to actually play the part, because he was interested in the way Turner’s personal experiences were similar to his own.249 Like the character whom she will eventually play, Kathleen Turner admits to alcohol abuse, using it to cope with the suffering brought about by her bouts with rheumatoid arthritis.250 Accordingly, the play not only reflects Lombardo’s personal struggles, but those of Turner as well.

The playwright’s note in the program for the production, “Coming Clean for “High,” is an autobiographical account of Lombardo’s journey into crystal meth and his experience as an addict. Lombardo’s note ends, “What keeps me clean today is simply what medical professionals surprisingly all agree is the most effective: A Belief in a Power Greater than Oneself. And so it is with that, I introduce my new play HIGH as a testament to the Power of Faith and the Belief in


Miracles.” While Lombardo does not align himself with the strict teachings of the Catholic Church, he acknowledges his faith is heavily influenced by his Catholic upbringing. Thus, the note in the program serves as one of the earliest dramaturgical strategies offered to the audience arriving to the theatre that offers them insight into what it means to be Catholic.

Lombardo’s program note begins to craft a narrative of Catholicism for the audience in which the institution of the Catholic Church did not suit Lombardo’s personal needs, but the possible relationship between the human and divine posited by the Church is still possible. Moreover, given the play’s dedication, the very performance of the production serves as a testimony to the practice of lived experiences between the human and divine that occur despite the tensions between humanity and the institutional church. Thus, the note in the program participates in the production’s overall attempt to suggest the possibility of the redemptive nature of the relationship between human and divine that is supported. Furthermore, it is also a somewhat heavy-handed nod to the version of Catholicism that the production will perform.

Throughout the play, the tensions between the role of belief in the supernatural and belief in the institution are reflected in the moments when members of the institutional church, specifically Sister Jamison and Father Flynn are brought face to face in performance. The performance of two members of religious vocations literally face off onstage, representing different manifestations of Catholicism. Jamison ultimately seeks to unite her work within the institution with her belief in a higher power. When Sister tells Father Michael why she became a

nun, she tells him that she joined the religious life, “To find forgiveness, to seek redemption.”

In this early explanation for vocation, Sister verbally acknowledges her relationship with supernatural presence in keeping with the dramaturgical strategies used to perform potential presence. In her first discussion with Father, she thus suggests that she sees her work as an opportunity to live out her relationship with a higher power in a tangible way, by serving God and ministering to those brought into the church ministry. In contrast, Fr. Flynn’s relationship to the divine is not established within the play. Instead, his connection to religion manifests as a result of the ways in which he functions within the institution of the Catholic Church as the head of the parish and ministry, a role that he performs in a business-like manner that does not appear to account for the role of the divine within it.

Sister later reiterates that she believes that she is living out her relationship with the divine during her earliest interaction with Cody. In their first conversation, Sister James again acknowledges her commitment to living in relationship with supernatural presence saying that her life “comes down to two things: this pin of the crucified Christ which acknowledges my commitment to serve others, and this ring on my left hand which symbolizes my commitment to serve God. So, yes, I am a nun.”

Sister’s statement points to the dual nature of her experience as a member of the Catholic Church. Her physical actions perform her lived experience with presence through the ways in which she serves the institutional church through her ministry. Just as Jesus served the Church by sacrificing his life on the cross, Sister gave up her life to serve others.


through the ministry of the Church. Moreover, the ring on Sister’s hand serves as a physical reminder that she is in a committed relationship with the divine. Accordingly, Sister’s conversation with Cody reflects the fact that she views her vocation as a nun and her work within the ministry as a manifestation of her perpetual relationship with the supernatural.

In contrast to Sister Jamison, Father Michael’s relationship to the divine receives little attention within the play although it can be assumed he has one given his status as a priest. Nonetheless, Father Michael’s character predominantly serves as a foil to Sister Jamison and draws attention to the differences in how Catholicism is practiced in light of institutional as opposed to spiritual faith. Whereas Sister Jamison performs her faith both through her participation in ministry as well as her personal relationship with the divine, Father Michael’s religious affiliation manifests within the play only through how he runs his parish and his ministry. Thus, he becomes representative of the institutional practice of religion within the world of the play. As a result, the play portrays his character and his relationship to his ministry in a business-like manner. He oversees Sister’s schedule, and he dictates what patients she takes. Moreover, when Sister questions whether she should continue caring for Cody, Father Michael cites finances as the motivating factor to continue care for the boy. Through this rather two-dimensional representation of the figure of the priest, the play draws attention to the ways in which religious practice is performed as an institutional practice.

The opening scene of the play draws attention to the ways in which both these figures, who represent religious vocations, view their relationships with the Catholic Church differently. In the first scene, Sister Jamison expresses that she is resistant to taking Cody on as a patient, because she does not feel prepared for his case. When she questions her own ability to minister to the child, Father Michael responds that, “Our only purpose here at Saint Francis is to help those suffering
from addiction.”  

The opposing perspectives on the case highlight the different ways in which the two figures view their ministry in light of the Catholic Church. Father Michael sees the ministry as one that functions on an institutional level. Its primary goal is to serve addicts in which case, he argues that Cody should be treated, because he has an addiction. In contrast, Sister Jamison argues that in that the ministry exists within the framework of the Catholic Church, the ability to spiritually minister to a patient must also be accounted for. Her response suggests that belief in God is key to the institutional mission of the church-run establishment whereas Father separates faith from the argument, upholding the institutional aspects of the establishment over its religious underpinnings.

The dichotomy between these two approaches becomes one of the primary challenges to Sister Jamison’s faith in that throughout the play she tries to reconcile her faith in God with the fact that the institutional nature of the Church is wrought with problems. Sister is increasingly faced with the questionable ethics of the institution of the Church that cause her to ask where God is amidst this world. This tension becomes evident in a later scene that once again places the two representatives of Catholicism face to face in a debate over the ethics of their ministry. When Sister Jamison admits to Father Michael, that Cody is beyond her help and suggests they send him for help elsewhere, Father Michael tells her that not caring for Cody is not an option as it leads to a potential investigation of their center which could result in the center losing its license. When Sister challenges this decision suggesting that the decision is rooted in money rather than a desire to care for their patient, Father neither confirms nor denies. Instead, he tells Sister she must find a

254 Ibid, 3.
255 Ibid.
way to help Cody.\textsuperscript{256} The ethics of the decision once again highlight the structural problems of the institution. As a Catholic institution, should it focus more on their patients or their non-profit status? Placing the fiscal status of the organization over the care of the patient once again does not resonate with Sister Jamison’s idea of a Catholic ministry that seeks to help humans attain healing, forgiveness, and redemption. Accordingly, Sister increasingly descends into a crisis of faith as she tries to discern how these practices align with God’s will.

The play also highlights the hierarchical politics practiced within the institutional Church to raise questions regarding the ethics of how Catholicism manifests as an institution. Although both the nun and the priest work within the same ministry and allegedly seek to attain the same goals, there is a clear imbalance in how power manifests within the ministry. After Father Michael refuses to relieve Sister of Cody’s case, Sister sends the Archbishop a letter demanding a change of schedule. She admitted to Father Michael that she did so, because she knew he would not have granted her request, a fact which he confirmed.\textsuperscript{257} During this interaction, it becomes clear that despite Sister’s allegiance to her ministry, her voice has little resonance within the practice of the ministry. Rather than respecting her request, the Archbishop alerted Father Michael to Sister’s actions. Moreover, Father Michael acknowledges that despite Sister’s multiple pleas for support, her requests will not be respected by the male hierarchy of the Church.

During this interaction, Father Michael also reveals that Cody is his nephew, a fact which he concealed from Sister originally. At this point in the play, Sister must fully face the corruption within the Church. The priest withheld information regarding Cody’s background although it was

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid, 39.

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid, 19.
unethical to do so. The ethics of the ministry are thus compromised not only by the institutional flaws that influence the ways in which the ministry is run, but by the fact that family ties are placed above everything. Father Michael knowingly withheld information from Sister knowing that it was unethical and knowing that Cody’s care was being provided at the expense of Sister Jamison’s emotional and spiritual well-being. At this point in the play, Sister Jamison is appalled by the lack of ethics that inform Father Michael’s involvement in the ministry and the ways in which his choices have compromised her ability to provide accurate care to her patient that aligns with the ministry in light of the Catholic Church.

At this point in the production, however, Sister Jamison is still being deprived of vital information regarding her patient, because Father Michael has control of the information to which Sister is privy. Instead, Sister does not find out until late in the second act that Father was also the one who found Cody when he overdosed.\(^{258}\) In a final argument with Sister, he reveals that he will not send Cody away, because he wants him to remain near him.\(^ {259}\) Thus, only at the end of the play does the audience see the extent to which Father Michael has control over the situation. At this point, however, the audience spent the majority of the play watching Sister fight to be released from this case so that her patient can receive better support and also to preserve her spiritual and emotional well-being. Accordingly, Sister Jamison’s and Father Michael’s interactions increasingly draw attention to the power dynamics within the church. Father controls not only Sister’s workload and how she ministers, but he also controls what information she is given access to in her ministry. Therefore, the play highlights the gendered dynamics within the institutional

\(^{258}\) Ibid, 65.

\(^{259}\) Ibid, 67.
church to underline the ways in which institutional practices have the potential to compromise the spiritual benefits of the church.

Despite the flaws of the institutional church, however, the play suggests a rather straightforward solution to Sister Jamison’s experience, and suggests that her faith is not limited to the institution. Rather, Catholicism also entails a relationship with the divine which she attempts to maintain in production despite the challenges to her faith. Moreover, the divine, rather than the institution holds the answer to Catholicism. In Scene 9, Sister prays the rosary with Father Michael over Cody, who just came to her seeking help after falling back into his drug habit.\(^{260}\) It would seem that for all of Father Michael’s attempts to rehabilitate the boy, Lombardo suggests that the power of the Church’s ministry rests in prayer. During their next meeting, Sister teaches Cody to pray the rosary with her.\(^{261}\) Later, on her own, she stands alone on the stage and prays to God to miraculously heal Cody, acknowledging her belief that the divine presence can manifest in everyday life.\(^{262}\) Though she struggles with her boss and feels inadequate in her ability to care for her patient, she continues to attempt to maintain her relationship with the divine. In the performance of Sister Jamison’s solitary prayer onstage, the play presents an image of Catholicism that suggests that it is more than one’s lived ministry within the institution of the church. Rather, through the prayer to the unknown recited solely by Sister Jamison, the play points to the potential of a relationship that exists outside of the confines of the institution.

\(^{260}\) Ibid, 49.

\(^{261}\) Ibid, 56-58.

Furthermore, mirroring Lombardo’s personal testimony, the climax of the play points to a relationship with the divine as the most viable answer to Cody’s problems. After getting high once again, Cody goes to Sister. Sister asks Cody to tell God what he has done. She begs Cody to be open to the miracle for which she has been praying- his reconciliation with God. Cody admits to hating his mother and admits to hating the man who first raped him. He also admits to the sins of his past, acknowledging that he encouraged the boy he was in a relationship with before to prostitute himself for money and admitting that he later killed the boy. After his confession, Cody picks up his rosary and begins to pray. On the one hand, Cody’s confession appears to be an answer to Sister Jamison’s prayers. Throughout the production, Sister has been a proponent of the idea that the ideal solution is the rectification of the relationship between human and divine. Through the performance of Cody’s confession, this comes to fruition. On the other hand, however, the play ultimately suggests that this type of solution is never as easy, and a relationship with divine cannot rectify the challenges of navigating the human element of the Catholic faith on earth.

Thus, although the play starts to suggest that the supernatural has the power to supersede earthly challenges, Sister’s faith remains conflicted at the end of the play. Was Cody’s confession enough? Could his relationship with the divine truly outweigh his participation in the death of the other boy? In Sister Jamison’s final encounter with the priest, she confronts him and learns that he once again already knew the details of the accident. He defends Cody saying that both kids were


264 Ibid.

265 Ibid, 86.
high, and it was an accident. Sister’s faith in her previous beliefs are increasingly waning. Not only was the situation fraught with questions, but even as Cody finally resolved his relationship with the divine, Sister is reminded that nothing about this case has been straightforward and honest. As she grapples with Father Michael’s latest disclosure, the two are interrupted by the police who come to reveal that Cody is dead. Thus, in this final scene between the two, the representatives of these different iterations of the faith, once again face off. This time, however, Sister is left unconvinced in her own opinions. Belief in the supernatural no longer seems to provide the answers that it once did. Cody allegedly repented, but he died nonetheless. Sister’s prayers were seemingly answered, and yet even as her prayers were answered, she learned that she still knew nothing of the circumstances that informed Cody’s case. Was her answer to life’s conflicts truly to be found in the supernatural?

At the end of the play, Sister’s faith is shaken. In her final monologue, she admits that it has been weeks since she last attended mass, but she finally is returning. She questions whether or not Cody’s death freed him from the struggles of the earth asking, “Did a miracle occur? Has Jesus brought him peace? Did Mary help free him himself?” Sister has no answers to her questions. She does not know whether or not God sent her a miracle to answer her request. Her faith is shaken by the ways in which Cody’s death causes her to view miracles and the ways in which power operated within the institution to put her in the situation in the first place. Nonetheless, her final
words are, “I need to be up there. I want- to be High,” suggesting that despite her doubts, she wants to believe.  

As in Agnes of God, High points to the potential for lived relationships with the divine. It crafts a rather straightforward story that presents the lived relationship with the divine as one which is ideally manifested both through ministry to others as well as prayer. Although the divine is never seen in the production, Sister’s conversations with God acknowledge that the relationship exists. Moreover, when Cody comes and makes his confession, it points to the possibility that God did answer Sister’s prayers, suggesting the potential of the divine to intervene in human life. However, when even Sister’s miracle appears to be clouded by the sins of humanity and the questionable ethics of the institution, the nature of this miraculous confession leaves the question of divine intervention once more up for debate. Did God truly intervene, or was Cody grasping at straws and his final grasp just happened to embody Sister’s prayers?

The production reflects on the nature of Catholicism in light of both the institution and belief. The play points to the potential of the divine both through the performance of prayers as well as the performance of a possible miracle. Nonetheless, the divine itself does not manifest physically onstage, and the legitimacy of its perceived interactions on earth remain dubious. Thus, the production crafts a narrative of Catholicism that focuses predominantly on the human nature of the institution as a result of the ways in which it highlights the lived relationships between different members who participate within the institution. Nonetheless, the play suggests that Catholicism rests on the desire for there to be something beyond the institution which may be far more redemptive although it is unclear whether it exists.

269 Ibid.
4.3 Case Study: *Seven Spots on the Sun* (2017)

Like *High*, the premise of Martin Zimmerman’s *Seven Spots on the Sun* is fictional. Though the plot is fictional and does not seek to represent a specific historical moment, the production nonetheless seeks to draw attention to the lived realities of conflicts that have taken place in Latin America. As Jesse Green notes in the *New York Times* review of the production, “Mr. Zimmerman has taken on important (if fictionalized) events, and engaged the painful questions that arise from them.” Zimmerman specifically crafted the story to consider how civil war has impacted multiple locales in Latin America and how these communities recover in the wake of civil war. Furthermore, the play specifically considers the possibility of supernatural intervention amidst the recovery process.

Although the plot of *Seven Spots on the Sun* is fictionalized, the broader premise of the play broadly considers the circumstances of people in Latin America who have experienced civil war. Zimmerman decided to write it after meeting people who suffered under many of the conditions that he would later present in his play. The play developed out of a trip Zimmerman took to Argentina where his mother was born. While in Argentina, Zimmerman interviewed families affected by the dictatorship that oversaw Argentina from 1976-1983. He was interested in how the people of Argentina navigated their relationships after the end of the dictatorship as


they grapple with what it means to attain “justice, redemption, revenge, and forgiveness.”

However, although Zimmerman is invested in the ways in which people recover from war, his play includes a significant supernatural component that allows the audience to consider the role of the divine amidst a world torn apart by war. Moreover, it allows for the audience to reflect on the possibility of divine aid in facilitating justice, redemption, revenge, and forgiveness.

Although Zimmerman’s encounters with people in Argentina were the starting premise of the story, however, he did not want to limit his story to conflicts within Argentina. Instead, Zimmerman wanted his play to speak to a wider variety of communities within Latin America who experienced and continued to experience conflict within their communities as a result of civil violence perpetrated by the government. Moreover, in addressing Latin American conflicts, Zimmerman was concerned that providing details specific to a particular history to an American audience might overshadow the thematic questions that he wanted his audience to consider. Thus, in crafting the story, he purposefully made the specifics of the world of the play vague in order to broadly consider the ramifications of civil war in Latin America.

This technique is first and foremost seen with regards to the locale of the play. In an interview with Stage Raw, Zimmerman noted that, “(he) chose not to locate the play in a specific country because there are so many other countries in Latin America where the government, often under control of the military junta, has waged war on its own people- where it continues to wage


war on its own people to this very day.”

Therefore, rather than set the story in Argentina, specifically, *Seven Spots on the Sun* is set in the town of San Isidro. There is a San Isidro in Argentina, but there are also towns and provinces of the same name in Belize, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru. By avoiding to connect San Isidro to a specific country, Zimmerman opens up the possibility that the experiences reflected in his play are not limited to portraying a single place, but rather his play speaks to the experiences of people undergoing similar contacts in a variety of locales. Accordingly, the play broadly seeks to consider the role of human and divine intervention in the wake of civic strife. The Rattlestick production of this play reinforces this strategy by using a single set throughout the entire production that serves as a variety of locales. The set does not incur any specific location, but rather it serves each location represented within the play. Its neutrality allows for the set to remind audiences that the conflicts within the story transcend any one geographic location.

Moreover, Zimmerman takes a similar approach in crafting his characters so that they may broadly speak to a variety of experiences of conflict. In his review of the production, Matthew Paul Olmos writes that, “While we become engaged in individual struggles, we are continually reminded of how each character belongs to a community and, in turn, to a country in which war is perhaps most easily digested as a political event.”

On the one hand, by presenting the stories of Monica, Luis, Moises, Belen, and Eugenio, Zimmerman crafts fictional characters who undergo

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circumstances specific to the world of the play. Nonetheless, their stories are painted with broad strokes, focusing more generally on the ways in which their lives were affected by injustice either as victims or perpetrators. While the play portrays their stories, it does so in order to reflect the scope to which war effects all involved regardless of what side of the conflict one might be associated with. This concept is amplified throughout the use of the play by the townspeople who function as a chorus, narrating what they witness in San Isidore and drawing attention to the fact that each man’s actions effect the entire community within the world that they inhabit. In doing so, the production seeks to reiterate the idea that all members of communities are implicated in the aftereffects of war regardless of their participation.

In addition to broadly considering the ramifications of civil conflicts, Zimmerman also considers how religious belief informs how people make sense of their experiences of conflict. The world of the play is informed by a Catholic sensibility. The priest and parish are central to the town. It is assumed within the world of the play that each of the characters are affiliated with the Catholic Church albeit to different degrees. Zimmerman draws attention to different ways in which Catholicism is practiced and how people use it to navigate their experiences of war. Moreover, he examines how Catholic ideas of the supernatural manifest and the ramifications of supernatural manifestations amidst a torn community. Within the play, Zimmerman includes potential manifestations of presence. These manifestations are questionable, however, in light of the circumstances surrounding them. Despite their dubious nature, because of the town’s affiliation with Catholicism, the people within the world of the play assume that unexplained, seemingly miraculous effects are necessarily a manifestation of Catholic presence. Thus, the play not only highlights the potential realities of those experiencing civil war in Latin American communities, but it also deals with how religious belief informs people’s experience of these circumstances.
Thus, the play explores the possibility of miracles amidst a world torn apart by war. It considers whether miracles can occur, the forms they take, and the forces that make them possible. Furthermore, these miracles are shaped broadly by a Catholic ethos insofar as the townspeople use the Catholic culture of the town to make sense of what occurs.

The story of *Seven Spots on the Sun* begins on March 4th as the people of the town gather together to listen to a radio that a townsperson had just acquired. The year is unknown, but it takes place in recent years. In the preface of the play, the townspeople, who often function within the play as chorus members, learn that the government is pardoning all political violence committed in the recent conflict. The play then flashes back in time to follow the stories of two couples, Monica and Luis and Moises and Belen, and introduces the audience to how the respective couples are situated in relationship to the conflict in San Isidro. Monica and Luis do not live in San Isidro, but in the nearby Ojona. Luis was a miner who, much to Monica’s dismay, leaves mining and joins the military with the hope of securing pension to be able to better care for his wife. After Luis joins the military, he returns to visit Monica at which time she discovers he lost a finger. Luis reveals to Monica that his finger was injured and could have been fixed, but medical care would have precluded him from returning to work immediately so he cut it off himself, because his men needed him. She observes that each time he returns to her, he is a little more scarred. By the end of the war, Luis is dismissed from duty, unable to get his pension, because he did not serve the allotted amount of time. He remains emotionally scarred from his experiences although he will not reveal what he lived through to Monica.

Meanwhile, Moises and Belen live in San Isidro which has suffered at the hands of the military. The two run a clinic and do their best to care for all those harmed at the hands of the military. The local priest, Eugenio, occasionally accompanies Moises on trips out of town to get
more supplies, using his status as a church official to get them through local checkpoints. One day the military comes to the town and leaves a tortured boy in the town center as a warning to the townspeople. Originally, the couple leaves the boy, because they know they cannot be caught caring for him. However, Belen eventually begs Moises to help him. The two put the boy on a stretcher, but the soldiers come back. Seeking sanctuary, the couple run to the local Catholic church where Eugenio hears them knocking. In fear of getting caught by the soldiers for aiding the boy, Eugenio locks the doors, goes to his sacristy, drinks the wine, and blocks his ears to drown out the couple’s screams. Belen is taken by the soldiers, and they torture her, shocking her with a car battery, before taking her away permanently. Before they go, however, the soldiers mark their handprints on the door of the clinic, a sign that those who live within it were punished. Moises shuts himself away from the town.

The play then returns to the current moment in the world of the play, March 4th. Eugenio goes to Moises asking him to open his clinic once again, because he has two orphans who have come down with boils. Clinics in other towns are seeing children with the same afflictions, but these children are dying. Despite his dislike of Eugenio, Moises receives the children into the clinic, and upon laying hands on them, the children are healed of their diseases. People start bringing children from all over to be healed by Moises. The play culminates when Monica, who is now a parent, brings her daughter to Moises for healing, and he recognizes the child as the child of the man who killed his wife.

The idea of presence is, to a certain extent, part of the cultural fabric of the communities that Zimmerman seeks to represent. From the onset of the play, Zimmerman presents the town of San Isidro, naming the town after Saint Isidore and suggesting Catholic roots. This choice immediately draws attention to the relationship between Catholicism and Latin America generally.
However, the play also more specially draws attention the spiritual practices of the majority of Latin American countries which predominantly uphold Roman Catholicism as their primary mode of worship. In the play, the only named character besides the two couples is Eugenio, the local priest. Eugenio is an instrumental figure within the community given that he is able to cross military checkpoints, because of his status as a parish priest. Eugenio testifies to the status of the church within the culture saying that when soldiers question him he tells them that, “‘The Bishop will not be pleased’ (which) works like a charm.”

Moreover, it is telling that Moises and Belen saw the church rather than their clinic as the refuge most likely to help them escape persecution of the soldiers. While the status of Catholicism in the community is not necessarily indicative of the degree to which the town believes in supernatural presence, it does at least point to a certain level of acknowledgment of the status of the Catholic Church and the practice of religious belief in the town. The play thus presents a world which places value in Catholic belief although the extent to which that belief is upheld is unclear. In doing so, the play presents a world in which belief in lived relationships with the supernatural are assumed to a certain degree.

