Research: Dudley Passion Play

Insights from volunteer-led arts communities on the potential of Passion Plays to tell the Easter story and promote religious literacy in a multifaith world.

THE PASSION TRUST

MBR

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Introduction

Every year Passion Plays tell the story of Easter and draw the largest outdoor audiences of live theatre in the UK. They give people an opportunity to experience the Gospel story unhampered by centuries of religious traditions, but they are more than one-off performances. Every year Passion Plays are the focus of sustained work that equips and invests in local communities across the UK and promotes understanding between Christianity and the other principal faith traditions.

Passion Plays tell the story of Easter as presented in the New Testament. It is a story that has been told many time over. A story censored in the UK from Elizabeth I's ban on public performances of Mystery Plays until their revival during the Festival of Britain in 1951. Today there are many professional films and theatrical performances of Mystery Plays and Passion Plays, yet Passion Plays are still performed by professional and amateur groups across the UK.

What is it about the Easter story that makes people want to see the story brought to life through live theatre in their own local communities? More importantly, what is it about this story that draws people to take part in re-telling it for themselves? Finally, what impact do Passion Plays have on other people in the community and on broader social structures?

Research undertaken by the Passion Trust focussed on the Dudley Passion Play as a case study, along with a number of other Passion Plays performed in 2024 to explore these questions and to hear from voices that hitherto have not been heard.

About Dudley Passion Play

The Dudley Passion took place in the centre of Dudley a market town in the West Midlands. A free, outdoor performance of the Easter story. Saltmine Theatre company worked with professional actors and a volunteer community cast of thirty to forty people, culminating in two performances on 19th and 20th April 2024.

Described as 'a unique contemporary retelling of Jesus' last days, death and resurrection live on the streets of Dudley,' this production has many points of relevance for the research: a contemporary production, professional theatre, community cast, three months production time; six week rehearsal; two performances.

About Saltmine Theatre Company

Saltmine Theatre company is a professional theatre company that performs in schools, churches, and theatres across the country. Its creative team – actors ranging in age from 20 to 30 – are all Christian and committed to high quality, professional theatre. The Dudley Passion is not Saltmine Theatre Company's first Passion Play. They have worked with local community casts on previous productions of Passion Plays in Birmingham in 2019, Norwich in 2020, and Stafford in 2023.

About the Passion Trust

The Passion Trust is a registered charity that brings together Passion Play communities to be inspired and equipped to bring the Gospel story to life in local communities in the UK. A key focus is to transform the way Easter is experienced through free, live performances of the Easter story that grow organically from local churches and communities.

It aims to promote greater unity among Christian denominations and across diverse ethnic communities. It also aims to provide opportunities to increase public understanding and appreciation of the dramatic arts by supporting young and emerging artists exploring the relevance of Easter in the context of the Christian faith.

Methodology

Qualitative research undertaken by the Passion Trust in 2024 focussed on the Dudley Passion Play for case study action research. To complement the case study, we widened the research focus by comparing and contrasting the Dudley Passion Play with a range of other Passion Plays taking place in 2024. Insights from plays performed in Worcester, Oxford, Reading, West Cheltenham and Edinburgh reflect back on the Dudley Passion case study to give a richer understanding of Passion Plays in 2024.

The research was shaped by the following questions:

1. How do volunteers' work within Passion Play communities to contribute to long-term changes to social structures?
2. How do arts communities tell the Easter story in a multifaith world?
3. How do volunteer-led communities provide opportunities for shared knowledge, skills and experience?
4. How do Passion Plays contribute to knowledge, experience and community in a multifaith society?
5. How do community theatrical techniques work as social research methods for investigating experiences?
6. How are participants empowered to be more reflective and purposeful agents of change
7. What practices and policies can be identified as models of good practice?

Data Collection:

Detailed and sustained interviews and observations with the Dudley Passion Play allowed us to collect more research data and dig deeper into the research questions. Interviews and observations with a number of different Passion Plays elicited broad themes and ideas, allowing us to develop and refine the research.

Recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed, along with gestures, non-verbal behaviours and interactions. Employing thematic content analysis and narrative analysis enabled identification of common patterns across the data set and highlighted individual voices and stories. We also collected data from online material, reflections on past productions, recorded interviews on the current production, past interviews and footage of previous productions, and structured observations of live performances.

Participants:

Participants in this research project included people involved in all areas of production and performance, from professional creative cast and community cast members to artists, scriptwriters, musicians and other volunteers. One of the tenets of qualitative research is the hearing and honoring of the participants' voices and experiences: their own words are quoted extensively. The research project was also designed so that participants not only contributed to collection of data but also engaged in self-reflection and feedback of insights and experiences back into the Passion Play community.

Play	Director	Producer	Professional actor	Volunteers	Script writer	Music/Movement Director
Dudley	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Havant			✓			
Liverpool		✓				✓
Oxford	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Reading	✓		✓			
West Cheltenham	✓		✓			
Worcester	✓					

Strengths and limitations:

As action research, participants were actively involved in rehearsing, performing and reflecting on their Passion Play while contributing to the research, so participation in the research encouraged critical reflection. However, the perspectives of participants were inevitably shaped by the positive and transformative experiences they reported. Future research would broaden this perspective to include audience perspectives for more objective data.

Part One
Dudley Passion 'Vignette'

The Dudley Passion Play opened with contemporary portrayal of Palm Sunday. Instead of donkeys and palm leaves, the play began with a lively samba with drums and a community cast mingling among the crowd that gathered to watch.

Trouble ensued as military police people arrived to try shut the buskers down, but Mary Magdalene took up a microphone and rallied the crowd to resist. They were not going to disperse; they were waiting for someone; they wanted change. The chanting started, the drumming increased…and Jesus arrived riding on a humble bicycle.

The cast immediately recognised him as their 'liberator', and their energy carried onlookers all the way through Dudley High Street to the next scene. With the samba and drums and the movement of a large crowd there was something of a buzz. Was there a protest? Or a riot?

