

## **Making a Performance, a Story, a Body: Performing the Gospels**

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*You might ask, 'why perform them?' It's the question implicit in many comments about the work of the project. It's a question of whether performance opens up different ways of responding to the gospel - there's such a limited range of response - and if it doesn't, forget it.*

### **Making a Performance**

First and last 4 Mysteries Project is a performance project. The questions we ask are based in performance and the ideas and insights that are at the project's heart emerge from this. They don't come from elsewhere - from theology, or from biblical scholarship, or studies of myth - though insights and ideas from these disciplines have assisted the process of performance. What we're talking about is another way of understanding the gospel, remembering that if it only comes up with what we already know then we don't really need performance. As we've discovered over time the question for the project isn't, 'what can I do with the text?', but, 'what's the best way of making these scenes?' We keep coming back to performance and asking, 'how do we do this?'

This needs to be clearly spelt out, and insisted on, because often when it comes to performing the gospels - or what is taken to be the story of Jesus - one of the common approaches is that people assume the order of the written text is set and their brief is to bring ideas from various sources to bear on it - to enliven it a bit - and then ask 'how do we perform them?' So, first and last, we ask performance questions, and, in our way of working with the gospels of Mark and John, these are asked at every point.

At the beginning of the project the Mark and John workshops and a subsequent performance of a Mark Passion provided a number of key insights that have given a direction to our work:

- Too abstracted, and/or metaphoric, or naturalistic approaches to the gospels don't enable the performance of them.
- We couldn't simply give performers some scenes translated specially for the project and expect that certain doors will open for them: often they don't.
- We had to 'make a story' of each gospel and to do that we had to find a story frame for them which brings into focus their distinctive character: this was a breakthrough.
- We began developing performance scripts shaped by this framing of a story and our understanding that there is a mythic dimension to each of them. As we did we moved away from the order of the written text and its language.

- In developing the scripts we have discovered more about this mythic dimension to the gospels: about how the mythic works in symbolic ways and involves the making of a body. This discovery is a key to our performing the gospels.

## **Making a Story**

It has been said to us, whatever about the work of scholars, that 'I don't think of the gospels as stories.' Many of us think this way and it's understandable because of their episodic structure and various long sections of talking etc. This sort of mix is unique to the gospels, but it's not what we're used to in stories. 4 Mysteries Project suggests that each gospel can be understood as story and the development of story frameworks is a useful way of entering the gospels. We need to develop different ways of doing this, because, for many of us, the gospels can seem impenetrable.

### **Story Frame**

A breakthrough came when we started to ask, 'what kind of story can you make out of each account of the gospel?' We discovered a frame that worked for the Mark gospel was taking it as war story, a guerrilla struggle to liberate people from the grip of evil, while a frame that worked for the John gospel was a story of transformation. With these discoveries, things started to fall into place, or were cut. The framework shaped whatever we did and enabled things to happen, with decisions being made on the basis of whether something would work within the framework or not. One of the things we found is that something may be dramatically interesting, but still, it may not fit.

We asked questions of the Mark war story, such as: 'What kind of world is it?' 'What kind of war?' 'How do you evoke this world at war?' 'Who is the enemy?' We wanted to evoke a mythic world from the start - different, but not too different from the familiar world - so that everyone would understand what sort of performance it was; and so that performers would understand 'the rules of engagement'.

We realised too, that the gospels are not mythic in any straightforward way, given that, in them, the mythic can't be played out in a timeless realm because of the death of Jesus. Being located in time and space is another way in which the gospels are quite unlike the very literary Greek myths and the mythic imagining of Genesis. When we speak of the gospels as myths we do so recognising that myth is a way of trying to represent not just what might have happened, but why it matters to us.

If the Mark begins with John the Baptist and his followers in training, then the John, with its transformation framework, begins with a parade entering into the playing space where stories of transformation from the gospel are enacted. A key question for us was, 'how do we get from the beginning - with its extraordinary imagining - to the new, resurrected body at the end?' (And, 'what happens in between, with Jesus?') Our response was to begin with a parade of the new, resurrected body followed by five acts of transformation and end with the extraordinary imagining of the 'once and always' union, of which the risen, transformed body is a part. Once again, we cut anything that didn't fit with the story of transformation including the episode of the woman caught in adultery, almost despite ourselves, because at the end of the story she isn't changed.

We have come to see that John is best performed simply, as a dance drama with different styles of performance for different acts, with music, movement and design having important parts to play in creating this mythic, symbolic world. However, we're mindful that simple doesn't mean minimal, recognising, as we do, that, 'everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.'

Finally, good frames produce good ideas. War and transformation produce all kinds of ideas that otherwise would never occur to us.

### **Performance scripts**

The development of performance scripts is implicit in the account of the development of story frames given above: the one has led to the other. Both were a response to the realisation that you can't simply give performers some scenes translated from the gospel texts and expect that certain doors will open for them - often they don't - and to the further realisation that we may have lots of beautiful images, but not much of a story.

Once we had created story frames that brought into focus the distinctive character of each gospel they began generating the sorts of performance questions we have been asking. In turn this led to the realisation that we needed to encourage and deepen this process by developing performance scripts. Crucially, this process involved moving away from the order of the written text and its language, though it wasn't a case of anything goes so that we might 'do something with it' - you have to ensure it isn't reductive - rather, we did this in order to make a story, and a body, and so realise each gospel's potential for making meaning, in performance.