In the play, presence first manifests in the performance when Moises heals the orphan boy. As a doctor, Moises already partakes in the process of healing through his work, but in the case of the orphan boy, this healing is of a different nature. The boy is miraculously healed of the boils that plague him when Moises places his hands upon the boy and then repeats the action with the second orphan. Although Moises does not express a strong belief in or connection to the


277 Ibid, 64.

278 Ibid.
divine, the act is ascribed to the power of God in keeping with the religious framework of the community. Thus, interestingly, unlike the previous plays the character who is associated with the manifestation of presence does not necessarily align himself with the divine. Nonetheless, as a result of healing the boy and saving his life, the townspeople and the parish priest interpret this moment as a manifestation of divine.\textsuperscript{279} As Moises continues to heal the afflicted, the members of his community pray softly in the background, reinforcing the idea that there is relationship between the healings and the supernatural through their performance of prayer.\textsuperscript{280} Accordingly, although Moises is unsure what to think of his newfound healing power, his community alleges that it is an example of how the divine manifests through human beings.

Support for an interpretation of this iteration of presence as a manifestation of Catholic presence is predominantly reiterated through the dramaturgy of the script. Throughout the text of the production, the chorus and Eugenio craft a narrative that connects this iteration of supernatural intervention to Catholicism. The epidemic that affected the orphan children began to affect children in surrounding towns. At the beginning of scene eight, the townspeople note how the healings are driving people into town, hoping for their children to be healed. The chorus notes that the town people reside in churches, and the town members describe the experience proclaiming, “At sunrise, we surround the clinic. I shower it with prayers, bendiciones, incantations while child after child cycles through.”\textsuperscript{281} Through their narrations, the chorus thus points to the conclusions

\textsuperscript{279} Ibid, 65, 67, 68.
\textsuperscript{280} Ibid, 68.
\textsuperscript{281} Ibid, 67.
made within the world of the play that ties the healings to the world of Catholicism. The healings are accompanied with the practices of the church.

In his narration of the events, Eugenio further suggests that the healings are similarly interpreted as a manifestation of the divine by calling in the bishop to investigate, thus further suggesting that the healing may be interpreted as legitimate by the institutional church giving further credence to the events.\footnote{Ibid, 68.} At the end of the play, Eugenio ends saying, “The bishop has told me to tear down the clinic and build a shrine in its place,” suggesting that the healings have been approved as manifestations of the divine by the institutional church.\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, the healing process may be considered as a potential or possible manifestation of presence within Catholic tradition insofar as it may be seen as the supernatural working through Moises and manifesting divine power on earth by healing the boy.

Despite the bishop’s approval, however, Eugenio is not convinced of the divine nature of the healings in keeping with the dramaturgy of possible presence outlined in this chapter. Eugenio is torn in how these healings should be interpreted. On the one hand, he called the bishop to investigate the situation, but he is not convinced that a shrine should be built to recognize these occurrences as manifestations of supernatural presence. In the final line of the play, he shares his feelings regarding the building of the shrine saying, “I’m not sure I should,” suggesting that he is less convinced that the divine has manifested itself through the healings at San Isidro.\footnote{Ibid, 88.} This final statement leaves room for the audience to consider what they witnessed within the play.

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\item \footnote{Ibid, 68.}
\item \footnote{Ibid.}
\item \footnote{Ibid, 88.}
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Thus, the audience is left with similar questions as to how to interpret the healings. First, although Moises’s healings are immediately associated with Catholicism in the world of the play, it is important to remember that from the beginning of the play, Moises is skeptical about God. Early in the play when he is going with Eugenio to get supplies, Eugenio and Moises debate over the power of God. Eugenio attributes their safety at getting through checkpoints to God to which Moises responds, “Since when was God in the business of forging letters?”

When Eugenio argues that God is in everything, Moises again counters him asking, “Is he in the shrapnel that shredded that kid’s leg?” Although Moises does not denounce the supernatural, his responses make it clear that his faith in the supernatural is not as far-reaching as Eugenio’s. His skeptical nature first raises the question of why the supernatural would manifest itself through him.

Moreover, through the production of the play, presence is suggested through the delivery of the text of the performance, but the performance techniques are not used to substantiate its existence. For example, in the case of the first healings, the narration of the townspeople and Eugenio suggests that the children were brought before Moises. From production photos, it appears, however, that the table remained empty in keeping with the suggested the stage directions that suggest that the operating table on which the alleged children lie in front of Moises remains empty. With regards to the actual healing, Eugenio narrates Moises actions noting that, “Moises presses his palms to (the orphan girl’s) stomach… The boils shrink into her body and disappear.”

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285 Ibid, 22.
286 Ibid.
287 Ibid, 64.
However, the audience does not witness the healing. Given the progression of the narration of the events, the play suggests that the healings did occur, the gap between the oral narration and lack of proof in performance call into question if the events truly occurred as narrated.

Further doubts are raised with regards to the relationship between Moises’s healing powers and their relationship to the divine when Monica comes to him and asks him to heal her child. Moises refuses to heal the child until Luis comes to him, admits to his crimes, and begs for his forgiveness. After Luis finally comes forth and confesses, Moises still refuses to heal the child. He relents only after Monica comes forward saying that if Moises heals her child, she will tell her child what Luis did to Belen each day for the rest of her life, raising the child to hate Luis for his crimes. Moises heals the child, while addressing Luis saying, “May she live a long long life full of resentment for the things you did. May she never look at you without seeing the faces of your victims in the black of your eyes.”289 During the healing, the townspeople cry out that they see seven spots appearing on the sun. Meanwhile, a white palm print, reminiscent of the handprint left outside of Moises’ clinic the night of Belen’s murder, appears on the child’s stomach. Is the child healed or cursed? Is this an act of the God or something more sinister?

In her review of the production, Gabriella Steinberg asks, “Is Moises a saint, or is he the devil, out to curse men who have done wrong?” Her questions directly reflect the challenges in characterizing the healings that occur onstage. Many of the healings appear to be the work of a divine force, giving hope to a small town amidst their despair. Moises’ final act of healing leaves room for doubt. On the one hand, it may appear that the final healing is an act of God for first and foremost, the child is healed without any natural intervention. After Moises heals the child, the

289 Martin Zimmerman, Seven Spots on the Sun, (New York: Samuel French, 2018), 85-86.
town cries out, “Look up! and there are spots on the sun seven spots that writhe and dance before our eyes as every child is healed”\textsuperscript{290} It is unclear whether the production of *Seven Spots on the Sun* engaged lighting effects in this moment, but the language of the chorus paints an oral picture for the audience that suggests that the sun that responds to the miraculous healing. While the moment may be interpreted as coincidental, the sun’s movement has significance within Catholic tradition. In discussing the significance of the title of his play, Zimmerman notes that, “In the Roman Catholic tradition, which is the religious tradition in which most of these characters were raised, people often report strange things happening to the sun when they witness a miracle.” This connection may be lost on audience members, and thus interpreted as just another supernatural event, but for those familiar with the tradition, the moment hearkens a longer tradition in which nature responds to manifestations of the divine. By calling upon this tradition within his piece, Zimmerman thus further legitimizes an interpretation of the healings as the manifestation of divine power in a contemporary world.

Nonetheless, the final act of healing ultimately is an act of revenge. If this is an act of God, the play crafts an iteration of divine presence not easily reconciled with traditional iterations of presence in Catholic tradition. This is not the forgiving presence of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* that seeks to offer redemption for anyone who is willing to accept it. Nor is it akin to that manifested in *Agnes of God*, a presence that offers hope for living amidst a world of despair. While this presence offers the justice that Moises seeks, it is unclear if he sees it as an act of redemption. Furthermore, while it may serve to ease Moises’s suffering, it forges a path of a life of suffering for Monica and Luis’s child. Thus, the manifestation of presence within *Seven Spots on the Sun* is

\textsuperscript{290} Ibid, 86.
caught up in a myriad of contradictions. It allows the people in the town to believe in miracles despite the pain that they have suffered. It draws people to the church, bringing them to the town, staying in the church, uttering their prayers as part of the healing rituals. It enacts a sense of justice, holding a murderer responsible for his crimes. However, it also precludes forgiveness for one’s sins and afflicts a family with a lifetime of pain during which they will forever be forced to remember the sins of their father.

Like many of his reviewers, the playwright himself is caught up in the dilemma as to how to describe the healings. On the one hand, he is quick to reference the Catholic traditions of Latin America in his play and to note that the reference to the sun directly calls upon a Catholic understanding of miracles. On the other hand, however, in another interview, he suggests that the word, “magic,” is suitable description for the experiences with the play.291 He describes the events as “magical- even miraculous,” using the words almost interchangeably.292 While the latter word is incurred within Catholic tradition to describe the effects of the divine, the former is not. Instead, it incurs the idea that something may be conjured out of nothing. Thus, although similar to a miracle, the use of the word “magical” removes the possible cause of this occurrence and in doing so it absents the possibility of a supernatural force.

With regards to Catholicism, the play thus raises two primary questions. First, what does it mean to be Catholic? In the play, Eugenio talks about nuns who risked their lives to save others, and yet, when faced with the opportunity to help, he chose to preserve himself. In contrast, Moises and Belen chose to make sacrifices for the life of someone they did not know. Although Belen


292 Ibid.
expressed belief in God, Moises did not, yet he was later gifted with the power to heal. Moreover, Luis’s performance also draws attention to his Catholicism. When Monica asks him to bring their child to be healed, he argues with her saying they should pray for their child’s healing rather than go to Moises. He begins to pray although his prayers run short as he forgets the words. Nonetheless, it is evident that he has been raised to turn to pray in trying times. May he, despite his crimes, be considered religious?

The second question the play raises is what does it mean for the divine to make itself manifest? Does the supernatural only manifest itself through those who believe concretely? Must it bring about healing or might it also bring about revenge to ensure the peace of those unjustly persecuted? The play questions where and when miracles can happen and the form they take. While on the one hand these healings resonate with those in which Jesus of the New Testament heals the sick, the element of revenge in Ailen’s healing casts the miraculous in a different light as something more sinister. A healing that will always be marked by the plight of her forefather. Is this truly the work of the divine? Although Catholicism is offered as the likely explanation for these occurrences given the culture of the world of the play, is this truly the most likely explanation?

Finally, the play performs presence as though it did occur within the scope of civil conflict, and in doing so, it provides a model for the historiography of the potential of presence within performance. However, it also presents a model that both has the potential to give credence to the testimonies of those who point to divine intervention as a possibility without creating a narrative that confirms its existence. Moreover, this particular model draws attention to the variety of ways in which people can understand religious belief and how it can inform the ways in which they come to understand instances that cannot be explained.
In conclusion, each of the case studies within this chapter engaged the same basic dramaturgical strategies of the productions in order to craft a *dramaturgy of possible of presence*. Particular to this chapter, these strategies are largely entrenched in the dramatic text of the play. The three primary strategies used to craft these productions are a statement that clearly affirms belief in one’s lived relationship with the divine, the inclusion of tumultuous historical circumstances that raise questions as to the credibility of supernatural presence, and a concluding statement that affirms the possibility of presence without confirming it. As noted in the reviews of each of these productions, the primary deterrent in the success of these productions lies in the execution of the written narrative in that the playwright should be neither too heavy-handed nor too complex in their portrayal of the narrative.

It is also worth noting that interestingly, of the three productions, the most successful production, *Agnes of God*, called upon a narrative of Catholicism that was likely well-known to many in the audience in that it loosely recalled an incident that made national headlines only a few years earlier. Furthermore, the production gave credence to the possibility of presence not only through a stated belief in the divine, but also the performance of possible presence. Through the use of blood and the handkerchief in the performance as well as Agnes’s allegedly divinely inspired singing, the audience can visualize and experience the ways in which the supernatural may make itself present. Through the use of blood in the final scene, in which the blood is less clearly associated with divinity, the production leaves the question of manifestations of presence up in the air. In contrast, while both *High* and *Seven Spots on the Sun*, engaged with aspects of Catholic history and tradition, the narratives informing these productions were further distilled from circumstances of which significant portions of the audience might be aware. Moreover, *High*, made repeated references to the potential presence of God, but there was little evidence of the
possibility of physical evidence of presence within the performance. Meanwhile *Seven Spots on the Sun* spoke to the possibility of healings, the healings were not physically recognized within the production values of the performance onstage. Thus, while they pointed to the possibility of presence, both productions shied away from including physical manifestations of presence within their productions. Accordingly, the varying degrees of success of these productions depends on a variety of factors from the writing, to acting, to production values. However, given the success of *Agnes of God*, in particular, it would appear that the development of dramaturgies of possible presence might best be aided by, first, calling upon lived circumstances that are likely familiar to the audience, and secondly, by reiterating the possibility of presence by materially suggesting the possibility of presence within the performance.
5.0 A Crisis of Faith

“I bless you… I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being,” John says as he begins baptizing the apostles at the beginning of Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi*. Through the performance of this ceremony at the beginning of McNally’s controversial play, the production thus begins by subverting the traditional hierarchy of powers that are inherent in the theology of the Catholic Church in which the supernatural is placed at the top of the hierarchy of beings. In the Roman Catholic Church, individuals entering into the church are baptized in the name of the “Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This ritual draws attention to the ways in which the recipients of the sacrament serve as members of the Church as a result of the fact that they are made in the image and likeness of God. The formula seeks to incorporate the newly baptized into the Body of Christ. In contrast, in *Corpus Christi*, the baptismal ceremony seeks to incorporate the newly baptized into the fullness of their humanity. Thus, whereas the Roman Catholic Church seeks to draw attention to the ways in which humans are blessed because of the ways in which they are made in the image of the divine, McNally’s baptism seeks to highlight how humans deserve to be blessed in and of themselves, independent of the divine. From the onset of the production, then, *Corpus Christi* seeks to destabilize the ways in which Christianity is seen as

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294 Ibid.
manifesting from the divine. Instead, it sets forth to consider how Christianity is enacted through the performance of humanity.

In the previous chapters, I focused on dramaturgies of presence that recognize and/or uphold the possibility of presence within the practice of Catholicism to various degrees whereas the dramaturgical strategies engaged in this chapter deliberately set forth to destabilize the possibility of presence within Catholic traditions. Even in productions in which the existence of the divine remains nebulous, prior performances nonetheless accounted, to some extent, for the ways in which presence functions within Catholicism in a manner akin to Andrew Sofer’s dark matter in that it serves as a nebulous force that holds the world together.295 The productions in previous chapters engaged dramaturgical strategies of presence that ultimately pointed to a presence beyond humanity that in some way held the world of the play together or at least informed the ways in which humans interacted with one another within the world of the play.

In contrast, this chapter considers how productions absent, erase, or destabilize divine presence from narratives of Catholicism. The productions under investigation recognize that relationships between human and the divine are assumed to be intrinsic to Catholic experience. Each of the productions begins operating under the assumption that presence is present within the world of the play although it may not manifest itself. As each production progresses, however, the productions engage dramaturgical strategies that deliberately absent, erase, or destabilize assumptions pertaining to the role of presence within Catholic tradition, asking audiences to consider what Catholicism looks like when God is taken from the equation or asking them to reconsider how divine presence is traditionally imagined within Catholic practice and tradition.

Within this chapter, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All to You* and *Doubt* erase and absent supernatural presence from the productions, and in doing so, the productions predominantly focus on the human elements of Catholicism. Thus, these productions consider how Catholicism manifests not only as lived relationships between the human and divine but also as a result of performed interpersonal relationships. Taking a different approach, *Corpus Christi* sets forth to destabilize the ways in which divine presence is understood in Catholic tradition and practice, and in doing so, it raises questions regarding assumptions about the relationships between humans and the divine in Catholic culture.

In this chapter, I turn to three productions that absent, erase, or destabilize divine presence from their productions of Catholicism. John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt* (2004), Christopher Durang’s *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (1981), and *Corpus Christi* (1998) each absent the divine from their narratives of religious practice to various degrees. In my case studies, I consider how each of these productions absent, erase, and destabilize the supernatural from Catholicism to critique different aspects of the embodiment of practices and teachings of the Catholic Church. Of the productions explored within my project, the plays that absent, erase, and destabilize the divine and focus on the human institution of the church have had the most overall success on the Off-Broadway and Broadway stages. *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (1981) ran Off-Broadway for over 947 performances. *Corpus Christi* (1998) was scheduled to run Off-Broadway for ten weeks, and although that ten-week run was not extended, the entire run was sold-out. Finally, the Broadway premiere of *Doubt* (2006) ran for 525 performances. The success of these plays in New York widely surpasses the runs of all other plays in this study with the exception of *Agnes of God* which ran for 599 performances which is perhaps not surprising given that *Agnes of God* also examines the roots of corruption that manifest within the institution of the
church. As a whole, the plays that strip Catholicism of ties to sacredness are by and large the most successful in the secular sphere. This suggests that while Catholicism has increasingly gained recognition on the secular stage, the secular stage still reaps the most commercial benefits from more secularized performances of faith.

5.1 Case Study: Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You (1981)

Christopher Durang’s *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* first debuted Off-Off Broadway in a series of one-acts presented at the Ensemble Studio Theatre for a limited run in 1979. Two years after its debut at Ensemble, *Sister Mary Ignatius* made its Off-Broadway debut directed by Jerry Zaks at Playwrights Horizon, a not-for-profit Off-Broadway theatre, where it debuted as part of a double-act with Durang’s other one-act, *The Actor’s Nightmare*, which was written to accompany *Sister Mary Ignatius*. The double-act ran from October 16, 1981 through February 21, 1982. Then, on February 24, 1982, the play transitioned to another Off-Broadway location, the Westside Theatre, where it played for another 947 performances. *Sister Mary Ignatius* presents a satirical critique of the Catholic Church. In his *New York Times* review of the production, Frank Rich describes Durang’s work saying, “He goes after the Catholic Church with a vengeance that might well have shocked the likes of either Paul Krassner or Lenny Bruce.”

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Speaking of his play, Durang, a self-described ex-Catholic, noted that, “I realize there are people who will find this offensive… I didn’t write this play to throw water in the face of those who believe, my purpose wasn’t to make people angry, but get off my chest how I look at things.” Nonetheless, the show was received with wide variety of responses, in some cases, laughter and, in others, horror.

The play denounces both Catholic teachings on morality and the ways in which those teachings are passed down through the institutional church. It features the fictional character of Sister Mary Ignatius, a fifth-grade teacher at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows. (The school’s name foreshadows the events that will occur as a result of the education provided there.) The production focuses on the relationships between Sister Mary Ignatius and her students. Throughout the production, Sister Mary Ignatius seeks to impart a series of moral truths to her students. Insofar as Sister Mary Ignatius is a nun, the play rests on the assumption that she seeks to live her life in relationship to the divine at least to a certain degree. Moreover, Sister Mary Ignatius claims that the moral truths she shares within her classroom represent God’s will as discerned by the Catholic Church over the years, suggesting that both the Catholic Church and Sister is aware of the will of the divine. In keeping, Sister’s performance of Catholicism rests on the assumption she is privy to the wisdom to the divine. Nonetheless, while Sister Mary Ignatius purports that God dictates the moral imperatives that she shares within the classroom, the dramaturgy of the production increasingly sets forth to erase both the possibility that Sister Mary Ignatius has a relationship with and is privy to the will of the divine or that the Catholic Church’s understanding of the divine is


300 Ibid.
relevant to those who have engaged with it. By the end of the play, there is no sign of a divine interlocutor nor is there any evidence that Sister Mary Ignatius’s teachings provide the solutions to the lived realities of her students. Through the erasure of the possibility of presence and the performance of the problematic relationships between Sister Mary Ignatius and her students, the play undermines Sister Mary Ignatius’s claims that the Catholic Church provides the solutions as to how one is meant to navigate life on earth.

Although the play is not based on actual events, the premise of the play engages with the historical legacy of the Vatican II and post-Vatican II classroom. The play’s subject matter features fictionalized Catholic school students who were educated within the pre-Vatican II classroom. The students return to confront their former teacher post-Vatican II. Although the plot is fictional, the production sets forth to explore the longer history of Catholic education both in terms of its teachings as well as the ramifications of those teachings on its students. The production sought to validate its interpretation of this progression of events by performing a version of a nun that resonated with real nuns. In his addendum to the play, Durang suggests that it is of the utmost importance that the role of Sister should be presented as straight as possible, and he suggested that Franz provided this sense of authenticity. Durang observed that, “Elizabeth Franz (who played the role of Sister in the 1981 production)… brought to the role a delicate femininity that was true to a certain kind of real-life nun.” The nuanced performance of the nun lends credibility to the potential that this performance of a nun resonates with the possible experiences students might have had historically with nuns.

301 Christopher Durang, Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You ;the Actor’s Nightmare: Two One-Act Plays, (N.Y: Nelson Doubleday, 1981), 34.
302 Ibid, 35.
Nonetheless, the production repeatedly navigates between historical possibilities and fiction. In his *New York Times* review of the production, Walter Kerr noted that Franz maintained a balance in her performance between realism and character of the nun, writing that, “Keeping the portrait steadily shy of cheap caricature, Miss Franz still finds herself airspace to take off into now and again, flapping away like a demented blackbird before roosting imperiously once more.”303 The characterization of Sister may, at times, be reminiscent of real nuns with whom audience members might be familiar. However, Sister engages in a plot that becomes increasingly fictionalized as the play progresses. Even the fictional, however, serves its purpose in considering the historical legacy of the Catholic Church. The hyperbolic fictional circumstances allow the production to explore the ways in which students might have been harmed as a result of their education. Rather, it allows the performance to problematize the historical legacy of Catholicism.

The production engages with the relationship between presence and the Catholic Church in order to consider the ways in which claims to knowledge of divine presence can be damaging. The play engages a dramaturgical approach to presence that begins with an assumption that divine presence is present within the world of the play. As the play progresses, however, it begins to erase the possibility that there is a divine presence operating within the Catholic world of the play. By the end of the play, it is evident that not only is divinity not making itself manifest within the play, but also any assertions that one is acting in the name of divine presence are portrayed as inherently destructive. Thus, the play sets forth to deconstruct the ways in which the Catholic Church’s alleged relationship to divine knowledge can be problematic.

The 1981 performance of *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* begins as Sister Mary, clad in her black habit, walks to the podium at the center of the stage. As she moves to the podium, Sister stands, looking out at the audience, and in doing so, the audience is brought into the world of the play, filling the seats in which Sister assumes that her current students sit awaiting her lecture. They are no longer merely spectators, but part of Sister’s classroom. This staging provides an opportunity for the audience to consider their own roles within the drama of the production. What does it mean for them to sit in the seats of Sister’s students? Are they coming to the classroom to hear Sister Mary Ignatius present the teachings of the Catholic Church for the first time, or are they, like Sister Mary Ignatius’s former students, returning to the classroom? Through the arrangement of the classroom space, the production hearkens the longer history of Catholic education reminding audience members both of its past legacy as well as its ongoing practice.

The classroom experience ironically begins with an invocation of the divine. Before beginning her lesson, Sister stands at the podium and makes the sign of the cross, blessing herself, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” Her prayer indicates that she sees herself as living in relationship to the divine. By beginning her presentation by incurring the name of God, Sister presents herself as acting in the name of God although there is no substantive proof that her relationship with the divine extends beyond the fact that she invokes his name. Next to Sister’s podium, she has a chart on which there are pictures of the sun, the moon, and the earth. Rather than engage with the world of the physical universe, however, she flips the chart to the next page, revealing a map of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory as she enters into a detailed

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lecture on the afterlife, explaining where people end up after they die based on how they lived out God’s rule on earth. Sister’s presentation once again reiterates that Sister’s world is governed by a Catholic cosmological system in which there is an afterlife in which humans will live in relationship to the divine. The act of passing over the chart of the material universe reminds the audience that Sister’s priorities emphasize the spiritual rather than the material world.

