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FOCUS ON THE ARTS

**Gregg Garner's Thoughts | Recent and Upcoming Productions in Tennessee
The Impact of Performing Arts in El Salvador, Uganda & the Philippines**



By Gregg D. Garner

THOUGHTS

The arts are often considered impractical and typically fall within the scope of “extra-curricular” for most education systems. Given, there are some forms of art that are, at best, media schemes for selling a product, and at their worst, a favor from an influential uncle to his favorite nephew so he could display his tantrum-inspired photography on the wall of a building he’ll one day inherit. The kind of art that that this edition of the Global Voice is going to capture, however, is the kind that has meaning, and is intentionally done with the purpose to serve others and help them engage the gift of life.

Genesis 1 introduces God as Creator. His creative efforts culminate in ordering an environment for human habitation, coupled with the potential for humanity to work with the materials he gave them, and turn that environment into a

home, and a beautiful one at that. The beauty of creation however, wasn’t the end of God’s creative effort; the aesthetic was only one aspect of the artistic endeavor. God also gave humanity the responsibility to make sense of their environment, to learn how to talk about it (education); *“and whatever the man named it, that was its name,”* (Gen. 2:19); to learn how to make use of it (food production, shelter, and clothing); and to learn how to develop as people in his image, moving towards an understanding of life (tree of life), rather than merely a scientific or philosophical pursuit of reason through the acquisition of knowledge (tree of knowledge).

Created in the image of God, our creative endeavors should include this effort to understand the life we’ve been given; to make sense of the mystery by walking through life being taught by God.

I believe that an artistic approach to life can ensure we take the time to appreciate the mystery of our existence, and walk it out with God. Allowing the Lord to speak into our moment and help us make sense of it.

Chapter 3 of Genesis hints that this was God’s intention with man and woman as he came in the cool of the breeze of the garden to walk with them, but the people didn’t show up for class. Humanity instead chose to make sense of life by breaking down what was before them into digestible bits of information: *“She saw the tree was good for food, to look at, and to make one wise”* (Gen. 3:6)

I believe that an artistic approach to life can ensure we take the time to appreciate the mystery of our existence, and walk it out with God. Allowing the Lord to speak into our moment and help us make sense of it, rather than searching for reasons why things are they way they are, on our own. This is a creative venture, it’s art. You can’t attach yourself to an algorithm and predict outcomes. You have to enjoy improvisation, and be patient to sit in the unfolding of a storyline that moves through action, dialogue, and even silence.

There’s so much to say about a biblical theology for art, and perhaps I’ll write more in the future, but for now, enjoy this edition of the Global Voice where you’ll see us implementing this kind of creative work for God’s people to move into an understanding of the life he’s intended for them. It’s good. Very good.



A Dramatic Beginning

Unearthing Talent in Salvadoran Youth

written by C.F. Edwards

Last year on a stage in Suchitoto, El Salvador, 26 Salvadoran youth put on an original theater production.

They had never acted before. The play, *El Bus*, reflected daily life in El Salvador, told through a variety of characters each with their own story arc. The play's setting was a bus stop, and this setting was the intersection for the many themes woven into the production—family unity, immigration, respect for the older generation, work ethic, and gang violence.

I recently sat down with two people who were involved in bringing this script to the stage: Sara Davis and Lavy Fernandez. Sara directed the play, under the instruction of writer/director Gregg Garner, and Lavy assisted with acting classes, facilitated logistics, and translated the script into Spanish.

"One of the most impactful aspects of the production for me was having prolonged time with the youth I was working with," Sara said to me. "These kids didn't have any formal training, so we were at square one

with instruction. We gave them a story that touched on many themes that are common in their daily lives, but aren't spoken about. We saw them begin to recognize their own intersections with the storyline, and at the same time become aware of their capacity to convey a powerful message."

I asked Sara and Lavy what have proven to be the most fruitful and memorable developments since *El Bus* was performed, and Lavy said, "I think about how some youth were really naturally talented and they didn't know it. One of them is now our intern, Angie. From the moment she stepped on stage, she did a great job. She was playing an old woman, so it wasn't easy, but she did really, really well." Now, as an intern, she has the opportunity to use her talent while working with children in the neighborhood around our headquarters.

All the youth want to learn drama, and Angie is able to help!

Sara added, "We had a teacher who auditioned, and she ended up participating through to the very end. She was all ears, paying very close attention to everything being taught. She was there as an actor, but also as a teacher who taught drama in schools. She was a really wonderful presence, and now she's been involved in all of our efforts for teachers since then."

As we continued to talk about this remarkable first dramatic effort in El Salvador, our conversation naturally turned toward anticipation for our long-term work with our interns, neighbors, and the youth who participated in *El Bus*. Those first seeds are sprouting, and we anticipate many more years of cultivating their talents for drama and storytelling.