A larger crowd gathered as the action moved down the High street, stopping at various locations to perform other key moments of the Passion story. From the statue of Dudley's famous footballer, Duncan Edwards to the fountain half way down the High Street which became a stage for the Last Supper. Despite the modern production and contemporary dialogue it retained 'iconic' moments such as the washing of Peter's feet and the bread and wine of the Last Supper.

A jocular mood among Jesus and his closest followers included jokes about Peter's smelly socks as Jesus washed their feet. The Last Supper included fish and chips from a local café delivered by a Deliveroo driver who was offered some chips.

The mood changed as police in riot gear arrived to arrest Jesus. Shouting and pointing, they took hold of Jesus and the noise and confusion increased as the action moved to the Glassworks factory. Here Jesus' was tried before Pilate and the religious authorities, before being condemned to death.

A sombre crowd followed Jesus as he carried the horizontal beam of the cross on his back out of the town centre to Coronation Gardens. At the main road a line of buses were waiting, blocked by a local council van, and Jesus crossed the road for his final journey.

In a corner of the Garden, with cars and buses passing in the background, three crosses stood prominently and there Jesus and the two thieves were crucified. A conversation between Mary Magdalene and Pontius Pilate explored the question of suffering: 'Why, if God is loving, why would He allow suffering to happen?'

Finally a silence descended as the audience strained to hear Jesus' final words before he died.

The bodies were taken down from the crosses and the crowd walked quietly, reflectively, to the Evolve Theatre in the College grounds. There the resurrection scene was performed with a lively rendition of 'Joyful, Joyful' from *Sister Act*. With the audience singing and clapping along from their seats, music was both a transition back into the real world and the culmination of the live theatrical experience that had journeyed through the streets of Dudley with the Easter Story.


GD MOBILES


Mac's

Production: ‘On a Journey’

The Dudley Passion was the product of a partnership between the creative team at Saltmine Theatre Company and the community cast gathered from local communities in and around Dudley. The community cast was a multicultural cast with people ranging in age from late teens to pensioners. There was no prerequisite for them to be Christians or to have acting experience, but they did have to be committed: they were rehearsing together every Thursday night for six weeks. Each two and a half session included tea and coffee, games for warm ups, short acting classes, and rehearsal techniques for exploring the script. There was a full rehearsal a week before the performance, a dress rehearsal with tech the day before the performance, and then two performances.

Sally, who had heard about the opportunity through her church described herself as someone who ‘loves talking to people’ and ‘used to dealing with a lot of people from different sections of society’. Now retired, she used to work on an intensive care unit and was drawn to the Passion Play from the moment she heard it would be performed in her local area.

She was part of the crowd drumming up an audience at the beginning, as well as a militant sent out to arrest Jesus, then part of the crowd at the crucifixion. She said ‘I had absolutely no acting experience at all but it was it was great!’

> They gave us like little acting classes how to do our voices and speak properly. I loved it. I was a militant, you know, we had proper police shields! They were heavy, really. And so we're either keeping the crowd back or we were keeping Jesus in. And you had to be fierce. You weren't allowed to smile. And they gave you these breathing techniques and it was like, ‘Stay back”!’ ‘There's nothing going on!’ ‘Out of the way!’ It was really good!

Since the script was almost literally the Bible, Sally described the rehearsals as ‘a Bible study combined with acting classes’:

> You had people come from quite different backgrounds. There's coffee and tea, and you could chat about your church and their faith. I guess you might not all agree on the same thing, but there's nothing wrong with that. You don't all have to agree on the same thing. But it was lovely meeting people seeing different views. And we prayed at the beginning, and then we prayed at the end and obviously prayed that the Lord would guide us with the Passion Play…It was beautiful, it really was.

Ben, Saltmine’s Co-director who played Peter in the Dudley Passion Play, described rehearsals as ‘immersive Bible study’: ‘You're getting them to think ‘What would it be like to be there?’ But you have more space to wrestle with the thoughts and the feelings of the people in the crowd. I think that for me is really special, because then they have a great connection with the story and ultimately with God.’

This special connection was described as a journey by Emily, scriptwriter of the Dudley Passion Play and actor with Saltmine. Having written the script with Dudley in mind, Emily reflected on the journey that people went on over the rehearsal process. For her, it was ‘one of my favourite parts of doing the show, it was absolutely brilliant!’:

> So what we'll do is say 'Go home and read the Gospel. We don't want you to be just like a generic crowd member. We want you to have your own journey as part of this show. So go and pick somebody in the Gospels who you think you could be. So whether it's one of the Pharisees who looks down on Jesus but then is maybe going to change their mind, or whether it's another disciple, maybe, who we don't have in the cast…And now you're watching Jesus, and you know what's your story? What's your relation to it?'…And I absolutely love in rehearsals where people will bring stuff that they've been thinking about outside of the rehearsal process, and they kind of come up and they say, 'Well, I'm decided that I'm going to be this character, and it's the woman who is caught in adultery, and I'm here now, and I'm watching Jesus, ad this is how I'm feeling, and this is where I'm going.' And you're like, oh, that's so brilliant.

This journey was also challenging, as Emily further reflected: 'It's definitely a strange kind of thing to have written a script, and then to take it into rehearsal, and just to allow it to kind of move away from your imagination and be opened up so that everybody can have a go exploring it.'

Another challenge was 'having to contemporize everything that's in the Gospels' – bringing it into the world of the local community without writing anything 'blasphemous or heretical':

> I don't want to write anything that's blasphemous or heretical. Or what if I've misunderstood this? But actually, what was amazing about it is that if you go into the Gospels and look at the some of the things that Jesus was saying. What he's saying is really quite controversial and quite cutting edge a lot of the time…and I think, putting that into a modern context where we want sort of big actions and big moments and we want people to stand up and overthrow things. When actually what Jesus does is all these little subversive acts of love to people, and has these small conversations which then spark something which travels further and further and further. And so for me, the challenge was in writing those kind of moments really authentically. So you can see how much power that they have in them, and that actually, that was the thing that was gonna be transformative for the society around, and can still transform our society too.