Perhaps Sister’s emphasis on the spiritual rather than the material world is not surprising given that Sister views herself as a representative of the Catholic Church, but her theology bears little grounding in logic, raising questions as to the legitimacy of her claims. For example, in her opening lecture, Sister claims that prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Church taught that unbaptized babies went to limbo, but she acknowledges that this teaching changed with the council. She teaches that after the Council, unbaptized babies were sent to Purgatory and later to Heaven. Although Sister acknowledges that the teaching changed with Vatican II, she maintains however that babies who died prior to the Ecumenical Council will never make it to Heaven. The performance of this lecture raises questions with regards to the legitimacy of Sister’s status as a moral authority in that her claims are dubious. Rather, than acknowledge that there was a discrepancy in Church teachings and that Church teachings can be fallible and can change, Sister maintains that the teachings both before and after the Council were true. Thus, she maintains that the babies that died before the Council go to Limbo and babies that die after the Council go to Heaven rather than suggesting that the Church might have been wrong in the past and all


unbaptized children go to Heaven. This moment also draws attention to the human element of these teachings. Although Sister Mary Ignatius suggests that this is a theological teaching that is divined from the supernatural, the relationship of this teaching to the council raises questions of whether the teaching does derive from the divine or if instead it is a human construction.

After her opening monologue, Sister Mary Ignatius continues to present a number of other didactic monologues presenting her views on topics such as the Immaculate Conception, limbo, birth control, Church teachings on sex, the role of procreation in marriage, mortal/venial sin, veneration of the saints, horoscopes, sodomy, and the use of violence as a means of self-defense. Sister’s logic remains questionable throughout the play. For example, Sister again addresses changes in church teaching with regards to the fact that it used to be considered a mortal sin to eat meat on Friday, noting that the church no longer teaches this. Nonetheless, she upholds that people who ate meat on Fridays in the ‘50s are now in Hell whereas those who eat meat in contemporary times on Fridays forego any punishment. Once again Sister does not address any discrepancies with regards to changes to the teaching and what those changes mean retrospectively for people who upheld certain teachings prior to the changes. Instead, Sister presumes that both teachings were correct fully as stated during the time periods during which they were proclaimed although they contradict one another. Shortly after, Sister once again provides a muddied explanation of the Church’s teaching on horoscopes that once again raises questions with regards to her logic when she decries the use of horoscopes, saying that you cannot have your horoscope told, because only God knows the future. In this instance, the first part of Sister’s lecture is grounded in the

307 Ibid 8.
308 Ibid.
However, she further argues that if the church’s teaching is not enough reason to avoid horoscopes, we also know that horoscopes are inaccurate, because, according to astrology, “Christ would be a Capricorn, and Capricorn people are cold, ambitious and attracted to Scorpio and Virgo, and we know that Christ was warm, loving, and not attracted to anybody.” This latter part of Sister’s lecture is entirely conjecture, bearing no relevance to teaching. Moreover, it serves as a satirical moment which suggests that Sister is better-versed in the premises of astrology than she perhaps should be given that she can apply its principles to an analysis of the figure of Jesus. Throughout the play, she continues to overlook any such discrepancies and contradictions in her statements, and she continues to present herself as a moral authority on all matters of Catholic teaching throughout the play.

Moreover, it quickly becomes clear that Sister sees herself not only as an authority on all matters specifically addressed by the Church, but also any matter that might broadly pertain to Catholicism regardless of whether the Church has made a statement regarding the topic. For example, Sister rattles off a list of individuals who she claims definitively went to hell including: Christopher Keeler, Roman Polanski, Zsa Zsa Gabor, the editors of After Dark magazine, Linda Lovelace, Georgina Spelvin, Big John Holmes, Brooke Shields, David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Patty Hearst, Betty Comden, Adolph Green. She offers no grounding for her claims regarding the eternal lives of any of the aforementioned individuals. Instead, she expects her students to take her word as definitive. There is no room within her lecture to question her proclamations.

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311 Ibid 6.
The performance of Sister’s authoritative teaching approach draws attention to a variety of Church teachings that have been contested and changed within church history. In doing so, it accentuates contradictions within the history of Catholic teachings by emphasizing that Church teaching can and does change. Moreover, Sister’s questionable delivery of her understanding of how these teachings continues to undermine the assumption that her relationship to Catholicism, as a member of a religious group, affords her particular access to divine knowledge. Rather, although Sister presents her beliefs with an authority, as the questionable nature of her logic becomes more apparent, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that this authority is affiliated with an all-knowing divine wisdom. Moreover, in the event that Sister’s words are in fact representative of divine wisdom, the horror wrought by them is so egregious that the audience cannot help but question if perhaps they are better off without the divine. Thus, while Sister performs the role of an authority figure, her performance is undermined by her contradictory statements, thus raising larger questions about the authority figures within the institutional Catholic Church.

The production then also raises questions as to what it means to learn the Catholic faith. The production does this both in how it asks the audience to fill the space in which Sister Mary Ignatius’s students presumably sit as well as in the performed relationships between Sister Mary Ignatius and her current and former students. At the end of her first monologue, the audience sees Sister Mary Ignatius interact with a current student when she summons Thomas to the stage. Thomas will repeatedly come to the stage between lectures throughout the rest of the production. Each time, Thomas comes onstage, Sister drills him with questions regarding his knowledge of the Catholic Church. Her questions are taken directly from the *Baltimore Catechism*. For example, in
their first exchange, Sister asks Thomas, “Why did God make you?” In this case, Thomas responds, “God made me to show forth his goodness and share with us His happiness.” Thomas responds each time with an answer that is almost, if not always, taken verbatim from the catechism.

Thomas’s answers model a method of faith dependent upon the rote recitation of information. When Timothy answers correctly, Sister Mary Ignatius rewards him with a cookie. The interactions point to both the ways in which religion within the Catholic school classroom is both communicated and received. The teachings are passed down, unquestioned within the institution of the Catholic school based on the premise that the teacher is assumed to be someone who serves as a trustworthy agent of the Catholic Church who is familiar with, upholds, and will pass down the teachings of the Church. Moreover, the performance of faith is based on the ability to recite it rather than perform it. There is no room for the divine in this equation. Rather, this method of learning and performing depends solely on how well knowledge is memorized and verbally repeated. Religion in this model has nothing to do with how the relationship between how the human and divine is performed. The perfect recitation of faith is literally rewarded in Sister Mary Ignatius’s classroom. Thus, Thomas’s performance of Catholicism is measured by his ability to parrot materials back to Sister rather than whether he comprehends the materials or embodies them through other practices in his daily life.

312 The Baltimore Catechism (Revised (1941), https://www.catholicity.com/baltimore-catechism/lesson01.html.

313 Ibid.

Halfway through the production, four of Sister Mary Ignatius’s former students enter the stage, prepared to present a Nativity pageant that was written by one of Sister’s favorite students in 1948. As seen in the opening of the production, this moment once again begins to hearken an idea of divinity in so much as it seeks to perform the story of the Holy Family. One of the students represents the Virgin Mother; she wears a contemporary white dress and a white veil covering her head. Another student enters carrying a staff, dressed as St. Joseph, wearing a head covering and a very nice patterned bathrobe. The collar of the student’s button-up shirt and a tie are visible under the robe. Between Mary and Joseph, stands a two-humped camel, named Misty. The camel’s head is a large-hand puppet made out of cloth; its eyes are represented by two large buttons. Attached to the camel’s head is a large piece of fabric under which the other two students stand, representing the camel’s humps. There are two holes in each of the humps, allowing the students visibility. The foursome look like they belong in a crudely produced piece of community theatre rather than a professional production. Through the dramaturgy of the costumes, the production reminds the audience that although these students might represent divine figures, the performed characters are clearly a human construct and a rudimentary one at that. Thus, the only potential iteration of divinity to grace the stage in this production comes in the form of poorly disguised humans. Thus, the potential performance of the divine is clearly devoid of any divinity, and therefore, it crafts an image of Catholicism as a human rather than divine construction.315

The irony of the situation is that, Sister Mary Ignatius is unable to recognize this false claim to divinity for what it is. Rather, according to the stage directions, when the students enter, Sister kneels when she first sees them.\(^{316}\) When the student garbed as St. Joseph asks her what she is doing, Sister replies, “You look so real.”\(^{317}\) In this moment, the clear absence of presence within the performance highlights the ridiculousness of Sister’s entire performance of faith. Throughout the *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All To You*, Sister Mary Ignatius asserted herself as a moral authority that was derived from her unquestioned knowledge of God’s intentions for mankind. With the entrance of these four characters, however, it becomes clear that Sister’s knowledge of the supernatural is so paltry that she is unable to identify even the most obvious fictional representations of her faith. Of course, Sister later quickly backsteps claiming that, “That camel looks false to me.”\(^{318}\) Nonetheless, at this point, the damage is done. The dramatic irony of the situation points to where Sister’s allegiance lies- a poorly constructed human performance of religion.\(^{319}\)

At this point in the production, any credibility that Sister might have maintained about her knowledge of the divine is undermined. However, the plot continues to escalate to consider now not only the legitimacy of Sister’s teachings, but the ways in which they impact her students. After

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\(^{317}\) Ibid.

\(^{318}\) Ibid.

the pageant ends, the students shed their robes and humps to reveal their true identities as Sister Mary’s former students from 1959. Sister immediately poses a few questions from the catechism to Diana, Philomena, Aloysius, and Gary. The students answer the first two questions correctly before their responses begin to demonstrate that the teachings have little resonance in their lives today. Diana had two abortions, but defends the first one, arguing that she got her first abortion after being raped.\textsuperscript{320} Philomena tells sister she had a child out of wedlock. When Sister reproaches her, Philomena defends her choice saying Jesus would forgive her as well considering that he defended a woman in danger of being stoned for committing adultery.\textsuperscript{321} Aloysius still goes to church, receives communion, and goes to confession, but he is also an alcoholic who abuses his wife and struggles with suicidal ideation.\textsuperscript{322} Because Aloysius is married and going to church, Sister Mary Ignatius is not particularly concerned about him. In contrast, Sister is incredibly concerned by Gary’s fate. Gary is gay, a fact that he discovered while in the seminary, and he is in a relationship with another former student of Sister. Nonetheless, Gary, like Aloysius, says that he and his partner are both practicing Catholics.\textsuperscript{323}

The production draws attention to the dichotomy between the implications of the Catholic school system beyond the classroom in that it brings the four adults back into the space in which their beliefs were formed. The teachings promulgated within the classroom are no longer in response to hypothetical situations, but rather specific lived experiences. Moreover, Sister no


\textsuperscript{321} Ibid 20-21.

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid 22.

\textsuperscript{323} Ibid 23-24.
longer uses her words to purport a general teaching, but to verbally attack her students’ choices. She applies her understanding of each teaching to her students’ life choices without accounting for the lived experiences that led students to those choices. The space thus provides the opportunity for the past and present understandings of the Church teachings to come face to face as the teacher, who continues to maintain her belief system, is confronted by students who have grown up and have come to understand her teachings through a more nuanced lens. Some of her former students have grown up to believe that what Sister taught is completely irrelevant to their daily lives. Meanwhile, two of her students continue to attend Mass, but they have rejected other aspects of Catholic teaching. Nonetheless, although the students have rejected her teachings to various degrees, those same principles continue to haunt them.

As tensions heighten between Sister and her students, her former students reveal that they share a deep resentment for Sister and her emphasis on the teachings of the Church. They reveal that they only came back, because they never liked Sister and wanted to embarrass her. As their confrontation continues, the students leverage accusations towards Sister, saying that she mistreated her students, calling them ignorant, not allowing them to go to the bathroom, playing clear favorites, and hitting them. The language coupled with the performance of Sister’s relationship with Thomas raises questions with regards to the purity and innocence of her character, further undermining any possibility of moral superiority. The student’s vocal opposition to Sister’s treatment raises questions with regards to how she cultivated her relationships with her students.

Within the production, however, Sister’s relationship with Thomas also raises questions with regards to her ethics and intentions towards her students. Here, I draw attention also to Sister’s physical interactions with Thomas throughout the production. At the beginning of the play, Thomas comes on and off the stage, standing to the side of Sister as he answers her questions. Later, however, at various junctions throughout the play, Thomas sits on Sister Mary Ignatius’s lap while she explains Church teachings to him.\textsuperscript{325} At first glance, this action might signify a caring- if perhaps imprudent- gesture toward her student. These interactions take on darker undertones, however, as Sister continues to converse with Thomas and her other students, revealing that her intentions may be far from pure. In one of their interactions, Sister asks Thomas if he would “like to keep (his) pretty little soprano voice forever.”\textsuperscript{326} When Thomas responds in the affirmative, Sister tells him that “we’ll see what we can do about it.”\textsuperscript{327} Sister’s less-than-subtle reference to Thomas’s potential castration is disturbing in and of itself.

The dubious nature of Sister’s intentions is further echoed through the staging of the physical interactions between Sister and her student. As Frank Rich notes, “the nun also tends to fondle little Thomas just a shade too playfully,”\textsuperscript{328} and in doing so, their interactions inevitably raise questions with regards to the nature of Sister’s interest in her student. Confronted by both verbal accusations of abuse as well as witnessing potentially questionable physical interactions between Sister Mary Ignatius, the production thus confronts not only the potential violence of


\textsuperscript{327} Ibid.

Sister Mary Ignatius’s words, but also the potential physical abuse she directed to her students. Sister Mary Ignatius’s credibility is further compromised as a result of the increased examples of immortality that it would seem she participated in despite her alleged embrace of morality.

Until the end of the play, Durang’s reproach for church teachings is predominantly delivered verbally. With the end of the production, however, the attack on the visible representatives of the Church takes on a more literal form. At the climax of the play, Diane pulls out a gun and threatens to kill Sister, an act which her four classmates did not anticipate. Even in this final moment, however, as she is physically under attack, Sister Mary Ignatius remains in control. Sister pulls out a gun from under her habit and levies it at Diane saying, “I was wrong. I admit it. I’m sorry. I thought everything made sense, but I didn’t understand things properly. There’s nothing I can say to make it up to you but… LOOK OUT… Ta-da! For those non-Catholics present, murder is allowable in self-defense. One doesn’t even have to tell it in confession.” She then pulls the trigger killing Diane. Once again, Sister calls upon Church teachings to justify the violence that she literally perpetrates, ending the life of her former student. Sister justifies her actions in self-defense. While the very notion that she is carrying a gun beneath her habit and her willingness to use the gun raise questions as to whether or not Sister’s actions were justified, Sister’s use of Church teaching is leveraged presumably to leave no doubt that her actions are moral sound. The chaos left as a result of her words and actions, however, does little to put the audience at ease with Sister’s so-called performance of morality.

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330 Ibid.
Moreover, in the event that members of the audience continue to afford Sister any credibility, the production continues to undermine any feasible defense of her actions. Instead of the play ending, the gun quickly transitions as the scene progresses from a weapon for self-defense into a tool for violence as Sister re-envisions the use of the gun according to Church teachings. The remaining students offer to clean up Diane’s body, claiming to be unaware that Diane planned to try to kill Sister. Sister then turns the gun towards Gary, asking if he still confesses his relationship in confession. During their conversation, Sister Mary Ignatius learns that Gary went to confession that morning, and according to his testimony, he has not sinned since. Sister then points the gun at Gary and kills him, saying, “I’ve sent him to heaven!”331 She notes while this is not technically acceptable, she is doing it to save his soul. At this point, Sister Mary Ignatius’s moral authority is undermined once and for all. Any credibility that she started with has been stripped from her throughout the performance as she blatantly resorts to sheer violence without any sign of remorse in order to allegedly save her students. She leverages her understanding of Catholicism and her position as a moral authority in order to participate in unmitigated violence. Neither her words nor her actions point to any hope that the Catholic teachings that she claims to profess provide the answers bringing about a better world. Instead, her teachings bring about literal chaos and destruction.

Ironically, however, the production ends with no sign of justice for Sister. The teachings of the Catholic Church, as she frames them, remain untouched within the world of the play despite her actions. Instead, the play ends with Sister sitting asleep waiting for the bodies to be cleaned up. Meanwhile, little Timothy recites the Church teachings from Sister’s lap. The production in

331 Ibid 32.
this moment provides a strong critique of the Church. It points to how Church teachings are leveraged within the institution of the Church in order to perpetuate a cycle of violence, a cycle which is furthered by the words and actions of a human institution devoid of any proof for its teachings.

5.2 Case Study: *Doubt* (2004)

John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt*, directed by Doug Hughes, achieved considerable success during its New York run. *Doubt* debuted on Broadway on March 31, 2005 at the Walter Kerr Theatre. *Doubt* ran for a total of 525 performances, and it was the top-grossing non-musical production on Broadway in the 2005 season. The production was well received in New York; it was nominated for eight Tony awards, winning four of them, including Best Play. Moreover, a year after its debut, *Doubt* received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, and the Theatre World Award. In the 2007-2008 theatre season, the play topped the list for most frequently performed contemporary American productions. The play returns to the parochial parish and school setting in 1964 to explore the dynamics of the institutional practices of the Catholic Church. Dedicated to the Catholic nuns who have generously

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served the church in various capacities, the play explores the intricacies of the hierarchical relationships between humans in the institutional church.

*Doubt* is set in St. Nicholas Catholic Church and school in the Bronx. The play follows the story of three primary characters: Sister Aloysius (Cherry Jones), Sister James (Heather Goldenhersh), and Father Flynn (Brian F. O’Byrne). The play takes place in a school and parish setting, but the students are never seen although the sound of boys talking can be heard throughout the production. *Doubt* explores the institutional hierarchical settings of the Catholic Church. The play returns to 1964 to tell the story of the dogmatic principal of St. Nicholas, a Catholic school located in the Bronx. The principal, Sister Aloysius, suspects that the pastor of her parish, Father Flynn, may have abused one of her newest students, and she seeks to investigate Father Flynn’s culpability.

At the beginning of the play, Sister Aloysius suggests that she has concerns to the much younger teacher, Sister James, regarding the pastor, Father Flynn’s, interactions with one of the male students. Throughout the play, Sister James struggles to determine whether she thinks that Father Flynn is capable of such act while also struggling to reconcile her gentler approach to teaching with the strict and didactic strictures set forth by Sister Aloysius. Meanwhile, unable to keep her suspicions to herself, Sister Aloysius accuses Father Flynn of abusing a student, Donald Mueller, a new student at St. Nicholas and the first black student at the school. He refutes her claims, arguing that they are circumstantial. He provides a rebuttal, but his argument does not provide firm proof of innocence, leaving the encounter up to the interpretation of the audience. Sister later tells Father Flynn that she called a nun at his former parish to confirm why he left, a phone call that she later admits to Sister James that she fabricated. In response, Father Flynn requests to leave his position at the school. In turn, he is promoted by the bishop and moved to
another parish that also has a school. The play ends with no clear conclusion as to Father Flynn’s culpability.

The play cultivates a dramaturgy of presence that begins by destabilizing ideas of presence within Catholicism and then increasingly absents divine presence from the production. In that the play takes place in a parish setting and each of the primary characters has a religious vocation, the premise of the play allows for the audience to assume that the characters have relationships with the divine. Furthermore, the production opens with the priest delivering a homily to an assumed audience; this opening sequence suggests that, at least Fr. Flynn, is actively engaged in practicing his faith. Moreover, the audience’s first glimpse of the sisters is in the principal’s office at a Catholic school, further establishing their characters as actively involved in the work of the Church, presumably as a result of their faith. However, although the opening sequence suggests that Father Flynn practices his faith, the words of his homily begin to destabilize any presumption that he is stable in his faith. Moreover, although the sisters are first seen in a Catholic school, their opening conversation bears little relevance to religious preoccupations, suggesting that religious belief may not be the top priority within the institution of the school. As the production progresses, the practice of religious belief in presence remains predominantly absent from the performances of both Fr. Flynn and Sr. Aloysius. Instead, by the end of the play, both Fr. Flynn and Sr. Aloysius’s relationships with Catholicism are reflected predominantly in light of how they are positioned within the institution of the church. Thus, while the production acknowledges that the practice of Catholicism is largely associated with belief in things which cannot be seen, it destabilizes and absents the practice of this belief in order to focus on the institutional nature of the Catholic Church.
The production of *Doubt* responds to two historical moments within the Catholic Church. First, through the setting of the play, the play is interested in exploring the ways in which Catholic practice manifested during Vatican II. It returns to the Catholic school parish in New York to consider the ways in which men and women were allowed differing amounts of power as a result of the gender dynamics within the church. However, like *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*, the play also draws attention to the longer history of the Catholic Church through its performance in the current moment. Through the performance of *Doubt* in 2005, the production seeks to draw attention in the implications of the hierarchical structure of the church that were in place during the Second Vatican Council but that continue to remain within the church through the current moment of the production of the play.

While the production itself does not address recent church history, the way that it engages with accusations pertaining to sexual abuse within the church encourages the audience to think about the relationship between the past and present of the institutional Church through the performance of *Doubt* in the moment of performance. The New York City debut of *Doubt* followed the Catholic Church making national headlines as a result of the breaking news of a sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic Church. *Doubt* was a timely addition to the Broadway stage in 2005, debuting three years after the Boston Globe drew attention to the sexual abuse scandal in the Archdiocese of Boston that broke through articles published in *The Boston Globe* in 2002. The 2005 production of the play reminded the audiences of the ongoing ramifications of the ways in which the hierarchical structure of the church functioned.

The overlap between the performance of the past of the Catholic Church and the national dialogue surrounding the Catholic Church in the current moment of its production allowed the production to participate in considering the longer history of institutional issues within the
hierarchy. By returning to the Catholic school classroom in the 1960s, the play considers how the Church historically sought to change and whether or not those changes ever came into effect. With Vatican II, the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church was allegedly supposed to allow for a more democratic structuring within the institution. In *In Search of American Catholicism*, Jay Dolan proposes that although prior to Vatican II, the American Catholic Church was extremely hierarchical in nature, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church moved towards a more democratic form of parish governance in response to Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*. He suggests that post-Vatican II, although the American Catholic Church did not necessarily embrace an outright democracy, it melded the democratic impulse of the United States with the Catholic church by including the laity on church governance boards as consults, suggesting that their position on these boards was deemed as *consultative*, a term that Dolan suggests points towards an embrace of democracy within the American Catholic Church post-Vatican II. Dolan thus suggests that post-Vatican II, American Catholicism was moving towards an inclusion of laity within church decisions. In light of questions surrounding the hierarchy of the Catholic Church during this time period, the play thus first raises questions with regards to whether or not those changes indeed took place or whether the church continues to operate within a dysfunctional system.

Moreover, the play explores the ramifications of that system. In a post-script, Jay Dolan acknowledges that after he finished working on his book, the 2001 sex abuse scandal broke out in the United States, compromising the credibility of the church hierarchy. With the 2001 crisis and, again with the 2018 Grand Jury Report in Pennsylvania, the legitimacy and efficacy attributed


335 Ibid.
to the hierarchy of the institutional Catholic Church once again experienced an extreme onslaught of public scrutiny within the practice of American Catholicism, in addition to already existing questions regarding its legitimacy. The performance of *Doubt* in 2005 also raises questions with regards to when and how sexual abuse was enabled within the Catholic Church and over a period of time as a result of the structures implemented within the church.

The play begins with a performance of part of the Mass, the practice within the Catholic Church that is most closely associated with performances of presence. Nonetheless, although the performance of the Mass is a celebration of presence and the certainty of God’s presence in Catholic tradition, Fr. Flynn focuses his homily on what it means to be uncertain of God’s presence. In production, Fr. Flynn stands center-stage in front of a blue-stained glass window. No other actors are onstage. Rather, he delivers his homily as a monologue to the audience. The staging invites the audience to actively engage with the world of the play, calling the audience to function as congregants within the world of the play and join Father Flynn in his reflection.

