

# CHRIST ON STAGE AND SCREEN

MURRAY WATTS

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**TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO**, I wrote a play about a Russian worker who was forcibly confined in a psychiatric hospital so his dangerously anti-social behaviour could be treated. The play was called *Cat-walk* and its hero's "sickness" was that he believed in Christ and, far worse, refused to keep quiet about his beliefs.

Almost exactly twenty years later, I was in Moscow meeting Russian animators to discuss the making of the feature film on the life of Christ, *The Miracle Maker*.

I could never have imagined such an extraordinary turn of events. I was deeply moved and said so, in a brief address to the artists and model makers who were animating my screenplay. At the end of my talk, one of the animators questioned me in Russian. The interpreter turned to me, deeply embarrassed. "I really should not translate this question because it is far too personal. One really should not ask questions like this." "Try me," I said. She took a deep breath. "The question is... are you a believer?"

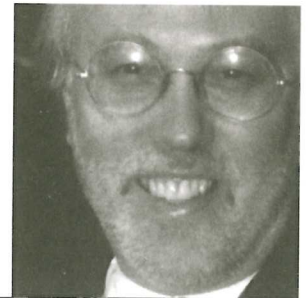
There was a short pause. I looked at my British colleagues, knowing I had not discussed my personal beliefs with some of them at all, then at the room full of Russians smiling politely in anticipation.

I said, "Yes, I am a believer, and I'm quite prepared to talk to anyone about this. But there is something else I want to say – which might alarm some Christians. I honestly feel that this film project is a great deal better because I am working with agnostics, people struggling with doubt, atheists, people who are drawn to beliefs other than my own."

"It is important that I am a Christian, but in a very deep way incidental to the success of this film artistically. I am employed because I've written screenplays for film and television, I've worked in animation, and it is known that I have some knowledge of the Bible, but not because I am a believer. I'll go further and say that if it were all Christians attempting this life of Christ, it would almost certainly be an artistic disaster."

Let me first of all add here, for the sake of those experiencing a sharp intake of breath, that there is a long and deeply painful background for me of Big Christian Projects in film and television that have failed catastrophically. They collapsed through a deadly combination of pious talk, overblown expectations and serious financial mismanagement, or suffering from a kind of super-spirituality and a lack of professionalism, rather than anything sinister or hypocritical.

**MURRAY WATTS WAS A FOUNDING MEMBER OF BOTH UPSTREAM THEATRE AND RIDING LIGHTS THEATRE COMPANY, OF WHICH HE IS CO-DIRECTOR. HE IS AN ACCLAIMED PLAYWRIGHT AND SCREENWRITER AND HIS FILM THE MIRACLE MAKER HAS BEEN SEEN BY MILLIONS ACROSS EUROPE AND AMERICA. HIS NOVEL BASED ON THE SCREENPLAY OF THE FILM HAS BEEN PUBLISHED.**



But, underlying my reply to the Russians, was not just a reflection on these dangers, but the even more serious consideration of truthfulness and quality in our work in film, video and the theatre.

I think that there are very searching questions for us to ask about why the best work – even directly dramatising the life of Christ – has not come from religious sources (Pasolini's film is the most outstanding example, and Dennis Potter's original and disturbing play, *Son of Man*, is another). And there is, I think, a deeply disconcerting question mark over the claim of many Christians to be interested in the truth, whether psychological or spiritual.

I would argue that the history in particular of the theatre, over the last century, has been more devastating in its honesty and paradoxically closer to Christ in spite of the beliefs of the writers – some of whom have passionately hated what we might call institutional Christianity.

I think my Russian interpreter's story illustrates something very important that is happening today, and it also illuminates a crisis that is now occurring in the performing arts as well as in the churches.

Dramatising, in *Cat-walk*, the diary of the Russian factory worker was an extraordinary experience: not only because of the insight it gave me into the faith of a Russian Orthodox Christian, but because it illuminated a connection between Christianity and the theatre which came to be of profound importance to me.

The purest expression of the Christian faith is essentially dissident. The nearer it comes to being an "establishment" religion, the further it is from Christ and the fainter his voice becomes, a voice which calls his followers into inevitable conflict with the status quo.

Theatre, at its most powerful, often has the same extremely disturbing function. It is a dissident art-form, prophetic in the sense of interpreting the present from a position of alienation and anger. It is also, in the work of many great dramatists from O'Casey to Miller to Tennessee Williams, an expression of deep love and sympathy for humanity in all its lostness. The figure of Christ, in my view, has trod the boards of many theatres and has wandered, unseen, through dramas of lost hopes, bitterness, longing, laughter, absurdity, passion.

Christ may be – whisper it softly – found more often in some theatres than in certain churches.

It may be that when we are seeking to discover the presence of Christ, or to hear his voice we are looking in entirely the wrong places.

The painter Emil Nolde said "Love is God, so is anger. But the Devil is a flatterer." We may wish to invert that first phrase and say, with St John, "God is love", but the point about diabolical flattery is the real issue here. The wrong place to look for Christ is where people prefer comfortable lies about themselves to the truth, however difficult, because according to the gospels "the truth will set you free". Where there is no truth, there is no freedom.

There is a terrible sickness in the present age that is the result of spiritual malnourishment, a lying to ourselves. At the heart of our self-flattery is the cherished conviction that we are not accountable for our own actions.

