

REVIEW

Strangers often come up to actor James Burke-Dunsmore with a bottle of water, asking him to turn it into wine. It is something he has grown used to during the 16 years he has been playing Jesus Christ in 57 separate productions.

"I'm flattered," he says. "This is a sign in a supposedly indifferent or hostile age that people are interested."

The trial, crucifixion and resurrection of an obscure carpenter one long weekend 2,000 years ago has been relived in solemn church services ever since Christianity came to Britain. Outdoor re-enactments by laymen were a popular feature of the medieval church until suppressed at the Reformation. However, Passion plays have been creeping back in recent years, perhaps, as the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge once said, because people are looking for God anywhere except in church.

This Easter, at least 15 performances are being planned by amateur groups around the country. They will draw their casts from volunteers with widely different backgrounds: members of local churches, Christmas-only churchgoers, even people uncertain about exactly who Jesus was.

Yet even those who claim to be totally ignorant of Christianity have some measure of curiosity. One production recently had Muslims playing disciples, and another featured Copts who showed some Baptists the proper respect due to a rabbi.

The production that will attract most attention this year will be Burke-Dunsmore's two performances in Trafalgar Square on Good Friday.

He will arrive on a donkey, and perform with another 78 players mingling with the audience until Jesus and the two thieves are crucified, usually in awed silence. An audience of more than 20,000 is expected this year, and the performance will be simultaneously shown on the website, wintershall-live.com, created for Peter Hutley, who pioneered modern Passion plays at his home, Wintershall, in Surrey.

The following day, James will perform it twice in Guildford High Street; and on Easter Sunday, he will watch the production he has directed at



AN ACTOR WHO WEAVES HIS OWN THORNY CROWN

James Burke-Dunsmore will be playing Jesus on Good Friday in Trafalgar Square. He talks to David Twiston-Davies

Suffering for his part: Burke-Dunsmore during a performance for the Wintershall Trust last year

meet James. One is that his story may not be the stuff of tabloid headlines, but it is unspectacularly, unthreateningly Christian. Brought up in the London suburb of Chislehurst, he became fascinated with art at an Anglican church school, then studied scientific illustration at Middlesex University.

"It was while living in a student dormitory that I became involved in an argument with a friend about religion," he recalls. "I was fiercely opposed, and determined not to allow myself to lose."

Neither could he claim

And when I ran out of all the arguments against, the teaching had got into my bones.

"Five years later I was with a theatrical group in Wales when I was asked to play Jesus for the first time, and on being asked to direct another production later, I realised that my knowledge of design had given me an invaluable instinct for stagecraft."

Since then he has written and edited 32 scripts based on the four Gospels, particularly that of St John. He gives some 40 talks a year to schools, in which he emphasises the importance of pupils feeling, not just studying, the words;

studying elephants formed a circle that became both cast and audience.

The other striking thing about James is his distinct resemblance to the Christ portrayed by the great religious painters, in those large works to be found in churches and museums, and on those small cards designed to be slipped into prayer

books. Tall and slim, with dark hair falling down his back, he is 41. But, with an energy that enables him to bound around with impressive agility, he looks 33, Jesus's age at the time of his death. His clear voice and gently penetrating eyes exude a genuine interest in those with whom he is speaking, though there is just a hint that latent anger can be summoned, as when Jesus turns over the moneylenders' tables in the Temple.

One consequence is that he is often the first choice for casting directors looking for a Jesus. He has played the role on both radio and television.

“Some, who are not even Christians have

in rehearsals, I encourage players to go back to the Scriptures and

delve deeper, though those who play Judas have a special problem. They want to know how he could betray a rabbi. It is not explained. But the play's well-judged pauses bring home our capacity for betrayal, especially if 30 pieces of silver are at stake."

To ensure that he will never become jaded, James weaves his own crown of thorns out of twigs for each new production. Every performance, he finds, can take on a mood of its own – a feeling of fear, of inevitability, an all-embracing guilt; but sometimes also a bouncy determination. There was the time a crowd laughed at Thomas's astonishment that he could touch the holes on Jesus's body, and another when James emerged from the tomb to cheering.

And he has his own surprises. A familiar line of scripture can suddenly take on new meaning, bringing on a gush of emotion or just a memory, as when the woman caught in adultery set off a ripple among the cast because James had asked the players to think about unfaithfulness. When a man helping him on to the Cross struck his leg with a hammer, and fractured his leg, James cried out in real pain, which the audience thought was part of the plot. He then had to find it in himself to shout "Father, forgive them..." and really mean it.

When another crucifixion scene took place in a snow storm so fierce that it was suggested the performance be cancelled, he carried on, and afterwards saw the gratitude in the faces of the audience.

Not all of James's parts have been so elevated. He once had a cameo in a production called *Mary and the Stripper* at the Edinburgh Festival and, walking home in his long robes, encountered a group of quarrelling drunks. "Oi Jesus," called out one. Instead of avoiding them, he stopped to recount the parable of the Prodigal Son. Afterwards he was asked: "What happened next?"

When a performance ends with Jesus commanding the apostles to go out into the world after his Ascension to Heaven, tensions can overflow. James has been cheered but also jostled as if in a football crowd.

Some in the audience, who are not even Christians, have burst into tears. A woman

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