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Recording Fresh Perspectives Music as an Inroad to Friendship

written by Laurie Germeraad Kagay

“When you’ve been locked up for six years for stealing a coconut, with no trial date set, you have plenty of songs on your heart to sing,” Chris Cameron told me. He knew this first hand—Chris had helped imprisoned Filipino youth write and record their own songs.

Chris manages a recording studio in Nashville, but also takes his skills with him when he works as a development worker in the Philippines. When I asked him what their songs were about, he reflected, “They’re simple. I remember just hearing ‘nanay’ repeated over and over. It’s the local word for ‘mom.’” The young men had less than 24 hours to write songs before recording, yet when Chris showed up to record, he found that they had compiled 13 songs! “They have plenty to say, but to tell them that there are people listening, people who’d like to hear their story—is powerful.”

Chris understands the role music plays in developing people. Development is in our organization’s name, and we mean just that: Developing people in their knowledge of the Lord and their capacity of service. But often, people don’t know that’s what they need. It’s the experience of doing something together, in this case recording music, that exposes people to the possibility of working together to make something meaningful. The arts provide an inroad to deeper relationships. Chris has witnessed this time and time again.

As Chris entered into the creative process with these young men, trust had to be established. It began on a technical level - trusting him as a producer, but gradually, it blossomed into friendship. The relationship deepened as the young men witnessed that Chris wasn’t going to breeze through this process, but was dedicated to give them a quality product. “This wasn’t some record-

ing on my phone. I’ve gained a lot of know-how in this arena, and we took quality equipment with us and projected video of what I was doing onto the wall, so they could watch. I’d walk them through the steps and get their



Calven facilitating a songwriting workshop for youth in a detention center, 2015.

input. When they received their own CD with their song on it, they were thrilled... They were so pumped.”

Through all of this, you’d see Calven Poquiz by Chris’s side. On one of his earlier trips to the Philippines, Chris helped Calven record some of his first songs. Now Calven taught one of the sessions on songwriting to the youth at the detention center. “Ever since I helped Calven record music, every time I am in the Philippines, he joins me. He literally leaves work and travels with me everywhere I go, assisting in ministry. But music was the door that led to his committed friendship. Everyone who knows me in the Philippines knows Calven now.” *This* is the reason Chris loves music. “Music is just the door to wonderful relationships. Calven and I would not be partners in ministry if it weren’t for the opportunity we had to make music together.”

Some people say that the best songs are



Calven recording his first song with Chris in 2013.



Chris and Calven continue to partner in ministry. This photo was taken in February when they facilitated a bible conference for youth (and of course led worship together).

birthed out of suffering. But they’re made known—recorded, published, distributed—through someone who hears it and says “This stuff is good, Let me help.” The aim of music recording isn’t to make people famous; it’s to show them that their song is worth listening to. In that process, you not only gain a friend, you gain the confidence that your words matter, to other people, and to the Lord.

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear. --Psalm 10:17



Ssekabira Moses grew up in Uganda playing the drums.

His father initially taught him how to drum on jerry cans, yellow plastic containers made for holding water. In primary school, Moses taught himself new rhythms by watching someone dance or listening to someone sing, and making music to go with it. He became one of the best percussionists at his school. He played many kinds of drums, as well as the xylophone, akogo (thumb piano), adungu (a harp-like stringed instrument), and endingidi (a violin-like stringed instrument). He enjoyed the adungu so much that he made one for himself to play at home. With his school's music group, he performed in numerous competitions against many other schools throughout the central region.

"Music helped me socially, as we would perform before hundreds of people at times, and to enjoy the other students involved," Moses said about the arts. "I also learned how to be creative, and to teach myself things. I felt so good to be able to play music."

In addition to school competitions, he would play for churches and for men's and women's choirs. One of his proudest moments was when the principal of a secondary (high) school paid him to train their

Passing on a Message The Need to Carry Meaning to Uganda

written by Brynn Buchanan

drummers. He taught students older than himself!

As much as he enjoyed the music, Moses acknowledges the downfalls of the program. Its goal was to compete, win, and give the school a good reputation. In order to accomplish such, the music students had to practice for long hours, missing countless classes and performing poorly on exams. He felt taken advantage of, as his family couldn't afford school fees, and he was only kept in school because of what he could offer the music program. As soon as the music program ended, his family was required to pay their debts or he wasn't allowed to attend school. While any student could join the program, those who couldn't perform well enough to compete were cut off from participating. Also, although the music always had a message (i.e. AIDS awareness), there was no emphasis on its communication, only on the trophy.

