


# The power of performing biblical text today: For trauma-healing, evangelism, discipleship and for supporting careful biblical study/translation

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Biblical texts were performed in Israel and current research shows many gains from performing biblical text today. This article, based on empirical studies, highlights four benefits. Firstly, multisensory communication engages the attention of the audience and enables them to remember the texts. This has an impact on evangelism/discipleship, reaching an audience not interested in reading. Secondly, as the actors study the text carefully, they discover its richness, resulting in enhanced discipleship. Thirdly, acting out a text requires one to make decisions about ambiguities in the text (e.g. concerning the emotional state of characters) and highlights to translators and Bible students where unintentional ambiguities might result in misunderstanding and where clarification is needed. Fourthly, performing biblical texts has great potential in the area of trauma healing.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Through acting out a story (which includes traumas with which the audience will resonate) and by having a jester interrupt with questions, audience members have opportunity to engage with the situations. This can be helpful in promoting healing, in line with Herman's three steps of trauma recovery. Thus, performance can support not only better biblical understanding but also pastoral ministry.

**Keywords:** performance; community involvement; trauma healing; discipleship; evangelism.

## Introduction

In this article, I focus on four particular benefits I have seen as I have encouraged communities to explore and perform biblical text. As a Bible-translator, I have found that performing a text is a very helpful way of determining where there are ambiguities (or gaps) in the written text, as indicated by the responses of audience members to questions at particular points in the story. It is important to verify which ambiguities are intentional and which are not in order that, in the latter case, some additional help can be provided (perhaps in a footnote) to prevent readers of a written translation from interpreting incorrectly. This attention to detail is also, of course, helpful to serious Bible students.

The second and third ways I have observed benefits accruing to the performance of biblical text are in the area of pastoral work, both evangelism and discipleship. The multisensory nature of performance draws in an audience who would often not be interested in reading a text or listening to a sermon. Moreover, for those involved in preparing a performance, the opportunity to explore the richness of the text, and get 'inside the black box' of translation can be a very powerful tool in discipleship. The fourth way is the performance of carefully chosen texts, those which deal with various distressing situations, can be a means of trauma-healing for both actors and audience.

This article begins with a brief outline of biblical performance criticism and then discusses empirical case studies representing these four benefits resulting from performance.

## Biblical performance criticism

Biblical performance criticism considers biblical text to be literature that was originally performed. It tries to restore the 3-D richness (including the role of the audience), which was central to the original performances (Maxey 2012:2–3), liberating the text from 'the captivity of the printed page' (Rowe 1999:47). Although biblical text does not always indicate performance features, it is

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recognised that religious literature (e.g. 'Two Ways', from the Didache) was performed in early Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Rhoads (n.d.:165) argued that New Testament writings are 'remnants of oral performances' and that for early Christians, the Gospel of Mark was 'not a text but an event'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if the original texts were prepared to be heard, we need to *hear* them today as well, if we are to interpret them correctly (Rhoads n.d.). Hearing and seeing biblical material performed helps us to understand the text in a new way, noticing things often missed in silent reading. Indeed, performance becomes a translation (Maxey 2012:14) with the possibilities of fresh insights.

There are certain issues integral to performance of any text (Rhoads 2012:22–26), and these contribute to the meaning communicated. Firstly, paralinguistic and extra-linguistic cues<sup>3</sup> are part of the message received by the audience and must be carefully considered by the actors. Secondly, in performance, words can take on a particular meaning that they might not have in another context. Thirdly, each performance is unique, adapted to the particular audience and situation.<sup>4</sup> As Dewey (1994:157–158) observed, each performance is 'a new formulation of the text'.