Described as 'transformative' in rehearsals among diverse community cast of different backgrounds and experiences the Passion Play had transformative potential in connecting Christians, enabling interfaith dialogue and investment in the local community, as discussed under the following three headings.


shoezone

Connecting Christians: 'Feels like family'

The potential for people to unite around the common basis of their Christian faith was a specific aim of Saltmine Theatre Company. It was important for them that their creative team were all Christians, as CEO Rachael explained, 'we pray every day together':

> And you know, we're praying that God will bring people to watch it, and open their eyes and hearts as a result. My heart is that all the professional actors are Christians, that they carry the story as well as communicate the story. This is not always the case. Other actors have said 'There are times when I've played Jesus, and there have been no other Christians in the cast'.

She described Saltmine as a 'creative missional resource for churches', something to make it easy for people to invite family and friends to explore the Christian faith. A number of local churches were also invited to take part and support the Dudley Passion. One of the main challenges to church involvement was that churches were so busy with their own programs over the Easter weekend. The Dudley Passion Play was performed the week *after* Easter to avoid clashes with church events.

They also worked hard to build interest, involvement and commitment but Rachael was at times bemused by the challenges of getting churches involved:

> I would say I've got good relationships with all these church leaders, but I didn't really get them engaged until the last four weeks…We tell the churches, look, this isn't about Saltmine because there are so many people that just don't know your story, Jesus's story.

Although churches were very busy, individual people from a number of different churches, representative of a range of different denominations and perspectives, took up the opportunity to take part in the play.

From rehearsal to production, Saltmine actors were aware of the importance of 'entering into dialogue' and 'presenting a story that people can respond to in whatever way feels authentic to them.' As Ben put it, this was what 'builds community':

> And what's special is by the end of it, it feels like a family. There've been people from a whole different range of denominations and walks and non-faith and faith, and seeing people journey together wrestling with one of the greatest stories ever told, just is a brilliant thing to unite people.

Sally, having heard an invitation to join the community cast at one of her church services, also described the experience as 'like a family, like a community':

> What was lovely was you had all these Christians from different churches, you know, Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal Church of England, and all in together. I knew three or four people from our church, but I didn't know anybody else. By the end of two months you felt like a family, like a community...and to pray about it and know

that the Lord is working in your area, you could feel it. You could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit working in the community that you live in.

Interfaith perspectives: ‘Ruffling a few feathers’

CEO Rachael was contacted by a journalist for a contribution to an article on antisemitism that was published just prior to a briefing hosted by Religion Media Centre on ‘Passion Plays and Antisemitism’.

The Dudley Passion was a modern production with modern dress and a contemporary setting, with the ‘religious authorities’ who rejected Jesus wearing the signs and symbols of Christian religious leaders (dog collars and white shirts). Since the signs and symbols of religious authorities were not taken from the historical context of the Gospels, there was no need for consideration of antisemitism in their use of costumes or other representation of priestly authority.

As scriptwriter Emily put it, the focus was on how Jesus spoke out against ‘the religious leaders of the time’ and reimagining the Gospels in today’s world would point to religious leaders as church leaders:

> I think quite often, even if you're not a Christian. The only thing you know about Christianity is that Christians believe that Jesus came back to life…We see him challenging in our version. He challenges church leaders because, you know, they would be the religious leaders of the time, so we kind of see him speaking out against things.

Although there was no need for careful consideration on how to portray religious authorities in first century Palestine, the creative team at the Dudley Passion did consider the customs of Jewish and Muslim people who might be watching: they decided not to use the pork baps that are traditionally eaten in Dudley during the Last Supper. Although it was a way to link to local traditions, it was deemed inappropriate and a possible offense to people of other faiths who don’t eat pork.

Emily was aware of engaging with people of other faiths in the public square. She reflected on Saltmine’s first performance in Birmingham with its multicultural demographic, aware that ‘it could really ruffle some feathers, because you are literally out in the street kind of shouting about Jesus’:

> In the bullring, the central square near the shopping centre, there were lots of stalls and things going around there. And we obviously start with this kind of flash mob thing and music and drumming, like you can't really ignore it. And there was a stall run by Muslims, and they were giving out Qurans, and talking about their faith with people…And we went and spoke to them and we said, ‘It's because of Easter, we're talking about Jesus, about the Gospels, and we're gonna be making a lot of noise for about twenty minutes, and then we'll go.’ And they were so encouraging and positive about it and wanted to hear about why we were doing it, and what the motivation was, and who was involved. They actually turned off their music so that we could have the whole sound, which was amazing.

Describing the crucifixion as ‘very provocative’ with the ability to ‘create a reaction in people’, Emily also reflected that ‘any negative response we had has not been from other faiths at all, and it's always been from people who, I think, are just a bit like Oh, my goodness! I feel a bit

confronted, and I can't just ignore this…but actually end up watching the whole thing because they can't step away.'

CEO Rachael recalled the experience of a Muslim man who had been involved in the community cast in one of their previous performances:

> We had somebody in our community cast who was Muslim as well, and he was just interested in telling the story and thinking about it from my perspective. You know, I would be really interested to see a story from another faith performed in the same way, because I think it makes it accessible, and it makes it interesting to watch…I remember talking to him, saying, 'Look, if you feel uncomfortable in shouting anything you don't have to but just, you know, be part of it.' Well, in fact, I was standing at the end and he was the one that came up and almost gave me a hug and said, I can't thank you enough for including me, and I now really understand the Christian story more than I've ever done before.'

It was not only people of other faiths who were included in the community who were impacted by the story, it was also people who worked with Saltmine in other areas of production. Rachael recalled the responses of people she had worked with:

> The man we worked with at Birmingham City Council, he actually said to me at the end, Rachel, I just want to thank you. I've enjoyed working with you so much, and I want you to know that I'm not going to have an atheist label anymore. I'm on a journey….and I took the West Midlands mayor around [and he] said 'this is very powerful'. And he's not a Christian.

Local Roots: ‘We're doing this for Dudley. We're from Dudley.’

The local community of Dudley featured prominently in both the creative production and the final performance. Volunteers for the community cast were drawn from local churches, local community groups and the local college, which has three or four thousand students and was also the venue for the final Resurrection scene.

