



Aristotle, Bodyslams, and Christian Drama

Or, What a Greek philosopher and a bunch of sweaty guys in spandex can teach us about Christian drama.

By John Cospers
Righteousinsanity.com

Introduction

How do I know that the WWE is theater in the traditional sense? Because of Aristotle.

Thousands of years before Hulk Hogan was born, the foundations of theater were laid in Greece. They were forged by the playwrights of the Greek theater and solidified by the philosopher Aristotle. In his book "Poetics", a must read for any student or teacher of theater, he laid out the six unities of theater: Action, Character, Ideas, Language, Music, and Spectacle. These six unities can be found in almost every type of dramatic production, from the stage to the screen and back. And they certainly define the theater of the absurd that is WWE.

Action - Plenty of it. Not just the matches, but the storylines. Love triangles, betrayals, family feuds, power grabs, revenge. You name it, they do it.

Character - Vince McMahon continues to create a never ending parade of distinct and entertaining characters, each with their own strengths, weaknesses, and goals.

Ideas - This relates to dramatic themes and messages. The theme of good vs. evil is a recurring one, but there are plenty more at work.

Language - Lots of it. Plenty of monologues and dialogues keep the storylines moving. Dusty Rhodes, The Rock, Chris Jericho, and Rowdy Roddy Piper are among the best at creating unique, character-specific, entertaining dialogue.

Music - Everybody has an entrance theme, and they are used to great effect. You want to see a Pavlovian response? Play just the sound effect of breaking glass from the beginning of Stone Cold Steve Austin's music over the loud speakers in a crowd of wrestling fans. The Undertaker's bell, the opening chord of Motorhead's "The Game", and "If you smelllllllll..." all generate the same type of response.

Spectacle - Smoke, lights, pyrotechnics, cage matches, hardcore matches, ladder matches... there's a ton of spectacle.

This e-book is a compilation of blogs I have written the last two years about wrestling's connection to drama, specifically playwriting. The first five segments are a five-part study on Aristotle's unities of theater. Each section begins with a look at how that particular element is used in wrestling and ends with exercises and questions to help you or your team apply the lessons learned to Christian Drama.

Following this five-part series is a section entitled, "What the WWE Can Teach Us About Drama." This section was adapted from a two-part blog, and contains a series of lessons that we can adapt to our writing and production efforts.

The final segment is something I threw in just for fun. For those who have never seen wrestling - and those who might want a trip down memory lane, I've put together a list of recommended superstars you can look up and

watch online.

I know wrestling isn't for everyone, but it has played a large part in shaping me into the creative writer and director I am. Taken as it is intended to be - as a combination of athleticism and soap opera - professional wrestling continues to be a delightful and entertaining "humbug" that would have made P.T. Barnum proud.

This e-book is dedicated to my old roommate Randy, who rejuvenated my own passion for wrestling when he and his 150 hours of wrestling videos moved in for the summer back in 2004. I'd also like to dedicate this to two of my favorite wrestlers and men of God: Shawn Michaels and Ted DiBiase.

Enough intro; let's rumble.

Plot

Introduction

It was supposed to be a beautiful, special moment. The boss's daughter, little Stephanie, was getting married to her true love, a handsome young fellow named Test. Daddy had spared no expense. The wrestling ring was decorated with beautiful flowers. A man and woman sang a romantic song called, "Together," a song originally sung at the wedding of Miss Elizabeth and Randy "Macho Man" Savage. Everything was perfect.

Then all of a sudden... HE showed up.

The thorn in the boss's side, the trouble maker, the instigator known as Triple H entered the arena - and he wasn't even invited! Nevertheless, Triple H had come to object to the wedding on the grounds that Stephanie was already married. Triple H then directed everyone to look at the JumboTron, where video footage showed Triple H taking a drugged Stephanie McMahon to a drive-thru wedding chapel in Vegas.

Stephanie's perfect wedding day was ruined.

Everyone Loves Drama

Plots like the one described above have been a part of professional wrestling for decades. Wrestlers are constantly in conflict with one another. Friends betray friends and become enemies. The strong and powerful use their influence to cheat the small and weak. And you can forget about true love, because no love lasts forever inside the wrestling ring. Matter of fact, I've never seen a happy ending to a wrestling wedding, ever.

There's a very clear purpose to the plots that carry on in and around the wrestling ring - to sell tickets, to draw TV viewers, to sell DVDs, and to sell pay-per-views. It's an old formula that still works, even in an age when the audience knows it's all staged. Why? Because people LOVE stories. And every good promoter knows that a good story is the key to selling out the arena - or the armory - on a Friday night.

