



To his first wife, Stanley Spencer was 'holy'. To his second, he was 'dirty'. Stanley the play depicts 'a little squirt but a genius'

## Marks of Spencer

Michael Simmons

**T**HIRTY-SIX years after his death, Stanley Spencer remains a complex and controversial figure. The art establishment is still ambivalent about him, while in the Berkshire village of Cookham, his birthplace and his divine universe, they're guarded about what they secretly call his "social life". For years, the little man of five foot nothing was a familiar sight in the village, in a curly suit but neat tie, trundling his enamel clobber in a dilapidated push-chair to wherever it was he had decided to consummate his latest vision. He carried a little notice: "As he is anxious to complete his painting . . . Mr Stanley Spencer would be grateful if visitors would kindly avoid distracting his attention from the work."

According to his first wife, Hilda Carliss, whom he loved all his life, "being with Stanley (was) like being with a holy person". His second wife, the predatory Patricia Preese, spoke of him as a "sexually 'dirty'" little man and their marriage was never consummated. But he saw himself as being on more or less equal terms with God. "I am Treasure Island," he told a group of students at the grand old age of 21. "The most exciting thing I ever came across is myself."

Fan Geiss, whose play about Spencer opens at the National Theatre next week with Antony Sher in the title role, is similarly unegalitarian. "I love him," she says, "and I think he's a genius." She started the play claiming

Wash and go: The Baptism, painted in 1952 (above) and Stanley Spencer with the dilapidated push-chair and painting materials setting off to work (right). This was a familiar sight around Cookham. "A nutter, but an interesting character," a local recalls



a certain affinity with her subject: "I am working-class too, I was brought up in a Church atmosphere, I was picked out as a gifted child, and I also grew up in the meadows, between two rivers."

For Geiss, Spencer clearly still lives — as he does for an elderly estate agent in Cookham. "A nutter," he suggests, "but an interesting character. Not particularly popular in the village . . ." Lynda Whitworth, who until recently ran the Stanley Spen-

cer Gallery in Cookham's former Methodist church, recalls: "He was always happy to talk. He was nice with children and would always tell us what he was doing." In the gallery, where a somewhat tremulous Spencer worshipped as a child, she says they've tried to keep the feeling of him "as the village lad". Spencer saw Cookham as "a village in heaven" and it was always with him. When he went to China, ill with cancer and weighing less than seven stone, he

## Michael Simons Previews Stanley

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