Volunteers and members of the creative team lived in Dudley and its surrounding towns and cities, with some coming from Bristol, Stafford, and Birmingham. As well as taking part in the performance, volunteers also took part as stewards who provided security and safety, ushers who helped the audience follow the promenade performance, and an ‘Engage Team’ – a new idea – included twenty people who were there to connect with audience members who were on their own or who looked confused.

Although Saltmine Theatre Company is based in Dudley, its professional actors were from different parts of the UK and they drew on the community cast for their knowledge and passion for the local community. Using public settings like the streets and squares of the town centre capitalised on their links to these familiar places.

Community cast member Sally was one of the people mingling with the crowd. At times breaking out into singing or chanting or shouting, she was part of the group existing in the space between the stage and the audience, creating atmosphere and adding to the immersive experience. She reflected on the ‘authenticity’ and intimacy within the performance:

> I think probably the modern take on it like Jesus coming in riding on a bicycle. I think the fact that we were just in normal clothes, and lots of references to Dudley in the rhyming of things, and I think that made it more intimate for them. So it wasn't generalized for the whole country. It was just specifically done for Dudley.

Other parts of the local community contributed to the performance in different ways. Over the three months of production CEO Rachael developed relationships with local churches, local council and local community groups and the local ‘Save the High Street’. Dudley Local Council, while not always easy to navigate in terms of forms, procedures and permissions from all the right people, was more than happy to work with Saltmine on this project. Rachel’s repeated word to describe her experience working with Dudley Council was ‘unbelievable!’

> The Council have just been incredible. They're all excited, and I'll never forget having to fill in big forms and go before a committee, and I said I'm just aware that in theory I shouldn't be starting to communicate about the Passion Play until all this has been done. And he just looked at me and said, ‘Rachel, watch me.’ And he goes to the wall and puts it on the calendar - Dudley Passion Play - and he said, ‘I give you full permission to start fundraising and start telling everybody.’

The local council not only put the event in the city calendar immediately, they arranged for the buses to stop as the performance moved from the place where Jesus was tried before Pilate to the place he was executed.

> One of the surprises that we had was the main big road for Jesus to cross with the cross on his back. And I just said to the Council, ‘Is there any chance we can temporary close

this so people could cross?' And they said, 'Yeah, of course. All the buses can watch, can't they?'

They provided a council truck to block the road while actors and audience crossed the road and the result was an even larger audience with bus passengers also able to see into the green where the Crucifixion was staged.

Live performance: 'Pursuing the Story'

A live promenade performance on the streets has its own unique challenges and rewards in terms of sound, music, public settings and, of course, the weather. CEO Rachael pointed out 'the most important thing is that people can hear the story, so the tech is very important' and co-director Ben described some of the challenges:

> You're talking about lots of variables. The weather. The people - are they gonna come? The staging…We're outside, and there's birds and noise and cars and you have to be prepared for something to interrupt or to go a bit differently to what you plan.

As it turned out, the weather was a pleasant surprise – welcome sunshine on both days of the performance. The Passion Play travelled to different locations around Dudley town centre unimpeded by rain and gathered an audience either from people doing shopping or meeting friends at the different locations, or from the people who had seen the first scene and followed them from there. As Emily put it, people were on a journey in more ways than one:

> People are pursuing the story for themselves. They have to be quite active in wanting to know what happens next. It's not just sitting back and watching it happen in front of you, you actually become part of the storytelling and part of the crowd, so that by the time we do the resurrection scene right at the end, we've journeyed physically, emotionally, spiritually with it, as well as just kind of watching it happen.

This journey resulted in an active and at times participatory audience which meant that for the actors, 'there was nowhere to hide.' As co-director and actor Ben put it:

> People are watching you 360. They're watching you in between the scenes. They're trying to like, heckle you or get a reaction or come up and interact with you, shake hands and give you a hug. There's no way to hide. That's what we have is that from the word go, really, as soon as we arrive at the opening scene, we are in character, and it is that immersive experience, as if the people there are experiencing Jesus come to Dudley.

For scriptwriter Emily this immersive performance allowed many shared moments and connection with the audience:

> The thing that I love most is the connection that you have with people, and that's what makes live performance so different from watching something recorded or on TV. So you know, when you're on stage and you make eye contact with somebody and you know that you've just got something between you for a minute. You just see them completely be present for a minute. And it's so much more elevated in the Passion Plays, because we're literally amongst the audience. So there's no distinction between us and us and them at all.

Sally, as part of the community cast, experienced interactions with the audience that were both scripted and spontaneous: 'the audience don't know that you're crowd actors, so you know it's quite interesting for them!'

She found that people who stumbled across the performance were happy to either stand and watch or follow the actors through the town. At times, Sally even drew people into the action: 'There was the music at the beginning and I got this lady from the crowd and I got her dancing and she was like, 'Oh, this is good!'

Others were less willing to be involved. A young man standing at a stall with literature about the war in Gaza said 'It's the Christians making a racket' and a couple walking past the Last Supper after having a lunchtime drink or two quickened their pace. 'You've all been brainwashed,' shouted the man over his shoulder, along with a few other choice words. A Muslim family with two small children stopped to watch, but soon the father lost interest and wandered off, followed by the mother and children still looking back over their shoulders.

During the trial scene when militant police armed with plastic shields came to arrest Jesus another man started shouting. Sally, who was one of the 'militants' at the time described how he started shouting at the actors and tried to stop them arresting Jesus:

> There was one guy there, must have been late sixties, who had had a few drinks and I think he was probably a guy on the streets. And I was a militant and he actually thought I was a policewoman and we were arresting Jesus. And he said, 'I'm a Christian, you can't kill him'. He took it so seriously. 'You can't kill him!' And he started banging on my shield. Then he went to the stage and he was saying to one of the actors, 'No, you can't kill him!' She actually had to say to him in the end, you know 'it's a reenactment'. And then, at the end, they actually interviewed him, and he came and apologized to me, bless him! He said 'it was so realistic…I got a bit confused.'

Scriptwriter Emily reflected on the power of live theatre in those 'moments where you see of Jesus being a relatable human person as well as the Son of God':

> We see him wrestling with his decision that he has to make to go through with it. Gethsemane is very raw and very personal to watch, because in the moment we want people to kind of almost think that Jesus could change his mind. You know he has the power to if he wants to. He could just run away. And we know that he doesn't. But we want people to think that he could.