Wrestling stories are cyclical. Rarely does one story end without begetting another story. It's the nature of the beast. The wrestling promoters can't afford to lose viewers in between plotlines. But when it comes to skits and plays, it's important to know how a good drama begins, progresses, and ends.

Elements of Plot

Plot can be broken down into the same elements you've probably encountered during your studies of literature.

Exposition - The story begins, and we meet the characters. In wrestling, stories often begin with one guy challenging another. It may also begin with two wrestlers forging an unlikely alliance, tag teaming in several matches

despite their obvious differences.

Inciting incident - This is the moment that gets the story moving. One wrestler calls out another. Or, one of the partners in that tenuous partnership turns on the other after a crushing defeat. Sides have been drawn. The audience will feel empathy for one fellow and hate the other. Both men are now on a collision course with destiny.

Rising action - A series of events leading to the story's climax. In drama or literature, we often see a main character, the protagonist (good guy), overcoming a series of obstacles in order to reach their goal. Heel (bad guy) champions are famous for putting obstacles in the path of babyface (good guy) rivals. "You want me to fight you? You have to win a number one contender's match in a steep cage against - THE BIG SHOW!" As the action progresses, tension builds. The hero wins victories and suffers set backs. The villain seems to gain the upper hand. And the audience really, REALLY wants to see him get beat up.

Climax - The high point of the story, where the main character wins or loses in a moment of finality. This may not be the first match between protagonist and antagonist in the wrestling ring. Some stories stretch for months and cover many matches, as the babyface tries to unseat the evil heel who holds that elusive title belt. But when the climax does come, things are changed forever. No rematches. No second chances. The battle is won (or lost), and both men move on to new stories.

Falling Action/Resolution - The aftermath and ending of the story. In a play, this is where the murderer gets carted off to jail and the location of the stolen jewels is revealed. In the wrestling ring, it's a brief moment of triumph for the victor - before a new challenger emerges!

Plot is the backbone of story, no matter what form it takes. It is the hook that draws your audience in and the path that they - along with your characters - must follow. A weak plot leads to books being put aside and channels turned. A strong plot gets people talking and sticks with the viewer long after the play is done. That's the kind of plot you want to build.

Writing exercises

1. Have your students select a Bible story. Not just a favorite scripture, but something with a storyline: David and Goliath, Jonah and the whale, the conversion of Saul, etc.
2. Have the students read their story and identify the plot points: Exposition, Inciting Incident, Rising Action, Climax, Resolution. In addition have the students identify the major and minor characters, and the themes of that story.
3. Have the students create an outline or a synopsis of a brand new story uses the same kinds of characters and teachers a similar theme as the story they chose. The story should follow a similar outline as their Biblical story. They can

set it in any time frame, any genre. Encourage them to be as creative as possible.

4. Share your Bible stories, outlines, and new stories with the rest of the group.

For further discussion

1. Ask the students if they can identify movies, books, or other stories that follow a similar plot as theirs. Many movies, for example, have a David and Goliath type of structure. Many more movies have a Christ allegory. Where do they see similar stories to their own?

2. What does your story have to say to our world today?

3. Why do you think this story appears in other places, even if they are not Christian sources?

Character

Introduction

I can still remember the first time I ever heard of Ted DiBiase. I remember, because I remember how much I hated his guts.

DiBiase first appeared on television in a series of short films promoting his arrival in the WWF. Vince McMahon often used this method to establish a new character before they ever hit the ring. It was his way of revealing to the audience whether they should cheer or boo.

Ted DiBiase was made to be booed. Calling himself the Million Dollar Man, the wrestler appeared in a number of segments where he would flaunt his wealth in order to get his way, cheating someone else in the process. The most memorable segment, for me, was the one where he paid off the manager of a public pool to kick all of the kids out of the pool so he could have the pool all to himself. The manager refused at first, but the Million Dollar Man insisted, "Everyone has a price!" After laying down enough cash, the kids were kicked out, forced to watch as the Million Dollar Man lounged on a floating raft, laughing his inimitable million dollar laugh.

By the time he made his wrestling debut, the Million Dollar Man was one of the most hated men in all of wrestling.

Good (and Bad) Characters

Characters are the people in your story. They include a protagonist who is usually the main character and often the hero. The protagonist has a goal; there is something they want that drives them to act. By pursuing their goal, we then have a plot, or story to tell.

