

Horror and empathy: My response to a gory Passion play

by [Eric G. Wilson](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue



Still from the trailer for *The Thorn's* touring production.

A couple years ago I bought tickets to *The Thorn*, a modern Passion play. It was being performed at the Seacoast Church in North Charleston, South Carolina. I drove there from my home in North Carolina on Good Friday. It was curiosity more than piety that impelled me.

I had recently read an article by Patton Dodd criticizing contemporary Passion dramas, such as *The Thorn*, for being excessively violent. In the essay, published in *Slate*, Dodd shows how these plays, like Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, depict extremely gory tortures that have little basis in scripture. He is troubled by such lurid sensationalism. He sees it as a manifestation of our culture's hunger for macabre visual thrills, regardless of ethical considerations.

I took my Easter journey to test Dodd's conclusion. I wondered: Is exaggerated violence in Passion plays merely a product of our baser natures? Or does the savagery actually have a proper place in the crucifixion's meaning?

My expectations for *The Thorn*, both theological and aesthetic, were not high. I assumed that the production would be an unintentionally campy rendering of the crucifixion, with bad acting, worse costumes and inflated seriousness. Brought up in a small, rural Southern Baptist church, I had seen one too many dramas in the Lord's

house, always amateurish and mawkish. I also feared that contemporary Christian music would pervade the play, and I cringed at the thought of enduring canned rock of the Stryper metal band variety or the peppy sanctimonious croonings of Amy Grant wannabees.

My wife Sandi and I drove into the parking lot of the Seacoast Church, a classic evangelical megachurch, as much sports arena as place of worship. Milling about outside were men dressed as Roman soldiers. The costumes were pretty bad—*Spartacus*-worthy sword-and-sandal garb.

The men were in character, strutting about, attempting to look imperiously cruel. In the lobby were more of the same—folks in robes, vestures, head cloths and sandals, behaving like extras in bloated Hollywood Easter films from the Technicolor sixties. Sandi and I were led by an usher (from the 21st century) into a darkened theater, large enough to hold hundreds. We sat and waited. The place was soon packed. The audience was tense.

Onto the stage limped an old man: John the Evangelist. Between lame slap-stick routines and corny jokes, he narrated the story of Jesus. As he recounted the episodes, they were acted out, in dumb show, on the large stage. Occasionally singers on high platforms located in the background burst into songs commenting on the events.

Satan—bald, muscular, his torso painted sickly white—hovered on the margins, demons by his side. When a scene called for it, he sprang into action, tormenting Judas or tempting Jesus. Angels countered, appearing either in the form of buff young martial artists or as acrobats descending, by ribbons and hoops, from the rafters.

The devil was not the play's true terror; the torturing of the Savior was. After Pilate condemns him, Jesus endures the compulsory scourging. He is tied to a pillar. A Roman soldier, flushed with sadistic glee, flogs his prisoner's back into a grotesque crisscross of simulated blood. Jesus writhes and collapses, is held up, beaten down again, over and over.

The crucifixion was even more distressing. Jesus carried his cross through the audience. The crown-of-thorns punctures went all the way to his skull. Blood saturated his flesh. He staggered under his burden. Once he reached the stage, the Roman soldiers laid the cross on the ground. They forced Jesus down. They slowly

and loudly drove in the nails and then stood the cross upright. There was Jesus, caked in gore, sinews ripping, reduced to an agonized and desperate gasping.

During the early parts of the play, I couldn't help mocking aspects of the drama: John's stupid jokes, the hyperbolic caricatures of evil, Jesus' efforts to look sensitive and blessed, the treachery Christian rock (Hall and Oates gone evangelical). I whispered jokes to Sandi, and she to me. We giggled quietly.

But with the scourging, the fun stopped. What took its place, for me, was self-satisfied triumph. Dodd was right, I thought. Here is the same hypocrisy that drove the success of Gibson's lurid film: ostensibly peace-loving people secretly drawn to brutality, the bloodier the better. Disgusted by the scene, I exonerated myself of the charge.

Just as I was settling into smugness, the crucifixion occurred. The visceral torture, only ten feet from where I was sitting, tore me from my aloofness. Exploitative or not, the episode moved me. I had never seen pain performed so intensely, and the agony gripped me, jerked me toward empathy: I imagined as palpably as I could what it would feel like to be starved and dehydrated, bruised all over and cut to shreds; to have thorns lacerating my head and nails hammered into my hands and feet; to have my limbs strained asunder to the point of rending.

I glanced over at Sandi. She saw me in her periphery and said, "Whatever you do, don't laugh." I was going to tell her that wasn't my intention, when I noticed she was crying. I looked beyond her, at the people in our row. They were weeping, too, as was everybody else I could see.

We all knew the ending: a beginning. Minutes later, after darkness had covered the executed man, a single beam shone on a deserted tomb, and then appeared the Christ, unwounded, all clothed in white. Real fireworks exploded, and the auditorium, filled with cheering, was flooded with brightness.

The violence had moved me. On the most basic level, I was, I had to admit, titillated by the torture. It gave me a physiological rush—increased pulse, tingly skin. But the violence also whipped my emotions to high turbulence. Fear was there, and pity, too, and an array of other feelings—remorse, anxiety, nostalgia, affection. The intensity was enlivening; the aftermath, serene.

These were selfish pleasures: animal arousal, acute passion and pleasing release. Another draw to the bloody passion, however, was more generous, empathetic. The crucifixion's vividness, ferociousness and ardor: these inspired a transfer. I felt the breathing of the man enter into my lungs, and I exhaled into his sphere my outrage and admiration. I sensed in my fibers his suffering and remembered, in one piercing shock, that the world is a network of pain, created cruelly by humans, perpetrating their small fears and desires. The jolt sparked another vision: these same human beings, in instances of unexpected affection, can assuage the hurt and make life livable.

All depictions of violence are dangerous, I realized, especially in performances of the crucifixion: they threaten to stir up sick thrills alone and drown out any higher moral message. But precisely in the risk, I also understood, is the power: brutal representations of the Passion can inspire intense acts of empathy.

Does this potential result outweigh the danger? When the savagery works to reveal difficult truths or moral challenges, when the luridness isn't an end in itself, the answer, for me, is yes. The artist creating the violence must hope that the better natures of the audience will prevail, that empathy will transcend exploitation.

This is the challenge for Christians in witnessing to the cross's gore—to be open to the full force of the macabre without sinking into base arousal, to rise to benevolence while not forgetting the body's suffering. But then this is the strange logic all believers must master: the body's death is invigorating, and living is sacrifice.

This article is adapted from Eric G. Wilson's new book Everyone Loves a Good Train Wreck: Why We Can't Look Away.