Fourthly, the role of the audience in interacting with the performers is critical and can change the direction in which the performance develops. Indeed, the relationship between the performer and the audience is a critical part of African oral performance.<sup>5</sup> According to reception theory (e.g. Darr 1998:29), the audience is understood to dynamically impact the meaning assigned to the text.<sup>6</sup> In Africa, the audience comes to a performance with the expectation that there will be much social interaction (Dorson 1972:262). Audience members understand their role to be that of providing additions, questions or affirmation/criticism. In Zulu praise poetry, this happens at the end of a stanza when the audience may call out 'Musho! Musho!' ('Say him!') in affirmation. Without such encouragement, the performer may simply stop (ed. Cope 1968:30). Indeed, audience participation is expected by both parties, and needed by the performers.<sup>7</sup> Dhlomo (1993:191–197) observed that 'The spectators are often performers waiting for their cue to enter the performance'. One could say that an oral poem is composed *in* performance

1.The 'Two Ways' was a living oral tradition in the 3rd and 4th centuries (Draper 2008; Nikander 2015:287).

2.Brown (2004) supported this idea, on the basis of the writings of Papias (circa 125 AD).

3.Paralinguistic cues include the tone of voice, speed and volume of delivery, emphasis is given to particular words, pauses, etc. Extra-linguistic cues include hand gestures, costumes, props, facial expressions, etc.

4.Canonici (1996:229) pointed out that different performances of a recorded poem (*Izibongo zika Senzangakhona*) have been shown to differ: Nyembezi (1958) has 128 lines, but Cope (1968) has 93 lines.

5.Foley (2004:11) lamented the lack of attention given to the audience's active role.

6.There are two degrees of audience role: the 'active audience' position sees the audience as mainly responsible for the interpretation, whereas the middle position involves an interaction between the audience members and the message, to create the meaning (Soukup 1997:91).

7.The performer seeks to use the oral arts in the best way to get the greatest response from 'an evaluative but involved audience' (Kunene 1981:xxxi).

(Lord 1960/2000), the work coming to fruition with the contribution of the audience.<sup>8</sup>

Other advantages to performing Scripture (rather than reading it silently) include the following:

1. The process of *hearing* a text is very different from that of reading it, in two important ways. Firstly, the human voice carries rhetorical power, and thus is able to powerfully contribute to one of the major functions of biblical text, namely to persuade the audience (Robbins 1993:110). Secondly, sounding out the text mimics the way the original message was communicated and received, 'in real time' (Stubbs 1980:33). Thus, performing a text restores these original functions of biblical text.
2. The audience as a community interprets the meaning of a text, diminishing problems that arise from individual interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, audience interaction (affirmation, interjection or lack of response) validates or corrects the meaning presented (according to the corporate group understanding). In this way, the text becomes owned by the community and the performance becomes part of their collective memory. The performance also heightens a 'community spirit' (Canonici 1996:53) and strengthens the group's unity through their common participation through the words or rhythms (e.g. finger-snapping, dance or percussion of some type).

## Using performance to help in the Bible translation process

### To discern ambiguities in the written text (and the need for supplementary helps)

The possibility of interrogating the text at points of indeterminacy to hear the audience-members' perception of the underlying moods and motivations is particularly helpful for the Bible translator to indicate where ambiguities (particularly those that are unintentional) are not being interpreted as the original audience would have been able to do so. This may be as a result of a lack of cultural, historical or linguistic understanding, highlighting the need for some form of supplementary help for the reader.

For example, understanding the linguistic analysis of the text can clarify a situation that appears to be ambiguous (Linafelt 2008). In a performance of the story of Ruth, Naomi's silent response to Ruth's generous commitment to her (Rt 1:18) must be interpreted by actors on-stage either positively (e.g. Alter 1981:78; Coxon 1989:27) or negatively (e.g. Fewell & Gunn 1988:100–107; Xie 2009:20). When audience members were asked by the jester as to how Naomi felt about Ruth choosing to accompany her back to Bethlehem (i.e. Naomi's emotional state underlying her silence), various ideas were proposed, some positive and some negative.<sup>10</sup>

8.This is in line with the post-modernists, who argue that meaning is negotiated between the text, audience and context.