Of course every protagonist has some conflict, some force he or she must overcome, and very often that conflict comes from another character, known as the antagonist. Their goal may be to stop the protagonist from achieving their goal. They may share the same goal as the protagonist, with the added goal of achieving their goal before the protagonist can.

For decades, protagonists and antagonists were easy to identify in the black and white world of wrestling. The protagonists were the pretty boys, usually smaller than their rivals, who were loved by the ladies and nice to the kids. The antagonists were bigger, meaner, and hated by everyone. They would cheat as much as possible to attain their goal of winning, without any remorse.

In later years, however, certain personas that were once the domain of antagonists began to develop a following. Stone Cold Steve Austin was the first to break out as more of a "gray area" hero. Eddie Guerrero later did the same, becoming one of the few babyfaces who was cheered for lying, cheating, and stealing.

When creating your characters, the most important thing isn't following archetypes, but creating some sort of connection between your audience and

the protagonist. People cheered Stone Cold because saw themselves in his character - a guy who hated his boss and defied authority. He represented who they wanted to be deep down, and they took his side. Whether you're writing a play, a film, or a sketch, it is vitally important your audience connect with the main character. If not, they're just not going to care what happens to him. If you don't believe me, just Sean Waltman, aka. "X-Pac."

A strong antagonist is one way to beef up your protagonist. The best action movies, from *Die Hard* to James Bond, have strong, powerful, and dangerous villains. Nothing kills the drama of an action flick like a weak, uninteresting, and over matched villain.

All protagonists have both strengths and weaknesses in connection with their goal. Throughout the story, they use their strengths to pursue their goal, while the antagonist seeks out the weaknesses in his or her foe and tries to exploit them. A heel wrestler focusing on his opponent's surgically repaired neck is a typical example of this exploitation. Overcoming those weaknesses and developing new strengths often becomes a part of the journey for the protagonist, and while the protagonist doesn't always attain their goal, but the protagonist almost always comes out a better person as a result of the journey.

Writing exercises:

1. Pick a character from any story in the Bible. They can be a good guy or bad guy, an antagonist or a protagonist. Read the story, and identify that character's goal.
2. Make a list of strengths or weaknesses this character has.
3. Write down anything else you can identify that makes this character unique.
4. Identify any obstacles or people that oppose your character. What is the relationship between your character and the obstacles?
5. Looking at your character's strengths and weaknesses, identify some other character "types" that could possess the same traits. For example, could your character be a cowboy? A Wall Street trader? A dirty cop? A lawyer? A super model?
6. Take one of these different types and create a new character, based on the original. Identify their goal and their opponents or obstacles. Write a short outline, telling the new character's story from their point of view. Remember the outline you learned from the previous lesson on plot.

For further discussion

1. We already identified some "types" that your character compares to. Have you seen this type of character in other movies or literature? Who are they?

2. What lessons can we learn from your character? What do we learn from their actions? Their strengths? Their weaknesses?

3. How might your character's fate have changed if they had made different decisions? What if the bad guys chose to be good, or the good guys did something wrong? Would we learn anything new from this example?

Ideas/Thought

Introduction

Barry Horowitz had never won a match in his entire WWF career. He was a jobber, a wrestler whose only job was to lay down and lose to whatever “name” wrestler he was paired with on a given night. Thus, the world was shocked when one night, Barry Horowitz defeated the arrogant and prideful Scott Donna.

Scott Donna (better known outside the WWF as Chris Candido) was a physically fit wrestler who had taken the WWF by storm. With his talkative sister Sunny by his side, Scott had made himself the ire of WWF fans by demonstrating he was better than them. Scott would showboat in the rings constantly, doing jumping jacks while his opponent lay prone on the ground. Sunny would berate the crowds for their fat, lazy ways, praising her brother as the embodiment of all they would never be.

Then, Scott Donna lost to a jobber. Not once, not twice, but three times. David had defeated Goliath.

Universal Thoughts

Ideas/Thoughts are the messages that writers convey, consciously or subconsciously, through their writing. Every story has at least one idea. The larger the story, the more ideas you are likely to encounter.

The WWF/WWE has taken a great deal of criticism for its explicit content in recent years. While the show has become less kid-friendly, the storylines continue to play out the traditional good versus evil patterns they always have. The seven deadly sins still exist and hold sway over the wrestling world. Wrestling fans do not approve of wrestlers who are arrogant, prideful, greedy, jealous, or full of lust. And as Scott Donna found out, those who live in sin will eventually fall to the righteous and good.

