

ARTS AND CULTURE

'Martin Luther' Offers Great Piece of Theatre

January 11, 2017 By Father Robert Lauder

I JUST FINISHED writing a letter to the co-author of a great play that I saw last evening. The co-author is Max McLean and the play is "Martin Luther on Trial." The other author is Chris Cragin-Day. I am encouraging anyone who loves theatre or is interested in religion, to get to the Pearl Theatre, which is in Manhattan on 42nd Street between 10th and 11th avenues. The play's run will end on Jan. 29.

This is the type of play that I hope both college and high school students have been encouraged to see, perhaps in relation to a religion course or a course on drama. It provides an evening in the theatre during which the audience will be challenged to think as exciting ideas are presented by both plot and dialogue.

In Awe of Artists

I am in awe of artists, especially authors and actors. A priest friend of mine believed that all performers should go straight to heaven because they give people such pleasure. When he first told me his view, I think I found it a little silly. Now I don't. Of course, I don't believe that art, even great art, saves or redeems either the artist or the viewer of great art. Only Jesus saves and redeems us.

However, I believe strongly that it would be a serious error to trivialize the importance of art or to believe that great art is not important. It can be a life changer. A friend of mine told me that reading Graham Greene's novel, "The End of the Affair," led to his conversion into the Catholic Church.

Artists, who are creative, mirror the creativity of God. Of course artists are under the same moral obligation that all of us are. The ideal that Jesus presented was not that all of us should create works of art, but that we should love God and love our neighbor. Still, I believe that great art can challenge people, enlighten people and educate people. An experience of great art can humanize us and help us to enter more deeply into God's plan for us.

McLean is the founder and artistic director of the Fellowship for Performing Arts (FPA). This is the company which has also put on the plays "The Screwtape Letters" and "The Most Reluctant Convert," in both of which McLean stars. In the Playbill for "Martin Luther on Trial," he has a brief statement about what FPA is trying to do. Pointing out that some people refer to the event that Luther inaugurated as the Protestant Reformation, and others refer to it as Revolt, he writes the following:

"Regardless where you come down, few will disagree that Luther left an indelible imprint on Western Civilization.

That imprint – from Justification by Faith alone, to the scandal of a splintered Christianity, and his role in the German-Jewish question – is still with us today.

'From a Christian Worldview'

"With the 500th anniversary of this moment approaching in 2017, we wanted to explore this Shakespearean-size personality on stage. Fellowship for Performing Arts' mission is to present theatre from a Christian worldview that engages a diverse audience. To be true to our mission, we are committed to the notion that the world is not the way it ought to be, and that 'we' (individually) are part of the problem...

"Many depictions of Luther's story deal with a troubled soul and conclude with the heroic 'Here I Stand' speech in 1521. Most choose not to look at the aggressive behavior of his later years. We care to look at both. We have, also, set the play in the 'Afterlife' to add a supernatural dimension to our story in the hope of sparking the imagination and inspiring dialogue toward renewal and reconciliation."

I cannot recall when my imagination was as "sparked" as it was last evening at "Martin Luther on Trial." I liked everything about the two-hour-and-10-minute production. I thought the staging was excellent and the acting superior.

One actor played six roles, among them Sigmund Freud and Pope Francis, and did all well. Among an excellent cast, I thought Paul Schoeffler as The Devil and Fletcher McTaggart as Martin Luther were really extraordinary. I don't think I have ever seen either of these actors previously. If I had, I suspect that I would not forget them.

I am delighted that there is a theatre group such as FPA. In the letter I wrote to McLean, I mentioned to him what I am sure he already knows, namely that what FPA is trying to do is very important. Christians need signs in a secular society that speak directly to their faith.

Good theatre that deals with serious topics can be a special blessing. If you are looking for that type of blessing, try to catch "Martin Luther on Trial" by Jan. 29.

Father Lauder is a philosophy professor at St. John's University, Jamaica, and author of "Pope Francis' Spirituality and Our Story" (Resurrection Press).