9.This is particularly the case when a very free translation is read, and the Bible is read as a contemporary text, rather than as a historical one (Scott 1994:35–37).

10.These are further discussed on page 5 (Using performance for trauma healing).

However, grammatical analysis of Naomi's speech to her daughters-in-law (viz. the use of masculine suffixes – Davis 2013:502–503) indicates that she is thinking of 'the sons she has lost' rather than the women before her, suggesting an attitude of indifference towards Ruth. On the other hand, there is 'gender confusion' at various points in the book (Hubbard 1988:4) so perhaps it is not significant. Nevertheless, Linafelt (2010) argued that the tension apparent here between Naomi and Ruth is a 'driving force in the narrative', and thus the Bible translator might need to consider adding a footnote to indicate that the gender confusion at this point in the story points towards such tension.

Another example of how performance can highlight a literary clue missed by most readers is the reference in Rt 1:4 to 'ten years of [childless] marriage'. An original audience would see a link to Sarah, who also experienced 10 years of childless marriage (Gn 16:3). The fact that Sarah gave her maid, Hagar, to her husband would result in heightened tension for the original audience when Ruth 1:4 was presented.<sup>11</sup> If the jester were to ask a contemporary audience how Ruth might have felt about being childless, and what options she might have had to address her problem, this would at least highlight the difficulty Ruth was facing (and one with which audience members might identify). It might also be possible to indicate Ruth's felt tension through a lament-prayer inserted into the performance at this point.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most significant ambiguity in the book is that in Rt 4:5 concerning the identity of 'the wife of the deceased', the one Boaz says he will claim. The Ketiv reading of the Hebrew (Block 2015) is deliberately ambiguous (Hayes 2016; Holmstedt 2010:40), with possible reference to either Ruth or Naomi. Several scholars argue that the indeterminacy should be retained in translation to keep 'the artful web woven' (Daube 1981:40). When the jester enquired of audience members as to who was being referenced, there was a mixed response. The younger boys thought it was Ruth, and when asked 'why?' their response was 'because she is more beautiful'. This response is again pragmatic rather than recognising the craftiness in the intentional ambiguity. This wit is apparent when one realises that the nearer-kinsman would probably have been less threatened to take *Naomi* as a wife, with her being beyond the age of child-bearing and thus not able to produce an heir to rival his children's inheritance (Rowley 1947:77). Later, when the nearer-kinsman realised the reference was to Ruth (whose potential offspring *could* upset his family situation), he reneged (Hubbard 1988:61). The wit contained in the Hebrew perhaps deserves a footnote, to help readers understand the confusion the nearer-kinsman experienced and why he later changed his mind. It also impacts the way the character of Boaz is perceived (Hayes 2016:176) and this influences the message of the book.

11. Iverson (2020) observed that hearers are less likely to discern intertextual cues than readers, as they do not control the pace of delivery of the story. However, listeners retain the 'general gist' of what they hear and are thus likely to recall the big theme of Sarah's childlessness and wonder how Ruth will solve the same problem.

12. Another advantage of performance is that it permits tensions (which are felt by the audience) to be discerned in the story.

These examples illustrate how hidden implications in the text can be exposed through performing the story and the need for supplementary helps can be clarified.

### To determine gaps in understanding the biblical context (and the need for extra-textual information)

Performing a text also highlights extra-textual information necessary for the audience to understand the text correctly. Maxey (2009:15) observed that in several performances of Luke 5:17–26 amongst the Vute people of Cameroon, the narrator always added cultural information about the difference between local rooftops and those of Palestine (to give meaning to Luke 5:19). Clearly such cultural information was essential for that community to understand, indicating it should be included as a footnote in a written translation.