Throughout human history, in every culture, good trumps evil. Even in sinful Hollywood, we see the same themes appear over and over. But while film, television, literature, and even wrestling convey these themes in a smooth, organic manner, Christian writers often struggle to convey their own ideas in the same smooth fashion. Too often they come across as preachy, and their stories suffer as a result.

The reason so much Christian writing suffers this malady is because we approach our writing differently. Christians have an agenda, a message we want to convey. There’s nothing wrong with this. In fact, it’s what God commanded us to do. The problem is, when you start out with an agenda in the front of your mind, the tendency in writing is to preach.

Playwrights, screenwriters, and fiction writers must never, ever preach. We are story tellers, and our job is to tell stories. Period. If you find characters are starting to preach and give long monologues, cut the line

entirely and find way to deliver the message within the story and without a sermon. The old saying holds true with drama as it does with life, "Preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words."

Group Exercise

Here's an exercise that will help you discover ideas and thought in writing.

1. Have each student write down a character name and one or two word description on a piece of paper. It can be as simple as "Bill - Cowboy" or "Hannah - Business executive." Have them write down a second character name and description on a second piece of paper. The two characters can be similar, related, or completely unrelated.
2. On the second piece of paper, have the students write down some sort of conflict. For example, there could be an argument over who was at fault in a car accident; or a sports contest; or a negotiation of some sort.
3. Have the students pass the second paper along to someone else. They will then take the first character, created by them, and the second character, created by someone else, and write a short script that pits the two characters in the conflict written down with their second character. (To save paper, have them use the pages they wrote characters and descriptions on to write their scripts; the trees will thank you.)
4. Have the students pair up, and read each play aloud. As a class, discuss the story, the conflict, and see if you can identify the ideas or themes the author has written about. In other words, what message did the writer convey through their story?
5. At the same time you are identifying themes, dig your Bibles out and try to find a verse than can correspond with each play.

For further discussion

1. How could you use these scripts in ministry? Are they useable? Could they be adapted?
2. Did you find yourself writing consciously writing on the themes in your work?
3. Do you agree with the message in your drama? What does that theme or idea mean to you?
4. Think about the last movie you saw. What messages did it convey? Were they worldly messages, or did they agree with a Biblical worldview?

5. Can you think of a "worldly" movie that had a strong Christian theme within it? Why do you think that happens, even with writers who are not Christians?

Language

Introduction

Time now for a quiz. See if you can identify the wrestling character by the dialogue written below. (If you are not familiar with wrestling, find a friend who is, and see how many they get right.)

1. Remember to say your prayers and take your vitamins!
2. And that's the bottom line.
3. It's true, it's true.
4. You didn't say that. Tell me you didn't say that!
5. It doesn't matter what your name is!!!
6. Ahhhhhhhhhh, what a rush!
7. To be the man, you have to beat the man!
8. You will never e-e-e-e-e-ever be the same, a-gain!
9. You can't see me!
10. Have a nice day!

Tying things together

Language is the glue that holds the first three unities of drama together.

Language conveys story; the dialogue between characters guides us through the exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution. Stage drama in particular is a mostly verbal form of storytelling. We cannot get into characters' inner thoughts like you can in prose fiction, and visuals are not as easy to pull off as they are in film. Therefore, the playwright must rely on language to tell his or her story.

Wrestlers are forever talking, performing sketches or "promos" to advance their feuds and storylines. The end game, of course, is to get people emotionally vested in the characters so they buy tickets the next time the wrestlers come to town, or tune in to see the end of the story at the pay-per-view. But just as in stage dramas, it is language, dialogue, that drives that story.

Language also conveys character. It allows us to form judgments of character just by the way people use it. Close your eyes, and you can tell the difference between a country bumpkin and a Wall Street tycoon by their grammar and diction. If you've ever seen Monty Python and the Holy Grail, for example, you can distinguish the knights and royal characters from the peasants by how they speak English. The knights use more sophisticated language; the peasants speak cockney.

As demonstrated in the introduction above, the voice and words of a great wrestler are as distinct as the tights they wear to the ring. Their words reveal character, telling us who they are and what they stand for. And the words are the driving force in their storylines between matches.

By way of conveying plot and character, language also conveys ideas. Again, we do not want characters delivering sermonettes. But through their words, we will learn the lessons inherent in their stories. Abstract ideas become concrete thanks to the words our characters speak.

