The power of performance

Human beings love stories and a great way to share them is by dramatising them. Richenda Milton-Daws reflects on a well-tried art form.

IT IS just over a year since the nation woke up in a state of outrage.

For more than two decades sub-postmasters had been wrongly convicted of theft because of problems in the Horizon software.

Campaigners and journalists had been seeking recognition of these wrongs and justice for far too long but it was only when a dramatised version of these events was aired on television that the story hit home.

As an illustration of the efficacy of drama, this is a really good one.

The use of theatre to convey messages and to win hearts and minds is much older than this, though.

Every ancient civilisation was familiar with some form of dramatic art.

In the Middle Ages, when most people were illiterate, mystery and miracle plays were used to share Bible stories and morality tales with everyone whatever their station in life.

Some decades ago I saw Tony Harrison's translation of the Mystery Plays performed in London. I was left with an awareness that the experience had not only been theatrical, it had also been powerfully spiritual. I could not have been described as particularly interested in religion at the time.

With this in mind, I felt strongly that an issue of "Transforming Ministry" (the national magazine for lay readers which I edit) focusing on "Making Christ known in a secular society" should include an article on the power of drama and so it was that I had the privilege of talking over Zoom with creative director of Riding Lights Theatre Company, Paul Birch.

Riding Lights was founded in York in the 1970s by Paul Burbridge, in collaboration with a vicar, David Watson.

David was passionate (as part of his ministry) about reawakening artistic traditions within the Church both as tools for evangelism but also in recognition of the fact that we are all creative beings and one of the ways we reflect our maker is through acts of creativity.

Burbridge was passionate about excellence; he wanted the work he was involved in to be good in artistic terms, as well as a medium for sharing a message. So, right from the start Riding Lights went beyond being an evangelistic tool.

According to Paul Birch, Paul Burbridge (who died in 2023) didn't like the term "Christian theatre". He was concerned about the expectations (many of them negative) that such a term could set up.

Rather, his aim was to use faith as a springboard from which to make work. In his foreword to the first edition of his sketchbook "Time to Act" (published in 1979), Burbridge wrote: "The Kingdom of God is not easily confined to our systems, whether artistic, theological or materialistic and it's certainly not possible to encapsulate the greatness of God in a sketch."

Paul Birch elaborates: "The Kingdom is pretty massive. It's not always what people think it is. And we are using every theatrical means that we can, a play, a comedy sketch, a workshop, a building where people can come and drink coffee — to create the Kingdom of God where we are".

This strikes me as completely congruent with Jesus' parables where he uses all sorts of everyday examples and the Kingdom of God is not what we think it might be.

It's bigger and stranger but also more wonderful and in a way more recognisable than we could ever have imagined. It is both stranger and more recognisable and while people, in Paul Birch's words, may have an expectation that (as Christian theatre makers): "We come in, we have this polemic thing, then we go away", he believes that it is taking the time to make space for conversations to happen and relationships to build that actually makes the difference. This is less a question of delivering a message than of sharing news by engagement and that, of course, is exactly what Jesus did, he didn't shout at people from a pedestal or a pulpit, he got right down there with them and engaged with them personally.

By a happy coincidence I was able to see the latest Riding Lights production "Cups on a String" a few weeks after talking with Paul.

This play was developed in partnership with Transforming Lives for Good, a national children's charity and explores how church volunteers can make a difference in the lives of struggling young people in schools. Riding Lights hope to be performing this play in more venues in 2025.

There is also a new Passion Play ("Night Falls") for Lent written by Paul Birch (you can find out more, including how to book a performance, at ridinglights.org).

Richenda Milton-Daws is a member (and former chair) of ArtServe. She is also a licensed lay minister (reader) in the Church of England.

A still from "Cups on a String".

Posthumously published works

Hymns Old and New

by Alan Sharp

The first in a new series

FOR the past three years I have been writing in this column about place names for hymn tunes. For this new series I would like to take a more varied approach to hymns in general. This month we shall begin to look at the hymns of George Herbert.

Herbert was born in 1593 in what was then the county town of Montgomeryshire.

He did brilliantly at Westminster School and Trinity College Cambridge, where he became public orator.

This involved making orations in Latin to both King James I and Prince Charles on their respective visits to the university.

As well as being a poet of religious verse, he was also highly musical, playing on the lute and viol and singing his own compositions.

He was noticed by King James and began to move in court circles. He became an MP and was clearly destined for a great career.

However his health began to suffer and he gave up the aristocratic life.

Eventually, in September 1630, he became parish priest of two tiny villages near Salisbury, Fugglestone St Peter and Bemerton.

He died of consumption on March 1, 1633, shortly before his 40th birthday.

As he lay dying he asked a friend to give the manuscripts of his poems and of a book he had written to Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding.

Ferrar was to burn them all if he felt they were not worth keeping. Fortunately he realised the inspirational value of both works and they were published posthumously, the poems in 1633 and the book in 1653.

Herbert has three hymns in "Singing the Faith".

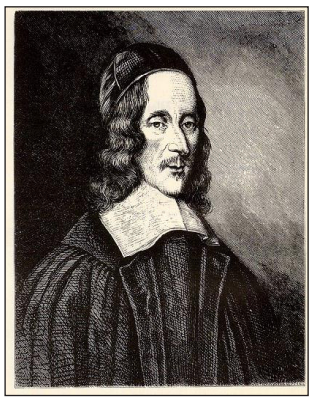
All three come from "The Temple", his collection of poems.

The first, titled "Praise II", begins "King of Glory, King of Peace" (StF 56).

Verse three reminds us of our need to praise God every day: "Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee".

This is reflected in his practice of encouraging his parishioners to join him and his family in morning and evening prayer every day.

As he rang the church bell at 10 am and 4 pm the farm labourers, who comprised most of his parishioners, would pause for a moment from their work and reflect that the vicar was about to pray for them as well as for the tiny congregation gathered in the church.



George Herbert's portrait by Robert White, 1674 (*National Portrait Gallery*).

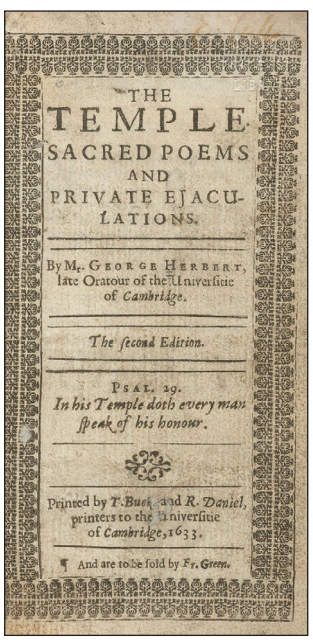
It is a practice which, surprisingly, is growing. Since Covid a number of Methodists and members of other denominations have joined members of their local parish church in saying morning prayer regularly on Zoom.

(This has the added advantage for me, an elderly man living on his own, that if one day I fail to log on, someone will check up after the service to make sure I am alright.)

The literary form of this hymn is typical of Herbert. The original was written in seven four line stanzas. The short lines follow a distinctive pattern alternating between "I" and "Thou":

"I will love thee/move thee; thou hast heard me/spared me.'

More about Herbert next month.


THE
TEMPLE
SACRED POEMS
AND
PRIVATE EJACULATIONS.

By Mr. GEORGE HERBERT,
late Orator of the Universitie
of Cambridge.

The second Edition.

PSAL. 29.
In his Temple doth every man
speak of his honour.

Printed by T. Buck and R. Daniel,
printers to the Universitie
of Cambridge, 1633.

¶ And are to be sold by Fr. Green.