As Sally recalled 'the mood just changed':

> I saw a few tears when Jesus was on the cross and died and...it just become very, very, very sombre…It was as though you were there. and his mother Mary coming crying up to the stage. It made you feel as though you were actually there, and you could see the pain on Jesus's face. It brought the story alive. You could visualize it, you know, rather than just reading the story.

The crucifixion was also a 'raw' portrayal, with sights and sounds of torture and execution that made it very personal to watch. The transition from crucifixion to resurrection moved the audience from the Coronation Gardens into the college theatre where Jesus' resurrection was celebrated with the lively rendition of 'Joyful, Joyful' from *Sister Act*. On both performance days the audience was so large it required two sittings for this scene.


FILA

Impact: ‘God's got a future for me’

Those involved in Dudley Passion Play were conscious that just as they had been on a journey, so the people watching were on their own journey. Among the audience was a man who approached one of the actors in tears:

> Ramel, who played Thomas, had somebody coming up come up to him and he gave him a big hug because he was very tearful. And he said ‘I've been in such a dark place that I was actually thinking of committing suicide tonight. I was just in the streets and I got brought along and I've just heard how much Jesus loves me in this resurrection scene and I know I've got a purpose in life to find more.’

Reflecting on this, Ben said the whole performance ‘was worth it for him.’ The homeless man who had tried to stop the actors as they were arresting Jesus also spoke to Ben after the performance:

> He followed it right through, from the scene where all the community cast are shouting, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ He's shouting, ‘Let him live! Let him live!’ He was so caught up in it, he was like, this is injustice, you can't let this happen. He followed it all the way through to the end and was tearing up, and he just said, ‘two weeks ago I nearly died. I was in a coma…but God sent me back, and he said, I'm not ready for you yet.’ He said ‘God has like grabbed hold of my life, I know he's got plans for me’.

Among the community cast was a real belief in doing something for their community and finding in the Passion Play a new momentum and passion, as well as new relationships and opportunities to talk about their faith. As Sally put it, ‘God is working amongst us. You can feel it! You can see it!’ It was this that ‘gave you such a high…the best form of a drug!’ Another member of the cast said ‘I have had one of the best experiences of my life being a part of this [and sharing] it with my daughter, and lots of other beautiful people.’

CEO Rachael described the actors as ‘absolutely buzzing’ and the community cast ‘absolutely just love it’. As Emily put it ‘just bringing that story onto the streets brings a sense of kind of hope and life.’ For Rachael, the important thing was knowing God wanted them to put the play on. ‘If God wants this, he partners with you, and I really sensed he did. And I'm not exaggerating when I say he is gone before us, like I have never, ever experienced before.’

The Passion Play also included an opportunity to keep on exploring. As Sally said, people who came to watch it ‘were encouraged to carry on the journey.’ One way to continue the journey was the Alpha Course, a key link with local churches and leaflets were handed out at the end of the play for people to join a group at one of the churches.

As a professional theatre company, Saltmine also offered other options for exploring further. They have a production titled *The Liberator*, a contemporary resetting of the Gospels in in a more traditional theatre format, which could be booked by churches and community groups as a follow-up show.

Local news coverage and also actors from the Dudley Passion Play were filmed as part of the BBC show ‘Britain's Easter Story’. The director had seen their Birmingham Passion Play and wanted them to perform extract for his choir as they were preparing to sing Bach’s Passion.

Their 15-minute excerpt included part of the trial and crucifixion, as well as an interchange between Pilate and Mary Magdalene as they wrestled with the question of suffering.

‘Some of them were in tears,’ Ben recalled, ‘some of them speechless.’ The final experience of the Dudley Passion Play, this was filmed and parts of it included in the episode that was subsequently aired on BBC iPlayer.

Part Two: UK Passion Plays

Along with detailed and sustained interviews and observations with the Dudley Passion Play, interviews and observations with a number of other Passion Plays allowed us to develop and refine our research. Insights from plays performed in Edinburgh, Havant, Liverpool, Oxford, Reading, West Cheltenham and Worcester reflect back on the Dudley Passion case study to give a richer understanding of Passion Plays in 2024. Key findings from the case study research on Dudley Passion Play are compared and contrasted with other Passion Plays that took place across the UK in 2024.

On a Journey

As was found in the Dudley Passion Play, rehearsals became immersive Bible studies that prompted deep engagement and personal insights through workshopping and rehearsing the Gospel story. Other Passion Plays reported a similar immersive and exploratory process.

The Oxford Passion Play ('And a Sword Shall Pierce Your Soul') which took place in a park near the city centre, also had rehearsals that welcomed personal exploration. Director Marion provided space for her volunteer cast to explore and learn, and considered this a strength of community plays that were 'by the people, for the people':

> I would rehearse a bit, and then I'd find them off in a corner, just going over it and refining it and getting it better and I would say to people, we're co directing, you know, you are inputting into this as well. And I love the idea of this being a community play. It's a play by the people, for the people. I wouldn't want to lose that I wouldn't want to get so professional that it loses that heart.

Michael, a professional actor who worked with volunteers in the community cast, described the moments of insight from others in the rehearsals:

> Well, [someone] made some really interesting comments, because I mean, at various stages I get exceedingly angry with Jesus and I yell really severely at him because he doesn't speak with me, doesn't want to utter a word. And Amy, the girl who's playing the sort of slave interestingly pointed out that he wouldn't have spoken because he needed to fulfil the prophecy, so he needed to be sent back to Pilate for the final judgment, which I thought yeah, that's true, really.

This exploration and 'ownership' of the personal and collective meanings developed throughout rehearsals and production were repeatedly described as one of the most meaningful and significant elements for community cast and professional actors. Taking part necessitated personal investment into understanding not only their own parts but also historical and theological details and how to fit that to their own specific local contexts.

In Bootle, Liverpool, a small Passion Play was reproduced a number of times for much small audiences in a local shopping centre. In their performance, 'everything is retrospective' and the audience was taken on a short journey to encounter different actors in role with first-hand

accounts of the Passion story. Producer Annie described the Easter story as 'very heavy' and how they worked create a family-friendly performance that would be suitable for children.

