



12pm and 3.15pm, Good Friday
Trafalgar Square, London WC2
Performed by the Wintershall Players, a 90-minute open-air play featuring 78 actors in authentic costumes, plus a donkey. The players also appear in the Guildford Passion, 12pm and 2.30pm, Holy Saturday.
passionofjesus-trafalgar.co.uk

Belper Passion

11am, Good Friday

Various venues, Belper, Derbys
Kicking off the Belper Arts Festival the first act takes place at the Methodist Chapel, the second at St Peter's Church.
facebook.com/belperpassion

Passion of Christ

2pm and 4.30pm, Easter Day
St Peter's Church, Brighton

The cast and crew of this production, written and directed by James Burke-Dunsmore, are volunteers from the local community.
soulbymythesea.info

Dundee Passion Play

3pm, tomorrow

Wellburn Convent, Liff Road
Dundee

Now in its third year, the Dundee Passion features a varied programme of music from a church and small orchestra.
dundeepassionplay@gmail.com

Cowley Road Passion Play

10.30am, Good Friday

Various venues, Oxford

The hour-long production begins at Cowley Road Methodist Church with scenes performed at a primary school and health centre.
cowleyroadpassionplay.org.uk

Edinburgh Passion

2pm, Holy Saturday

Princes Street Garden West,

Edinburgh

Rob Drummond's modern production features an impendend referendum....
easterplay.org

Liverpool Passion Plays

6.30pm, April 14-19

Liverpool Cathedral, St James Mount, Liverpool

Audience members will be guided around the cathedral to watch the performance of the production.

Raw, lyrical, relevant: a one-man Passion play to reckon with

Retelling the story of Christ's last days is usually a task for an ensemble cast. **Bess Twiston Davies** meets the actor playing all 18 characters himself

"Moon-sharpened shadows, weirdly shaped, quickened the pulse..." says the actor. The words echo, the audience in church shivers. It is London, a chill winter evening, yet this voice speaks into the soul, re-creating a balmy night in Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago. Word made flesh through theatre.

This, *Impossible God*, is a retelling of Christ's Passion via a host of witnesses, some taken from the Bible, others imaginary. It is just one of about 23 variations of Passion play on offer throughout the UK this Easter. You can watch them indoors or out, in places as far apart as Brighton and Aberdeen; there's a huge Good Friday performance in Trafalgar Square, a play staged in the grounds of a castle in Tonbridge, and in Poole you can see the story of Christ's Passion through the eyes of a child, with a cast that stretches

He portrays the intense imagined emotions of a host of characters

from priests to recovering drug addicts.

The idea is to bring the Gospel story from churches into the community. For advice, performers may turn to the Passion Trust, which helps and encourages those producing the plays. "The Passion story is still relevant," says its spokeswoman, Linzy Brady. "We have few collective experiences of grief in society, for instance, but these plays allow for that."

Usually the plays the Trust supports have scant resources and large, amateur casts. The 21 monologues and 18 characters of *Impossible God* are, however, interpreted by just one actor: Mark Topping.

His props are few — a candle, the odd gnarled stick — and his costume changes minimal: a few sashes, lots of fringed shawls. Yet the script he knows inside out and backwards.

It was written 30 years ago by Topping's father, Frank, a Methodist minister and broadcaster. When Frank took the play on tour, Topping Jr was in charge of lights and music. Tonight, his nephew, Andrew, 17, is the roadie, overseeing the swell of classical music that envelops the stage as his uncle transforms from Roman servant to maid, disciple to Pharisee.

To keep things fresh he tries out new accents in different performances. Doubting Thomas is broad Dublin; Peter is a Northerner. The script dazzles — it's raw, punchy, yet lyrical. Phrases linger in the darkness between scenes: the wounds of Jesus, for instance, described as "chasms of love".

Over an hour and 20 minutes, Topping portrays the intense imagined thoughts and emotions of a host of characters. This filter gives freshness to an oft-told story. Take the disciples in Emmaus, realising the identity of the stranger met by chance on the road: "Our wits staggered to the brink of lunacy, teetered at the edge."

Topping, a Methodist, has also enjoyed spiritual adventures: for six months he was a novice Franciscan in a Roman Catholic order, and for eight years a guide at the New Room in Bristol, the oldest Methodist chapel in the world, built in 1739. Someone suggested he dress up as John Wesley to show people around, and when Topping eventually left he began to stage theatrical "evenings" with Wesley. In 2010, his sister Anne, a trained theatre director, suggested he try *Impossible God*. Since then he has performed the play 94 times, as far west as Cornwall and as far north as Carlisle.

The satisfaction is in the reaction. Krzyszna Ambrus, a spectator at tonight's performance, says: "It made me feel like I was right in the middle of the action. I could have sat there all night."

"As an actor, what more could you want than that?" says Topping. impossiblegod.co.uk



Passion plays are intended to bring the Gospel story