In his homily, Fr. Flynn asks his congregants to reflect on the relationship between doubt and belief in divine presence. He tells the story of a sailor, lost at sea, who gets a quick glimpse of the stars, before losing sight of them. Nonetheless, he orients his course according to what he thought he saw. Flynn closes his homily observing that, “Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.”

His homily serves as a metaphor for belief in God. It suggests that one can enter a relationship

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with divine presence in good faith, but lose all sight of it, raising questions as to whether it ever existed. Nonetheless, that presence can continue to be a guiding force in one’s life despite its absence. Father Flynn further notes that when loses sight of these guiding forces, it is easy to enter a state of doubt. He observes, however, that even when you enter into a state of doubt there are likely other people who are experiencing this same fate, and thus, people are never actually alone even when they doubt the presence of presumed guiding figures.

Flynn’s opening monologue thus begins to destabilize assumptions of what it means to live in relationship to an assumption of divine presence in that he uses the Mass, a celebration of presence, to ask his parishioners to consider how one navigates when presence is seemingly inaccessible to them. He suggests that guiding forces may absent themselves from a person’s life, and yet one may still orient his life towards a goal that has been established as a result of his original relationship to presence. Moreover, Flynn, suggests that when doubts in presence occur, communities can be reconfigured as a result of their shared doubts in the possibility of presence rather than their confirmed belief in presence. Flynn’s opening monologue thus reconfigures doubt in presence, rather than steadfast belief in presence, as the dark matter that can guide the progress of one’s faith and bind communities together. In this case, the world of faith that Flynn proposes in his homily is not one which takes presence for granted. Instead, it assumes that presence is increasingly out of the reach of the believer. Nonetheless, this vision of a doubting commune continues to be informed by presence insofar as the community is encouraged to continue to orient itself towards presence regardless of its seeming absence. Accordingly, the opening of the production begins by drawing attention to the tensions between a ritual that celebrates presence and the reality that presence is not always apparent to those who claim to have experienced it. Furthermore, it highlights the possibility that absence of proof of presence can nonetheless drive
communities of faith together to strive for answers. Accordingly, the opening sequence of the production allows the audience to reimagine the Catholic faith, not only as a celebration of presence, but as a striving to discern presence even when it is seemingly absent. By beginning the production by encouraging the audience, who filled the space of Flynn’s parishioners, to question a primary tenet of the Catholic Church, the production sets a stage for the audience to go forth and question other elements of Church practice and teaching, united in Doubt.

As the production progresses, it increasingly focuses on the institutional nature of the Catholic Church. The setting of the play switches after the opening monologue from the inside of the church building to the school. The play only returns to the setting of the physical church building one more time during the play, once again for a homily. As the focus of the play shifts to the school setting, the play increasingly begins to focus on the institutional nature of Catholicism rather than the theological tenets of the Catholicism. Whereas the opening monologue reflects on the role of presence in religious practice the rest of the play largely reflects on the role of the hierarchical dynamics within the Church teaching. These dynamics are explored in production by the performance of Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn as they navigate their respective roles within the school community.

As the play begins a nuanced exploration of the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church as an institution, the role of religious belief in presence becomes absented within the play in order to focus on the human side of the Church. With his monologue, Father Flynn establishes that definitive knowledge of presence is intrinsic in guiding the directing of a community of believers. As the show progresses, the performance continues to minimalize the role of presence within the broader scope of the Catholic community as represented through the school setting. The first introduction to the Catholic school within the performance features Sister Aloysius and Sister
James discussing the school’s curriculum. Sister Aloysius, who drives the discussion, is, at best, minimally interested in the theological ramifications of the students’ education. She does remind Sister James that her role as a teacher is to serve as a “fierce moral guardian,” which according to Sister Aloysius is someone who is not “excessively innocent” so as to avoid being “easily duped” by students.\footnote{John Patrick Shanley, \textit{Doubt: A Parable}, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2004), 18.} However, Sister Aloysius does not provide significant detail as to what that looks like. Instead, Sister Aloysius’s concerns as a Catholic educator do not have a clear relationship to the role of faith within the Catholic school setting. Instead, she is invested in the problems with ballpoint pens, over-emphasizing history, and the performance of individual students.\footnote{John Patrick Shanley, \textit{Doubt: A Parable}, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2004), 15-16.} As the play progresses, Sister Aloysius’s concerns continue to reflect, at most, a minimal concern with presence, if any.

Whereas Father Flynn begins the play by allowing for doubt in presence, Sister Aloysius does little to actually acknowledge presence throughout the performance. Although Sister wears the garb of a nun and serves as a principal of a Catholic school, suggesting that she believes in the tenets of the Catholic faith, her performance throughout the production does little to suggest that she ever engages in a relationship with presence. In her analysis of the film of \textit{Doubt} Maureen Sabine observes that the play “gives no indication that Sister Aloysius ever had a religious calling but instead focuses on her political contestation of priestly power and higher authority.”\footnote{Maureen Sabine, \textit{Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Post-War Anglo-American Film}, (Fordham University Press, 2013), 295.} Sabine’s analysis of Sister Aloysius’s performance in the film resonates with the New York production of the \textit{Doubt} in that Sister’s relationship with the divine is also minimalized in
production, almost to the point of nonexistent. Sabine further argues that Sister Aloysius gives voice to women who entered the convent, because it provided an unparalleled career options with regards to upwards economic and career growth in comparison to the options provided to women outside the Church rather than entering for spiritual reasons.\textsuperscript{341} Sabine’s assertion bears merit in light of the institutional focus of the production. Even more so than Fr. Flynn, Sister Aloysius’s relationship to the Church is constructed throughout the performance in light of how she functions within the institution. As she seeks to assert her voice as a woman within the institution, Sister Aloysius’s performance suggests that her primary concern as principal of the school is in maintaining her role as the primary authority in the school at all costs.

The play specifically draws attention to discrepancies between the treatment of men and women by the hierarchy of the church as well as the hierarchy’s potential complicity in covering up abuses within the church. This becomes apparent when Sister Aloysius first brings concerns regarding Father Flynn’s behaviors to Sister James and claims that, “Here there’s no men I can go to, and men run everything.”\textsuperscript{342} In the Broadway production, Fr. Flynn’s first encounter with Sister Aloysius immediately signals the ways in which the performance will construct the relationship between men and women religious in the world of the play. At their first meeting in Sister’s office, Father waits outside the door of the office as a matter of propriety until Sister James arrives to observe the meeting. Sister Aloysius’s office is stark; it contains a desk, a bookcase, a small table with a typewriter, and two chairs. The only ornamentation in the room, is a single picture of the pope that is situated above the bookcase; although unassuming the single picture serves as a subtle

\textsuperscript{341} Ibid.

reminder of the hierarchical structure of the church. The most prominent piece of furniture in the room is the desk, which is up center on stage right. One of the chairs is directly behind the desk. The other chair is downstage left. Although the office belongs to Sister Aloysius, upon her ushering him into the office, he heads directly to the desk and sits behind the desk with no invitation. Meanwhile, Sister James takes the chair down left. This blocking establishes Fr. Flynn’s position within the parish society. His first entrance immediately signals to the power dynamics between the priest and women religious. Although Sister Aloysius is the principal of the school, Father Flynn, as pastor of the parish, warrants the place of authority in the room without any discussion.\footnote{John Patrick Shanley, \textit{Doubt}, Live Theatre Performance, Directed by Doug Hughes, 2005 New York: Theatre on Film and Tape Archives, Video recording.}

The production calls upon similar blocking at Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius next meeting in her office during which Sister accuses Fr. Flynn of inappropriate behavior with the students, noting that he touched the wrist of one of the boys before school that morning. As Sister unleashes her accusations, she calls Fr. Flynn’s past experiences in Catholic school settings into question, saying she knows he has changed schools three times in the past five years, drawing attention to the unusual frequency with which the pastor seems to have moved. She further adds that she called Flynn’s former school. When she claims to have talked to a nun rather than the pastor of the parish, Fr. Flynn reprimands her, telling her that that is not how things are done.\footnote{John Patrick Shanley, \textit{Doubt: A Parable}, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2004), 48.}

On a surface-level, the circumstances raise questions. Why did Fr. Flynn move so often? Was the bishop trying to cover up past abuses? Moreover, Fr. Flynn’s reprimands draw attention once again to the relationship between men and woman religious within the church. Perhaps there is an institutional reason for such procedures, but he does not give one. Thus, his quick response begs
the question of why it matters that the pastor be contacted rather than the nun. Does Flynn worry the nun knows something? Is the pastor complicit in the coverups? Or, is Flynn merely a stickler for following protocol? The performance provides little insight into the answer to this question, but Fr. Flynn’s generally easygoing demeanor does little to support the latter option.

Unsettled by Sister’s claims, the priest goes to her desk where he sits, takes out a piece of paper and pen from within the desk and begins writing. It is unclear at the time what he is writing down, but it would seem that he is taking note of Sister’s claims. His actions not only once again suggest that he has the right to sit in the place of authority, but they further suggest that he believes it his right to enter her desk and access her materials without permission. Although Sister questions what he is writing, she does not challenge his right to sit in her desk or access her office supplies. Once again, despite the scandal of the accusations leveraged against him, the blocking highlights the underlying dynamics of the institutional structures that guide the relationship between Fr. Flynn and Sister Aloysius.345

The severity of Sister Aloysius’s accusations still do not have the power to overturn the power dynamics of the relationship or even put the two on equal footing. The room continues to be owned by the institutional church and remains subject to the hierarchical structure that informs that. Until there is proof of the accusations (if such proof can even be ascertained), the power remains unbalanced, leaning in the favor of the priest as the head of the parish.346 Even when Sister later claims to have called Fr. Flynn’s former parish, she is reprimanded before she can even make her case, because she claims she spoke to an old nun there. Before she can offer further explanation,

345 John Patrick Shanley, Doubt, Live Theatre Performance, Directed by Doug Hughes, 2005 New York: Theatre on Film and Tape Archives, Video recording.

346 Ibid.
Fr. Flynn down her argument, saying that she should talked to the pastor. Thus, it remains unclear whether, even with proof, Sister would have the power to see justice come to fruition in this situation.

The institutional dilemmas at play within the situation are brought to a head when Sister Aloysius tells Sister James that, without explanation, the bishop moved Fr. Flynn to another parish into a position that was ultimately a promotion. This move raises questions as to the bishop’s motivations. Was he trying to free Fr. Flynn from Sister’s scrutiny? Or was he perhaps complicit in a history of covering up Fr. Flynn’s actions. In either case, the lack of transparency within the move is an affront to Sister Aloysius’s seemingly well-intentioned, if harsh, good intentions to keep her students safe at all costs. Sister Aloysius further admits to Sister James that the only person within the male hierarchy of the church she told of her concerns is Monsignor Benedict. However, she did not express her concerns until after Fr. Flynn left her parish. Moreover, Sister Aloysius admits to Sister James that Msgr. Benedict dismissed her claims.

The play concludes, coming full circle to a discussion of doubt, and once again drawing attention to the possibility absence of presence within the world of the play. The play ends with Sister saying, “I have doubts! I have such doubts!”347 The utterance of this line in the final moment of the play reminds the audience that Sister’s entire world is held together in this moment by doubt. However, it is unclear what her doubt is in. In that her words echo Father Flynn’s opening monologue, they suggest that she too struggles to believe in presence. However, given that she utters the words after discovering that Father Flynn has been moved to a new parish with a school, it is possible her expression of doubt could also pertain to her own presumptions regarding Father

Flynn or doubts pertaining to Father Flynn’s claimed innocence. Regardless of what her final utterances reference, the end of the production portrays Sister Aloysius in a world that is framed by doubts rather than undisputable beliefs. Her world is framed by a lack— a lack of proof, a lack of power, a lack of a guiding force. She has no proof to support her own claims nor divine insight to comfort her with regards to the choices she made regarding Fr. Flynn. She has been given nothing that would allow her to operate confidently within the world she inhabits.

Is there any presence— human or divine— that can offer Sister the proof that she made the right choice? Not until after Father Flynn left did Sister Aloysius raise her concerns to a male member of the church. However, Monsignor Benedict’s denial of her claims, leaves the audience to face the dilemmas of the situation once more. Did Monsignor Benedict dismiss Sister’s claims because he did not believe Father Flynn was capable of abuse? Did he dismiss them, because she is a woman? Or is Sister Aloysius overly strict and paranoid? As a woman, the male members of the church will not respond to Sister’s questions nor concerns. Moreover, there is no divine intervention to give meaning to her experience.

The production destabilizes the possibility of presence in the Catholic world of the play insofar as presence is presumed given the setting, but there is little evidence that any divine presence is at work. Moreover, the opening monologue encourages audiences to consider what it means to be a community of believers where beliefs that were held to be true are shadowed by doubts. By destabilizing and absenting presence throughout the play, the production focuses on the institutional church and draws attention to how the voices of women religious were valued as a result of the systems of power within the institutional hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. The lack of definitive proof that frames Sister’s experience within the world of the Catholic Church draws attention to the inequities within the institutional church as well as raise
questions with regards to the ways that they have the potential to enable abuses. The performance provides no answers, leaving the audience to grapple with whether Sister’s final doubts are personal or more broadly warranted as a result of institutional structures. The absences within the play allow the audience to question the problems that arise within a structure that privileges certain voices.

5.3 Case Study: *Corpus Christi* (1998)

Unlike the first two plays in this chapter, Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* does not seek to create a play that clearly represents Roman Catholicism. Nonetheless, narratives surrounding the 1998 production of *Corpus Christi* inevitably present the play within the context of its relationship to the Catholic Church. McNally, a self-proclaimed ex-Catholic, actively worked to create a story that is in opposition to Catholicism, as well as other sectors of Christianity that uphold strict moralistic interpretations of the Gospel that reject the practice of homosexual activity. In his preface to the play, McNally acknowledges that his play sought to reframe divinity to create the story of a savior-figure that was more inclusive than the God of the Roman Catholic Church. In order to expand his interpretation of Christianity, McNally turns to the general Gospel narrative and broadly reimagines the story to allow for the inclusion of the gay community within it. In doing so, he seeks to subvert traditional Catholic interpretations of the Gospel, placing gay men at the center of the narrative.

Corpus Christi portrays the story of a young man, Joshua, who is born to his mother, Mary, and stepfather, Joseph in a motel in Corpus Christi, Texas. Like the biblical Jesus, Joshua is described as the Son of God, and many events in his life loosely parallel Jesus’s experiences in the Gospel narrative. Corpus Christi, however, reframes these experiences to resonate with a contemporary setting. The play not only portrays Joshua’s early life and later life, but unlike the biblical narratives, it explores his teenage years. Joshua’s apostles include figures such as a lawyer, an actor, and a hairdresser. However, the primary innovation in Corpus Christi rests in the fact that Joshua, as well as many of his apostles, is gay. Moreover, it is his sexuality rather than his radical religious practices that cause Pontius Pilate to declare him, “King of the Queers,” and condemn him to be crucified. I include Corpus Christi in my project not because of how it seeks to represent Catholicism, but rather to consider how the play subverts Catholic ideas of the divine through a loose re-telling of the Gospel story in order to challenge Catholicism. Given the significant response to the play from within Catholic communities, Corpus Christi offers an opportunity to consider how the performance of divinity in production destabilizes Catholic ideas of presence to respond to Catholic teachings and practice. In this case study, I thus consider how McNally’s reframing of the Gospel is performed through a combination of destabilizing and erasing the divinity that is attributed to Jesus within Catholic tradition.

Given the impetus behind creating Corpus Christi, McNally’s play was inevitably at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church from its inception in that Catholicism upholds the idea that marriage can solely take place between a man and a woman and argues that homosexual activity is sinful. Nonetheless, McNally says that his play was “never intended to shock people”

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although he acknowledges that it would have been naïve to assume that his play would come under no scrutiny.\textsuperscript{350} Not only did the play come under scrutiny, but complaints began before it was ever performed. Controversy over \textit{Corpus Christi} erupted on May 1, 1998 when an article was first printed in the \textit{New York Post} that began to hint at the content of the play. The \textit{Post} article wrote that the play contained a Christ-like figure who discussed having sex with his apostles.\textsuperscript{351}

After the article was published, the Catholic League for Religious and Civic Rights, led by President William Donohue, began protesting the play. The Catholic League has a long history of protesting allegedly sacrilegious art. Donohue clarified that with regards to \textit{Corpus Christi}, their contention with the play was not the presentation of homosexuality in and of itself. Rather, he observed that, “(They) would not have gotten involved if it were not for the religious message there, exploiting a sacred religious figure.”\textsuperscript{352} Nonetheless, given the purported controversial subject matter of the play that was a topic of debate both in religious and secular spheres during this time period, the efforts of the League gained national media attention. Accordingly, the play was permanently positioned as being in opposition to the Catholic Church in the public imagination. The initial outcry over the play eventually developed into protests led by a wide variety of people both against and in support of the production.

At the time the protests began, neither McNally nor the theatre disclosed any information regarding the actual content of the production nor did the Catholic League have access to a script. Nonetheless, the League launched a campaign against the production. They began first, by voicing


\textsuperscript{352} Ibid.
their objections to the theatre and McNally, asking McNally to consider altering his script. When this failed, the League began to seek media attention to raise awareness of the issue. They also wrote to federal, state, and local officials who oversaw arts funding asking them to reconsider any funding given to the Manhattan Theatre Club.\textsuperscript{353} Although the League asked McNally and the theatre to reconsider producing the production, however, Donohue acknowledged that he would never actually advocate for government censorship of the play nor would he advocate for violence in an effort to stop the production.\textsuperscript{354}

The play was cancelled prior to its opening when Manhattan Theatre Club received anonymous threats to burn down the theatre and a Muslim fundamentalist group in London sent McNally death threats.\textsuperscript{355} However, the Manhattan theatre Club later reconsidered and decided to go forward with the production. When the play opened, 2,000 people protested outside the theatres, representing approximately 45 different religious groups.\textsuperscript{356} Protestors were not only Catholics, but also other sectors of Christianity as well other faith traditions such as Muslim.\textsuperscript{357}

While religious activists protested the play, artists and free speech activists largely stood in support of the play, invoking the First Amendment and arguing that McNally had the right to

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produce the play on the grounds of free speech.\textsuperscript{358} Playwrights such as Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein, David Henry Hwang, Edward Albee, and Athol Fugard joined with the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Coalition Against Censorship to defend the production. When the Manhattan Theatre first announced that they planned to cancel the production, Athol Fugard pulled the rights to his play, \textit{The Captain’s Tiger}, which was scheduled for production at MTC that season.\textsuperscript{359} Once the production opened it was performed as planned for a scheduled ten week run although it continued to receive backlash. Despite, or perhaps because of, the controversies surrounding the production, the run of the play was completely sold out.\textsuperscript{360} Interestingly, it got less than mediocre reviews from a significant number of critics who suggest that although the extent of excitement that the production warrants was related to the protests outside the door, but who observed that the production as a whole did not warrant significant notice. Notably, his work was criticized for being boring and depending on the protests for publicity. \textsuperscript{361}

Within \textit{Corpus Christi}, the divinity of the Christ-figure is destabilized in order to consider the role of homosexuality within a predominantly Christian culture. In his revision of the Gospel story, McNally consciously explores the tensions between history and fiction, testing the ramifications of creating a highly fictionalized iteration of a story that is considered to be, at least


to a certain degree, a historical narrative. He acknowledges that the play is a highly fictionalized representation of the Gospel stories, describing the play as told “in the theatrical tradition of medieval morality plays.” The play calls upon this tension between history and fiction to rethink assumptions made about historical fact within Christian history. McNally’s play consciously fictionalizes the Gospel stories in order to explore the ways in which humanity and divinity are positioned within Christian culture.

The play examines the relationship between humanity and divinity within Christian culture by destabilizing the Christ-figure’s divinity. It does so by elevating the humanity of the character, specifically by adapting and elevating the role of Joshua’s sexuality within the narrative. The dramaturgy of the production seeks to destabilize Catholic ideas of divinity insofar as elevating Joshua’s sexuality provides an antithesis of Christian and Catholic teachings which not only condemn homosexuality, but also minimalize Jesus’s sexuality within the narrative of his life. McNally does not erase Joshua’s divinity. Instead, his script reimagines the Gospel narratives to include moments that accentuate Joshua’s human and sexual nature. For example, McNally highlights Joshua’s teenage years, years of Jesus’s life that are not accounted for within the Christian Gospel. During these years, McNally emphasizes Joshua’s humanity by crafting scenes in which Joshua has his earliest sexual encounters. Thus, McNally adds stories to the Gospel narrative in order to further substantiate an interpretation of the Christ-figure that allows the audience to consider the relationship between sexuality and the Gospels. In doing so, McNally destabilizes the ways in which the Christ-figure has predominantly been associated with celibacy and chastity, challenging ideas of what it means to be divine.

Nonetheless, McNally maintains moments throughout the plot that continue to affirm more traditional ideas of divinity, such as portraying him as a character capable of performing miracles. In doing so, he reminds the audience that although his character deviates from traditional understandings of the Christ-figure, his characters also live in a world where presence can make itself manifest to those who both embrace their humanity and seek to live in relationship to presence. Through the reconfiguration of the Christ-figure, Corpus Christi explores the implications of elevating human sexuality within the broad framework of a Christian society. McNally’s primary critique of the Catholic Church was its treatment of homosexuality.\textsuperscript{363} In his treatment of the Gospels within the play, McNally sought to create a story that is more inclusive writing that, “I was trying to invite gay men and women back to the table of spirituality. We’ve been made to feel we are sinners and that we have no business in this story.”\textsuperscript{364} Thus, the play considers how homosexuality might be reconciled with the biblical narratives and with society more broadly.

Although the play reimagines traditional narratives of the Gospel, it nonetheless remains inevitably linked to Catholic and Christian tradition insofar as it pulls from biblical tradition. Theatre scholar, Thomas Fish deems the play a “radical biblical appropriation” in that, as he argues, the play seeks to reclaim the Gospel narrative for the gay community.\textsuperscript{365} He purports that

\textsuperscript{363} Although narratives of the productions opening are largely framed within the context of religious dispute, the play’s opening was also framed within the context of the larger national debates. At this point in the history of the United States, the Defense of Marriage Act, defining marriage between a man and a woman, had been signed into effect two years previously. Moreover, the week of the play’s opening was further colored by an event a second event that received national attention. On October 12, 1998, the death of 20 year-old Matthew Shepherd, a gay college student, was beaten and left to die on a fence in Laramie, Wyoming.


“appropriation acts as a form of violence because these discourses, part of our inherent power, structures, are thought to be owned. The biblical narratives “belong” to the church, despite any inherent instability that critical theorists posit.” Fish focuses on how McNally not only appropriates the biblical narrative, but how McNally’s appropriation is antithetical to the meaning of the biblical narrative as a result of his focus on gay men. Fish observes that, “McNally centers the passion narrative on the body of the gay male… The play claims a fixed identity for the Jesus-like character and his apostles; homosexuality is not presented as a phase, but as something inherent, static, and even something natural.”

Building upon Fish’s observations, I propose that McNally engages dramaturgical strategies that destabilize and, at times, erase the role of divinity within the narratives, in order to prioritize the characters’ sexuality. The play considers both the position of homosexuality in society at large as well as the position of homosexuality within Christian tradition. McNally transforms the story of the Gospels from a story of a divine figure who was persecuted for claiming to be the Son of God to a man- who may or may not be divine- who is ultimately killed as a result of his homosexuality. The reframing of the overall narrative destabilizes the role of divinity within the overall story leading from the birth of the Christ-figure to Crucifixion. At times in the story, McNally absents the role of divinity within the story in order to focus on how homosexuality is positioned within society at large. At other moments, McNally’s production recognizes divinity, although it destabilizes traditional notions of divinity within Christian society, in order to reimagine and reconsider the relationship between the gay community and divine presence.