What is happening is something quite different to what happened at the beginning of the project when we worked with a translation of the gospel text. The scripts have provided frameworks within which we are able to play and open up these stories.

## Making a Body

### Mythic Dimension

Our understanding of the mythic dimension emerged from the performance process. Initially we weren't thinking in this way, but it became clear that a naturalistic style of performance doesn't work with the gospels. Each story is not set in a naturalistic world, but in a mythic world that introduces us to the unfamiliar and uncanny. Working in a performance way led us to conceiving of them as mythic creation stories, but unexpectedly so. They're not biographies of Jesus; they're stories about one becoming many, and many becoming one - about the fusion of groups and the risen Jesus in one body: the body of Christ then isn't a *he*, it's a *he/we*. This re-creation story is the central myth into which feed the different mythic worlds of the gospel. So the mythic refers to the fact that the Jesus life story doesn't end with death. The questions that arise at every point are: 'How do we do make this body?' And, 'how do you show it in the process of being created?' These questions are at the heart of the war story and the story of transformation and offer us a particular take on how to view the four gospels together. In turn, performing all four enables us to understand more deeply, this making of a new body.

At the beginning of Mark we set the scene for the creation of the body with John the Baptist and his followers, training together; after which there is the emergence of Jesus and his followers - the guerrilla band - showing us a different form of the body being created as they battle with a variety of demons.

These battles are foregrounded, not dismissed or sensationalised, because, as we say in the FAQs, 'these elements - such as demons, but also angels, God, Spirit and the Devil - that can seem foreign to us, are so much a part of the gospel wordscapes, that any attempt to deny, or degrade them, destroys the mythic ecology of the accounts. In performance we've tried to bring them to life, before our senses, without resorting to clichés, as vital parts of our story framework.' One very practical question we asked was, 'how do you fight a demon?' We wanted to ensure that each fight was differently staged and exciting, because if they're not, they can be farcical. On asking these questions we understood they went to the heart of the exorcisms which are such a feature of Mark's gospel and to the heart of the war story, as well as the re-creation of the body.

Then, thinking of how this central myth of *he/we* is a key to it, we worked to ensure Jesus is not an isolated heroic figure - so that in fighting the demons in Mark, he and his followers would work together to counter them. We asked all sorts of questions about how we might do this.

With the John we came to realise that if you have to simplify in order to focus on the body then that's what you do in order to make it real. A question being, 'what actions will build the body?' A prime instance in John's gospel is Jesus' death, where the focus isn't on the death of the individual. It's not a question of 'why is this death more special than anyone else's?' - which is beside the point - but, 'how does this death tie in with the birth of a new family?' that's happening at the foot of the cross.

In the scene involving the man born blind the man speaks of the body in the making, and in performance we find ways to allude to it throughout. The scene is always building in this direction. There's an elusive naming of Jesus - the body - in this scene, because we don't want to be preachy; but we're constantly reinforcing this sense of a body being formed. In our performance Jesus isn't there in this scene, but through the testimony of the blind man he is there. That's the point of the whole story: absence makes for presence. Jesus isn't there physically, but is there in the body. It's why in the gospel of John we have often asked the question, 'do we include Jesus in the scene?' The answer being, 'only if it's dramatically interesting.'

### **Symbolic Level**

We realised that myth works at a symbolic level with all sorts of questions being asked about what are the implications of this in performance? For instance, in the scene involving a bleeding woman and the raising of a young girl in Mark's gospel, we asked, 'why are these incidents juxtaposed?' There is a 'technical' answer given by scholars, but in the symbolic sense you can't leave it at that - nor can you be distracted by questions about the woman having an internal disorder - which is why we asked other questions: 'what is the symbolic world it's alluding to, or evoking?' And, 'how do we reflect that in a dramatically interesting way?' Not forgetting, 'what's it got to do with us?'

Touch too is part of the symbolism of this scene when the woman touches Jesus and is healed. We often think there's a flow of godly electricity, whereas, at a symbolic level, the emphasis is on her becoming part of him. When we hear something like this, many of us invariably think in sexual terms, but 'symbolising activity is about weaving and re-weaving human relationships': it represents the real in a new way. However, you can't labour touch in performance for fear of it becoming melodramatic, so that we may not show the touch, instead concentrating on the woman's testimony, because it drives the action. Consequently we've had to find a way for the woman to enact her story rather than simply tell it and we have considered how touch might work in this context.

Again, these considerations and questions are all a part of making a body, a way of realising that 'the symbolic is the milieu in which the real happens for us.' It's why we have looked at patterns of movement - in Kabuki and Peking Opera etc. - plus a range of music and sound and design elements and made use of them to evoke the mythic worlds of the gospel. In doing so we're seeking to develop a more stylised, symbolic way of performance across the four gospels.

## **Making a Performance**

Clearly in making a performance there are two key principles that shape what we're doing: the making of a story - developing a distinctive story framework - and the making of a body - the *he/we* re-creation of Jesus become us. So we're not talking passion plays, one man shows, medieval mystery plays, recent musicals and movies etc. - 4 Mysteries Project is doing something different. A core understanding for us is that these are four accounts of the one gospel. Paradoxically there are four, but only one. In the end we believe that a fourfold take on the gospel opens it up in interesting, productive, useful ways, and this makes for different ways of doing theatre. The further we go the stranger and more exhilarating it becomes.