

Jesus actor gets the gospel across

Ahead of his final year of acting the part of Jesus in Trafalgar Square's Passion play, which will be performed twice on Good Friday (15 April), JAMES BURKE-DUNSMORE reflects on what he has learnt from his years of playing Jesus in productions around the world

Interview by Emily Bright

HE has been asked to turn water into wine, heard confessions in restaurants and even broken up fights in the street. That's according to a *Financial Times* interview with James Burke-Dunsmore, who for the past decade has appeared as Jesus in the annual Passion play in London's Trafalgar Square.

I'm curious to find out more about how people interact with James, who does bear a striking physical resemblance to the Jesus portrayed in popular culture. 'They have the most enjoyable reactions,' he says. 'I've had it in restaurants where people have half-heartedly joked: "We feel like we're

sitting near Jesus." But within minutes of chatting to them, they all start talking about their lives in a confessional way.'

While being told he looks like Jesus may have its lighter side, James's performances in the Passion play don't shy away from depicting the hard-hitting realities of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It's not always an easy watch for audiences.

'My initial interest in the role was that, having always worked on plays by William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, Noël Coward and Charles Dickens, I was looking at a book – the Bible – that everyone has an opinion about,' he says. 'I think people find the story of Jesus itself uncomfortable, particularly when it's being told in a public place. There will be people who can't watch the Crucifixion, for example.'

James is well versed in seeing audience reactions to his role, having first depicted Jesus in a play at Wintershall, a venue in the heart of the Surrey countryside, back in 1998. Then in 2010, the same company performed its first Passion

play in Trafalgar Square. James gave his debut performance as Jesus in the central London location the following year.

This month marks his final outing at Trafalgar Square, with two performances on Good Friday. But he'll continue to perform Passion plays at Wintershall for the rest of the year, and is planning for others in 2023.

Looking back on how he prepared to play Jesus for the first time, James says:

I had to do a lot of soul-searching

'I had a great appreciation of all the attempts to describe him in the stories, through painting and culture. But suddenly, I had to look at his words

and work out what was on his mind, what his intentions were, and what made him very human, a person you could instantly associate with. He always seemed to speak of the best in us.'

So, I wonder, how do you go about preparing to play someone who is fully God yet also fully human?

'I had to do a lot of soul-searching, to think about dropping my vices and why I was carrying out behaviours and ways of thinking, to filter out my unnecessary baggage,' James explains. 'It was an extraordinary process for an actor. It's very rare to have such an extreme person to play.'

There are also the practical implications of his performance to consider. 'I've had to solve a lot of things in rehearsals. How would Jesus

walk? When Jesus skids on wet leaves in Trafalgar Square, how would he right himself and carry on?'

James has fully embraced the opportunity to step into the shoes of the Son of God and to empathise with what it would have been like to face opposition and stand alone.

'There have been occasions where Jesus' extraordinary confidence in a crowd has rubbed off on me,' he says. 'I don't think there are many people who enjoy being a single person surrounded by a crowd. It's extremely daunting, particularly if that crowd doesn't want you to be there or is questioning you or doubting you. It takes courage to stand up for yourself.'

'I'm in scenes where Jesus is surrounded by opinion and often violence. I've learnt year after year more and more what it is to have the confidence to stand up for what you believe in, for what you have that's important enough for you not to turn away.'

Passion plays portray the story of the days leading up to Jesus being crucified on a cross. They show him enjoying huge popularity that suddenly turns to opposition after he criticises and argues with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It is a story that tells how Jesus forgives those guilty of causing him to feel anguish, abandonment and physical pain.

One year, James suffered actual physical pain while performing when one of the actors playing a Roman soldier



James Burke-Dunsmore has played the role of Jesus in plays since 1998

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A performance of the Passion play in Trafalgar Square

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unintentionally went off script and hit James hard with a mallet.

'He fractured my ankles,' says James. 'As they were hoisting me up on the cross, and as I hung there, he was looking up at me, apologising, because he knew what he had done. And what's the first of the statements Jesus makes on the cross? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

'I was in utter agony and I was very concerned that I wasn't going to be able to walk and perform the resurrection scene. I was furious because the reason the soldier had hit me was that he was under-rehearsed, brought in at the last minute. I blamed the producer. While I was hanging on the cross, in front of 10,000 people, I was filled with anger, pain, fury and judgement.

'And I knew I couldn't deliver the line "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" until I'd forgiven the producer. So once I'd forgiven them for possibly crippling me, I delivered the line.'

Although live performances come with their challenges, James is keen to return to his role after being prevented from doing so because of pandemic restrictions.

'We stopped mid-rehearsals in March two years ago,' he recalls. 'That had a big effect on us, because the process that we were all so familiar with was interrupted.'

'When it was suddenly cancelled, it was horrible for everyone. Some of these actors had been doing these plays for as long as me, and they were used to this being a part of their Easter.'

Covid-19's legacy will also bring an added poignancy to the Passion play performances, explains James. 'We have lost some very dear friends and actors

during the pandemic, and we're going to miss them terribly.'