Following the performance, the actors – still in costume and often still in role – answered questions from the audience. One of the creative team reflected:

> Some of the [actors] have got strong faith, and some of them identify as being atheist…but they then went away and they researched it themselves, so that they were prepared for any questions. One of the girls that we work with, who identifies as an atheist, went away and did some research and she was fielding questions like some of us that have a background in theology. She was giving answers that were like where's that coming from? And that was powerful.

Rev. Janice, director of the West Cheltenham Passion Play and ordained vicar in the church of England, reflected on the way rehearsals provided a space for personal and collective exploration:

> We would read through the script…and then afterwards discuss in the group. People had a few different interpretations, and it was great. Everybody who just really took part in that discussion. I loved it and a young volunteer aged seventeen who was probably used to this sort of thing because he does Drama, but with all sorts of insights from a non-faith background, and yet really understanding the story. So that I loved. Some people obviously came from a very faith-based background with preconceived ideas in a sense, but it was good to be challenged and have a new angle to something.

Taking part in Passion Plays was a journey of faith, discovery and personal growth for many people, and also an opportunity for journeying with other people. Inviting people into the process either to experience it as part of the cast as volunteers or to give feedback that would shape the performance. Journeying with other people was also evident in the final performance which often invited their audiences to follow a physical journey around familiar spaces in their local community as well as a journey through familiar and unfamiliar aspects of the Easter story.

Contextualising and localising the Passion story

Contextualising a script and anchoring a production in local communities was a common theme among other Passion Play communities. As with the Dudley Passion, Passion Play actors and volunteers in other parts of the UK explored ways to connect with the history and cultural life of their local community during production, rehearsal and performance.

A Passion Play in Edinburgh ('Princes Street Easter Play') uses a new script every year to reflect local and national concerns: in the year of the Scottish Referendum, the play had a modern political context; in the year of the Ukraine war, the play focussed on refugees, in 2024 it was written from the perspective of women. This year Edinburgh's 'Princes Street Easter Play' also had a particular focus on included people with disabilities and mental health in the community cast. They integrated BSL into the performance rather than on the sidelines.

A Passion Play in Liverpool ('Born for This') was performed in a shopping centre and used music to connect with the Passion story and the local community. Music and movement director Meghan described Liverpool as 'a very artsy city' with a 'Beatles culture', and their Passion Play made use of the arts to help onlookers to connect with the story as well as those taking part in the community cast:

> I think God really works through the arts a lot. It's sharing the gospel in a very unique way. Choreographing for Jesus's mother, for the song 'Born for This'. You could see just her heart for the Lord in her eyes, and everything, she's really perfect for the part. It's not about making choreography super professional or anything. It's about showing people's heart for the Lord.

There was another, more transformational aspect of localising and contextualising the Passion story. The events of the Dudley Passion intersected with the experience of the homeless man who watched it: the injustices as Jesus was arrested and the suffering as he was crucified resonated with him and in some way with the injustices and suffering he experienced or witnessed. Similarly, the Passion story spoke to personal experiences and private sufferings of the people who took part in telling the story.

For Christi, born in Namibia and with a background in performance poetry, playing the role of Mary in the Oxford Passion Play was particularly meaningful. She had lost her sister in a tragic car accident when she was eighteen and she described how that brought her close to Mary and helped her understand what she must have felt: 'For me, I lost a sister. For her, it was a son.' Director Marion recalled the way she played the role of Mary:

> And then she herself would have tears in her eyes and a lot of the audience were had were tearful. She said to me that it was because she kept thinking if it was her child being tortured. She also lost her sister in a tragic car accident when she was eighteen.

Clare, producer of the Passion Play in Belle Vale, Liverpool, recalled a similar story about the community cast who played Mary:

> [I] found out a week before the performance that her son had been killed in a stabbing twelve or thirteen years earlier and to see her in the performance holding her son saying 'its ok now, you're at peace and laid to rest, it's over now.' And she's crying her eyes out and she's putting all this into her goodbye. I didn't know.

As well as powerful personal stories from members of the community casts, professional actors also wanted to provide personal experiences of the Passion performances for their audiences and described moments where they invited people to move closer or engage more personally.

Reading Passion performed in the context of a the church Arts festival in Forbury Gardens with a gazebo hosting worship and teaching sessions as part of the festival as 'a chance to bring people together'. The crucifixion took place on a natural hill which became a 'powerful visual' and other scenes took place near the bandstand and along the path, with people being drawn into the performance often by Jesus himself. People who stopped to watch were sometimes surprised as Jesus included them in his teachings or parables, or even reached out his hand to greet them personally.

Emily from Saltmine Theatre Company recalled a moment of connection with a member of the audience in the Passion Play's first production in Birmingham where she played Mary Magdalene:

> One of the moments that stood out when we did it was that in the trial scene and everybody is shouting for Jesus to be crucified and the crowd kind of turns against him. I was playing Mary Magdalene and I was standing in the crowd and there was a little girl who was too small to be able to see over the heads of the people in front. I could see her kind of trying to crane her head. And I said 'Can I pick her up?' And her mum was like 'Yeah, yeah.' So I said, 'Do you want to be able to see?' I just lifted her up and as soon as she could see what was going on she was like, 'No, no, he's innocent, don't you know? Let him go. Let him go!' And she was really into the story. You could just see the justice like she could see that it was like a complete injustice that was happening. I don't know she might have known about the story all her life, or she might have never seen it before, but she could see an innocent person being convicted by a corrupt system, and she just wanted him to be set free. And I think for me that was like this is how powerful that story is that is a story which is kind of embedded in us in some way that we really want to change it. It's really not fair. I didn't see her for the rest of the show, so I hope that she made it to the resurrection, and saw that Jesus was alive and could celebrate and join in. But yeah, just that moment of sharing it was amazing.

