



Art, Performance and the Sacred: A Curriculum for the Senses

By Libby Garland

In ninth grade, I spent the first half of every school day at my large suburban middle school, a hulking, oppressively square building plunked in the middle of lawn, sports fields and parking lot. Every day at noon, though, a school van came to take my cello, me, and five other students to downtown New Haven, where I spent my afternoons at the Educational Center for the Arts, a public magnet high school with students from all the towns in the area. This school seemed very beautiful to me. It was old, gracious red brick; art and music students milled through hallways carrying portfolios and trumpet cases, and dancers propped their legs on banisters and stretched. The building's central space, where performances and assemblies took place, was huge, high-ceilinged-a mesh grid for lighting hung suspended far above the movable bleacher seating-with black springy floor covering and black curtains over the windows.

As it happens, a painting of this very same building hung in another institution I attended: the Reform synagogue where I had gone to religious school since I was five. The painting testified to the fact that the arts school dwelt in the congregation's former home, in the building left behind when Mishkan Israel, in keeping with a widespread postwar migration, struck out for the suburban New World. There, there was space for classrooms, a gift shop, and a rotunda in which hung the painting commemorating the congregation's urban past. Like my middle school, and probably built around the same time, the suburban incarnation of the synagogue was surrounded by lawn and by a parking lot which got so full on Yom Kippur that latecomers had to settle for the lot at the Unitarian church next door.

But I never thought much about the connection between my arts school and my synagogue. I knew the black curtains in what was now the school's performance hall covered stained glass windows that were cousins to those I stared at, bored, in the temple sanctuary during High Holiday services, but it never struck me that there was an interesting metaphor in play-art in "the place" of religion. For me, those afternoons of music, and of theater and dance and art, were the closest I came, in my jaded teenage way, to sacred time, sacred space. I didn't think of it as such, not being particularly interested in sacred anything; but it was an experience of intense, vital learning, of sound and color, of connection and sustenance, of meaning, and of joy.

I found myself musing about the coincidence of arts school and synagogue after a roundtable discussion CLAL's Jewish Public Forum held last November. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, professor of Performance Studies and Hebrew and Judaic Studies at NYU, museum theorist and folklorist, was the featured guest. She spoke about her interest not only in media, old and new, but also in the ongoing salience of live, real-time, "real" place venues-museums, theaters, concerts-and how such venues both persist and become transformed with shifts in technology, economy, and culture. The conversation that evening kept coming back to the striking intersections, both conceptual and literal, between synagogues and arts venues. Here I try to sketch a few of the questions it raised.

Synagogues, like institutions for the arts, must grapple with how to remain relevant in the face of cultural and economic change, just as they did in the era of urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of mass media, and just as they did in the era of suburbanization, postwar prosperity and the television of America. What role do these institutions have in communities, these days, as purveyors and sites of respite, education, sociability, beauty, meaning? How can they stake out their place in an age we think of as characterized by speed-up, fragmentation, and the pervasiveness of mediated and virtual forms of engagement? To what extent might synagogues and arts venues remain sites of older modes of physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual experience, and to what extent might they need to transform themselves to be intelligible to congregations or audiences whose sensibilities have been fundamentally shaped by new media, new technologies?

But it is not just that they face parallel challenges; synagogues and the arts are kin, are mirror images of each other. What I was learning to feel at my arts school-although no one ever put it this way-was a kind of reverence for the power and sacredness of art. And synagogues, of course, have long used the power of art-think of cantorial virtuosity, or of stained glass windows-to heighten the sense of sacredness and reverence. Ritual is a special sort of performance, of theater and concert; theater and concerts are special sorts of rituals.

What can the similarities and convergences-or competition-between these sorts of spaces teach us about how people seek and find meaning in "liveness," in communal, spiritual-sensory experience? What is lost in translation, and what is made richer or more accessible, when these experiences are mediated, as so much of life is these days-heard through microphones and speakers, or from elsewhere via radio broadcast, or listened to or viewed later on sound recordings, video or webcast?

These are the kinds of questions raised by perspectives like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's; her work, as her job title suggests, stands at the crossroads of performance studies and Judaic studies. Performance studies, as a discipline, has gained currency in the academy in recent years, as scholars have reached for new ways to describe the slippery concept of "identity," meaning both who we

are, and also how what we do and how we act reflects and creates "who we are." Gender, sexuality, citizenship, ethnicity and religion have been among those forms of identity reconceptualized as deeply shaped by the ways we "perform" them, enact them for each other and ourselves every day, through our bodies, our dress, our adornments, our language, our public and private rituals, our professional and personal roles.

Some critics of postmodern theories dislike the implication that identities are so mutable; "performance" can seem to imply superficiality, artifice, a costume easily put on or taken off. Is this really how we want to understand people's experience of sacredness-as a triumph of form over content, a highly produced affair, something generated from the outside in? Is it vaguely insulting to Jewish ritual to compare a synagogue to a theater, a congregation to an audience?

There is another way, though, to think about "performance" as a structuring metaphor for how we experience and express who we are. Anyone who has ever gotten up on stage to act or play or sing knows that performance, far from being about superficial fakery, is about hyper-engagement, an intensifying of experience in the extreme. If my middle school seemed dull, it was partly because there was something more real to me about what I did every day at my arts school. Admittedly, this had to do with my suburban bias that anything that happens in cities is more authentic than anything that happens in suburbs, but it also had to do with the intense realness of what happened in the classrooms there where I learned and practiced, and in the remodeled "sanctuary" where we performed for each other.

Thinking in terms of "performance" helps illuminate the ways some of our deepest experiences of selves and communities don't just "happen." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett offered the term "curriculum" to describe the ways museums provide a kind of training ground for the senses. All these institutions, really, provide a "curriculum," a training ground, an education in creating, building and, yes, "producing" selves and communities.

The parable of my arts school and my synagogue is, perhaps, that they were connected, but only silently, implicitly so. Putting them in dialogue with each other, as it were, helps us begin to recast our understanding of sacredness, performance, art, and the intersections thereof, and it helps us to ask how and where we come to learn and enact such things, and to feel that they are a meaningful part of our lives. It also helps us, I think, to ask where and when we do not feel that we learn them. I was a dutiful student at my regular middle school, and a respectful religious school attendee, but although there were some engaging moments here and there, these places did not fire me up in any profound way. Whether we participate in them by spectating, listening, singing, dancing, or in some other way, institutions are themselves performances, really, creations that catch us up, convince us, teach us to engage in their logic and reality-or else don't.