If anything (and this is our favourite, our most honey-tongued whispering to our soul) we are the true victim. Whatever damage we have caused to others, well ... we were damaged in the first place. Look at our lives! Look what has happened to us! Look how, with all the best will in the world, we could not have avoided these regrettable mistakes. Pity us, even though we destroy our relationships and allow our societies to decline and silently conspire in the destruction of our planet. Pity us, because we are victims.

So who is to blame? Who is accountable? The reason I have emphasised this question, and the virus of irresponsibility which has infected our world, is because I think that this is one of those places where Christ hangs bleeding on his cross, alone and ignored, but the long shadow of that cross falls across theatres and touches the work of the finest dramatists.

The same cannot be said for many churches, where doors are closed to Christ, because all they are concerned with is an exclusive comfort for believers, the flattery of a "spiritual outpouring" exciting the emotions and massaging the soul. The poor soul, victimised by the world, not responsible for others, pampered souls in an orgy of self-forgiveness, who live a lie and think that freedom is raising hands in the air and singing reassuring songs. Christ sits outside and weeps with the excluded.

Before "Outraged of Spring Harvest" writes to me, let me say that I am not talking about styles of worship, but about the meaning of our worship and the purpose of our lives. We are to live for others, and that means going far beyond joyful thoughts of our own salvation or even inspiring hymns about the greatness of God.



'IF WE ARE LOOKING FOR THE FIGURE OF CHRIST IN THE ARTS TODAY THEN I DO NOT THINK HE WILL BE FOUND ON THE STAGE OR SCREEN VERY OFTEN. WE SHOULD LOOK FOR HIM BESIDE THE DESKS OF DISILLUSIONED WRITERS, STARING AT PILES OF UNPERFORMED PIECES.'

The greatest plays and films are often not about comfort for the soul; they are about people in situations of conflict, people living on an emotional cliff-edge, individuals struggling to survive against overwhelming odds. People who sit weeping on the doorstep outside the comfort zone; those who have no access to the collective reassurance of religious groups, political movements or happy marriages and stable families.

These reach out to us because of the extreme vulnerability of the protagonists or their loneliness or their subversive humour.

The best of plays and films tell us how the passion of Christ is not a thing of the past. They tell us how we are all characters gathered around the cross in the year 2000. We are all to blame. And it is this point of responsibility, of accountability, this disturbing arena where no one is innocent – without which there can be no hope of any redemption, psychological, religious, social or political – that is fundamental to great theatre and is utterly inimical to contemporary politics and to much religious belief.

Christians, as well as politicians, nationalists, religious and political fundamentalists of all persuasions, frequently project evil into the world, invent bogeymen, castigate “unbelievers”, “outsiders”, political rivals, the Devil, the media. There is always an innocent and an injured party and it is themselves. Of course, I am not saying that all the great plays are concerned with this kind of accountability, nor that this is the only theme where we can find the figure of Christ walking towards us, unexpectedly, through the storm of our mental chaos. There is the risen Christ too, to be found in laughter and celebration, in farce and comedy, in the midst of a self-forgetting joy that is extremely unusual in churches. True laughter liberates us from ourselves. But I have chosen to emphasise this element of accountability because I think it has been of critical spiritual importance in our times and is now dangerously under threat.

When I spoke to the Russian animators I recalled my despair as a history of art student. I was spending time looking at the finest paintings of the centuries, many inspired by the life of Christ, but I seemed to be surrounded by academics who were interested in the “thrust of diagonals, the finely balanced compositions ...” Not one of them, as I recall, had much sympathy for the subject matter.

Art was a matter for the material world. Then I read the words of the Russian painter Jawlensky: “All art is nostalgia for God.” This phrase has continued to inspire me. The word nostalgia, which means “the pain of longing to go home” is a uniquely fitting one for so many works of art, and so many people in the present century.

I think it was my referring to this that led to the question, “Are you a believer?”. It turned out that the Russian interpreter was a believer herself and, with a doctorate in the philosophy of science, she had once been in an extremely awkward predicament. She did not want to reveal that she embraced these “crazy beliefs”, knowing what it would cost her and her family. So she always wore her crucifix under her dress and never spoke of her faith. In talking to her, I had no sense whatsoever that what she did during that period was in any way diminishing to her faith. In fact, her humility and her reticence were challenging to me as someone who always says too much rather than too little.

But it was when I asked her about the present situation in Moscow that I began to understand why she was still so cautious about declaring her beliefs. “Well, it’s a greater tragedy today, because it has become fashionable to wear crucifixes. People go to church to be seen by others – it’s the socially acceptable thing.” And as she touched her chest lightly, where her cross still lay hidden, she said quietly, “This has become a matter of style.”

“A matter of style...” In that lies the tragedy. Not simply the crucifix as a fashion accessory, rather the emptying of content from our plays and films, the turning of our theatres into amusement centres, the rejection of our best dramatists, the drowning out of our prophetic voices with the sound of cash tills. There are many fine playwrights in Britain but they no longer write tragedies; they write thrillers. They no longer write comedies; they write sit-coms.

They do not call their audiences to account, because they are dumb. Like the Jesus most of them do not believe in, they stand as “jesting Pilate asks, ‘What is truth?’ – and do not stay for an answer”.

If we are looking for the figure of Christ in the arts today then I do not think he will be found on the stage or screen very often. We should look for him beside the desks of disillusioned writers, staring at piles of unperformed pieces. But the appalling silence that is descending does not stop me believing, hoping against hope, that one day there will be a glorious resurrection. ■