### To elucidate rhetorical features in the text

Performing a text, sounding out the words and hearing the word-repetitions (and sound play, if performed in the original language) can highlight rhetorical features that might be overlooked when reading silently. Tom Boogaart (2020) gave two examples where his students (performing texts in Hebrew) had 'aha moments of discovery' as they came across such unexpected insights. Firstly, in the story of the three men thrown into the fiery furnace (Dn 3), the word 'bound' (or 'bind') appears four times (Dn 3:20, 21, 23, 24) and then the next verse (3:25) suddenly has the opposite, 'unbound'. Actors performing this text must deduce how this change came about. Did the fire cause the ropes that were binding them to disintegrate? Has the fiery furnace, an instrument of death, become part of their salvation?

Boogaart's other example comes from the account of David and Goliath. The text says that Goliath 'fell on his face to the ground' (1 Sm 27:49). In a performance of this story, the audience and actors physically saw Goliath's body lying on the floor in front of David, making it appear as if Goliath was showing abeyance and serving David, a dramatic reversal of Goliath's taunt in 1 Samuel 17:9. Such insights often only become apparent as one physically acts out the story. As Jeff Barker (2020) observed, 'Great drama makes the unseen see-able'.

### To test a translation's interpretation limits

Rhoads (2006:179) maintained that 'performance may be one way to test the limits of viable interpretations'. This proposes that the audience play a key role, determining the validity or otherwise of interpretations actors bring to a performance. In a sense, then, the audience serves as gatekeepers to 'the continuing canon'.<sup>13</sup>

### To show respect for the community

When a text is translated with the goal of being performed (including paralinguistic and extra-linguistic material as part

13. Performance will bring new possible insights or interpretations to a text and thus the limits of acceptability might be stretched.

of the message), this use of media which the community prefer shows significant respect for them. Also, as the community of believers plays such a critical role in setting the limits of acceptable meaning, their status is further elevated.

## Using performance for evangelism

Performance of biblical text reaches many more people than a traditional reading. For example, the Tamil poet, Sastri, performed his biblical poetry not only within Tamil church services, but also outside, thereby enlarging the audience reached (Israel 2011:206). In an oral community, performance of the Scriptures is far more engaging than listening to the reading of a text (especially as written texts are prepared to be silently read and do not include memory cues and oral forms of speech).

In South Africa, many contemporary Zulu youth do not read the Scriptures (Dickie 2017:195). However, there is a thriving 'performance culture' with many participating in presenting their own compositions of poetry.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Africans generally explore using the arts (oral and visual) to communicate important messages. This opens up possibilities for new ways to interact with the Scriptures. My PhD work (Dickie 2017) invited Zulu youth to compose and perform some psalms of praise using the form of Zulu praise-songs (*izibongo*). One of the outcomes was a clear indication of the value of performance to engage the attention of those who might otherwise not be attracted. Many of the youth in the audience were delighted to see their friends performing, even whipping out their phones to take videos. Consequently, the message is more likely to become 'something talked about and shared with friends' (Soukup 1997:106). The psalms became alive in a new way, with the praise performative and immediate.<sup>15</sup> For example, some poets made the messages even more memorable by changing third-person statements to second-person address.

The Zulu youth used their creative skills in new ways,<sup>16</sup> experimenting with different forms of communication (e.g. complementing their words with music and non-verbal forms such as humming, snapping fingers and gestures). For the audience, the display of new talent was considered 'inspiring' (Dickie 2017:Interviews 7a and 8). Even those not very artistically inclined appreciated a fresh and lively way of presenting the Scripture message. Maxey (2009:15) had shown that the inclusion of different genres can engage the attention of an audience. A performance of biblical text amongst the Vute included songs following the traditional musical style, with the audience joining in during the chorus. The audience highly valued being able to participate.

Those who are concerned about encouraging Zulu culture were also attracted to the songs as they were perceived as

14. For example, across KwaZulu-Natal, there are countless 'poetry and performance groups' such as one where about 100+ young people meet every Friday afternoon in the Pietermaritzburg city library.

