

ANTHONY PADOVANO'S IMAGE OF THOMAS MERTON

by **Michael Steinmacher**

Capturing the essence of a personality is nearly impossible, yet biographers have been attempting to do so since human beings began recording their history. It is the unique author, however, who somehow succeeds in capturing a thorough sense of his or her subject. In *The Human Journey*¹, Anthony T. Padovano succeeds in painting an effective and believable picture of Thomas Merton. While he succeeds in the genre of straight biography, he falters with his one-person play about Merton, *Winter Rain: Six Images of Thomas Merton*.²

The Human Journey and *Winter Rain* share similar insights, but the play leaves one surprisingly disengaged. One reason is that the play assumes a large degree of familiarity with Thomas Merton. One observer, a professor of theater largely unfamiliar with the facts of Merton's life, noted: "I didn't know what he was talking about much of the time, who he was referring to, and what important incidents in Merton's life he was talking about. That wasn't communicated. There could have been more exposition written into the script to help us know what he was referring to."³ *The Human Journey*, however, avoids this pitfall by carefully filling in Merton's story. The book provides the exposition necessary for the reader to follow the developments in Merton's life, but the play fails to provide much of this necessary biographical information.

The "journey" emerges in both works as a central theme in Merton's life. Merton explains at the beginning of the first scene of *Winter Rain*: "My journey to Gethsemane [sic] is different. Gethsemane [sic] for me is not a garden but an abbey, not agony but healing, not anguish but home, paradise, a Pearl Harbor, safe, peaceful — the pearl of great price, the harbor of tranquility. I want that for the whole world" (*C&C*, p. 9). According to Padovano, the involvement of the United States in World War II convinced Merton "that the suffering required for sanctity in a secular age must originate with the pain of the world. The discipline that is demanded is identification with the anguish of the world in its search for meaning" (*HJ*, p. 22). From the beginning, the image of Merton on a continuing journey dominates both works.

While it may seem that both *The Human Journey* and *Winter Rain* project the same image of Thomas Merton, this conclusion is only superficially true. The play draws much of its strength from being paired with the more thorough biography. Padovano's Merton of *The Human Journey* and his Merton of *Winter Rain* are far different when compared in terms of the attention the play gives to the character and its portrayal of him. An initial weakness in the play is the very portrayal of Merton. In Padovano's script, Merton is essentially a very glib and flippant person. "The Padovano Merton is a very chatty fellow. He likes to play



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with words. ‘Trappists should keep their traps shut,’ stuff like that.⁴ This characteristic makes it difficult to embrace the Merton of *Winter Rain*.

While there is no discounting Merton’s well-known and remarkable sense of humor and his wit, the humor of the Merton of the play seems odd and forced. Merton’s wit, as in his lectures to the novices, does not emerge true to character in *Winter Rain*. Padovano, while able to paint a truly gripping portrait of Merton in *The Human Journey*, does not seem able to grasp Merton’s penchant for language, humor, and wit in *Winter Rain*. When the play’s Merton makes a serious statement like “I’m going to become a saint, but in a way that doesn’t fit the rules,” it rings with the same resonance as “How the hell do you detect a hermit on a radar screen?” The play’s monologues simply work against a truly credible portrayal of Merton because they do not successfully intertwine the serious and the humorous Mertons. While the serious thoughts are evident with a close reading of the script, the choice of words and their delivery undermine the hoped-for effect. Though Merton makes assertions about his belief in human rights in *Winter Rain*, there is not enough development of his insights into the human condition. Merton’s “speech,” while retaining the basic ideas, does not successfully convey the messages that Merton’s own works succeed in delivering.

Coupled with this problem is the development of Merton’s social and intellectual sides. While the social side comes off quite clearly, in scenes such as those aboard the train and the conversation with D. T. Suzuki, the intellectual side is seriously neglected in Padovano’s script.

The person being portrayed seemed very remote from the flesh and bones, the feeling and deep thought Thomas Merton developed . . . I get the sense [from the film] that in order to demystify him and keep from putting him up on a pedestal, people concentrate on telling stories about how simple and unabashed he was. Like the scene where he was setting up his cabin. You know, the blue jeans and all that. I think that what that ends up looking like is someone who is not really a deep thinker — who’s very shallow. That’s not counterbalanced by the deep thought. The actor [Michael Moriarty] was very successful in conveying that ordinary humanness of Thomas Merton throughout the film, but that kept overshadowing what must have been his deep thoughts and great insights into the human condition. (Vorder Bruegge)

Much of this problem lies in trying to grasp Merton’s own inner experiences. In *The Human Journey*, Padovano succeeds in developing the possible repercussions of Merton’s experience by thoroughly examining his choices, decisions, and reactions. In *Winter Rain*, little of that is considered. Rather than exploring those choices, decisions, and reactions, *Winter Rain* jumps into Merton’s life without filling in the background.

