Oh What a Bloody Good Friday!

Opinion - Terry from Derry
By Terry Boyle
August 6, 2011

Some time ago I visited York, England for the bi-annual production of the 14th Century Mystery plays. I sat for five and half hours, watching eleven plays, with only a ten-minute break. The plays, religious in nature, are based on bible stories.

The playwrights took the cannon of scripture and injected their own unique flavour into the stories, something that we today call poetic license. Given that the audience were largely illiterate, who would know what was the artist’s imagination, and what was the word of God?

The task for the writer was to make the sacred book come alive to an audience unfamiliar with its mysteries. In order to do this, they needed to employ the language of the vernacular, and a little comedy. The plays, performed on the feast of Corpus Christi, were a great source of entertainment, a communal event in which actors and craftsmen demonstrated their talents.

Given the limitations of the genre, it is no surprise that the authors sought to humanize the biblical characters, adding humour that, at times, could be construed as sacrilegious and by today’s standards not politically correct. One of my favourite examples of this approach involves the dramatist’s interpretation of the story of Noah. While the heavens opened and the world is about to be drowned; Noah’s wife hesitates to get on the ark. She doesn’t want to be separated from her ‘gossips’ (friends). Resorting to violence, Noah strikes his wife, and his blow is returned with gusto. The scene is hilarious.

Having been inspired by the creative genius of the medieval dramatists, I took it upon myself to try and construct a modern version of the mystery play. This is not a new idea; others have attempted this with success.

For me, I wanted to place the death and resurrection of Christ in Derry, Northern Ireland. I wanted to find a path back to what it must have been like for those alive during the life and death of Christ. We have had over two thousand years of church councils to refine our understanding of these events, and as such lost the immediacy as well as the confusion of the times. There had to be a way to strip away our erudite preconceptions and place the audience back into the experience that was neither didactic, nor demeaning to the act of belief.

I still remember a priest speaking to our high school in the 70’s about how the conflict in Derry was not unlike that of the time of Jesus. For some reason his little motivational homily found a niche in my mind, and I could see for myself the ingredients for creating a modern version of New Testament Israel in Northern Ireland. We had all the right players; the foreign occupying forces, the rebellious insurgents, an overbearing religious system and the occasional movement for peace.

As all of these ideas began take form in my imagination, I wanted to have the story told by women, since their role, though pivotal, appears underwritten in the gospels. Mary, the mother
Jesus, should be a typical Derry woman, a bingo player with the odd flutter on the horses. Mary Magdalene, the former party girl whose search for the mystical could also be the result of too many hallucinogens.

Coupled with the more recognizable biblical women, I included Siobhan and Phyllis. Both these women have complicated lives. Siobhan loves life, loves to gossip, and appears the epitome of superficiality. She is hopelessly decadent. When we first meet her she’s on her way for a sexual liaison with someone she just met at the pub. Phyllis, a teacher, is in the prime of her life. As a married woman with children, she is forced to come to terms with aging. She is on the verge of a breakdown. Casting caution to the wind, she becomes entangled with a younger man who wants to break up with her. Desperately, she seeks to maintain control of her life while all around her the world is changing.

Initially, neither of these women is interested in the news that a man of peace has died. The reports of his subsequent resurrection are discarded as religious delusion. But as the play unfolds, circumstances force them to re-consider the significance of the larger political/religious events.

What neither of them realizes, and which becomes obvious to the audience, is that they have deep feelings for the same man and it is this key relationship that brings them into the centre of the mystery of faith.

Their human complexities are placed against the backdrop of Northern Irish politics, hence the play on the phrase ‘good Friday’. The tensions of the larger world, coupled with the strange religious events, begin to seep into their personal struggles and drive them to re-evaluate their priorities.

As I worked on this play, I had a chance encounter with the president of Loyola University, Chicago, who was enthusiastic about the project. I sent him one of the earlier drafts of the drama, and soon found his enthusiasm developed into an offer to stage the drama at Loyola, and Cuneo Mansion. (Vernon Hills, north of the city).

Since the mystery plays were staged outside, this play will take place in front of the Information Commons building at Loyola (August 30th), and at the rear of the mansion at Cuneo (September 9/10/11). To add to my good fortune, a very dear friend of mine, is coming from England to direct the work. If you are out and about, near Chicago, I hope you can join us.