Writing exercises:

1. Choose a story from the Bible that has two characters. You can use part of a larger story, but the scene must have a beginning, middle, and end. Spend a few moments brainstorming on these characters. Who are they? How do you think they might speak? How can you use language to distinguish between them?
2. Write a script of the story using the two characters you have chosen. As you are writing, be sure to:
 - a. Move the story forward using their dialogue, with each line building on what has gone before.
 - b. Convey who the characters are. Avoid having them say "I'm Elmer Higgins the world champion chicken plucker." He can introduce himself as Elmer (unless the other character already knows him), but don't have them come out and say who they are. Use the dialogue to tell us without specifically stating who these people are.
3. Read your scripts aloud with the group. As you do, critique one another on how well you've told a story, how well you used dialogue to define the characters, and how clearly the ideas and thoughts of the story are presented.

For further discussion:

1. Language is a good way to convey character in part because we judge people in every day life based on the way they speak. What sort of judgments do we make about people based on language? Is it fair to judge people in this way? How would God want us to make our judgments about others?
2. Language in drama can be tricky, because characters often say one thing and do another. Are we guilty of the same thing in real life? How does that affect the way other people look at us?

Music and Spectacle

Introduction

Aristotle said a great deal when he gave music and spectacle equal importance with the elements of story that we, as modern students of language, consider most important. But are they really on equal footing with plot, character, ideas, and language?

Back in the day, wrestlers would come to the ring with no fanfare. Your typical wrestling match would begin with the wrestlers' names being announced over a loud speaker with no music and no fancy lighting. Not even a spotlight. The fans would cheer or boo, depending on if they liked that particular wrestler, but there was not much to it.

Then, along came Sgt. Slaughter, a former marine, who asked Vince McMahon Sr. if he could walk to the ring with the Marines hymn playing over the PA system. The crowd ate it up, and the promoter saw a golden opportunity. Now everyone has not only a theme song, but their own light and fireworks.

Bring 'em to their feet!

The music and spectacle that is the entrance of the modern wrestler has a powerful impact on an audience. Much like the trumpets that heralded the coming of kings in ancient Israel, theme songs inspire an almost Pavlovian response in a crowd. Some wrestlers are so connected with their fans, that the opening note (the bell of the Undertaker's theme) or sound (the shattering glass that precedes Stone Cold's theme) are enough to bring an arena to its feet.

Music is a powerful force in drama and film. Take the Star Wars movies, for example. George Lucas once said that the Star Wars movies were basically silent films. They would be more than incomplete without the musical score of John Williams. They would be empty. Music amplifies the story. It is the glue that holds the story together. It is the bridge that connects the story with our emotions.

Horror films are another great example of how music can create tension in an audience. If you have a copy of "Creature From the Black Lagoon" handy, fast forward to the scene near the end when the creature climbs on the boat and grabs Julie Adams, dragging her into the water. Watch it on mute, with no music. Then roll it back and play the music. See what a difference it makes?

Spectacle is obviously a huge part of modern film as well. Steven Spielberg used it to masterful effect in his films. The first time a brachiosaur is seen in Jurassic Park is a powerful example of the emotional impact spectacle can have on an audience. Yet even there, the spectacle is heightened by the themes of John Williams. It's something the movie audience at the time had never seen.

Many church drama teams have taken to human video - which is really

just a fancy new term for mime without the makeup. In human video, actors will tell a story without words set to music. Take away the music, the effect of the drama diminishes greatly.

The traditional big church Easter pageant is a great example of music and spectacle in drama. In addition to the music that tells the story, the large set pieces, live animals, and makeup effects used in crucifixion scenes add spectacle to the drama. Some churches have even used flying rigs to send Jesus up into heaven at the end!

You may not always have the time or resources to incorporate music or spectacle, but keep an open mind to when they might prove useful. They are as vital a part of the dramatic experience as the other four elements, and they can transform a good play into a great one.

Writing exercises

1. Let the students work in groups or pairs on this one. Choose a story from the Bible that you want to tell using music. The drama can be all set to music, like a human video, or it can use music as a dramatic element, like in a horror film.
2. After you have chosen your story, write an outline or a simple script for your drama, indicating where and how music would be used.
3. Looking at your drama, what elements of spectacle can you incorporate? Can you use costumes or props to make it more real or dramatic? What sort of surprises can you give your audience within the drama?
4. Allow the students time to work on the scene. Then come back for another session with music, and allow them to rehearse further. Each group will present their drama, using music. Groups can enlist help from other groups if they need more actors or someone to press play on the CD player.

For further discussion

Have one of the groups perform their drama without the music or spectacle elements. As a group, discuss the difference that the music and spectacle made on the drama. What was the difference with and without those elements?