Professional actor Neil who played Jesus in the Havant Passion Play when it was performed in the centre of town on market day described how he included the audience as 'part of the production':

> They were they were priests and teachers of the law when I was talking to the Pharisees. Some of what I address went to them so I was looking at [the audience] as well. They were also the arresting party when they came to Gethsemane. They were the crowd of people in Jerusalem when I was doing the teaching about the sheep and the goats. So again, a lot of it was directed to them. I looked at them and made eye contact with the people that were watching, so that they felt very much part of the story.

Connecting Christians

Connecting different churches in the local and providing an opportunity for people from different Christian denominations to connect with each other was also important for other Passion Plays. Like the Dudley Passion Play, many people reported on being surprised and encouraged that they could connect with Christians from different churches and traditions.

For some people Passion Plays were an opportunity to connect with other Christians and with their own faith outside of the church. Annie, producer of the Passion Play in Bootle described how many people 'have become disillusioned with the Church' and their Passion Play is 'an amazing opportunity':

> I just think it's an amazing opportunity for the church. And we know quite a lot of people, quite a lot of Christians have become disillusioned with the Church and don't go anymore with any regularity. But they haven't lost their faith. They haven't lost their love of God, and often they really want to give something to the community… But I

> think you know Jesus didn't actually go to church…lots of the time his mission was largely outside the church, wasn't it?

In West Cheltenham a Passion Play directed and produced by Rev Janice had a community cast of people drawn from fourteen different churches, including less mainstream churches such as the Church of Latter Day Saints.

> Can I work with Mormons?...There's a few things that I was not sure about, that feels I'm not entirely in agreement with that, but then I thought, well, there are things I don't agree with a Catholic Church, and yet I work ecumenically with them. There are things I don't agree with a Church of England, and I'm ordained in the Church of England. Is there a church that's got the full truth, anyway?

Jon, a professional actor who played Jesus in West Cheltenham and a member of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, reflected on his experience and contribution as a Mormon:

> You often hear that people are not attending churches, and you know that Christianity is the on the decline. From that experience I don't see that. I see a really vibrant community of Christians in the West Cheltenham area, and that was awesome. Like to be able to see that, and to feel that, and to be part of that, especially when I think sometimes the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints isn't necessarily included in that kind of Christianity when people talk about it…It was really lovely to be accepted for my faith in Jesus, which was as valid as anyone else's. I think the biggest thing for me was that community and that shared love of Christ from Catholics, the Protestants to Baptists, to Salvation Army, to the Church, Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Jon also described a moment of connection and encouragement made possible by the Passion Play and his commitment to the role as Christ:

> There was a there was a lady who was in the cast as a bystander, who got really, really emotional having to shout 'Crucify him'. That really touched me. Just her connection to her spiritual side, her connection with her Saviour. And I think because of the relationship that I've trying to build with Jesus and because of the emphasis that I was looking at in terms of him taking upon himself, I was able to just say to her, 'You know he's doing this, and he did this for you like directly for you. For me, yes, and for everyone else, but individually he knows you, and he did this for you. So like it's awesome that you're getting emotional about this, but don't be upset about it because he did this because he loves you.' And it was just a wonderful experience to be able to share that testimony with her.

Passion Plays, in bringing people together around the central story of Easter, also provided a space for Christians to explore their faith outside their different church traditions.

Interfaith dialogue and feedback

Passion Plays, when performed in the public sphere, cannot escape the fact that people of other faiths will have questions, responses, concerns and pushback. Some Passion Plays welcomed

involvement, some encouraged feedback, some engaged in conversations with people of other faiths.

This year, for example, Passion Plays provided an opportunity for inter-faith dialogue prior to Easter performances in 2024 with the RMC Briefing on Passion Plays and Antisemitism. The Religion Media Centre hosted a panel representatives from the Council of Christians, UK Passion Plays, along with academics and a Rabbi from the Edgware and Hendon Reform Synagogue, as well as a couple of Passion Trust trustees. The panel discussed how producers can pay closer attention to words, settings and costume in public performances of Passion Plays.

West Cheltenham's Passion Play was performed in traditional costume and, with guidance from Rabbi Silverstone from Cheltenham Orthodox Synagogue, made use of the shofar horn to create the sights and sounds of Jerusalem in the first century. At the start of each new scene there was a blast on the shofar and programme notes contributed by Rabbi Silverstone described the different sounds and uses of the shofar in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Traditional plays such as Wintershall's Trafalgar Square and the Worcester Passion decided not to use prayer shawls as costumes out of respect for Jewish people. Tim, producer/director of Worcester Passion Play, reflected on how he made changes to avoid misunderstandings:

> We changed the kind of shawls that the priests wore because we didn't want to give offense unnecessarily. I did make the point in my concluding remarks at the end that in no sense is this an antisemitic play or story…The Romans actually carried out the crucifixion, all mankind was guilty in the sense of Jesus on the cross, and we all need forgiveness and the salvation that Jesus offers. So I made that sort of point at the end, because I thought it might just be helpful and avoid misunderstandings.

Edinburgh's 'Easter Story' was also performed in traditional costume and the director worked with academics such as Dr Katie Turner, consultant on visual depictions of the Bible from Kings College London and Helen Bond, Profession of Christian Origins from the Department of Theology at the University of Edinburgh. Their research and feedback led to costume change, mainly the costumes of priests and religious authorities which were changed from black robes to the same robes worn by everyone else in the cast.

Feedback also came from the Muslim community when a man who watched the Edinburgh production wrote to them afterwards, describing his experience:

> I so enjoyed the play yesterday. [I] actually got a bit emotional watching it – the Jesus narrative in general (outside of the play) is so moving and I'm thankful Easter took place in Ramadan. It made it all the more special to attend. The best part was feeling like you were actually there, in the crowds of first-century Palestine, listening to the different conversations unfolding in the marketplace and then seeing Jesus show up and speak to a lowly vendor, or have a heated dialogue with a centurion. There were some interactive elements that were quite innovative: when Jesus fed the 5,000, the disciples actually walked through the crowd with the baskets of left-over bread, thereby directly bringing us into the narrative itself. (I saved my piece for iftar!) For me the most memorable moment was when Jesus was brought before Pilate, and half the actors were screaming 'he's innocent!' and the other half 'crucify him!' At that point, a couple of staff who seem to have been planted in the audience screamed out 'crucify

> him!'. I thought that was just a brilliant touch – why should we assume we would have been on the right side of history had we lived then? It got me thinking about EP Thompson's warning about "the enormous condescension of posterity". By and large it was a really moving, powerful play, and so wonderfully performed. Honestly, it made my Ramadan, and the crowd was friendly and families were sprawled out along the grass, with their lunches out and coffees in hand.