366 Ibid 34.
367 Ibid.
The overarching narrative of the production rewrites the Gospel stories to provide a commentary on the ways in which homosexuality is received within society at large. The premise of *Corpus Christi* hearkens the general narrative of persecution displayed within the traditional Christian Gospels which tell the story of a Christ-figure, who is persecuted as a result of teaching and practicing a belief system that falls outside the norms of society. Similarly, the predominant narrative of *Corpus Christi* is broadly concerned with how the gay community is persecuted as a result of the teachings and practices that fall outside the norms of society during the time period during which the play was written. The overarching narrative of *Corpus Christi* erases the role of divinity within the broader story of persecution that is told through McNally’s appropriation of the biblical narratives. Although McNally’s Gospel story at times recognizes that the character of Joshua has divine characteristics, Joshua’s divinity is not intrinsic to the climax of the Gospel stories, the moment of Crucifixion. The Christian Gospels tell the story of a man who was crucified, because of his religious convictions and his claim to be the Son of God. In contrast, McNally’s Gospel tells the story of a man who was ultimately crucified as a result of his sexuality, condemned to die as King of the Queers.\(^{368}\)

The overarching framework of *Corpus Christi* re-imagines the passion of the Christ-figure within the narratives to highlight the story of a man condemned not for his religious beliefs, but rather his human passions. Within the 1998 production, he is adorned with a crown of thorns and wearing glittering red sequins and a flowing purple veil before he is brought to the cross and crucified for his sexuality. Interestingly, following the Crucifixion scene, McNally’s interpretation

\(^{368}\) Terrence McNally, *Corpus Christi*, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1999), 75.
of the Gospels ends with Judas’s suicide rather than the Resurrection.\textsuperscript{369} By ending the production, McNally chooses to end the play once more with a reflection on the fragile nature of human life rather than on the everlasting nature of divinity. Accordingly, the framework of the plot emphasizes the humanity of the characters within the story. Specifically, the overarching plot that traces the story of how Joshua navigates his personal sexuality thus erases the ultimate significance of divinity within the Gospels in order to highlight the persecution of the gay community within society more broadly. Whereas the Christian Gospels were shared with their audiences to consider how they might attain eternal life by following the example of the divine, McNally’s Gospel provides an overarching narrative that asks his audience to engage with the ways in which homosexuals are persecuted within society.

Although the play broadly speaks to persecution of the gay community within society at large, it also more specifically speaks to the relationship of the gay community to Catholic ideas of presence in smaller scenes throughout the play. The play establishes its relationship to Catholicism upon the first time that the audience encounters it. The title of the play, \textit{Corpus Christi}, which translates to “The Body of Christ,” sets up certain expectations for the audience before they even enter the theatre space. It suggests to those audience members familiar with the term that they should expect to engage with notions of the Body of Christ. Given that the term, “Corpus Christi,” derives specifically from Catholic tradition, the title of the play further establishes the performance as responding to Catholic ideas of presence. However, the opening of the 1998 production of \textit{Corpus Christi} immediately sets out to subvert any expectations that the production will attempt to perform an authentic representation of presence according to Catholic tradition. Instead the

\textsuperscript{369} Ibid, 80.
As the audience enters the space of the 1998 production of *Corpus Christi*, they are greeted by a stage, a single wooden platform, backed by an exposed black concrete wall. It does little to incur any sense of time or space. Thirteen men, dressed in white shirts and khakis, are already moving about the theatre space. The actors begin the production, performing as themselves rather than characters. The men engage in a round of spin-the-bottle. The winner steps forward to welcome the audience to the theatre and tells the audience that they are going to tell them a story that the audience already knows, but which is worth retelling. At the end of the opening monologue, the actor playing, John, begins the play by baptizing each of the actors, saying, “I bless you, (full name of the actor playing ANDREW). I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being… I christen you, Andrew.” As he baptizes each actor and welcomes them into their role in the story, he sprinkles them with water in keeping with a traditional baptismal ceremony. He then repeats the process for each of the actors playing a role in the production.

The opening monologue and baptismal ceremony immediately destabilize ideas of divine presence by emphasizing the significance of humanity within the production in two ways. First, the metatheatricality of the opening reminds the audience that they are seeing an imitation of the characters in the story rather than trying to incur a more authentic representation of presence. The opening monologue specifically tells the audience that they are seeing a story that is well-known.

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and has been repeated often.\textsuperscript{372} Moreover, the baptismal sequence reiterates that what is taking place onstage is being performed by actors by introducing each of the actors by name.\textsuperscript{373} As each character is called forward, he is baptized into the role of his character. Thus, from the outset of the production, the production engages a metatheatrical technique to remind the audience that what they are seeing is a human reenactment of a story that has religious components. The production therefore asks the audience to enter into an agreement with the actor and engage in the suspension of disbelief. Henry Bial points to the use of a similar technique in the performance of \textit{J.B.} in which the actors playing God and Satan put on masks throughout the performance in view of the audience. He proposes that the metatheatricality of this technique serves to continually remind the audience that the characters were configured as part of a performance rather than as an effort to realistically portray a divine presence.\textsuperscript{374} Similarly, in \textit{Corpus Christi}, the recitation of the monologue and the performance of the baptismal ceremony consciously informs the audience that the play is merely a performance and does not seek to cultivate any particular authentic representation of divinity onstage. Within \textit{Corpus Christi}, this technique further emphasizes the significance of human relationships within the production. The production invites the audience to enter a relationship of sorts with the actors, inviting the audience to recognize the humanity of the actors.

Moreover, the baptismal ceremony further seeks to undermine Catholic ideas of divine presence and emphasize the humanity with regards to how it subverts the ritual of Christian


\textsuperscript{373} Ibid 3.

\textsuperscript{374} Henry Bial, \textit{The Bible on Broadway}, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2015), 128.
baptism. In the Catholic Church as well as other Christian denominations, baptism depends upon the performance of the Trinitarian formula in which the individual is baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and thus recognizes that the individual is made in the image of the supernatural. In contrast, McNally subverts the traditional formula in his play, anointing the actors in their humanity and upholding their humanity as the pinnacle of their existence. This model presents an entire system that is directly in opposition to the Catholic idea of the relationship between the human and the divine. Rather, the Catholic Church teaches that, “The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness.” Through the baptismal formula within Catholicism, members of the Church are called to grow closer to the divine.

In contrast, the baptismal ceremony in *Corpus Christi* performs a ritual reminiscent of the Catholic baptismal ceremony. In keeping with the tradition presented within the Gospels, the apostle, John, performs the baptisms at the beginning of the play. As with Catholic tradition, John sprinkles the men with water and, as mentioned previously, he recites a formula that is vaguely reminiscent of the Catholic baptismal formula. Nonetheless, whereas the Catholic formula baptizes its entrants in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, McNally’s formula baptizes the apostles saying, “I recognize your divinity as a human being.” Although the baptismal rite within Christianity usually provides the recipients a model to which one should aspire to emulate, the formula used in the play subverts any such model. Rather, than being challenged to aspire to divinity through the rite of baptism, the apostles are being called to embrace a system that allows them to become more authentically human. One’s humanity is prioritized as the epitome of

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existence. Whereas Christianity and Catholicism ask their followers to aspire to conform to a particular idea of divinity, this baptismal ceremony begins the show by suggesting that humans in and of themselves are enough. They do not need to conform to be anything more than who they are.

This initial blessing establishes the framework which will later guide the apostles’ interactions with the Christ-figure, Joshua. Although Joshua demonstrates characteristics of divinity, the characters are not asked to aspire to emulate him in his divinity. Instead, McNally also further emphasizes Joshua’s humanity by focusing on his sexuality, and the apostles need only live in relationship with Joshua rather than emulate him. Accordingly, the performance of the baptismal ritual further destabilizes and subverts Catholic ideas of presence by using the baptismal ceremony to encourage Joshua’s followers to embrace their humanity in order to access the divine. As the play progresses, the apostles then live out their baptismal vows throughout the performance by fully embracing their human nature in front of Joshua. As I will address shortly, much of what McNally depicts with regards to the apostles is how they embrace their sexuality by engaging in homosexual relationships which Joshua condones. Accordingly, the opening of the production, sets the stage to reimagine how humanity and divinity are configured within Christian life in order to consider how the performance of one’s sexuality, specifically with regards to homosexuality, is situated within Christian life.

After the baptismal ceremony is performed on each of the apostles, it is performed on the character of Joshua, the Christ-figure within the play. Once again, John uses the same formula on Jesus that he used on the disciples. As was the case with the disciples, the character of Joshua is literally anointed in his humanity as John proclaims, “I bless you, (full name of the actor playing
JOSHUA). I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being."³⁷⁷ While the baptismal performance was already subverting Catholic traditions, this moment offers even more significance when applied to a divine figure. First, the baptismal rite once again reiterates the metatheatricality of the performance, reminding the audience that they are not watching presence manifest onstage, but rather the performance of a human actor. Moreover, once again, the production performs a baptismal formula that recognizes the expression of humanity as the ultimate expression of one’s divinity.

The performance further destabilizes notions of the divine presence within Catholic tradition by further emphasizing the humanity of the Christ-figure through the use of names in the baptismal ceremony. According to Catholic tradition, after Jesus’s baptism, a voice from the heavens declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”³⁷⁸ Within the Christian Gospels, this moment emphasizes the divine nature of the man, Jesus, who was baptized in that God recognizes Jesus and addresses him as his son. However, here, the script once again challenges how divinity is configured within Christianity by endowing the Christ-figure with two different names during the baptismal ceremony. After baptizing the character in the divinity of his humanity, John concludes the baptism saying, “I christen you, Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, son of God, son of man. I christen you Joshua.”³⁷⁹ Whereas the Christian Gospels, emphasize that the Christ-figure is the son of God, McNally’s production, seeks to place equal emphasis on his Christ-figure’s humanity and divinity by recognizing him as son of God and son of man and christening

him with two names- Joshua and Jesus. McNally uses the name of Jesus for his character to remind audiences of his divinity. Throughout the performance, this character is occasionally known as Jesus, particularly during moments when he manifests his divinity. Even in cases where he manifests his divinity, however, the character is sometimes referred to as Joshua. However, the name, Joshua, is most commonly incurred for this character and is used when the play focuses on the character’s human nature and his sexuality. By engaging two different names for the Christ figure, the production emphasizes both the human and divine nature of the Christ-figure. In that the production focuses predominantly on how the character manifests as Joshua, however, the production destabilizes and engages in the erasure of the overall significance of divinity of the Christ-figure in the Gospel narratives within the production.

The main character’s human identity as Joshua is predominantly established through the performance of Joshua’s sexuality. Joshua’s sexuality is recognized in performance vis-à-vis how he relates to other individuals within the world of the play. Here once again, the production subverts the Catholic teachings with which McNally was raised that purport that Jesus remained celibate throughout his life. Whereas within Christian tradition, Jesus develops his relationships with others through platonic friendships, McNally’s protagonist establishes his human identity through how he engages with the sexuality of those he encounters. Peter Wolfe describes the Christ-figure in the production of Corpus Christi writing that, “He keeps groping, and gets groped.”

Joshua’s sexuality is first introduced within the production when he attends his high school prom. At the dance, Joshua and one of his female classmates start to grope one another, but they

stop when Joshua seems uncomfortable with it although he claims to want to touch her.381 This scene introduces Joshua as a sexual being whose experiences growing up are shaped by his growing awareness of his sexuality. The same night as the prom Joshua and Judas meet and share a kiss.382 Before kissing for the second time, Joshua tells Judas that, “You can come no closer to Me than My body. Everything else you will never touch. Everything important is hidden from you.”383 This moment once again subverts ideas of the body of the Christ-figure according to the Catholic Church. According to the Catholic Church, followers of Jesus consume the Body of Christ in the Eucharist which allows Christ’s followers to enter into the “communion of divine life.”384 Thus, it is through the Body of Christ that followers are able to access Jesus’s divinity in Catholic tradition. In contrast, Joshua’s divinity is inaccessible to Judas. All that is physically accessible is his body which he makes available to Judas through their physical encounters. However, insofar as Joshua claims that only his body will be available to Judas, the moment prioritizes the ways in which sexuality functions within the world of the play to provide Judas the ultimate opportunity to know Joshua through the physical encounter of the body. Their evening ends with Joshua and Judas having sex.385 The action takes place offstage although it is accounted for within the

381 Terrence McNally, Corpus Christi, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1999), 36.
382 Ibid 38.
383 Ibid.
narration provided onstage.\textsuperscript{386} The narrated interaction between the two men invites the audience to consider the role of human sexuality within Christian tradition.

Joshua and Judas’s encounter is performed as the culmination of Joshua’s teenage years as it is the last moment in Joshua’s story before which he returns as a young man. Like Jesus in the Bible, Joshua goes through years of his life during which he is unaccounted. Within \textit{Corpus Christi}, Joshua’s teenage years culminate with the revelation that he is gay and that he has had a sexual relationship with Judas. The production thus constructs an image in which Joshua’s humanity rather than divinity is the epitome of his being. By adding this moment to the narrative, McNally’s play invites the audience to consider what is unknown about the story of the Gospels given that years of Jesus’s life is unaccounted for. His story challenges the audience to consider what is truly known about Jesus’s young adult years, specifically with regards to how he performed his humanity. Moreover, the play challenges the audiences to think about the ways in which the Christ-figure’s humanity impacts his public ministry.

When Joshua returns from his unaccounted travels, like Jesus in the Gospels, he begins to participate in a public ministry in which he calls upon the apostles to follow him, and he performs miracles. Nonetheless, the production engages dramaturgical strategies that recognize Joshua’s divinity while challenging the audience to reconsider the ways in which the gay community is incorporated within the Gospel narratives. Accordingly, within \textit{Corpus Christi}, McNally creates a variety of reimagined circumstances under which Joshua performed his divinity that predominantly reflect how he ministered to his gay apostles. For example, within the production, Joshua calls Philip to join him as one of his followers after Philip offers his services to Joshua as

\textsuperscript{386} Ibid.
a prostitute; Philip reveals that he is HIV positive, and Joshua heals him and welcomes him among his followers. 387 At another point in the play, Joshua officiates a wedding between James and Bartholomew. 388 When a priest questions his role in performing the wedding ceremony, Joshua strikes the priest. The performance of the wedding ceremony seeks to subvert traditional understandings of marriage within the Christian tradition. Moreover, Joshua’s physical response to the priest emphasizes his human nature insofar as his anger was a human response. Moreover, by physically punishing the priest for his remarks, the production thus uses the moment to draw attention to the ways in which religion is more broadly leveraged in order to attack gay marriage. Through Joshua’s performance of the wedding ceremony, the production asks the audience to consider how a Christ-like figure would treat the couple during this moment as well as how he would treat someone who opposed this. These miracles are predominantly framed in light of the different ways in which Joshua encourages his apostles to embrace their sexuality. Moreover, in keeping with McNally’s focus on emphasizing the humanity of those involved within the Gospel narratives, the miracles are specifically oriented towards uniting people on earth rather than drawing them closer to Heaven. The production thus destabilizes the traditional narrative of Jesus’s public ministry in order to consider what it might look like to live out a vision of the Christian Gospels that is more inclusive of the gay community.

*Corpus Christi* thus engages in a process of destabilizing and, at times, erasing the divinity associated with presence in order to challenge how homosexuality is engaged within Christian tradition as well as to more broadly consider how homosexuality is positioned within society.

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387 Ibid, 55.
388 Ibid, 62.
However, unlike the previous plays, this production does not engage these strategies evenly throughout the process. Instead, the production fluctuates between scenes that merely seek to destabilize divinity whereas others fully seek to erase any trace of divinity. The show hearkens Catholic ideas of presence specifically in order to reimagine the ways in which homosexuals might be better accepted by Catholic ideas of divinity within Christian tradition. However, *Corpus Christi* also specifically erases ideas of Catholic presence from the ultimate conflict within the show that drives the final persecution of the main character in order to use the story of the Gospels metaphorically to explore the persecution of societal outcasts. By engaging both strategies of destabilization and erasure, the play seeks to dually reflect on how the gay community is positioned within Christian culture as well as how it is positioned more broadly within society.

In conclusion, each production under investigation in this chapter calls upon dramaturgical strategies that destabilize and erase and/or absent presence in order to examine the ways in which Catholicism manifests without presence or to examine how ideas of presence might be differently construed. Accordingly these productions engage with the assumption that ideas of divine presence are intrinsic to the world of Catholicism. Each of the productions begins functioning with that assumption, but it proceeds to destabilize common conceptions pertaining to how presence manifests. In the first two case studies, the productions begin by destabilizing ideas of presence and then erasing and absenting presence from the world of the play in order to examine how Catholicism manifests apart from presence. In the last case study, the production begins by destabilizing Catholic ideas of presence in order to rethink how presence may more broadly respond to the needs of individuals whose needs are often overlooked within the generalized narrative of Christianity. Furthermore, the production eventually erases divinity from its narrative in order to consider how the story may also reflect on the role of these individuals more broadly,
not only on Christianity, but within society at large. Performances that destabilize and absent divinity from narratives of Catholicism suggest that although presence may be assumed within the Catholic world, Catholic teachings, practice, and culture are more broadly intertwined human politics. Removing or reevaluating the role of presence amidst the web of human and divine relationships that inform the Catholic world offers an opportunity to reexamine how humanity has coopted divine presence as an excuse to best suit its own purposes.
6.0 Interventions of Faith

As seen in the previous chapters, performances largely provide commentary on the practice of religious belief within the context of the religious culture. Nonetheless, plays about religion also have the potential explore conversations that reach beyond religious cultural traditions. The case studies in this chapter look to productions of James Berrigan, S.J.’s *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (2014), Katori Hall’s *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2014), and Bill Cain, S.J.’s *9 Circles* (2017). Although religious belief is central to the narratives these playwrights craft for the stage, they use religion to facilitate broader conversations regarding the religion and social justice issues that extend beyond the religious sphere.

Each of the playwrights in this chapter views his or her portrayal of Catholicism as an opportunity to address the ramifications of social issues that extend beyond the institution of the Catholic Church. For example, Daniel Berrigan S.J., whose play documents his experiences protesting the Vietnam drafts with fellow Catholic activists, noted that, “(*The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*) was not a matter merely of a record… This work had but one purpose… to wind the spring tighter.” He saw the play not only as an opportunity to record the work of Catholic activists, but also to draw further attention to his social justice initiatives. Katori Hall, who notedly wanted to draw attention to the ramifications of the Rwandan genocide, described her process saying, “I went (to Rwanda) with the goal to write about genocide, but where do you start? There are literally a million tales that need to be told. There had been several movies and plays that

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addressed a certain parenthesis in Rwanda history—those 100 days during the genocide. But I
wanted to address a different parenthesis, a different door. I did not want to enter the gates of
hell.” For Hall, the story of young Catholic visionaries who saw the Virgin Mary provided the
opportunity to portray the events surrounding the genocide without putting the bloodshed onstage.
Thus, Catholicism becomes both a subject within the play as well as an entry point into
conversations surrounding the genocide.

Similarly, Bill Cain, S.J.’s play, 9 Circles traces the journey of an American soldier who
committed a war crime during the Iraqi war. He purported that he did not see the play as an anti-
war play, but rather as a play that encouraged audiences to think about war from a different
perspective. For Cain, he wanted his play to encourage audiences to have empathy for those
who have been involved in war. He observed that, “There is a solution to war. The solution is
finding out who you yourself is. Once you discover yourself, you don’t see people as objects; you
see them as life yourselves. You have empathy… It isn’t about opposing, it’s about creating
something different… I have nothing against anti-war plays. I think there’s a certain amount of
violence in anti-war plays that fuels the flame. My goal in this play is to create empathy.” For
Cain, his play was a means of encouraging his audience to engage with the topic of war while also
providing a new approach into the subject matter, in this case, one centered around religious belief.

While Catholicism is intrinsic to the narratives of each play, it is not the sole focus of it. Instead,

390 “Katori Hall’s Raptures of the Spirit in ‘Our Lady of Kibeho’,” Interview by Lynn Nottage, American

391 Bill Cain, Interview with Sarah Saddler, “Bill Cain’s 9 Circles: Dramaturgically Re-evaluating an
American Understanding of the Military and Individualism,” 67.

392 Ibid.
Catholicism becomes a means that allows audiences to reconceive of their relationship with the social justice initiatives depicted in the production.

This chapter explores how three different dramaturgies of presence are used to intervene in public political affairs that extend beyond the church and that seek to intervene in social justice issues. The common dramaturgical strategy that unites these case studies is the way that each production engages with a particular event that is connected with Catholic history in order to draw attention to a social justice issue that reaches beyond the purview of the Church. Each of the histories is invested to various degrees with the role of Catholicism in interrupting and preventing innocent bloodshed as a result of unnecessary warfare. Each of these historical moments assumes the existence of presence within that moment and considers the ramifications of that historical moment in light of its relationship to presence. In each production, however, supernatural presence is configured differently. In *The Trial of Catonsville Nine* and *9 Circles*, supernatural presence is assumed within the world of the play, but does not physically manifest. In contrast, supernatural presence does manifest in *Our Lady of Kibeho*. Nonetheless, they all consider the ways in which the supernatural informs Catholic understandings of social justice and examine the ramifications of allowing the supernatural to intervene in tumultuous historical events.

Two of the three productions in this chapter debuted with pre-planned limited runs. Of the three, Berrigan’s *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* was the only one to try for a Broadway run. It debuted in California before making its way to the New York stage, premiering on Broadway on June 2, 1971 at the Lyceum Theatre where it ran for twenty-nine performances. Meanwhile, both Katori Hall’s and Bill Cain’s productions debuted much more recently as limited runs in their respective theatres. Hall’s *Our Lady of Kibeho* boasted a successful run at the Signature Theatre from October 24th through December 14th as part of Hall’s playwright residency at Signature.
Meanwhile, Jesuit priest, Bill Cain’s, *9 Circles* debuted Off-Broadway at the Sheen Center, an Off-Broadway theatre that is funded by the Catholic Archdiocese of New York City, where it ran for a limited run from February 21st through March 19, 2017.

These plays each arrived to the commercial stage under unique circumstances culturally and historically that aid them in making their Broadway debut. *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* debuted three years after the trial of the Nine, and it was performed while the Vietnam War was being fought. Although it has been produced since, the success of the production appears to rest on its performance during the time period on which it reflects. At the time it debuted, the Nine had been tried and jailed, but war protests continued and thus it continued to participate within the larger dialogues pertaining to anti-war protests in American history.

Meanwhile, both *Our Lady of Kibeho* and *9 Circles* also come to the commercial stage under unique circumstances. *Our Lady of Kibeho* arrived on the stages of New York as a result of Katori Hall’s already rising prominence on the stage. The work was well-received in New York, and it was nominated for a number of awards. Moreover, as I will note later, the play was widely noted for the fact that it was respectful of representations of the supernatural within the play. Nonetheless, the play comes as somewhat of a surprise among other representations of Catholicism on Broadway and Off-Broadway stages which until this time have largely focused on white demographics of Catholics. Hall’s role as the resident artist at the Signature positions her in a manner that allowed her to bring a narrative of African Catholicism to the stages of New York that are all too frequently absented. The success of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, however, will hopefully pave the way for other iterations of Catholicism representing more diverse demographics on the stages of New York.
Bill Cain’s *9 Circles* ran for a limited run at the Sheen Center. Given the play’s particular focus on redemption in the afterlife, the play is uniquely positioned to debut at the Sheen Center. The Sheen Center is a recent contribution to the New York Arts scene. It opened in 2014 as “a project of the Archdiocese of New York City.” The Archdiocese of New York has a history of supporting theatre artists, particularly though St. Malachy’s, the actor’s chapel that both ministers to artists and hosts free staged readings of productions. However, the Sheen Center is the first, and currently only, commercial theatrical space hosted by the Archdiocese in New York City. The theatre is open to Catholic and non-Catholic productions, and it hopes to foster broad dialogues regarding culture and art. One of its guiding principles, however, is that a play cannot openly mock religious beliefs of any affiliation. Although the space unquestionably caters to both secular and religious patrons, it can also be assumed that people who attend the Sheen are aware of the mission of the company and the types of works that it seeks to cultivate. Cain’s play, which presumes a Catholic understanding of the supernatural in order to explore the Iraqi War, coincides with both ongoing discussions regarding American intervention in Iraq and the presence of a Catholic theatre space in New York City. Thus, the production makes its debut on New York stages in a time and space that speaks to the particular issues with which the play grapples. Accordingly, productions engaging dramaturgies of presence to reflect on social justice issues on the commercial stage are largely reflective of the historical and cultural time periods that they explore.