What the WWE Can Teach Us About Drama

Part One

If you're reading this blog, you fall in one of three categories: you love wrestling and are thrilled by the title; you're at least intrigued by the title; you hate wrestling and are reading on so you can judge my logic. Judge all you want. I am a wrestling fan. I love the WWE and have loved it since the hey day of Hulk Hogan, Rowdy Roddy Piper, Ricky the Dragon Steamboat, Andre the Giant, Ted DiBiase, and the Junkyard Dog.

Many people are surprised (and some dismayed) when I tell them that the WWE has been one of the top influences on me as a sketch writer. (The other leading influences being Saturday Night Live, MTV's The State, and Monty Python.) I'll admit they're not always on top of their game, but on their better days, the WWE produces some of the best sketches and storylines on TV, and they present them with the most colorful collection of characters anywhere. Where else can you see a dead man, a leprechaun, rednecks, Olympic heroes, 1950's greasers, and even the Boogey Man do battle?

Whatever you think of professional wrestlers, there's a lot they can teach us about drama.

1. Drama is larger than life. I know a guy named Pat. When Pat goes to work in the morning, he says hi to his co-workers, chats for a bit, then sits down to go to work. When Pat's boss has a problem, he talks to Pat about it. They disagree, but they are cordial and professional. Pat is a real life character... and he's boring.

Compare that to Stone Cold Steve Austin. When Austin walks into a room, there's a sound of glass shattering, then loud rock music. He walks in muttering under his breath. He gets in the face of people who make him mad. Then he kicks them in the gut, snaps their neck, and celebrates by chugging beers while thousands - make that millions - of fans scream his name.

Too often when we put on plays in the church we act like Pat instead of Stone Cold. We have to realize that even when you're doing "slice of life" drama scenes, drama is always larger than life. The conversation you have at lunch with a friend is probably going to bore people 98% of the time. Drama is about presenting those heightened moments of tension, the 2% of the time when something extreme happens. Those are the stories we repeat to friends. Those are the moments we write into plays.

2. Drama is physical, not just verbal. Vince McMahon has one of the most expressive physical features on television: his Adam's apple. With a simple bob of the Adam's apple, Vince can convey more emotions than the average person can in their whole face.

Many times actors who are in a rush (like most church drama teams are) will focus on the words and not the meaning behind them. We need to slow

down and look for ways to act with our face, our bodies, and tell a story through our whole selves.

3. Drama is about conflict. When I was a kid, I like many wrestling fans was stunned when Andre the Giant ever turn on his good buddy Hulk Hogan. The two had always gotten along so well. Then alone came Bobby the Brain Heenan, who poisoned Andre's heart. He convinced Andre that Hulk was holding him back from being all he could be - from being champion. A conflict erupted, and the two men settled it at Wrestlemania III when Hogan bodyslammed Andre.

What conflict is in the drama you are working on for this Sunday? It may not be spoken; it could be in the subtext. How can you convey that conflict with your face? Your vocal inflection? Your Adam's apple?

4. Drama is about character. There used to be a guy on TV named Steve Blackmon. Steve was a martial artist, a "lethal weapon." The guys in the WWE locker room, a place famous for practical jokes, knew to leave Steve alone. He could literally kill you with his bare hands.

Unfortunately for Steve, he had the ability to kill something else - the show. Despite his physical gifts, Steve Blackmon was a terrible wrestler by WWE standards. He had no "mic skills", no personality, and his career went no where.

It takes charisma to get to the top. More than that it takes character. Guys like Hulk Hogan, Randy Macho Man Savage, The Undertaker, The Rock, Stone Cold, Triple H, and Chris Jericho are beloved because they are tremendous characters played by performers willing to let themselves go and project their character to every person in the audience - live and on TV.

Granted, we're not likely to encounter many characters as over the top as The Rock on a Sunday morning. But how far are you willing to go to become a larger than life character? What simple steps can you use to get outside your comfort zone?

Part Two

On November 19, 2007, Monda Night Raw welcomed back one of wrestling's most charismatic stars, Chris Jericho. After two years away from the ring, the self-proclaimed Ayatollah of Rock and Rollah returned to "save us" all from Randy Orton and his reign of tyranny, promising that the WWE and Planet Earth would never... e-e-e-e-e-e-e-ever, be the same, a-GAIN!

There's a lot we can learn from Jericho. His charisma, his speaking ability, and his talent for feeding off a crowd and leading them to an emotional height. Last time I wrote, I spoke about four things we learn from the WWE that can improve the way we do drama. I'd like to finish that discussion now, starting with emotion.