15. The immediacy of performance is noticed in that 'another space and time becomes reality' (Boogaart 2020).

16. Julian Beck (in Malina 2011:194) often said that '... those of us who work in the arts have the task of releasing the sublime artist in everyone'.

being culturally relevant, within the Zulu idiom. As an audience member observed: '[The Nguni people will enjoy having/creating more songs like these] because it is performed in a way that people can relate to and understand better'. Another observed: '[The people] were able to understand in different ways God's word, using the singing and using drums'. Another person, when asked 'what did you like best about the songs', responded: 'They were songs that you can sing along with' (Dickie 2017:Interviews 4, 2, 9, respectively).

## Using performance for discipleship

Performance of a text can be a very helpful means of understanding a text well (Rhoads 2006). When members of a community perform a passage of Scripture, many issues are raised that are not apparent in a printed form.<sup>17</sup> For example, one has to consider questions such as 'Who are the actors?' When one reads Psalms 134, it is not initially clear that there in fact two groups of actors, but this becomes apparent in performance. Another important question that must be considered in performance is: 'What devices are used to help the audience remember the text (the most important message) and to keep their attention?' Such devices (such as parallelism, repetition of words and chiasmic structures) are more obvious when one is hearing the sounds than simply reading silently.

Performance also clarifies difficult issues in the source text. For example, the Greek text of Mark 1:1–13 is difficult to understand, but if the text is performed, it becomes obvious that the text includes performance notes (gestures and directions for the voice), which are not part of the narrative (Loubser 2005:12). Similarly, Brueggemann (1995:6) commented that some consider Psalms 145 to be 'a not very interesting collection of clichés', but if the psalm is performed (with antiphonal singing of the different voices), the structure becomes clear (Dickie, 2021). Scott (1994:93–94) also observed that parts of the Greek New Testament are oral cues that make no sense when read as part of the text. Indeed, performing a text highlights the detailed contents of a text, some elements of which may otherwise be missed.

Another advantage that came out of my PhD work (Dickie 2017) was that creative members in the church appreciated the opportunity to discover new gifts<sup>18</sup> and to contribute in a significant way to the ministry of the church. This was affirmed when the pastor observed how the performances prepared the congregation for his message and, in fact, even supported the preaching of the sermon (Dickie 2017:interview 3).

A major benefit that accrued to the oral artists was the sense of ownership they had for the text that they had composed and performed. Although a local bishop (a published poet) had created two beautiful, poetic versions of Psalms 134 and 93, participants were not interested in performing *his* words,

17. For example, De Regt (2001:218) observed that in certain situations, second-person address is inappropriate, being 'face-threatening'. This may become apparent in performance, and may thus raise issues that need further consideration.

18. One singer observed at the end of the workshop: 'I always knew I was a singer, but now I realise that I am also a poet'.

although they agreed that they were readily understood and 'more poetic' than the 1959 Bible. Rather, the process of interacting with the Scriptures *themselves* and creating their own translation appeared to be more fulfilling and motivating than having a 'perfect product'.<sup>19</sup> This is in line with West's (2016) question: 'Do we need a better translation or a better life?' It seems that young people are more interested in having a meaningful, owned translation than a 'perfect' one. This was even the case with those who were more musically gifted than word-gifted.

Young people today want, and expect, to interact with knowledge, not simply to be handed a final product already prepared.<sup>20</sup> Moreover (West 2013):

Exegesis offers important details to ordinary readers of the Bible that they do not usually have access to. Often the very details denied to them by the church [are] vital in their daily struggles to live full abundant lives. (p. 311)

The participants revealed in the opportunity to dig into the text, understand the message and experience revelation of its relevance.