6.1 Case Study: *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1971)

On May 17, 1968, nine Catholic Vietnam draft protesters entered a draft board office in Catonsville, Maryland and took possession of 378 draft files. The protestors took the files outside and burned them with homemade napalm while praying an “Our Father.” Meanwhile, at the invitation of the protestors, a cameraman stood nearby capturing the actions of the protestors as they burned the files and waited the inevitable arrival of the police. The nine had alerted the cameraman to their actions before entering the draft office to ensure coverage of their protests. As expected, the police came and arrested the nine for intentionally tampering with government property. At the time of their arrest, the protestors proclaimed that “(they) speak in the name of Catholicism and Christianity.” As a result of their declaration, they positioned their actions not only as representative of the broader efforts to resist the war, but also as specifically representative of their religious beliefs. The Catonsville Nine, as they came to be known, were put on trial October 5-9, 1968, in a highly publicized venture, in a Baltimore Federal Court where they were all found guilty of destruction of U.S property, destruction of Selective Service records, and interference with the Selective Service Act of 1967.

After the defendants were sentenced, one of the defendants, Daniel Berrigan, S.J., went on the run and eluded the police for four months. While on the run, Daniel Berrigan continued his anti-war resistance efforts, and he continued to garner media coverage of the group’s resistance

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efforts. He continued to write for newspapers and give interviews on radio and tv that drew attention to the Catonsville Nine’s mission. Moreover, during this time, Berrigan developed the script for The Trial of the Catonsville Nine, chronicling the trial of the nine activists, using over 1200 pages of court documents to craft his narrative. Like Berrigan’s newspaper articles and interviews, Berrigan’s script exemplified yet another example of his attempt to make his efforts accessible to the general public by using a public performance form. Berrigan was captured shortly after the script’s publication, but playwright, Saul Levitt, continued to develop Berrigan’s script after his arrest, preparing it for its theatrical debut while Berrigan served his sentence in prison. The play debuted in California before making its way to the New York stage, premiering on Broadway on June 2, 1971 at the Lyceum Theatre.

In the introduction to his script, Daniel Berrigan writes of it that, “This work had but one purpose… to wind the spring tighter.” In doing so, he suggests that he sees the docudrama not as historical documentation, but also as part of the continuing efforts of the Catonsville Nine. For Berrigan, the script is not only documenting a past effort, but a continual reminder of ongoing resistance efforts. At the time of the play’s debut, seven of the nine defendants, including Berrigan, were serving time for their crimes; one member of the group had passed away in a car crash prior to his incarceration and another remained on the run. Although the group had been dismantled, the draft continued, and the play served as a reminder of the fact that the defendants continued to serve out their sentences as the war carried on.


399 Ibid.

The play’s production became part of the larger anti-war performance of the Catonsville Nine. Jim Stacy addresses the Nine’s broad use of performance strategies in his article, “Iterations of Conscience in Performance,” where he argues the Catonsville Nine used a variety of performative techniques to draw attention to their efforts in Catonsville that continued to draw attention to their resistance efforts far beyond the actual event. The nine publicized their actions from the outset of their efforts, calling reporters to document the burning of the draft cards in Catonsville. Stacy suggests that the nine then used the media coverage of the trials to again position the nine as heroes asking the government to make choices based on their consciences. Members of the nine confirmed that they considered the trial part of their larger effort, seeing the trial as an opportunity to further reiterate their stance. Stacy then proposes that the theatre and film performances to follow the trial further expanded the continual presence of the efforts of the nine, suggesting that, “The trial became the second act of a performance piece. Berrigan’s play script merely extends the words and actions of the Nine to additional audiences, who can appreciate their ideas and courage.” I would further add that between the trial and the theatrical performances, Daniel Berrigan’s continued writings and interviews, while on the run from the police, also played a part in the performative nature of the longer scope of the Catonsville saga. By positioning the role of this performance as not only historical documentation, but a performative technique used


to continually engage in anti-war demonstrations, the performance itself then becomes part of the activists’ intervention in civic life.

*The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* models an approach to Catholic activist intervention into the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War. Although the play points to the general rise in anti-war efforts taking place throughout the country, it specifically draws attention to the work of Catholic activists as well as criticizes the failures of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to engage with similar issues. The play hearkens a moment in post-Vatican II American Catholicism when Catholics began to reconsider their role in contemporary society. In the early half of the 20th century, American Catholicism was viewed as anti-democratic. American Catholics responded to these accusations in two ways, half of them removed themselves from mainstream participate in American culture. Meanwhile, those wishing to integrated into American society began to perform their faith as an espousal of American democratic values that sought to demonstrate the ways in which Catholics fit in with American culture. For example, military service became an increasingly popular demonstration of the merger between Catholic values and democratic values within American Catholic households. The espousal of American values allowed American Catholics to assimilate into American culture in an effort to combat anti-Catholic sentiments and suspicions, demonstrating how Catholicism aligned with American democratic values. However,

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406 Ibid.

American Catholics were largely accepted into American democratic public life by the 1950s.\textsuperscript{408} By the ‘60s, American Catholics no longer had to work as hard to prove their place in American society with the rise of Catholic politicians in American civic life, most notable John F. Kennedy.

Moreover, with Vatican II, Catholics were encouraged to reconsider the ways in which Catholicism was performed in the modern world. For many American Catholics, this meant placing an increased emphasis on fighting for social justice which they saw as enacting their faith through participation in civic life. Jay Dolan notes that as social justice and peace movements became a greater focus in American society at large in the 1960s, Catholics also increasingly became involved in these efforts.\textsuperscript{409} One of the social justice movements in which Catholics played a formidable role was in movements protesting United States involvement in Vietnam. Dolan notes that, “By the end of the 1960s, Catholics were in the forefront of the movement to stop the war in Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{410} Mark Massa further argues that the protest at Catonsville, specifically, was a major moment that led American Catholics to reconsider their role in American society.\textsuperscript{411} They thus reconstituted their identities based on social justice advocacy rather than on the acceptance and practice of American cultural values.\textsuperscript{412} Massa argues that Catonsville became a definitive moment in American Catholic history in which American Catholicism was performed in a manner that

\begin{footnotes}
\item[409] Ibid, 198.
\item[410] Ibid.
\item[412] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
allowed for Catholics to civilly disagree with American democratic principles.\textsuperscript{413} In the production of \textit{The Trial of the Catonsville Nine}, the changing face of American Catholic culture is highlighted as the production both lauds the efforts of the activists while simultaneously critiquing Catholics who refused to participate in this new version of Catholicism.

The supernatural functions within \textit{The Catonsville Nine} as an assumed presence that motivates the nine to perform their civic duty. The divine remains unseen throughout the play. Nonetheless, the assumption of presence frames the production, in that God is hearkened at both the beginning and end of the production through prayer, suggesting that the narrative of civic duty performed throughout the play is framed in light of its relationship with the divine. Of all the productions in my project, \textit{The Trial of the Catonsville Nine} is most invested in crafting a historical iteration of American Catholicism based on Hayden White’s conception of the “true.” Berrigan, himself, describes his work as “factual theatre.”\textsuperscript{414} Although Berrigan took some liberties with the script, he observes that he did his best to stay true to the 1200 pages of trial transcripts he used as the premise of his work. Moreover, he notes that he predominantly adapted the text by cutting and combining overlapping testimonies, but he sought to remain true to the events that took place as best he was able to do so.\textsuperscript{415} For the most part, then, the script and consequent productions sought to represent the courtroom procedures that Berrigan and his companions underwent following their arrest, focusing solely on the journey of the nine as they navigated the courtroom. Because the play is a courtroom drama, the divine remains physically absent from the narrative. Nonetheless,

\textsuperscript{413} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{414} Daniel Berrigan, \textit{The Trial of the Catonsville Nine} (Boston: Beacon, 1970), vii.

\textsuperscript{415} Ibid, viii.
it’s assumed presence crafts an iteration of Catholicism that focuses on the performance of civic intervention as being a manifestation of Catholic belief in divinity.

The space of the 1971 production was cultivated to immediately remind the audience of the civic nature of the actions of the nine. The production took place on a thrust stage and was designed to recall an American courtroom. A podium, from which the defendants would later give their testimony, was set center stage. The judge’s bench stood further up-center behind the podium. The jury’s bench was placed up stage right, to the right of the judge’s bench. There were two desks for the prosecution and the defense placed down on the ground on either side of the thrust. Like the audience, the attorney’s desks faced the stage. The positioning of these desks situated the members of the prosecution and defense on the same level as the audience. In doing so, the space situated the audience within the courtroom, positioning them as witnesses to the trial. The space thus asks the audience to consider the plight of the Nine as well as their own positionality in light of American civic affairs.

Whereas the space initiated the audience into the civic nature of the performance, the opening sequence highlighted the fact that this was going to be a play not only about the law, but also about Catholicism. Audiences attending the 1971 production were likely well-versed in the premises of the piece upon entering the theatre given the previous coverage already granted to Berrigan and his colleagues from the initial events and consequent trial. Given the public nature of their actions, the Catholic identity of the defendants in the production was hardly a surprise. However, from the first scene, the production makes it clear that this is not a production purely about the relationship between the law and anti-law protestors who happened to be Catholic, but also about the relationship between Catholics. As Jacqueline O’Connor observes in Documentary Plays in Contemporary American Theater, this is a play not only about Vietnam resistance efforts,
but also one that puts the Catholic Church on trial. Throughout the play the defendants are not only put on trial for their actions, but they also use their testimonies on the stand to draw attention to the ways in which they feel the Catholic Church could further intervene in social justice initiatives. In doing so, the courtroom drama asks the audience to not only consider the culpability of the Nine at Catonsville in light of American democratic principles, but it also draws attention to the ways in which Catholicism is more broadly positioned in civic interventions. Thus, the production draws attention to both the relationship between the Catholic activists and the law as well as the changing American Catholic culture that seeks to become increasingly involved in social justice initiatives.

The production opened with Daniel Berrigan, clad in black clerics and wearing a large gold religious medal hanging around his neck, moving center stage to deliver a monologue. The text of his monologue forefronts the notion that this play was not merely about a series of anti-war efforts, but efforts which Berrigan performed specifically as a means of embodying his Catholic faith. In the monologue, Berrigan highlights the tensions between his own ideas of what it meant to live his faith in relationship to the approach he saw the Catholic Church taking. Berrigan begins, describing the day that he was ordained a priest. In the monologue, he reflects that from the time of his ordination he questioned what it meant to be a Catholic in modern society and where he could learn what it means to live out the Catholic faith. He provides a scathing review of the priesthood describing it as “a pallid, vacuumatic enclosure a sheepfold for sheep,” and he further describes the priesthood as a group of individuals who “kept their peace, muttered the mass, sidestepped

quality the public horror, made Jesus mild as milk, a temple eunuch."\textsuperscript{417} Thus, the play begins with a critique of the hierarchy of the church as a passive space with little investment in the realities of the world. Berrigan continues by describing how he and his brother chose to live out their vows as priests, noting that the year prior to the trial both he and Phil were in jail for damaging draft records. Speaking of his time in jail, he cries, “Those prison blue jeans and denim shirts! It’s clerical attire I highly recommend for the new church.”\textsuperscript{418} His speech concludes with an introduction to the actions of the Catonsville Nine, cultivating an image of the actions of the nine as faith in action. Thus, the opening monologue draws attention to the changing configurations of Catholic identity pitting older iterations of American Catholicism against that enacted by Berrigan and his colleagues. In doing so, it points to a new model of Catholicism that arises with Vatican II in which Catholics begin to reconsider their role in the modern world.

In the case of \textit{The Trial of the Catonsville Nine}, performed references to the supernatural are minimized within the production although not insignificant. The presence of the supernatural is assumed within the world of the play from the onset of the production, and these assumptions frame the entirety of the courtroom proceedings. At the beginning of the 1971 production, the defendants form a semi-circle at the center of the stage where they join hands and began to pray the “Our Father” following Berrigan’s opening monologue.\textsuperscript{419} This moment is not indicated in the script of the play although it is reminiscent of the real-life trial proceedings in which Daniel


\textsuperscript{418} Ibid, 6.

Berrigan asked if he could recite the Lord’s Prayer upon first taking the stand. For those audience members familiar with video footage captured by the cameraman at Catonsville that made national news, the moment also likely recalls the video footage shared at the time of the nine’s initial actions. This footage captures the nine as they burned the draft cards, followed by a recitation of the “Our Father,” outside of the draft office. After ending their prayer, the defendants step forward, one at a time, to plead, “Not guilty” to the crimes of which they are accused.

The recitation of this prayer serves as a dramaturgical strategy within the production that establishes the divine as the motivating factor for the Nine’s civic interventions. The performance of the prayer establishes the religious impulses motivating the nine’s efforts and connects them explicitly to the divine. The prayer positions the nine in relationship to the divine, portraying them in conversation with God. The line of the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven,” draws attention to the idea that the will of the divine figure should manifest not only in the realm of the supernatural, but on earth. The performance suggests that the will of God is enacted by humans on earth. The performance of prayer in this context suggests that the Nine are motivated by their belief that God calls them to serve others and to bring about peace on earth in earth in his name. They view the draft as bringing harm to those affected by it and thus it is contrary to God’s call for peace. In following, their actions are driven by the belief that they are called to protest the draft to bring about God’s plan for the earth.

The performance of prayer within the context of their trial thus inextricably ties the defendants’ actions within the courtroom to their belief in God. As the scene transitions from the prayer into the defendants’ pleas, it reminds the audience that the defendants performed their

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actions in the name of God, and thus their case is not only about civil disobedience, but also about the ways in which Catholicism is performed through civic intervention. Accordingly, the performance of prayer starts to cultivate an iteration of Catholicism informed by the ways in which humans enact the will of the divine on earth. The performance of prayer at the beginning of the production initiates an image of the courtroom proceedings as not only a civic matter, but an act done for the glory of the God. Thus, the trial becomes a testimony to a lived relationship with God based on the performance of civic intervention in the name of social justice.

Throughout the play, the trial proceedings are used to increase awareness of other growing social justice initiatives in which the activists have been involved. In doing so, the court testimonies draw attention to other social justice initiatives performed in the name of God and cultivate an image of Catholicism rooted in the performance of social justice advocacy. The production presents the work of the activists who each propose that their efforts as protestors grew out of their desire to protest injustices. They each note that they became increasingly aware of social injustices as a result of their involvement in Catholic ministries. Mary Moylan suggests that her social justice work began with her work with a Catholic lay group who served in Africa. Thomas and Mary Melville, a married couple who were former members of religious orders, began with missionary work in Guatemala. John Hogan also began his missionary work in Guatemala with the Maryknoll Brothers. George Mische cites his brother’s work with the Catholic worker movement in Chicago as the inspiration for the beginning of this social justice work.

421 Ibid, 11.
422 Ibid.
423 Ibid, 12.
Lewis says that work began as a teacher at an inner-city Catholic school in Boston where he worked with students in the ghetto; he then took his efforts to the next level when he went with three other protestors to the Baltimore Customs House to pour human and animal blood on Selective Service records under the leadership of Philip Berrigan, S.J., Daniel’s brother.\(^\text{425}\) Philip Berrigan, who eventually became the first priest tried and jailed for a political crime in the United States, became exposed to the injustices wrought upon the black community in the South during his time in the military; he began his social justice efforts by caring for black communities in the slums of New Orleans right after finishing seminary.\(^\text{426}\) By including the history of their past histories as activists the defendants describe how they came to their current activism as well as craft a narrative of Catholicism that prioritizes social activism. Thus, as the production highlights the efforts of a single activist effort, it also testifies to a longer history of activism through the performance of the testimonies.

Although no other Catholic figures are represented in the production, the production rarely lets the audience forget that other iterations of Catholicism, those which are less likely to partake in social activism, continue to exist. In doing so, the production critiques the lack of Catholic intervention in other social scenarios. Berrigan’s opening monologue is only the beginning of critiques levied at the church as other defendants address where the church neglected to intervene on a more significant level in the places in which they served through their ministries. Throughout the production, the defendants’ direct sharp barbs towards the hierarchy of the Catholic Church as they provide their testimonies. These criticisms repeatedly warranted responses from the judge

\(^{\text{425}}\) Ibid, 14.

\(^{\text{426}}\) Ibid, 17.
along the lines of, “We are not trying the Catholic bishops of the United States.” Although the bishops escape the judge’s critique, the very premise of the production casts its own judgment on their actions. Insofar as the play reframes the courtroom proceedings as a testimony to the divine, the production casts aspersions on those who have not partaken in similar civic interventions. The testimonies of the defendants levy critiques at prominent Catholic figures and institutions who have not taken action in social justice initiatives. Their testimonies ask the audience to consider what constitutes a true performance of Catholic belief: lack of action or action that is persecuted as civic disobedience.

At the end of the production, the “Our Father,” is once again recited by the defendants. The performance of the “Our Father,” parallels the opening staging in which the nine stand center in a semi-circle holding hands. Additionally, this time the judge, sitting behind them at his bench, joins them in praying. Unlike the opening recitation of the prayer, this moment is indicated in the script. The moment directly reflects the actual proceedings within the courtroom. At the end of the trial, Daniel Berrigan asked the judge if the nine could pray the “Our Father” before their verdicts are read, a request which the judge granted. The defendants finish their prayer and are immediately thereafter declared guilty. After the final defendant is sentenced, a screen drops down in front of the stage, and footage of the burning of the draft records is projected onto the screen. The footage featured the defendants burning the draft records as they prayed the, “Our Father,” in the background. As the footage ends, the actors are escorted offstage as the production came to an end.


This final moment highlighting the prayer both in the performance of the production and the video footage again returns to highlighting the divine as the force motivating the nine to take part in their resistance efforts. By closing the production with prayer, it frames the performance as an overall testimony to the performance of belief in the supernatural. Throughout the production, there is an inherent assumption that the supernatural exists and people live in relation to it. There is an established relationship between the defendants and the supernatural as demonstrated in their performed prayer. Insofar as this relationship exists, the relationship manifests through the performance of civil disobedience as an act that is performed to bring about God’s will on earth. The supernatural remains physically outside of the world of the play, but its effects are brought about through the actions of those who believe in it. Thus, the supernatural is a motivating force that manifests insofar as humanity makes it manifest. In doing so, the play provides an example of social justice interventions that models civic disobedience to both religious and secular audiences broadly. On the one hand, it crafts an image of Catholic social justice intervention based on the understanding that such interventions are called for by the supernatural, and it calls Catholics to consider their particular role in social justice interventions. On the other hand, however, for those members of the audience that are not religious, it also draws attention to an entirely human intervention into social justice issues.

6.2 Case Study: Our Lady of Kibeho (2014)

While Berrigan’s historical production forefronts the role of humans in events, the 2014 production of Katori Hall’s Our Lady of Kibeho crafts a historical performance that forefronts the divine as a primary player in the event through the performance of manifestations of the Virgin
Mary. *Our Lady of Kibeho* is based on a series of alleged Marian apparitions that occurred in the 1980s in Kibeho, a small town in southern Rwanda. In this instance, it is believed that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared many times to three Catholic Rwandan school girls, Alphonsine, Nathalie, and Marie Claire, between November 1981 and 1983. Early accounts of the visions report that Mary warned the girls that the world needed to repent, do penance, and pray the rosary. The apparitions, however, also foreshadowed more sinister events. The girls notably claimed that they were told to ask the Rwandan president to revisit his discrimination against the Tutsis.429 On August 15, 1982, the Virgin said that a “a river of blood” would flow across Rwanda. Moreover, the visionaries saw a river of blood, people killing one another, dead bodies and other images of destruction.430 Thousands of people were visiting Kibeho the day of the vision, but they did not know what to make of the visions at the time.431 Ten years later, the genocide took place, in part, on the very site where the seers had their vision. The vision was later understood as a prediction of the oncoming genocide.432

Hall first visited Rwanda in 2009 with the intention of gathering research on the genocide to write a play. Although most of the plays and movies Hall saw depicting the genocide focused on the one hundred days of bloodshed, Hall contends that she wanted to explore the history from

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431 Ibid.

432 Ibid.
a different perspective that did not rely solely on bloodshed.\footnote{Ibid.} During her trip, Hall took a trip to the Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows where she was introduced to the story of the visionaries. In \textit{Our Lady of Kibeho}, Hall turns to the apparitions to consider the climate within Rwanda prior to the genocide. Hall based \textit{Our Lady of Kibeho} primarily on the oral testimony of one of the visionaries.\footnote{Ibid.} Although her play takes liberties with characterization, time, and the Vatican investigations into the apparitions, Hall attempted to honor Anathalie’s account of the events.\footnote{Ibid.} She acknowledged that, “(Her) hope is to take a copy of the play and give it to Anathalie and tell her, ‘See, the message is being spread.’ Just like she wanted.”\footnote{Ibid.} Hall’s play asks audiences to consider the implications— for better or worse— of giving credence to peoples’ claims of the existence of supernatural presence.

Hall’s play respectfully depicts Anathalie’s experiences although she takes artistic liberties with the story. Through her play, Hall’s play explores the events leading up to the Rwandan genocide based on how the girls came to understand the genocide as a result of their interactions with the divine. Hall thus crafts a dramatized model of a history that allows for supernatural presence; this model in turn represents voices whose stories— or at least parts of their stories— are likely to be dismissed from a more secularized historical narrative frame in light of the girls’ claims to divine interactions. Within their own communities, the girls’ voices were challenged at the time of the visions. As young girls in a patriarchal society, the voices of the visionaries were quelled by

those around them at the time of their visions, including their local priest and nun. Even as their stories gained credence within their local community, their stories held little weight outside the local Catholic community. Moreover, even within the Catholic community, there continues to be debate regarding the plausibility of the girls’ stories.

The common thread uniting reviews of the 2014 production is that it uniquely performs and gives credence to the possibility of supernatural presence in everyday life. Reviewers almost unanimously note that it is unusual to see a contemporary play on the secular stage give credence to the presence of the supernatural. Terry Teachout of the Wall Street Journal notes, “It is stop-press news that the most important new play of the year to date, Katori Hall’s Our Lady of Kibeho, not only tells the story of a modern miracle but dares to suggest that it might have really happened.”437 The production, he notes, addressed the girls’ experiences with “complete seriousness.”438 In New York Times review, Charles Isherwood similarly acknowledges that, “Both as written and directed… Our Lady of Kibeho all but affirms the reality of the girls’ experience.”439 Meanwhile, Thom Geier of Entertainment Weekly writes that, “Katori Hall’s fact-based new drama, Our Lady of Kibeho, is an unusual blend of the historical and the devotional with a forthright unwinking approach to Roman Catholic theology and beliefs.”440 Thus, critics’ reviews repeatedly highlight how Hall’s play was successful both in the ways that it gave credence to the

437 Ibid.

438 Ibid.


girls’ lived relationships with Catholic ideas of the supernatural and in the ways that it drew attention to the lived experiences of those who lived through the genocide.