5. Drama pricks the emotions. Given the choice, most wrestlers will tell you it's

more fun to work as a heel (bad guy) than a babyface (good guy). The heels just get to have more fun. Your job, if you are the heel, is to make an audience hate you. Heels hate whatever town they are in. They insult the town's hometown heroes. They trash their sports teams. They rip on the people as being ugly, fat, ignorant, and whatever other clever adjectives you can string together. The heel does this to help create a babyface. By way of association, whoever comes out from the back to beat up this discourteous heel will have the full support from the crowd. The heel has emotionally involved the crowd; he insulted me and my town, and I want to see someone make him PAY!

A three point sermon is not, as a rule, emotional. A drama depicting a marriage in crisis is. But that drama loses its impact if we can't connect with the characters. If we don't empathize with the over-worked husband and the mom who has no time for herself, we're not going to care that they woke up this morning and realized they didn't know one another any more. It's not easy to step outside yourself and emote on stage, but if it touches someone in the audience in a place a sermon can't reach, it's worth it.

6. Funny people don't know it. Vince McMahon didn't think it was funny when Donald Trump shaved his head at Wrestlemania. Kurt Angle, one of the greatest comic heels ever, never got the joke when he said something stupid. Bobby the Brain Heenan never found it funny when someone would knock him out and stuff him in a weasel costume. And Skip and Sunny were not laughing when Barry Horowitz, a long time jobber who had never won a match, seemed to pull out win after win over the super-fit Skip.

Mel Brooks once said that comedy is determined by your point of view. If Donald Trump forcibly shaved your head, you would not be laughing. When the evil, conniving Vince McMahon gets his head shaved, it is funny. When Vince tries to run, his face white with terror, it gets funnier. And when Vince pleads and begs for help, it's even funnier still. Back in the day the crowds got a big kick out of seeing the lowly loser Barry Horowitz score a pinfall on the arrogant Skip. And the more Skip and his valet Sunny screamed at the audience to shut up, insisting it wasn't funny - the harder they laughed. (Check out this next video to see what I mean!)

When playing comedy, it's important that you learn to hold your character and not laugh at the audience. Laughter is their department; your job is to play whatever comedic moment unfolds as seriously as you can. The joke that befalls your character is not, 99% of the time, something that would make them laugh. Play it straight, and you'll have them rolling in the aisles.

7. It's all about the story. Every sketch, every vignette, every promo delivered on Raw, Smackdown, and every pay-per-view is designed to do one thing: to tell a story. When the World Wildlife Fund forced Vince McMahon to change the name of his company, he chose World Wrestling Entertainment for a reason - it is what it is. There is sport and athleticism involved in professional wrestling. But all the holds, suplexes, and high flying stunts are used to serve a purpose: telling a story. The world of wrestling is full of love triangles, power struggles,

betrayals, and just about every plot line under the sun. These stories are created so that the wrestling fans buy tickets, pay-per-views, and DVDs. The fans buy tickets, pay-per-views, and DVDs because they want to see how the story ends.

Stories stay with us much longer than sermons. I can only remember one or two sermons I heard back in the 80's. But I remember vividly the night Ted DiBiase paid off an official to cheat Hulk Hogan out of his title belt on Saturday Night's Main Event. Maybe you're not a wrestling fan, but I bet you could list ten times as many stories you heard as a kid as you can sermons.

That's why Jesus used stories to teach people how to live. That's why we use drama in worship. It's all about changing lives, and touching people in a deeper, emotional way. Drama puts wrestling fans in the seats. How much greater a work can we do using drama to put people into Heaven?

One More Parting Thought

I recently picked up a DVD set called 'The Legacy of Stone Cold Steve Austin.' The box set sadly skips over a lot of the legend's greatest or most significant matches (because they are available on other box sets already), but it does a very nice job of documenting Austin's career.

The most striking thing I learned watching the DVD was about the moment that catapulted him to super-stardom. The night Austin defeated Jake the Snake Roberts to win the King of the Ring tournament, Austin ad libbed the infamous "Austin 3:16" line, mocking Jake's on again off again faith in God. That ad lib led to the most popular poster seen in wrestling venues and the best selling T-shirt slogan since Hulkamania. (I won't repeat the verse; you can look it up yourself.)

I already knew that Austin ad libbed Austin 3:16 that night. What I didn't know was that Austin was never supposed to win that tournament. Another superstar had originally been planned as the King of the Ring winner, but because of internal politics, McMahon punished the would-be king. That wrestler's misfortune cleared the way for Austin to take the spotlight. McMahon and the company were smart enough to see they had struck gold, and they rode Stone Cold's popularity for the next several years.