Appreciation for being a part of the translation process was apparent in many comments by participants. One noted:

*'[What I liked best about the songs]* was the fact that we contributed, and became part of the translation of the scripture into a song ... it will encourage and engage people in making them realise the potential they have in being part of the process in translating the scripture in a way they can relate to.' (Dickie 2017:Interview 5)

Another observed:

*[Being part of the workshop]* I discovered the potential of transforming the scripture ... by understanding the context of the psalms. I have learned to be part of the process of transforming the scripture for my context. (Dickie 2017:Interview 6)

Participants also commented that they gained new insights as to the message of the psalms studied. In particular, several were amazed at the beauty and emotive power of the poetic portions in the Bible, and how they related to their own daily experience. One participant observed:

'Being part of the workshop helped me to engage more with the text.' (Dickie 2017:Interview 4)

Another said:

*'[Being part of the workshop]* will change the way I engage with the scripture because I have learned better and different ways to approach and understand it.' (Dickie 2017:Interview 5)

A 29-year-old studying for the ministry expressed concern that 'young people do not know the text, they do not read the Scriptures'. But he added: *'[The most important thing*

<sup>19</sup>This is in line with Shirky's assertion (2010:78): 'Creating something personal, even of moderate quality, has a different kind of appeal than consuming made by others, even something of high quality'.

<sup>20</sup>The upcoming generation expects to be able to participate and share (Shirky 2010:212–213).

*I learned is]* that every word contributes to the meaning of the text'. He argued further that the main benefit of an exercise like translating Scripture is that it brings people 'into contact with the text'. Through learning to translate and perform some psalms, he observed that participants were able to engage with the text significantly and this captured their interest to do this more often.

An interesting observation by one of the participants is that the translations were evaluated to be 'part of the Scripture, not something we came up with' (Dickie 2017:Interview 6). For all these reasons – benefits for the participants and the wider community – it is worth giving more attention to involving interested members of the community in the process of Bible translation. The opportunity to increase the general understanding of the Bible in this way is significant.

## Using performance for trauma healing

A major need in society today is for ways to deal with everyday trauma and specific highly traumatic events, such as the loss of a loved one, difficult health situations in the family, bullying at school and many more trials of modern life. Judith Herman, a psychiatrist specialising in trauma therapy (1992), gives three steps to recovery that can be usefully applied through performing texts in a supportive environment. The three steps are: (1) for the sufferer to regain agency, (2) for the sufferer to express her pain and (3) for the sufferer to connect with others, for life going forward.

In a study with two groups from two townships in Cape Town, the participants studied the biblical story of Ruth and then gave dramatic performances before various audiences (See Dickie 2020.) This story includes a number of traumatic events: famine and hunger, loss of husbands and children, the in-law relationship, being a foreigner, having to move home to another country, childlessness and poverty. The two main characters, Naomi and Ruth, are particularly vulnerable, being women without men to protect and provide, in a patriarchal society where a childless widow had no rights (Kidd 1999:24) or hopes. The difficulties faced by the women are experiences with which township audiences can readily identify.

In the performances there were five characters on stage: the three main characters (Naomi, Ruth and Boaz), a narrator and a jester. The purpose of the latter was to interject at various moments in the story, to ask audience members how they understood the moods and motivations of the characters in such situations. This was a way to raise to the surface emotional problems, which audience members (along with the characters in the story) face, to allow for such matters to be discussed, and for various viewpoints to be raised. For example, when Naomi instructed her daughter-in-law, Ruth, to go at night to meet a powerful man (the owner of the field where she was working), the jester asks the audience, 'How do you think Ruth felt about having to do this?' A number of young boys responded, 'Excited', as did a couple of men in

another performance. However, when some Grade 7 girls were asked, they immediately replied, 'Scared!' The reality of 'sugar-daddies' is something that many young women in South Africa face (Khazan 2018) and the performances (and varying responses to the jester's question) raised to the fore the fears experienced by many young girls, something often not even considered by males.

