Drama in worship

There are good reasons to engage drama in presenting the Word in worship. Biblical texts were often derived from oral tradition and retain freshness when spoken rather than read. For those of us who know the texts well, drama often brings fresh insight to familiar stories. Drama is participatory and inclusive. For this reason, it is good to invite people of all ages to perform, selecting actors for their ability rather than giving over the activity to young people. The following dramatic forms will be explained: storytelling, drama, tableaux and dramatic reading. We will also consider the benefits of videorecording a dramatic presentation.

**Storytelling**

This is the simplest form for presenting the Word in dramatic form. A storyteller tells the text from memory, engaging the congregation with eye contact, minimal gestures and use of space. The Network of Biblical Storytellers Australia, part of an international network, encourages and facilitates storytellers this method. The Art of Story is a short course at the Centre for Theology and Ministry to develop skill and inspire people to speak Biblical text, wisdom tales and poetry from memory.

**Drama**

Effective drama relies on the movements, gestures and expression of the performers to carry meaning and to express the emotional content of the text. This will be achieved when the performers fully embody the character they are presenting. The performers’ lines need to flow out of their movement and gesture so it is good to start by finding these before adding the text. You will find that when the focus is placed on gesture, performers will more easily improvise around the text, making the words their own.

Performers need sufficient rehearsal time to memorise their lines and to work with others till their movement and gestures are fully integrated with the text, and they feel confident of their cues. To achieve a dramatic presentation the performers need to be script free. If you can’t manage sufficient rehearsal time to have performers memorise their lines, you are better to choose another dramatic form such as tableaux or dramatic reading.

**The Director’s role**

When working with a group of performers, it is a good idea to set aside one person to direct, or take on the role of “outside eye”, who leads the work of rehearsal, blocking the action (deciding how performers move within the performing space) and encouraging performers to refine, or amplify gestures, expression and movement. It is very difficult to be both performer and director. The director’s role includes liaising with the worship leader to ensure the space is clear, safe and uncluttered to ensure focus on the drama. If lighting and sound support is required it is the task of the director to liaise with sound and lighting technicians to support the drama. Each of the following forms will benefit from having a dedicated director.
Video
You may prefer to create a filmed version of your drama, leaving performers free to enter worship. There’s less need to memorise text, and the action can be caught in several takes which may be less demanding of your performers. A good editor will pull it all together and can incorporate interesting effects and add music if desired. You also have the opportunity to control the light and select appropriate outdoor locations as a backdrop.

Tableaux
This form works best for Biblical texts where large-scale action, or high emotional intensity create a challenge for human actors to embody. A tableau is like a freeze-frame photographic image. You can work up a strong presentation with a narrator reading the text and working with a group of performers to create a series of stop action scenes. The ensemble of actors may represent different actors in the drama, captured at key moments in the story. Or the whole ensemble may represent different emotional states within a moment in the text. You can have fun creating images of non-human elements with the ensemble working together to create a single image.

In rehearsal, start with an energetic physical warm-up and then work with the performers to create scenes from the story. Don’t try for too many scenes as the narrator will continue to link the scenes. A few really strong images work best. Make sure the performers use different levels (close to ground, mid level and reaching up high), and look for different states of tension in the scenes. Practice achieving clear, sharp stops. When presenting the tableaux, allow the time between changes from one scene to another to vary. You may ask the performers to hold some of the images for a long time through the narration, then move through two or three quick changes. Rehearse transitions too, so that the way the performers move from one scene to the next is consistent with the imagery or pace of the story.

Dramatic reading
The purpose of a rehearsed dramatic reading is to convey meaning through vocal expression. Think of this art form as similar to a radio play, where it is not possible to see the action. In this form, performers may read their lines at a lectern, but you have the opportunity to play with sound and vocal elements. In rehearsal, concentrate on vocal qualities - using dynamics of volume and pitch and try layering sounds. One performer may work with simple percussion instruments to incorporate appropriate sounds. If you have the technical capability of placing performers in different parts of the space you can greatly increase the dramatic potential. Look at the church or performance space with an eye for drama. Consider the possibilities of having some performers speaking from unexpected locations or even hidden from view.

Ask your performers to play with their voice and discover how they can vary vocalisations using the microphone. If you have a sound technician who can bring their skill to the rehearsal process, make good use of their expertise. This allows performers to become familiar with the capabilities of the microphone, whether wide or directional.

Choosing a form
Each of the forms outlined above lend themselves to particular kinds of texts. Drama is a good choice for representing dialogue, and for the parables, that is, stories in human scale. Tableaux are good for texts where the imagery, action or setting is “larger than life”, e.g. the story of Jonah or other prophets, Jesus clearing the temple, Jesus calming the storm, or being tempted in the wilderness. Dramatic reading is a good form for the sayings of Jesus, poetic texts and wherever there is little action, or for lengthy texts such as the Passion Narrative.

More help?
The Network of Biblical Storytellers Australia
Contact Annette Buckley, melgage203@netspace.net.au

Contact Christina Rowntree, Artfull Faith Co-ordinator, chris.rowntree@ctm.uca.edu.au to learn more about the Art of Story course, for more ideas, or to present a workshop to explore some of these dramatic forms.