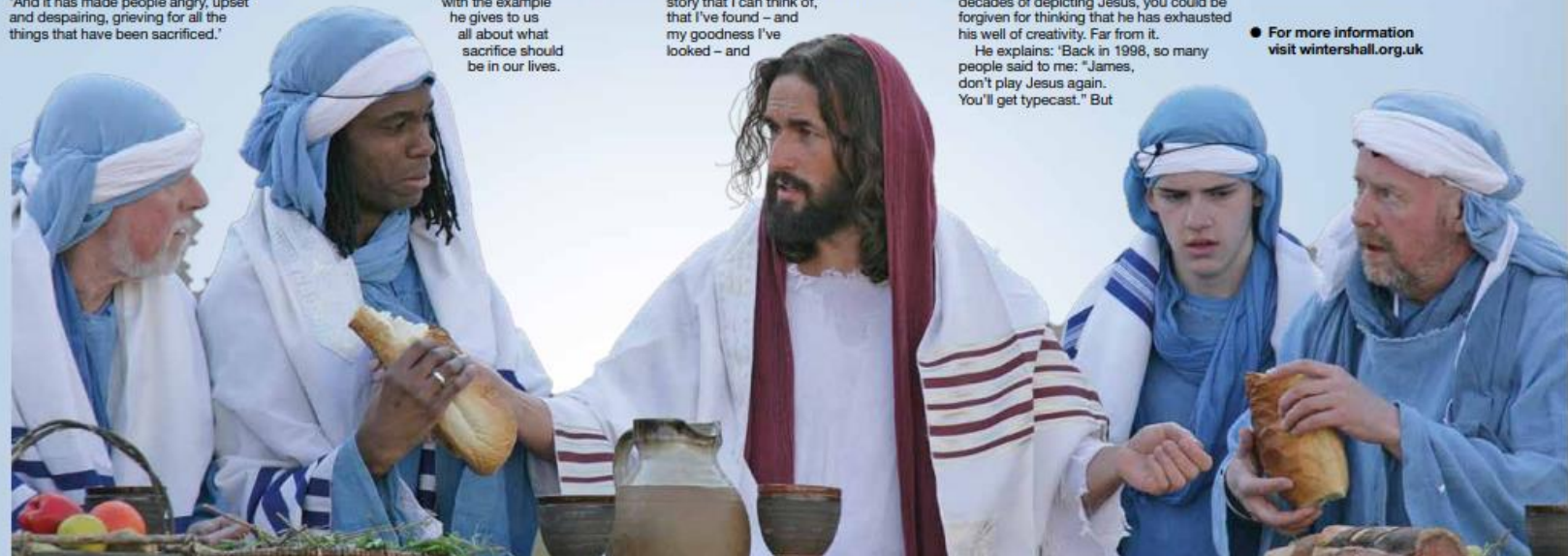
In the context of the pandemic, the idea of sacrifice in particular may have a whole new resonance with the cast, crew and audiences.

'Over the past two years, it has been mentioned so many times in the news: what people have sacrificed, what others weren't willing to sacrifice,' says James. 'And it has made people angry, upset and despairing, grieving for all the things that have been sacrificed.'

James aims to bring this timely theme into his performances.

'One of the things we talk about most in preparation for these plays is sacrifice, because if the sacrifice that Jesus was willing to make doesn't come through, if it's seen as too easy, if it's seen as what was just going to be, you miss the depth of what he truly did. You also don't connect

with the example he gives to us all about what sacrifice should be in our lives.



This story has to speak to people in all walks of life, otherwise we've failed.'

One interaction with a member of the public stands out for James as the inspiration for how he sees his Jesus role. During a run of a production of *Macbeth* in which he took the main role, he was approached by a woman who said she'd enjoyed watching. She enquired what he was doing next, and James told her

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that he was rehearsing to play Jesus. Her reaction wasn't quite what he expected. 'She said: "I'd love to see you play Jesus." Bearing in mind, she saw me as *Macbeth* the previous night, the darkest of all Shakespeare's characters, and now she's going to see the Light of the world. And then she paused, looked at me and said: "But only if you tell it properly. Only if you use enough blood."

'I think about her every time I tell the story, and about what she may have witnessed or experienced in life. I think if we pad the Easter story in cotton wool, then it's not going to reach everyone, and it's not going to give the example that I hope everyone will be inspired by.'

The significance of retelling the Easter story, something that millions of people around the globe believe in, is not lost on James. 'This is the ultimate story about transformation. But it's a transformation driven by such clarity,' he says.

'And it seems to be matched by no other story that I can think of, that I've found – and my goodness I've looked – and



I keep coming back to the Bible stories because there is an encouragement from transformation that speaks so clearly and openly to everyone.'

He believes that this theme of transformation is 'what makes it such a frightening story, but also one of the most engaging and life-changing stories, because it offers a mirror to our lives, and then an opportunity for our own transformation'.

Over the course of his career, James has been involved in retelling the story elsewhere through Passion plays in Scotland, Wales and Australia, and has been invited to write and direct them in South Africa, America, the Cayman Islands and Kenya. After more than two decades of depicting Jesus, you could be forgiven for thinking that he has exhausted his well of creativity. Far from it.

He explains: 'Back in 1998, so many people said to me: "James, don't play Jesus again. You'll get typecast." But

I knew that there were such depths of his character to look into, and I still haven't found the bottom.

'Books come out every month, every year, trying to find the bottom of this man's heart, his soul, his character, everything about him. Nobody seems to have managed. I challenge anyone to find the full depth of Jesus.'

● For more information visit wintershall.org.uk