Closer to God

Christians who took part in Passion Plays saw it as an opportunity to deepen their understanding and connection with their own faith as well as with other Christians. Many people reported becoming closer to God or seeing more answers to prayer or knowing what they were doing was blessed by him. This sense of blessing was articulated on more than one occasion with reference to the weather. In West Cheltenham, a sudden thunder storm occurred at precisely the right moment:

> And then the heavens opened, and this all mighty hailstorm came. I mean, somebody said to me afterwards that it was biblical proportions. And seriously, I've not been in a hailstorm that heavy in years. It was really dramatic. And you know, reflecting on it since, I felt it was quite poignant that that would happen as we were going to go to Gethsemane in Jesus' darkest hour.

In Oxford, producer Carolyn described an inverse change in weather:

> I absolutely believe that this was blessed by God because it was extraordinary in some of the things that happened. We had rain Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and on the [Saturday] it was so pretty with the blossom and the greens, the little shoots, and the blue sky. And the sun actually then shone on Jesus, when he was crucified. Set up to die lit up by the sun.

The ability of the performance to move people to silence was seen as testimony to the power of Easter story. Marion, director of the Passion Play in Oxford, recalled the response of the audience:

> You watch the audience and 99% of them were totally attentive and focused on the play. Afterward people commented about the silence of the audience. And I mean obviously not when people are singing and dancing. But moments like Judas' speech, the moment of Gethsemane and Calgary, with the cross coming round. It was also almost of uncanny. The power of silence. You're in a park so there could be lots of interruptions. There's the train quite close that goes by. We didn't even notice that all I noticed was the beautiful setting in the bird singing and a couple of ducks that went cracking by just before. I don't think you can demand more from an audience and my husband was saying, he didn't once look at his watch. There were no dead moments and it was always so compelling to watch.

Others articulated awareness of God guiding, blessing and answering prayers. Sometimes, people reported becoming a conduit for the words of the Gospel for other people. The words and stories of the Gospels coming to life in such a way that they became more real, with real

significance for different people. Professional actor Neil reflected on performing Jesus in the Havant Passion Play in the centre of town on market day on Easter Saturday:

> We rehearsed the crucifixion scene and a lady that was the stage manager was in tears. She was crying at the end of it, and told me off afterwards.. and again I think it was just a moment where maybe she'd seen something different for the first time, or wasn't expecting to be quite caught up in the emotion of it, the way she was so that this was like in our third or fourth ever rehearsal. When we blocked the crucifixion scene for the first time. And we actually performed it. And I went on the cross and cried out and she said she just found it really, really emotional, and she couldn't help herself. She didn't cry again after that one.

Clare O'Brien, producer of the Passion Play in a shopping centre in Belle Vale, Liverpool, remarked on the way people were given an opportunity to 'work with each other, using skills that no one ever gave them.' A lady whose daughter has mental health [problems] was involved with the dance and movement team and her mother said 'thank you its given her purpose again.' Movement director Meaghan further described how taking part in this Passion Play was a 'simple act of obedience' that had big result:

> How much God works like all it takes is kind of a mustard seed of like and he just balloons it. His miracles and the friendships you gain through it, and how much you inspire people and they inspire you. Just a simple act of obedience. Kind of waters and harvests an entire thing.

Similarly, playing Jesus in the West Cheltenham Passion Play was a 'transformational' experience for Jon from a spiritual standpoint:

> It was not so much from an acting point of view that I was nervous about it, but I think it was from a theological and from a personal relationship with Jesus. It was actually really taxing just. putting myself into his shoes and trying to understand…I've known the stories of Jesus, and especially the story of Easter for my whole life. but putting myself into it completely changed how I feel about it, and how I think about it. So actually, this experience has been humbling and extremely challenging. And the biggest part that I've taken away from all of this is just how my relationship with my Saviour has grown…just in how I kind of think about and feel about and reverence my Saviour.

Conclusion

A ‘journey’ was a common and repeated way to describe a Passion Play and as can be seen in both the case study in Dudley and the range of other plays around the UK this journey took different forms in different locations.

The vision for a Passion Play often started by mapping locations in the local community: key spaces meaningful in the local market place, high street, park or shopping centre. They often had an element of journey or promenade as key scenes lent themselves to different locations and audiences were invited into a symbolic journey through both the story and familiar locations of their home town.

Rehearsals were repeatedly described as a journey of exploration and discovery. The majority of volunteers who took part in the community casts were Christians who saw it as an opportunity to deepen their understanding and connection with their own faith and with other Christians. Shared understandings and negotiated meanings in a very physical and active engagement that brought new meaning to old, familiar stories.

Workshopping and rehearsing gave new and unique vantage points and stories heard in snippets from sermons or Bible readings in churches were put back in their full context. Embodied explorations enabled those who took part to strengthen their faith and find common faith among Christians of different traditions and denominations.

Professional creative casts were the guides on this journey and their expertise was used to facilitate, guide and inspire, often including references to local, national or international events relevant to their particular local community.

People of different faith traditions and people with no faith tradition were also invited into these journeys. Either taking part or watching live performances, people of different faith traditions found in Passion Plays new understandings and new ways of responding. Points of familiarity or points conflict with their own faiths were easier to recognise and dialogue made more meaningful.

As well as an exchange of ideas and theoretical concerns, Passion Plays occasioned very practical advice and responses that resulted in feedback and demonstrably changes. What was it like for a Jewish person to see a Passion Play with people dressed in religious items from their own faith traditions? What cultural or religious traditions could be used to represent first-century Jerusalem to life on the streets? What was it like for a Muslim person to see a Passion Play during Ramadan?

In taking the Easter story out of the churches and onto the streets in a multifaith and multicultural world, Passion Plays used a range of approaches to promote religious literacy, strengthen faith and invest in their local communities.