Another failing of *Winter Rain* is the role which Padovano seems to have assigned Merton.

Padovano describes Merton as a “prophet” (Padovano 5). This characterization is also troubling. A prophet may be thought of as a “see-er,” one who discerns the course of the future in the events of the present. Merton would disclaim this role, would he not? Or the prophet may be the one whom God summons to speak the particular word which God wants the men and women of his generation to hear. This comes closer to the mark. We have only to recollect Merton’s witness against war, anti-Semitism, racial injustice and false materialism. But does the term “prophet” do justice to Merton’s calling to be a man of prayer, a “contemplative?” At the least it seems to obscure the way in which prayer, theological reflection, humanistic culture and the ethic of love are knitted together in Father Louis’ hands.⁵

With the exception of the resignation scene, “the other scenes are often little more than loosely tied together introspections and mini-lectures. Here, Padovano has made the error of relying too heavily on the

talent and mystique of his subject to prop up the script in which he appears.”⁶ While Merton develops somewhat from scene to scene in *Winter Rain*, the growth is negligible. It is as if Padovano’s conception of Merton at the beginning of the script is his fully developed image of Merton. In *The Human Journey*, Padovano traces Merton’s development by starting from the beginning and working forward. *Winter Rain*, however, seems to portray the young Thomas Merton little differently from the middle-aged Merton.

Actor Michael Moriarty’s performance as Merton in the film is hampered by the script, is entirely based on the script, and does little to stretch beyond it and grasp the essence of Merton.⁷ Moriarty’s abilities as an actor, however, allow him to overcome some of the difficulties with the script. “Moriarty is skillful at reigning in some of the runaway, overly self-conscious monologues to which this play more than occasionally falls victim” (Greenfield, p. 12). Even with Moriarty’s strengths, the script continues to pull away from the audience and in toward the character of Merton. The audience cannot grasp what made Merton such a widely read author. The script of *Winter Rain* does not allow the audience to participate with Thomas Merton because it seems preoccupied with Merton’s dealing with his struggles alone. To resolve his struggles, the *real* Merton involves his readers in his problems and draws strength and answers from his writing.

Sadly, taken by itself, *Winter Rain* does little to enlighten one about Thomas Merton. As a companion to *The Human Journey*, the play succeeds better and Padovano creates a more viable and believable image of Merton. While *The Human Journey* can stand by itself as a biography, *Winter Rain* needs *The Human Journey* to fill in the pieces Padovano has left out of his play. Coupling *Winter Rain* with *The Human Journey* produces a powerful duo, but the principal strength of the pair comes from Padovano’s crisp and detailed portrait of Thomas Merton in the latter.

NOTES

1. Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982. Hereafter in the text as *HJ*).
2. Anthony T. Padovano, *Conscious and Conflict: A Trilogy of One-Actor Plays: Thomas Merton, John XXIII, Martin Luther* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988). Hereafter in the text as *C&C*.
3. Andrew Vorder Bruegge. *Interview*, 17 November 1993 (Louisville, Kentucky). Hereafter in the text as Vorder Bruegge.
4. Michael J. Farrell. “Videocassette Version of Merton’s Life ‘Compelling.’” Review of *Winter Rain: Six Images of Thomas Merton*, by Anthony Thomas Padovano. *National Catholic Reporter* 21:7 (7 December 1984), p. 28.
5. John C. English. “Three Plays.” Review of *Conscious and Conflict*, by Anthony T. Padovano. *The Merton Seasonal* 14:2 (Spring 1989), p. 19.
6. Thomas A. Greenfield. “One Man Merton.” Review of *Winter Rain: Six Images of Thomas Merton*, a play by Anthony T. Padovano. *The Merton Seasonal* 10:2 (Spring 1985), p. 13. Hereafter in the text as Greenfield.
7. Anthony T. Padovano. *Winter Rain: Six Images of Thomas Merton*; videotape recording directed by Jacquie Plews with Michael Moriarty as Thomas Merton; script adapted for television by Robert T. Reilly (Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press Communications, 1984).