In giving credence to the girls’ stories, Hall crafts a *dramaturgy of presence* that gives credence to the lived relationships between an individual and the supernatural. *Our Lady of Kibeho* models how the practice of religious experience can escape the neat boundaries of what can be observed and justified and yet these experiences are still intrinsic to understanding history. It portrays how relationships between individuals and the divine manifest, and it gives credence to the ability of the supernatural to function autonomously within this relationship. In doing so, it portrays not only the lived relationship between the human and the divine, but also points to how the supernatural has the power to intervene in human experience independent of human agents. Hall’s dramaturgy then allows the audience to consider how the supernatural sought to intervene in the civic circumstances explored within the world of the play. In doing so, the play encourages audiences to grapple with how the genocide might have been understood differently in the years leading up to it if the visions had been considered as legitimate warnings.

Throughout the play Hall gradually develops her *dramaturgy of presence* so that presence becomes increasingly present throughout the world of the play. Presence is first assumed in *Our Lady of Kibeho* in light of the Catholic worldview guiding the day-to-day life of the Catholic school in Kibeho in which the play takes place. As the story proceeds, the visionaries’ claims to experiences of presence bring increasing attention to the reality of the presence of the divine. The divine then begins to manifest through the physical performances of the girls during scenes in which the girls enter trance-like states when the divine appears to them. Eventually, the effects of presence manifest in performance through material performances that are not rooted in the girls’
bodies to demonstrate the power of presence as an external force within the world of the play that is not dependent on the performance of humans.

This dramaturgy is further cultivated through performance in the 2014 Off-Broadway production of the play in which director, Michael Greif, directed scenes in which the girls had visions of the supernatural onstage. In some of these scenes, the girls were portrayed merely in trance-like states while others explored the material effects that were associated with their visions. In addition to cultivating performances of the girls as they received visions of the supernatural, Greif also sought to incur the materiality of the supernatural onstage by choosing to recognize the girls’ visions onstage, providing the audience access into what the girls were seeing. 441 Performing the visions onstage rather than leaving the visions off-stage reinforces a historical narrative that recognizes the visions as intrinsic to the girls’ reality. In doing so, the play testifies to the power of presence to manifest both in relationship to and independent of humans. The dramaturgy of presence within the play testifies to the potential power of presence both in private experiences with the supernatural as well as to how society as a whole accounts for the supernatural. Our Lady of Kibeho encourages audiences to consider the ways in which presence has the potential to function broadly within human historical events, and it draws attention to the ramifications of ignoring the supernatural amidst these circumstances.

The possible manifestation of the supernatural is introduced in the opening of the play. The entire play takes place in the school in Kibeho that Alphonsine, Nathalie, and Mary Claire attended at the time of their visions; the play is set in different rooms throughout the school. The play begins

by debating the potential of Catholic manifestations of presence. In the first scene, Sister Evangelique and Father Tuyishime argue in an office over the possibility of whether Alphonsine could have seen the Blessed Virgin. This scene draws attention to the question of divine presence although it does not affirm it. The reality of Alphonsine’s experience with the supernatural is later given weight through the performance of her first vision onstage in scene three. In the script, Hall notes that Alphonsine is praying when some of her peers enter the room and begin to make fun of her for engaging in her devotions, calling her a “witch” and “blasphemer.” According to the stage directions, the girls begin hitting Alphonsine with their rosaries, but Alphonsine does not respond. Hall writes that, “(The girls) continue to hit Alphonsine in the head. But she is gone, not hearing the yells of the girls. She begins to speak to someone high, high above their heads.” The girls then ask Alphonsine who she is talking to, but Alphonsine does not respond to the girls, she is so caught up in her vision. In production, Alphonsine falls to her knees “lifting her arms in a gesture suggesting a radiant embrace.” As she has her vision, the stage lighting shifts to focus on Alphonsine amidst her peers.

In the same scene, another schoolgirl, Anathalie, tormented Alphonsine moments before, also falls to her knees, joining Alphonsine in a trance-like state. Hall describes their experience

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443 Ibid.


writing that, “An intense joy ripples through their bodies. Anathalie is staring up at something floating high above their heads. Tears begin to stream from her eyes. She is somewhere else.” Anathalie also falls into a trance-like state while the other girls attempt to break her focus and bring her back to reality. Once again, Greif’s direction supports Hall’s vision and Anathalie “seems to be transported, neither seeing nor hearing.” Anathalie enters fully into the vision, so wrapped up in it that she does not respond to those around her. Later, Marie-Claire, Alphonsine’s primary tormentor also falls into a trance-like state, becoming the last of the visionaries. During each of the following visions, other characters speak to the visionaries, but the girls do not respond, caught up in their interactions with the divine. This is reiterated, for example, in Act Two, when Fr. Flavia, the Vatican representative, comes to investigate the legitimacy of the girls’ claims. When all three of the girls fall to their knees during a vision, Fr. Flavia walks between the girls waving his hand in their faces. Despite his efforts to disrupt the girls’ attention, he is unable to break their concentration. As the girls enter into their unbreakable trances, the possible power of presence becomes further supported in the production in that presence is not only purported through verbal claims. Instead, the power of presence is represented as having a power that blinds the girls to all human interventions within the moment.

In the script and the production, the girls’ visions serve as only one facet supporting the reality of the supernatural intervention. As the play progresses, Hall crafts circumstances

447 Ibid, 72.


surrounding the visions that are increasingly incredulous. Each of these moments gives further rise to the power of the supernatural and its ability to have tangible effects within the human realm. The production increasingly demonstrates how the supernatural is able to make itself manifest autonomously, apart from the ways in which it effects the girls’ bodies. At the end of act one, for example, Alphonsine, Anathalie, and Marie-Claire notably have a vision while in their bedroom at the school that results in levitation. Hall’s inspiration for including this moment came from her tour through the sanctuary in Kibeho when she was shown the broken beds of the girls. The beds are displayed for tourists as proof of the visions, suggesting that the girls were so caught up in their experiences that their beds broke amidst the intensity of what they experienced. In production, two of the girls rise into the air during their final vision in the first act. As they are drawn further into the vision, all three of the beds rise until three loud bangs are heard, the beds break, and the audience is left to grapple with the incredulous circumstances surrounding this final vision before intermission. The moment is particularly noteworthy because it draws attention to the material results of the appearance of the supernatural. Here for the first time in the production, the audience sees that the girls not only demonstrate inexplicable behaviors in a trance-like state, but that their interactions with the divine have physical implications that are beyond the girls’ ability to control. This final levitation scene introduces the idea that the supernatural can tangibly

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intervene in the mortal realm. Notably, this scene is not presented with a sense of doubt. Rather, through the performance of the levitation and the breaking beds, the audience is presented with a version of the story that upholds the inexplicable narrative without question.

The production intensifies its portrayal of physical manifestations of the relationships with the supernatural in the second act when Fr. Flavia seeks to further discern the reality of the visions. In keeping with Hall’s stage directions, in the New York production, Fr. Flavia tests Alphonsine’s focus during a trance by injecting her with a large needle. Hall’s text suggests that the needle is injected into her eye although it is unclear where it enters her in performance. Despite Father Flavia’s actions, Alphonsine does not move. Greif’s direction continues to support the performance of the trances as a miraculous encounter between the mortal and supernatural realms for how else could Alphonsine withstand the pressure of the needle. Moreover, when the needle is removed from Alphonsine, blood appears from the injection site in the shape of a cross.

This is one of the moments during which Hall and Greif took artistic liberties with Alphonsine’s story. Hall acknowledges that she was unable to gain access to Vatican paperwork surrounding the investigations into the apparitions. The version of the story put forth by the sanctuary in Kibeho does not address the specifics of Vatican testing. It notes that in their investigations, the Vatican turned to the document, “Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations.” The prescribed norms, however, do


454 Ibid.

not detail physical tests conducted on alleged visionaries. Nonetheless, the account of the needle is not specific to Hall’s rendition, but is also found in other renditions of the story in Catholic culture. By crafting the moment in this way, however, Hall and Greif draw attention to the inexplicable focus exhibited during Alphonsine’s visions. Moreover, the manifestation of the cross on Alphonsine suggests that her trance-like experience is miraculous rather than psychological.

In *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the presence of the divine is repeatedly tested, and each test increasingly suggests that the girls are interacting with a being who is entirely present to them. The supernatural with which they are in contact maintains their attention despite the odds, and she has the power to intervene in their lives in tangible life-altering ways as is made clear at the very end of the play. The extent to which the supernatural maintains its role in the mortal realm becomes evident in the final scene of the play. Throughout the play, Hall draws attentions to the tensions between the Hutus and the Tutsis. Nonetheless, until the final scene, Hall does not address them outright. The final scene of the play, however, presents one of the girls’ best known visions in which they saw bloody carnage that was later attributed to be a vision of the genocide. In production, the final vision is highlighted with projections on the stage that reflect the girls’


claims. The projections and sound effects accompanying the end of the production allow the audience to enter into the girls’ reality. The performance of these final moments not only gives credence to the girls’ visions by performing them for the audience, but it also confronts the audience with the implications of believing the girls story. The audience is invited to enter into the horror of the girls’ experiences, engaging with their lived realities. Moreover, the performance of these images reinforces the reality of the visions by displaying the images that the girls predicted.

*Our Lady of Kibeho* suggests the possibility that divine intervention in modern times is possible in that it gives credence to the visionaries’ stories. Furthermore, in that Rwanda is still recovering from the devastating effects of the genocide, the production proposes that there are imminent consequences of ignoring these interactions. Forced to reconcile the reality of the recent genocide with the girls’ story, the audience is left to grapple with the weight given to Catholic belief in the supernatural in contemporary society. Insofar as these three productions go, this production more so than the others points to possibility of lived relationships between the divine and contemporary humanity. Even still, the performance maintains a distance from the lived experiences of religion known to its audience members in that it emphasizes the tensions between hemispheric iterations of Catholicism. Throughout the production the skepticism of the priest representing the Vatican reminds the audience of a gap in the ways in which religion is perceived even within the Catholic community. Although the Rwandan priest eventually comes to believe the girls’ claims, the Vatican official is skeptical and belittles not only the girls’ claims but also the opinions of the Rwandan priest, dismissing them as rudimentary. Through the inclusion of this

character, the production suggests that while lived relationships with the supernatural has manifested in recent years, there is a juncture in how different communities, even within the same faith tradition, accept and acknowledge these histories. Within the play there are racial components with regards to the politics of whose stories are given credence. Amongst the girls, these tensions derive from their Hutu and Tutsi backgrounds. More broadly, however, these tensions are demonstrated within the broader Catholic Church in that the white priest from the Vatican is hesitant to give credence to African claims to experiences of the divine. Nonetheless, the production’s repeated testimonies to the likelihood of the Virgin’s recent intervention serves as a reprimand to contemporary society, asking it to reconsider the ways in which the divine is discounted from historical narratives and the ways in which the divine may perhaps intervene in contemporary societal turmoil only to be overlooked.

6.3 Case Study: 9 Circles (2017)

Bill Cain’s, 9 Circles debuted Off-Broadway at the Sheen Center where it ran for a limited run from February 21st through March 19, 2017. With 9 Circles, Bill Cain, the Jesuit priest who wrote Equivocation once again seeks to explore the relationship between the truth of religious presence and its relationship to historical events. In the case of 9 Circles, however, Cain specifically engages in historical events that have recent ramifications for the American public in light of its connection to the Iraqi war. In doing so, the play reflects on the relationship between religious truth and the ways in which it provides insights into experiences of war. Whereas the previous two shows were interested in where the supernatural has the potential to intervene within the overall historical event, 9 Circles is concerned with the lasting relationship between the
supernatural and an individual who is grappling with his participation within an event. Accordingly, the play is not so much interested in examining how the supernatural is leveraged to become anti-war, although the play does provide critiques of war, as much as it is interested in how the supernatural accompanies individuals as they deal with the ramifications within such an event.

The protagonist in *9 Circles* is a young man by the name of Daniel Reeves. However, the play is closely based on the story of Steven D. Green. In an interview with Sarah Saddler, Cain states that the play is not supposed to tell the story of Green, but rather the story of Reeves. Nonetheless, the resonances between Reeves and Green cannot be overlooked by those who are familiar with Green’s story. On March 6, 2006, Private Steven D. Green, a private in the United States Army, left a traffic checkpoint with some of his fellow soldiers after a day of playing cards and drinking whiskey. Dressed as civilians, the men went to the nearby house of an Iraqi family of four. Upon arriving at the house, Green killed three of the inhabitants- a mother, a father, and a four-year-old girl- immediately. Green and his companions then proceeded to rape the last inhabitant of the house, 14-year-old Abeer Qassim Al-Janabi. Green was the third soldier to rape Abeer; he then shot her in the head. Before leaving, the soldiers set the girl’s remains on fire.

Green and his colleagues were not originally suspected of committing the heinous crime. Rather, both American and Iraqi authorities first attributed it to the work of insurgents.

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Meanwhile, as investigations into the deaths of the Al-Janabi family were underway, Green was diagnosed with a personality disorder, and he received an honorable discharge from the army in May 2006 after only eleven months of service. A month later, he was arrested for the deaths of the Al-Janabi family. In the midst of an already tumultuous relationship between Iraq and the United States, the crime increased tensions between the Iraqi and American governments insofar as the Iraqi government wanted Green to be delivered to them, so that they could press charges under Iraqi law, a process which would likely result in the death penalty. Nonetheless, Green was tried in the United States in a federal, rather than a military court. He was the first soldier tried under the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act which allowed the federal government to press criminal charges against soldiers for crimes committed overseas. While the trial focused on Green’s actions in Iraq, it drew attention to the performance of American military leadership.

The defense did not try to deny Green’s participation in the crime. Rather, they questioned the extent of his culpability by drawing attention to the support- or lack thereof- of army leadership. Green was a high-school dropout from Midland, Texas who joined the army at 19 years old. Prior to joining the army, he had a history of drug and alcohol abuse, and he was known for impulsive behavior. In order to join the army, the army granted him a morals waiver, allowing him to enter allow his background might otherwise have precluded him from doing so. He entered the army as a private in the 101st Airborne Division in Fort Campbell. During his time in the army, Green claimed that his experiences with army training and with what he experienced in Iraq caused him to dehumanize Iraqis. On December 10, 2005, two of his sergeants were killed when an Iraqi, who had previously been on good terms with the American soldiers, killed two of Green’s sergeants at

\[462 \text{ Ibid.}\]
a checkpoint. One of the soldiers died at the scene, but the second, a soldier whom Green admired, lived long enough for Green and his companions to try to transport him to a local hospital. Nonetheless, the sergeant died. During the course of Green’s trial, it was revealed that Green and some of his colleagues told an Army counselor that they wanted to seek revenge on Iraqis—both soldiers and civilians—for the deaths of their peers. The counselor suggested the unit needed more supervision, but that was never provided. In the meantime, Green received prescription drugs, and he and his companions continued to serve.

In 2009, Green was found guilty of his crimes and sentenced to serve five life terms, the equivalent of 110 years, in prison. Four other men stood on trial for their participation in the crime. Unlike Green, his companions were tried in a military court. Two men pled guilty to rape. A third man was convicted for having prior knowledge of the events. A fourth soldier later pled guilty as an accessory to the crime; he was aware of the men’s intentions, but he stayed at the checkpoint. The men were found guilty, but unlike Green, they were offered an opportunity for parole. Green expressed remorse for his role in the events, but he also expressed frustration at his ineligibility for parole. He told the press, “I was made to pay for all the war crimes. I’m not the only one here in federal prison… I’m not a victim, but I haven’t been treated fairly.”


9 Circles portrays the story of Reeves from the moment of his dishonorable discharge from the army through his trial for the murder of an entire Iraqi family and the rape of a 14-year-old girl. Although the main character goes by a different name, there is no doubt that the story reflects upon Green’s situation. Not only did the character commit the same crimes, but his background is identical to Green’s. The play is broken into nine acts, which are referred to in the script as “circles,” a reference to Dante’s inferno. The audience is introduced to the premise of the trial in circle two. They are then subsequently introduced to Reeves’s the events that led him to commit his crime in later circles. Each scene further reveals the depths of Reeves’s depravity as well as also offers further insights into Reeves’s insights into his actions which become increasingly clear throughout the piece. The dialogue in the scenes is fictional, but it reflects on Green’s overall experience with the army. Thus, Green’s army experiences become the premise for the historical nature of the play. The play does two primary things. First, it questions the role of the United States in the Iraqi War. According to Bill Cain, he did not intend his play to be a war play; instead he was interested in the personal journey of those who have been affected by war. Nonetheless, the play raises questions with regards to the legitimacy of American intervention in Iraq. Secondly, the play explores the potential of human redemption as is demonstrated in light of the Reeves’ journey through his time on earth into the afterlife. In doing so, it questions the relationship between man and the supernatural and whether a man can even be redeemed in the afterlife after having participated in unthinkable acts. Can even the worst sinner be redeemed through supernatural intervention?

467 Bill Cain, Interview with Sarah Saddler, “Bill Cain’s 9 Circles: Dramaturgically Re-evaluating an American Understanding of the Military and Individualism.”
In *9 Circles*, commentary specifically on American involvement in Iraq is not cultivated in light of presence. Instead, it is presented as background context to the larger issue within the play which is the ways in which involvement in the war permanently impacted those who participated within it under the guidance of the American government. The play is not interested in encouraging human intervention to prevent repeated interference in Iraq nor is it interested in how spirituality and the supernatural intervene within or judge acts of war. Rather, the play focuses on the repercussions of the event on the individual.

Accordingly, within the play, supernatural presence is explored in light of its relationship to the individual who is reconciling his experience with the after effects of war. Supernatural presence is physically absent in the play, but it is assumed within the world of the play insofar as it is understood that the play is modeled loosely after Dante’s *Inferno*. The play engages a dramaturgy of presence as a result of the ways in which it calls upon Dante’s *Inferno* as a model for its narrative structure and plot. As the production travels through each circle it allows the audience to trace the protagonist’s journey into the afterlife. As the audience becomes increasingly aware of all of Reeves’s crimes, the production raises questions with regards to the existence of the supernatural and the consequences that will be wrought upon the defendant by the supernatural in the afterlife. The space in which the play is performed also contributes to the ways in which presence within this play may be understood in light of ideas of Catholic ideas of presence. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the play was performed in the Sheen Center, a theatre space run by the Archdiocese of New York City. Although the space hosts performances that are both Catholic and secular in nature, it’s recognized association with the Catholic Church coupled with Cain’s heavy allusions to Dante suggest the play will bear close associations to Catholic ideas of presence from the outset of the performance.
The individual’s journey from life into the afterlife is further reiterated with the use of space and lighting within the production. The physical space of the stage is shaped as a circle, reminding the audience of the circles that makeup Dante’s vision of Hell. Moreover, the circular space creates an enclosed feeling, trapping Reeves within it, and reminding the audience that although the production reflects upon the situation in Iraq, the play is ultimately about the journey of the single man within the space. Moreover, in its final moments, the production uses lighting to underscore Reeves’s experience in the afterlife. Rather, than change the physical set of the play, the play uses light to highlight Reeves’s transition into the afterlife. This light suggests the presence of a force beyond the mortal world that has the power to determine one’s eternal fate. However, it gives no answers as to what form that force takes,

Given the nature of Steven Green’s story, the idea of redemption is challenging to fathom. Nonetheless, while public narratives of Green’s story were predominantly focused on his troubled youth, what he witnessed while in Iraq, his request to his counselor for his help, and his final crime, narratives of his life also drew attention to one additional journey in his life, his journey of faith. Green did not grow up in a religious household. He grew up without any religious affiliation, he converted to Christianity as a young adult, and he entered the Catholic Church after his trial. Steven Green’s journey with Christianity began in 2005 when he was baptized at Fort Benning with a number of other young military recruits. He joined the army a few weeks later. It is unclear to what extent Christianity played a part in Green’s life overseas, but he spoke of his relationship to God publicly when he was sentenced at which point “he apologize and said he

expects to face “God’s justice” when he dies.” Green’s religious journey continued, however, during his time in jail where he converted to Catholicism. According to a 2010 article published by the Associated Press, after his conversion, Green “corresponded with a nun in Louisville about his faith.”

The production seeks to increasingly draw the audience to more closely consider the relationship between Reeves and the supernatural by calling upon a dramaturgy modeled on Dante’s *Inferno*. The name and structure of the play immediately ask the audience to grapple with the idea of the afterlife in its allusion to Dante’s notable literary descriptions of the Hell and eternal punishments within the *Inferno*. Given that the play is modeled off of the *Inferno*, the dramaturgical structure does not question whether there is an afterlife, but rather what Reeves’ final destination will be within the afterlife. Moreover, given that the Christian framework inherent to Dante’s *Inferno*, it is assumed that the play is governed within a Christian cosmological system.

The production is organized into nine scenes that allow the audience to journey through Reeve’s private hell. The scenes begin in the mortal world, but the final two scenes transition into the afterlife. They draw attention to encounters that Reeves has from the moment of his discharge through the end of his life that force him to grapple with what he has done. Each circle provides background into the circumstances that led Reeves to the end of his life. Each scene brings Reeves closer to the end of his life, forcing him to grapple with whether he will have to deal with the repercussions in his afterlife. By portraying Reeves as moving through each of the circles further

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470 Ibid.
towards his permanent damnation in the afterlife, the dramaturgy of the script presents an iteration of human experience which is perpetually oriented towards the reality of an afterlife and eternal judgment.

The idea that each scene serves as a different circle of hell is reinforced literally in production through the set which is a circular space with gray borders that denote its boundaries.\textsuperscript{471} It invites the audience to observe hell from their perspective of observers. Like Dante in the \textit{Inferno}, the audience are given the opportunity to witness what the journey into the afterlife may look like. The only furniture within the space is a single chair. As the show transitions from scene to scene, all that changes in each scene is the people who accompany Reeves in that particular moment. Reeves does not leave the circle. As people enter in and out of the space, interacting with Reeves, the audience is increasingly made aware of the circumstances that are leading Reeves to his final judgment. Like Dante who witnessed the different sins that led people to settle in different circles in hell, the audience witnesses each interaction in Reeves’ life that leads him further and further towards his final destination in the afterlife.

The beginning of the production draws attention to the circumstances that informed the beginning of Reeves’ journey in the world of the play. It draws attention to the relationship between the United States and Iraq, providing context for Reeves’ journey into Hell. In doing so, it also draws attention to the history of American-Iraqi relationships. United States intervention in Iraq is a central premise of the production from the moment the audience entered the space of the Sheen production, and it remains a primary focus in the production throughout the majority of the play. Upon entering the theatre, the audience is greeted by an American flag, hung upside down.

For those familiar with the customs associated with the flag, the upside-down flag is traditionally understood as a sign of distress. By cultivating a space that displays the American flag as its most prominent feature, the production thus immediately calls to mind not just an individual in distress, but an entire country that is struggling. The production began with a recording of George W. Bush talking about Saddam Hussein. Two soldiers come on stage and begin to fold the flag. Reeves and the lieutenant come on stage in full uniform for the opening scene in which Reeves is discharged from the army. Thus, the entire opening sequence is concerned strictly with military service. Nothing is revealed of Reeves’s crimes during this scene. Later, in the production, a recording of a Colin Powell, Bush’s Secretary of State who vocally supported the Iraqi invasion, is played. In this recording, Powell speaks to the existence of weapons of mass destruction. (It was later revealed, however, that the weapons of mass destruction never existed, and thus, the premise of Powell’s speech was negated.) By including Powell’s speech in the play, the performance further draws attention to questions the legitimacy of American involvement in Iraq. These questions then color Reeves’s military experience which gives rise to questions regarding how culpable Reeves is for his sins. Is his culpability undermined by the ethical dilemmas of the war itself? Will these circumstances grant him some reprieve for his actions?

