

# Gospel according to Dennis

Michael Billington savours Bill Bryden's stirring, communal adaptation of *Son Of Man* by Dennis Potter at *The Pit*, and argues that God is very much alive in British theatre

**D**ENNIS POTTER'S *Son Of Man* has had a curious history. Its vision of an angry, mutilated Christ exploded on to our TV screens in 1989 leading to threatened prosecutions for blasphemy. It then turned up as a rather tame stage play at the Roundhouse.

Now it has been stirringly resurrected by Bill Bryden at *The Pit* as a communal theatrical event irresistibly reminiscent of his production of *The Mysteries*.

Potter's view of Christ is undeniably fascinating. It is partly a reaction against pre-Raphaelite sentimentality and the kind of anemic milkop presented by Hollywood in a dreadful sixties film, *King Of Kings*. But Potter, the most autobiographical of writers, also imbues Christ with something of his own searing pain and incandescent fury.

This is a Jesus who spevs up by the roadside before a big event, who ridicules established institutions, who preaches the subversive doctrine of "love your enemies" and who combines messianic fervour with self-doubt. Gazing at the crucifix, he says: "You should have stayed a tree and I should have stayed a carpenter."

Bryden's production, however, unwittingly exposes Potter's chief limitation: one that afflicts most TV drama. Put simply, Potter lacked the gift of poetry. The paradox is that while his expository prose was full of Biblical rhythms, his language in this play has the calculated thinness of one of those modern paraphrases of the New Testament.

I guess Potter's aim was to be as direct and simple as possible. But, although there are odd echoes of Auden ("We must love one another or die — that is a fact," says Potter's Jesus) for the most part the diction rarely matches the radical vision.

This is the key difference between stage and TV drama. Theatrical poetry, Cocteau famously said, should be "thick like the rigging of a ship and visible at a distance." But on television, where the camera can do half the work, the language of understatement works best.

Admittedly the point of view is wholly different but you only have to contrast the knotty poetry of Tony Harrison's *The Mysteries* with Potter's prosaic plainness. Harrison's Jesus tells God: "Thou bade that I should buxsome be For Adam's plight I must be pined"; Potter's hero baldly announces: "The son of man must be a man."

If Potter's play still works on us emotionally, in spite of its verbal limitations, it is partly because of Bryden's ability to turn theatre into a communal

ritual. The actors assemble in working clothes having, literally, clocked in. Hymns are constantly sung including Potter's own favourite "Will there be any stars in my crown" — to John Tams's music.

At one point, after Jesus has preached a sermon on love, the actors move among us shaking hands. It sounds embarrassingly corny; in practice, it is a simple demonstration of theatre's capacity to unify. By such devices, Bryden turns a TV play into a theatrical event. He is also aided by a strong cast led by Joseph Fiennes as a wiry, angry, abrasive Christ who kicks the money changers out of the temple with positively Marxist fervour.

And there is good work from John Standing as a Shavian Pontius Pilate who despairs of military blockheads and who is perplexed by the force of Christ's radical ideas and from Philip Locke as a Calaphas who has the beard of a prophet and the low scruples of a politician.

**We increasingly look to theatre to provide a substitute religion**

The event moves us because Bryden, helped by Hayden Griffin's design of timbered platforms arranged in the shape of a crucifix, creates a sense of folk ritual. But something even more powerful is at work which is to do with theatre's capacity to tap into ancestral

religious feelings. It was obviously there in *The Mysteries*. I noticed it too in Katie Mitchell's production of Strindberg's *Easter*, also in *The Pit*, with its message of redemption and mercy.

It is as if, at a time of waning faith in organised religion, we look to theatre to shore up and sustain our wilting belief.

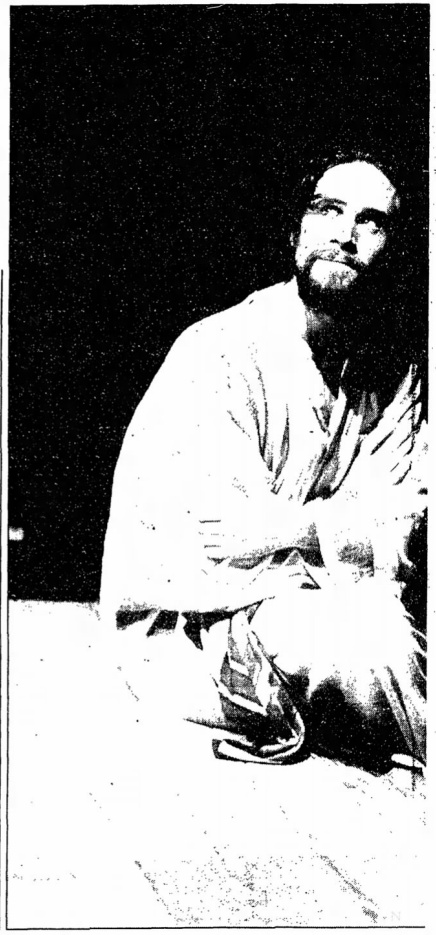
Potter's play set out to re-define our notion of Christ by portraying him as an angry militant who doubted his own divinity. But, far from being blasphemous, it survives precisely because it re-creates the Biblical story and plays on a certain generation's memories of church, chapel and Sunday School.

All I'm saying is that something significant and scarcely noticed seems to be happening in our culture which is that, as a counter to the materialism of the age, we increasingly look to art, and specifically to theatre, to provide a substitute religion. God, we are told, is dead: I would argue He is currently very much alive in the British theatre.

in rep at The Pit. Box-office: 0171-628 3351

**Joseph Fiennes in Dennis Potter's *Son Of Man* ... 'a wiry, angry, abrasive Christ'**

PHOTOGRAPH: TRISTRAM KENTON



## Billington on Son Of Man

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