Another example was when Ruth makes a strong commitment to accompany Naomi wherever she goes, even until death. Despite this generous show of loyalty by Ruth, Naomi appears to give no response to her. One wonders how Naomi was feeling at this point and thus the jester raises the question. Some people thought that perhaps Naomi was bothered by having another mouth to feed in her home country, where she might feel responsible to look after this 'foreigner' (cf. Linafelt 2010:121–122). Others thought she might be embarrassed by having a daughter-in-law who was from an enemy nation (cf. Block 2015:632). Another group imagined that she would be happy to have a young person with her to help her. By having these various viewpoints expressed in public, audience members (and performers) were brought to understand that there is more than one way of interpreting a person's behaviour and encouraging a need to withhold judgement.

Apart from the emotional responses with which audience members will resonate, the characters' actions provide models for positive ways of dealing with hardships. The first step towards healing from trauma is to regain agency, and in the actions of the two women, we see them both displaying strong initiative. Neither of them sit around passively, expecting someone else to solve their problem. They do what is possible, using 'the (patriarchal) system', as they also look to God to bring about a full solution. For example, Ruth offers to go and glean as a means to get food for herself and Naomi. That was something she could do, although one imagines that it was not her best hope for long-term employment (in the sense that it was back breaking and seasonal). However, she takes the first step, to meet the immediate need. Naomi also thinks ahead and devises a plan for Ruth to meet with Boaz alone and to request his help in such a way that Boaz must act (one way or the other). Although the situation was risky, especially for Ruth, both women optimise the possibilities, but judiciously, with careful planning, wise behaviour and carefully chosen words. They prepare the way for a positive outcome (Ruth making herself attractive and ensuring Boaz is fed and relaxed before introducing the topic in a way that requires a response). Then Ruth, with perceptive wit, reflects back to him the words he had used (in blessing) when they first met (3:9 cf. 2:12).

Apart from agency, both the women also show *hesed* ('loving kindness') to others, and in this way demonstrate the *hesed* they hope to receive from God. Their agency, although 'active', includes a 'waiting on God' to give what they ultimately need: a redeemer, a provider (including of progeny) and a protector. Their behaviour is in line with Torah, rather than being manipulation by independent, wily women (Steinman 2020:2). At times in the story, the jester raises issues that demonstrate such *hesed*, for example, Ruth's

kind behaviour to her mother-in-law, even at times when the older woman's theology was errant (e.g. 1:13, 21) or when she put Ruth in a difficult situation (as in 3:4–5).<sup>21</sup> In this way, issues that are problematic in many communities (such as the in-law relationship) can be openly discussed and various view-points can be expressed.

Performance is thus a way that allows for those who are experiencing trauma to take the three steps towards healing: firstly, they can be encouraged to regain agency and think through how they might be able to recover initiative in their situations. Secondly, they have a chance to express their pain in response to the jester's probing. And thirdly, they can connect with others experiencing similar difficult situations (in the story or in the audience) or receive empathy and understanding from others who hear their expressions of pain.

There are many other stories in the Bible (or in literature generally), which can be performed in this way to raise issues that need discussion. For example, the stories of Sarah, Hannah or Rachel raise the problem of childlessness and that of Joseph raises another (dealing with the false accusation of Potiphar's wife against him). If possible, the stories should be internalised and then the actors perform using their own words (to make the story more culturally and linguistically appropriate to the community) but if remembering the story is too difficult, a dramatised reading can also be helpful.

## Conclusions

In biblical times, it is likely that texts were performed, with all the advantages of recipients *hearing* the text and being included in the communication event. This article shows a number of significant advantages that arise when a biblical text is performed today. In the modern world where entertainment is visual and aural, important messages need to use media and forms that can compete for attention with the many other messages being conveyed. The relatively new field of Performance Criticism, and applications of the theory in this article, provides a possible new direction for more communicators of biblical text to explore.

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The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

J.F.D. is the sole author of the article.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (No. HSS/1602/015D).

<sup>21</sup>The two women are very different, but Ruth quietly submits to her mother-in-law, always showing honour and respect (Greenblatt 2006:A66). Her conduct is always exemplary (Branch 2012:6).

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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