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As the play continues it increasingly draws attention to Reeves involvement in Iraq. As the production traces Reeves’ journey from his honorable discharge through the trial, the dialogue surrounding the circumstances that led to Reeves’s crime continues to highlight tensions pertaining to U.S. participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the circles presented subsequent to Reeves’s arrest, Cain chooses to highlight interaction between Reeves and those involved in his case, particularly, his lawyer that question the morality of the army’s actions with regards to both the war generally and Reeves’s case in particular. For example, in Circle Two, Reeves argues with a young female lawyer who is bringing the charges against him that his biggest mistake was not getting killed overseas. At the time of his arrest, Reeves was home in Texas for the funeral of a friend who was decapitated in Iraq. He argues that the soldier was not necessarily moral although he was being lauded by his local community. Rather, Reeves notes that if you get killed overseas, you are lauded in the United States despite your actions; he contends that, “Everything we did over there is a crime over here.”

In this sequence, the dialogue thus first raises questions as to the legitimacy of U.S. military action that occurs in Iraq. In doing so, the production continues to explore the ethics of American-Iraqi relationships. However, it also begins to increasingly shift the focus of the play to the effects of the war on Reeves. It draws attentions to the ethics of this government intervention, encouraging the audience to consider how this historical moment effected Reeves’s own ethics. Accordingly, while these scenes continue to draw attention to the ethics of American interventions in Iraq, they also increasingly draw attention to the tensions in discerning Reeves’s personal culpability.

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While the first two scenes focus predominantly on Reeves’s military experience and critiques of the military continue through Circle Seven, the production starts to focus on Reeves’s identity as an individual rather than a military cog at the end of the second scene. This shift highlights the inherent tensions in condemning Reeves in that on the one hand he has served as pawn of the military, but on the other hand he is still an individual with free will. The play draws attention to the focus on Reeves’s individuality through the costuming of Reeves, by re-costuming him repeatability and distancing him from his military identity through the use of his clothing. Throughout the stage directions, Cain suggests that Reeves should strip off his clothing, and in two particular moments, he should strip entirely. At the end of the first circle in which Reeves receives his honorable discharge, the stage directions suggest that Reeves strip off his army gear, remaining in a t-shirt in pants. At the end of the second circle, Cain requests in his production notes that Reeves be stripped entirely of his clothes in order to get into his prison garb. Cain requests that Reeves is stripped entirely of his clothes once again at the end of Circle Seven as he prepares for his final moments of life. Although it is unclear to what extent these stage directions were followed in the Sheen Center production, the actor playing Reeves did change costumes for each of the aforementioned scenes. Although Reeves’s prosecution continues amidst the first changes, the clothing changes increasingly distinguish Reeve’s identity apart from the military, allowing the audience to also consider the impact of the trial on Reeves individually. This allows for the opportunity to ask how Reeves will be judged as an individual for the crime that he committed in Iraq.

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477 Ibid, 15.

478 Ibid, 76.
In the first seven circles of the play, the audience is gradually introduced to Reeves’ journey into Christianity as Reeve’s background is revealed to provide context for his crime. Reeves’s journey with Christianity enters the conversation through dialogues his lawyer and an anonymous pastor who comes to visit him in Circle Three and Circle Four respectively. In Circle Three, Reeves reveals to the lawyer that he was baptized.\footnote{479} In Circle Four, while Reeves is in Federal Prison, a pastor visits him and tells him that he needs Jesus, a suggestion which Reeves adamantly rejects. The pastor encourages Reeves to reconsider his relationship by calling upon a very loose interpretation of Mark 7:25.\footnote{480} In his interpretation of Mark 7:25, the pastor emphasizes that while Jesus was generous with his miracles, he did have limits for those who did not believe in him. The pastor argues that God’s limit becomes evident when Jesus was asked to bring the daughter of the Syrian woman back from the dead to which Jesus responded, “You don’t give the master’s meat to the dog under the table.”\footnote{481} The pastor tells Reeves that this verse changed his life, because it was the moment when he realized that even God has his limits and not everyone will be saved. The pastor further argues that there is still room for Reeves’s redemption, suggesting that if Jesus could drive the demons out of the men who are referenced in the Gospel of Matthew, he can drive them out of Reeves.\footnote{482} Through these conversations, the play establishes a relationship between Reeves and Christianity, raising questions with regards to what Reeves’s experience with Christianity will look like as he moves forward. Given Reeves’s actions overseas, the play eliminates any discussion of how he lived out (or did not live out) his faith on earth. Instead, the


\footnote{480} Ibid, 35, 76.

\footnote{481} Ibid, 35.

\footnote{482} Ibid, 39.
play is invested in what it means for Reeves to move forward and raises questions with regards to the possibility of his redemption.

In Circle Five, Cain again calls into question the mental health care resources that the army provides to their soldiers. In this scene, Reeves recounts an interaction with his counsel in which he told her, “I TOLD HER I WANTED TO KILL EVERYBODY… SHE SAID I WAS NORMAL!” As mentioned in the introduction to Green’s story, this hearkens to Green’s actual experience in which he expressed his desires to a counselor, but no action was taken and he continued to serve. Mental health resources continued to come under attack in Circle Six in a scene in which Reeves tells the lawyer about his interactions with his counselor. Cain crafts a scene in which Reeves and his counselor reenact a conversation in which she admits to Reeves that she thinks this war is merely violence. She further suggests that the United States entered it by mistake and then had to commit to their participation in it to cover up their mistake. At the end of his interactions with the counselor, she warns Reeves that he cannot tell her that wants to kill everyone and then gives him pills to help him sleep. Again, the script calls into question the ways in which military resources were used to support the mental health of those serving in the armed forces, and in doing so, it questions to what extent Reeves is responsible for his actions if he lacked the resources he sought within the army.

The following scenes between Reeves and the lawyer continue to raise questions regarding Reeves’s redemption as the lawyer seeks to prove that the circumstances that led to Reeves participating in the crime were not his fault. Rather, the lawyer later argues that Reeves testimony

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483 Ibid, 50.
about the counselor’s knowledge of his thoughts presents an argument in which Reeves can be portrayed as the only person to acknowledge and take steps to rectify the fact that he was mentally unstable prior to the death of the girl. While this argument casts blame on the military for not taking the proper steps to address Reeves’s mental health, it also raises the question of the degree to which Reeves was culpable for his actions, because he was admittedly unstable and no one provided him with the help which he sought. The play never argues that Reeves did not commit the act of which he was accused. Rather, it raises questions as to the relationship between the army and the support they provided to their constituents as well as to the relationship between mental health and moral culpability. By considering the role of the military in contributing to the development of these issues, the play asks to what extent Reeves is responsible for his actions.

As was the case with Green’s trial, regardless of any negligence on the part of the military, Reeves is found entirely guilty for his crimes in the eyes of the law. However, the play maintains that Reeves’s final judgment is that which takes place in the afterlife, a place in which his final judgment remains unknown. As the exploration of Reeves’s experience within the judicial system closes, the play revisits the culpability of the government in allowing Reeves to even fight in Iraq

n Circle Seven, The Trial, one final time. In this scene, the lawyer begins his case arguing that:

A recruiting officer met a deeply troubled nineteen-year-old with convictions for alcohol, drug abuse, violence. He had a personality disorder and everybody in town knew it. To make his quota, this recruiting officer obtained a morals waiver for him, and this disturbed young man was soon strapped up with world-class weaponry to fight in a war so lacking in popular support that an army could not be assembled to fight it- without candidates like this young man.486

485 Ibid, 50.
486 Ibid, 64.
As in the case of the counselor, this testimony points to the realities of how Reeves came to be in the army. The lawyer’s testimony questions whether Reeves should ever have been allowed into the army given that he did not meet the qualifications from the very beginning. Furthermore, his defense suggests that the army knew that they did not have the support necessary to fight and that they had to lower their standards in order to do so. However, in doing so, they allowed for people unfit to engage in warfare to do so. Accordingly, the first seven scenes of the production not only present Reeves’s case to the audience, they also present a case against the government which is highlighted through the use of the American flag, live recordings, and dialogue based on Green’s lived experiences. Although Reeves is found guilty, Cain’s play does not let the American government off the hook for the ways in which they enabled Reeves’s crimes through their lack of support.

Nonetheless, regardless of who was culpable for the crimes on earth, the play concludes by exploring what the individual ramifications for spearheading the crime are for Reeves in the afterlife. Unlike the first seven circles which are predominantly based on Green’s lived experiences, the final two scenes of 9 Circles are entirely fictional. Fact deviates from fiction in Circle Eight of the play in which Reeves prepares to say his last words prior to receiving the death penalty. There is no historical premise for the final two scenes of the production. In fact, Green was specifically tried in the United States as opposed to Iraq which is why he was able to secure a sentence of a life in prison as opposed to the death penalty. Moreover, he died after committing suicide while serving his life sentences at a federal penitentiary in Tucson, Arizona after the play was written so there is no historical inspiration for the final two scenes.

In Circle Eight of the production, Reeves presents his last words. In this scene, Reeves acknowledges remorse for what he did, but he openly admits to committing the crime. His speech
mentions little of religion, except to refer back to the story that the pastor told him. Reeves says, “In the story about Jesus and the woman? I wonder, I wonder where that demon went when he got driven out. I suspect I’m about to find out. If I wake up and there’s sand, I’ll know I’m in hell.”

Through the delivery of these words, the production reminds that the audience that Reeves’s final state is still undecided. He has a relationship with Christianity - unclear though it may be - and there is a supernatural being that has the power to decide his final fate. Thus, although supernatural presences are absented from the stage, presence is indexed in performance in so much as it is suggested that there is something beyond what can be known and experienced to this point. Akin to Andrew Sofer’s dark matter, there is a being which is invisible, but inevitably controls the fate of humanity beyond the physical world.

As Reeves’s enters the afterlife, his entrance into this moment is hearkened by a bright light rather than a change of human companions. In his review of the production for *Lighting and Sound America*, David Barbour describes the lighting change in the final scene as “a cone of white light that becomes overwhelmingly bright.” This change of lighting within the play suggests not only a change of space, but a change in presence. The light signifies a presence of something that is beyond human experience and understanding. Although the supernatural is never made present, the production suggests with the light that there is something beyond death which Reeves is forced to face as he enters into the next stage of his journey.

Circle Nine, the final scene of the play, which is titled the “Inferno,” portrays Reeves’ meditations on existence from the afterlife. Upon waking up, Reeves verbally acknowledges that

\[\text{487 Ibid, 68.}\]
\[\text{488 Ibid.}\]
he does not know where he is although he observes that there is no sand. According to Reeves’s knowledge of hell, he does not recognize this place. Nonetheless, the audience recognizes that Reeves’s journey has continued in that he is able to continue to reflect after his execution. The set has not changed beyond the fact that it is now empty of all other people and continues to be lit by a bright white light. As the final scene continues, Reeves meditates on the final words that the Iraqi girl said to him, “Halini A’ish,” or, “Help me.” From the time the accusations were first levied and through his trial, Reeves maintains that he did not know what the girl said to him in her final moments. Now, after his death, Reeves admits that he knew what she said, yet he chose to kill her anyways. He describes his final moments with the girl. She asks him to let her live, but he kills her saying he did so out of sympathy, because no one would touch her after what he did to her. He continues his reflection saying, “This is it. This is death. Has to be. Can’t get worse. Worse. Won’t shout. Feel it. Feel what she. Don’t shout. Be him. For once. At the end. No more words. Won’t speak again, Silence. Halini a’ish. Oh, God. Let. Me.” In the final moments of the play, it becomes clear that Reeves is transitioning into the finality of his death in which is solidified with a blackout.

With this ending, the production suggests that there is judgment after death. Reeves goes through a reckoning of sorts in which he is forced to grapple with what he has done after his life on earth ends. He is forced to live with the knowledge of what he has done. His words suggest that he, like the figures in Dante’s Inferno, is forced to relive his crime. Although he starts to ask God

490 Ibid, 73.
491 Ibid, 74-75.
presumably to free him, he is doomed to live forever with the knowledge that he knew what he was doing when he committed the crime. In his review, David Barbour writes of the end of the production that, “It’s a kind of redemption—but a savage one.” In the moment of this final judgment, then, Reeves once again seems to be found guilty in the afterlife as he plummets into darkness. Reeves has been tried and found wanting not only within the American courts but by the God that he cries out to in his final moments, but who never comes to draw him out of his eternal damnation. As the play draws to a close, Reeves’ words make it clear that he did believe in God, but his actions in Iraq would never provide him the resting place that he desired.

Each of the plays in this chapter engage different *dramaturgies of presence* in order to reflect upon the relationship between Catholic ideas of the supernatural and a specific historic event. The plays all function on the understanding that God is present within the world of the plays regardless of whether or not he is made manifest. Through their performance of different historical moments, the plays are able to reflect upon the ways in which an understanding of God within the framework of Catholicism provides unique insights into how these events are understood. For example, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* asks the audience to consider the ways in which Catholicism models social justice initiatives that allows people to engage in civil disobedience. *Our Lady of Kibeho* raises the question of whose voices are given credence within historical moments and whether or not expanding the breadth of voices represented might have the potential to change history. *9 Circles* asks the audience to consider the ways in which government involvement in overseas conflict impacts all individuals, both on this earth and in the next. In doing so, the play highlights the plight of the individuals who are used to bring about government ends

and then neglected, left to fend on their own. It asks the audience to consider both the practical and spiritual ramifications of overseas conflicts. Moreover, the plays consider how including God as a player within the framework of these historical events might provide different models of how people should engage with similar topics in light of Catholic social justice principles. Could the world be bettered through increased engagements in Catholic forms of civil disobedience? Could we avoid bloodshed if we listened to the divine when it speaks to us? What happens when we stop focusing on the institutional nature of conflict and focus on the redemption of the individual?
7.0 Conclusion

With the end of Vatican II and John F. Kennedy’s rise to the presidency, American Catholicism began to draw increasing attention in the public eye as is suggested by the increased prominence of Catholic narratives on the secular, commercial stages in New York City. As demonstrated throughout my project, the secular stage post-Vatican II presents a vast array of narratives that reflect on the relevance of Catholic belief in a quickly changing world. Theatrical representations call upon different histories of Catholicism to draw attention to the various ways in which Catholics situate themselves in relationship to Catholic ideas of supernatural presence. In some cases, these performances reflect how Catholics live in relationship to observable manifestations of supernatural presence. In other examples, the performances reflect upon how people configure their lives in relationship to ideas of invisible presences that nonetheless effect how they see themselves as living out their Catholic faith. In either case, the performances recognize that the practice of Catholicism is construed not only in light of human relationships, but also in light of lived relationships between human and the divine. In doing so, these performances provide a historiographical model that gives credence to the possibility of supernatural intervention within human experience.

Despite a decline in American Catholicism in the United States in recent years, performances of Catholicism, featuring lived experiences with the supernatural, continue to debut on the secular stage in New York. For example, Bill Cain’s *Nine Circles* made its Off-

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493 Recent studies reflect that the practice of American Catholicism is gradually decreasing in the United States; according to statistics provided by the Pew Research Center, there was a 3% decrease in the practice of American Catholicism from 2007 to 2014. (David Masci and Gregory A. Smith, “7 Facts About U.S. Catholics,” Pew
Broadway debut at the Sheen Center in 2017, and more recently, the Magis Company performed its Off-Broadway debut of *Miracle in Rwanda* at the Lion Theatre in April 2019. *Miracle in Rwanda* is a one-woman show written by Leslie Lewis and Edward Vilga that tells the story of a Rwandan genocide survivor, Immaculee Ilibagiza, who is often referred to as “our generation’s Anne Frank.”494 The play’s debut corresponded with the twenty-five year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. When the genocide broke out, Ilibagiza hid in a bathroom with seven other women for ninety-one days. During that time, Ilibagiza predominantly spent her time praying the rosary and reading the dictionary. In her autobiography and her talks, Ilibagiza recounts how she would pray within the bathroom where she could hear the voices of those who were searching for her and who wanted her dead.

According to playwright, Leslie Lewis, the miracle to which the title of the play refers is not related to Ilibagiza’s survival, but rather “that she was able to forgive those who killed her parents and two brothers.”495 Although Lewis suggests that the miraculous nature of Ilibagiza’s experience rests in her ability to forgive, Ilibagiza’s relationship to her faith is intrinsic to her tale. Ilibagiza is a well-known Catholic writer and speaker. In her book, *Left to Tell*, upon which *Miracle at Rwanda* is based, Ilibagiza attributes her survival and her ability to forgive to her relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary.496 Accordingly, Ilibagiza’s lived relationship with the


divine is at the heart of the history performed onstage. The production was originally billed for a limited run from April 4th through April 21st. However, as a result of its popularity, the play’s run was extended through May 11, 2019.

The continued production of plays such as Miracle in Rwanda suggest that performances of Catholicism that recognize relationships between the human and the divine continue to bear relevance in contemporary society despite a decrease in Americans identifying as Catholic. Notably, however, performances of Catholicism that tend to boast the most success in the secular sphere are those in which Catholic belief in the supernatural is presented as a possibility without affirming the actuality of supernatural presence as is demonstrated in performances such as Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?, Catholic School Girls, Late Nite Catechism, Agnes of God, The Trial of the Catonsville Nine, and Seven Circles. By taking this approach to recognizing presence within performances of Catholicism, artists speak more broadly to both religious and secular audiences. They draw attention to the ways in which the supernatural is configured within Catholic belief systems. However, by neglecting to completely affirm the possibility of presence, the productions resist alienating their secular audiences. In doing so, these productions draw attention to the nuances of Catholic religious practices without erasing aspects of Catholic belief and without asking secular audiences to fully buy into a narrative of presence.

Like the aforementioned plays, Miracle in Rwanda portrays a situation in which the presence of the supernatural is assumed in that Ilibagiza is presented throughout the production.

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praying the rosary, asking Mary’s intercession. However, Mary is never made manifest within the performance. The performance thus suggests that Mary is possibly at work in Ilibagiza’s life although this idea is not solidified in performance. Furthermore, although *Miracle in Rwanda* accounts for Ilibagiza’s relationship with the divine, reviews largely situate the play’s success in light of its ability to reflect on the role of forgiveness in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. In doing so, the performance functions like the plays under investigation in Chapter Five that demonstrate how the practice of Catholicism offers a means to reflect on social justice issues that extend beyond the private sphere of religious practice. Given the success of plays such as *The Trial of Catonsville Nine, Our Lady of Kibeho, Nine Circles,* and *Miracle in Rwanda,* the success of plays that perform the private practice of Catholicism are not only successful for their portrayal of Catholic experience but for the ways in which they reflect how Catholicism intersects with the secular public sphere. Regardless of what gives rise to their success, however, each of the plays in this project give credence to the different ways in which Catholics live in relationship to ideas of supernatural presence, and in doing so, these performances engage aspects of Catholic history as a means of exploring the possible role of presence within human experience.

The rise in representations of Catholicism in commercial theatre gives increasing credence to the legitimacy of lived experiences with Catholic ideas of presence within the secular sphere. In that the practice of Catholicism is made distinct from other Judeo-Christian traditions within these

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performances, these productions interrogate the changing demographics of American Catholicism, exploring the resonances and tensions between religious and secular experiences. Moreover, the commercial success of many of these productions in New York City, which is arguably the commercial center of theatre in the United States, points to the willingness of audiences from a wide variety of backgrounds to engage with religious belief in secular spaces.

The productions under investigation begin to point to the ways in which American Catholicism is comprised of a wide variety of lived relationships between the human and the divine. At this point in time, these performances largely focus on iterations of American Catholicism as constituted within white Catholic communities. This study provides an opening to consider how providing opportunities for more diverse groups of artists to access Broadway and Off-Broadway stages may expand the ways in which audiences understand the diversity of American Catholic experiences. For example, recent polls conducted by the Pew Research Center suggest that American Catholicism is far more racially and ethnically diverse than these representations reflect. Pew Research Center studies suggest that white Catholics constitute sixty percent of Catholic adults, Latinos constitute approximately thirty percent of Catholic adults, and the remaining ten percent of Catholic adults is constituted by black, Asian American, or other racial and ethnic groups.  

Furthermore, the study suggests that among the Latinx community, in particular, the growth of the Hispanic population in the United States is leading to changes in the demographics of Catholics in the United States. While there is a significantly higher number of white Catholics among older generations of adults, the number of white and Hispanic Catholic


501 Ibid.
Millennials is roughly proportionate. The changing demographics of American Catholicism reflected in the study by the Pew Research Center are not proportionately reflected on the stages of New York City. Accordingly, although the performances are broadening the spectrum of lived experiences of religion represented on the secular stage, theatrical representations of Catholicism continue to overlook the broader diversity of lived experiences with presence that are shaped within different cultural practices of Catholicism.

As noted within my project, there are artists that seek to draw attention to these experiences. The Sol Project, which hosted Martin Zimmerman’s *Seven Spots on the Sun*, provides a space for Latin American playwrights to present their work Off-Broadway. Meanwhile, playwrights such as Katori Hall and companies such as Magis Theatre Company, with their productions of *Our Lady of Kibeho* and *Miracle in Rwanda*, use their plays to draw attention to Catholicism practiced within Black communities. Nonetheless, even as they do so, they focus on the experience of Black Catholicism in Africa. Thus, lived experiences of Black American Catholicism remains largely absent from the secular stage. Further studies on the performance of Catholicism on the secular stage might consider the economic circumstances that allow for the performance of religious narratives in secular spaces. Such studies might provide insight into the ways in which the economics of Broadway and Off-Broadway production cultures contribute to the erasure of certain racial and ethnic performances of Catholic belief from the secular stage.

Furthermore, given the limitations of my project, it only examines performances of Catholicism on secular, commercial stages in New York City. However, as I noted with performances such as *Do Black Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* and *Late Nite Catechism*, some

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Ibid.
of the plays addressed within my project received (and continue to receive) more significant success on regional stages as opposed to on Broadway or Off-Broadway stages. A more comprehensive investigation into the performance of Catholicism both in New York and regional stages may further expand our understanding of how different iterations of American Catholicism appeal to the public imagination in varying regions of the United States. Moreover, recent surveys of American Catholics suggest that, where in the past, American Catholics predominantly settled in the Northeast and Midwest, American Catholics are increasingly settling in the South and West, shifting the geographic center of U.S. Catholicism. As the geographic center of American Catholicism continues to shift, an investigation into performances of Catholicism on regional stages in the South and West may expand the ways in which we can see how the secular stage reflects changes in American Catholic culture.

Lastly, although my project is interested in how Catholicism is constituted on the secular stage in light of supernatural presence, not all representations of Catholicism on the secular stage are constructed in a manner that accounts for the possibility of Catholic ideas of presence. Popular shows such as Sister Act and the Nunsense franchise are distinctly linked to Catholicism within their performances without accounting for presence in any regard. Further investigation into other dramaturgical strategies may be useful to theatre and religious scholars alike to consider how Catholic identity is constructed within performance without references to presence. Such a study may provide insight into the ways in which Catholicism has been broadly reconfigured within secular entertainment in a manner that absents the supernatural in order to appeal to secular

503 Ibid.
audiences. Moreover, it has the potential to consider not only how images of Catholicism are crafted for commercial consumption but also the implication of promoting these images.

Nonetheless, as performances of Catholic ideas of presence continue take the stage in the present moment, it is important to consider the ways in which these performances inform how Catholicism is understood in contemporary society. These performances engage histories of Catholicism to bridge the different ways in which the practice of Catholic belief is perceived among different audiences. The shows call upon a variety of histories of Catholicism (both fictional and performative) in order to cultivate dramaturgies that reflect the diversity of lived experiences with presence within the practice of Catholicism. While these performances inevitably do not encompass the full diversity of expressions of Catholic belief, they nonetheless begin to reimagine the ways in which narratives of Catholicism are disseminated for public consumption. By turning to the secular theatre for production, these performances begin to re-envision how secular spaces can be used to account for the different strains of lived experience of religious belief rather than presenting a primary overarching narrative of Judeo-Christian beliers. In doing so, the secular theatre raises awareness to the broader diversity of human experience, in this case, with regards to religious practice.
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