But when Moses saw *Breathe, A New Musical* (an original production at the Arts at Center Street), he experienced the opposite. "Everyone participated to pass the message, and it wasn't a competition. G.O.D. Int'l getting attention wasn't the goal. That

We've known Moses since we first arrived in Uganda in 2004. He was a young boy in the choir at the church where we were ministering. He assisted his parents in showing our team hospitality every time we were in Uganda. We supported him through secondary school and in his training as an electrician. Now, Moses lives in Nashville and attends the Institute for G.O.D. where he is learning the Bible and Community Development in order to serve his people in Uganda, alongside his wife Megan. Of the photo on the left he says, "This is my story. As you can tell I was going through a lot then. But God has done a work in you guys [at G.O.D.] which has been transferred to [G.O.D. East Africa] that we are also able to interpret our story. Thank you Lord!"

was always how it was for my school, but in *Breathe*, it's for each other."

Of the message he received, he says: "People in power put down those who work hard, in order to be known for their greatness. And parents have to advocate for their kids, no matter if the powerful aren't hearing or concerned, or are chasing you away, you don't give up. I got all that from *Breathe*."

Moses is excited about what this kind of art could do for his people in Uganda. "People's lives can really be touched and changed. It's a great way to pass messages to them. The arts can open up their minds to help them see what's going on in life, learn and gain new perspectives."

This is the kind of empowerment we're a part of where we serve.

Becoming Fragile and Unafraid

The Impact of Breathe, A New Musical

written by Brett Logan Madron

Jaelyn Roufs' (Dottie Walker) favorite part in "Breathe: A New Musical" is when Skylar Aaseby (Morten Walker), her dad in the production, asks if she wants to make some Dottie Donuts, and she says 'YES!' and runs downstairs to begin the task.

In the midst of a musical that more often deals with solemn themes like childhood terminal illness, it's one of the lighter moments that all audience members need along the way.

If you had the opportunity to see Breathe recently, then you may have carried some of those themes with you. But what about those involved, who had to embody the message of Breathe, and get into the character of people in vulnerable life situations? I recently sat down with a few of the main cast members to see just how the candid message of this production had affected them over the course of its run at the Arts at Center Street.

We think our job is what is important. But older people will often say 'I spent too much time working, not enough time with my kids.' Breathe makes you listen to that perspective, and make sure you're spending your effort in the right place.



The cast of Breathe was continually surprised by audience members whose life experiences were very similar to the parts they acted on stage. After one mother of a childhood cancer survivor attended the show, she brought her daughter to meet the cast. The children's cast made her posters and cards, telling her what an inspiration her life was and how they would be praying for her.

As I spoke with Skylar Aaseby and Tori Roufs, who play Morten and Charity Walker, a couple who have to deal with the heartache of childhood terminal illness as a family, they both initially described their roles as 'heavy'. From researching the mindset of a person who has a terminal illness to becoming more aware of life's unpredictability, both expressed the deep effect it had on them. But, perhaps not in the way you might imagine.

"I think in life we have an inclination to make our job what is important," Skylar commented, "and I think the perspective of older men will often say, 'I spent too

much time working and I missed out on too much when my kids were younger.' Breathe makes you listen to the older perspective and make sure you're spending your effort in the right place."

Skylar and Tori both reflected on how this production has even strengthened their marriages. "It changed Jason and my relationship a lot. Just enjoying each other more and taking time to do that. Thinking about the limits of time and the fragility of life changed us," Tori said.

Skylar reflected, "This musical has given my wife and me words to communicate that we didn't have before. Although she has talked to me about being more present at times, there was an inability in me, perhaps because of youthfulness, to hear that the way I needed to. This musical made me more sensitive. It helped me to understand her, and our dynamic has changed."

Continued on page 6...





Breathe, continued...

While Justice Garner, a lead member of the children’s cast, couldn’t reflect on marriage, he was able to tap into the need to appreciate and make the most of life in the midst of varying circumstances. Justice, who plays a hospitalized JoJo Cruz, said his favorite part about playing his character was, “Even though I’m sick, I’m still joyful and I still like dancing around and dreaming of better things.”

Justice was particularly impacted by the musical because of a hope he has. “Learning about other kids that are sick really impacted me because I want to be a doctor when I grow up, so I really want to help those kids. It helped me to learn about them so I can help them when I’m older.”

So it seems, learning and acting out a character’s struggle makes you sensitive to it. It can even lead to a greater sense of empathy towards those with similar struggles in real life. (Particularly when your director helps you make those connections before every show.)

Tori reflected, “It made me sensitive to realizing that people are going through things that we don’t know, that we can’t see on the surface.”

Some of the characters in Breathe looked fine, but inside were going through so much. It’s made me want to be more encouraging and supportive of people, knowing that what is on the surface is not always the whole story.”

When asked what the biggest lesson was that she took away from Breathe, Jaelyn said quickly: “Don’t be afraid.” The fragility of life can make us want to put up walls or protect ourselves, to the point of missing out on the very life we want to protect. But dimpled little Jaelyn reminds us that if we do, we miss out on Dottie’s donuts and all the other simple, wonderful moments we can have with those around us. •

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-- Sara Davis, Manager of The Arts at Center Street



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