Some times good things come about through careful planning, strategizing, and preparation. Some times, accidents happen. Accidents can lead to even bigger things than any careful planning could have arranged - but only if you're flexible enough to allow them.

Further Study

If you've never watched a minute of wrestling, if this book has made you curious to see if I'm on the level, you're in luck. Thanks to youtube and wwe.com, there's a ton of material - old and new - available to watch free online. If you need a little guidance as to where to start, the following list will give you just that.

I chose wrestling as the theme for this unit on playwriting because of the stories, the colorful characters, and the creative dialogue that set them apart. The wrestlers on this list were among the very, very best at creating characters with unique voices that could sway an audience to love them or hate them. (Ask most wrestlers, and they'll tell you it's much more fun to be hated.)

Hulk Hogan - Possibly the most charismatic, dynamic figure ever in professional wrestling. Not the best wrestler in the ring, but rarely matched on the mic.

Ric Flair - Considered by many the greatest wrestler ever, his tenacity in the ring was matched by his fire on the microphone. When you hear a wrestling crowd yell, "WOOOO!" they're echoing Ric Flair.

Dusty Rhodes - Arguably the greatest talker on the mic ever. Dusty was a fan favorite for years with his unique banter.

Rowdy Roddy Piper - Another strong candidate for best talker ever. Unmatched in his ability to whip a crowd into a murderous frenzy by abusing their favorites. Piper originated the wrestler talk show segment with his groundbreaking "Piper's Pit" sketches.

Randy "Macho Man" Savage - One of the most unforgettable and oft-imitated characters in wrestling history. Macho Man had a natural charisma and a unique voice that made him second only to Hogan in his hey-day with the WWF. "OOOOH YEAH!!"

The Rock - Once he reached the height of his game, the Rock held the audience in his grasp from the moment his music hit until he disappeared behind the curtain. A master communicator and entertainer with a dynamic character in the ring.

Stone Cold Steve Austin - The anti-hero of all anti-heroes, a Texan who used his natural "I don't give a ----" streak to become one of the biggest stars of all time. If you hear a wrestling crowd shouting, "WHAT?" at someone they hate, it's because Steve started it.

The Million Dollar Man Ted DiBiase - I hated him as a kid. I love him as an adult. He's a godly man doing ministry through wrestling, and he forged one of the most hated, evil characters of all time. His laugh is iconic.

The Undertaker - A legend in the business, Taker's not known as a great speaker. He doesn't have to speak. He can say more with a look, a tip of the hat, a roll of the eyes than your average wrestler can say in ten minutes of rambling.

Bobby "The Brain" Heenan - There are exceptions to every rule. The rule is, to be a star, you must be a good wrestler and a good speaker. But if you're scary looking and can wrestle, you can get around the speaking part thanks to men like Heenan. Heenan took many a wrestler to the top of the business by taking on the role of their manager. Audiences HATED Heenan, and they hated all of his people by proxy. Heenan could sell any monster put by his side to an audience thanks to the heat he drew from the crowd.

Chris Jericho - One of the most charismatic speakers in recent memory, Jericho admits in his biography, *A Lion's Tale*, that it didn't come naturally. Determined to become a huge star, he worked on his mic skills constantly while working through the ranks of small promotions. My personal favorite Jericho moments came during his feud with Stephanie McMahon back in 2000-2001.

Jesse "The Body" Ventura - By the time Vince McMahon took the then WWF national, Ventura had left the ring to become a commentator. He set the bar for the heel commentators to follow, drawing the ire of fans at home with his obvious bias and proving the perfect foil to Gorilla Monsoon's play by play. "Would you stop that!"

Mr. McMahon - Vince McMahon is P.T. Barnum, a peddler of humbug still selling old fashioned staged wrestling to fans despite the advance of MMA and UFC fighting. He is an opportunist with an eye for talent and a keen sense of what will sell tickets and pay-per-views. When the company was under assault by WCW and short on heels, McMahon changed from Vince McMahon to "Mr. McMahon," the greedy, evil corporate CEO whose evil schemes helped catapult Stone Cold Steve Austin - and WWE - straight to the top. He knows his audience well, and he knows just where their buttons are. That knowledge has kept him at the top of the business for nearly three decades.

About the Author

John Coper is a playwright, screenwriter, and director from New Albany, Indiana. He is the founder of Righteous Insanity, a drama ministry providing scripts, training materials, and custom writing services to ministries around the world. You can view his entire drama catalog and get information on writing services at his website, www.righteousinsanity.com