

The joy of being part of a Passion play – and a national revival

Ours is just one of many groups across the UK darting around in hi-vis vests saying such lines as 'Blasphemer! Crucify him!'



Actor Martin Sheen is 'crucified' in the Passion play taking place across his home town of Port Talbot in Wales in 2011. Photograph: Tim Ireland/PA

[Martin Wainwright](#)

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Today's young people know more about the general topic of religion than my generation, but less about Christianity in particular. That is for the better. Nonetheless I am grateful to have been hard-wired with specific parables and heroics from the past – as it happens these are from the Testaments, but they could as well have been from the Torah, the Koran or Hindu holy writings.

It's one of the reasons for my small part in an interesting revival of medieval tradition: the growing number of Passion plays being staged by amateurs on the UK's local streets. I have been learning lines for the first time since I studied for my A-levels 46 years ago, and turning out on chilly evenings to help recreate Jerusalem in AD33 in our Woodstock market square, Oxfordshire.

A thoroughly mixed bag of us have been darting around in hi-vis vests to avoid being run over, saying such lines as "Blasphemer! Crucify him!" quietly enough to avoid annoying the people having a more conventional night out. [This Sunday](#) at 3pm, the show will go on for real, and it promises to be noisy, educational and fun.

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The word "fun" might sound inapposite for a story containing passages of great cruelty and grief, but the national revival of the plays has as much to say about community as it does religion. Our rehearsals have brought together a comprehensive group of locals, from a teenage rock band singer (Jesus) to a former MP (Pontius Pilate). We bond over fish and chips and emails which read along the lines of "No Last Supper rehearsal – only one disciple can make it" and "Don't wear trainers. They weren't invented in Jesus's time."

Local singers have set up an ad hoc community choir, schools are involved, and we've even managed to link the enterprise to eternal debates about parking. The parking problem would take a miracle to solve in Woodstock, but abuse of yellow lines was notably less on a night when Roman soldiers and Temple priests (I'm one of those) were out in force rehearsing.

We are far from alone in all this. Cowley Road in Oxford is busy rehearsing [its own Passion play](#) for Good Friday. The choice of venues, which include behind Tesco for Pilate's death sentence and Manzil Way health centre for the crucifixion, makes an important point about presenting ancient lessons on human behaviour in a modern setting.

There are 17 Passion Plays in the UK this year (plus the fictional one taking place on BBC Radio 4's *The Archers*), and the [Passion Trust](#) has a list of 74 places with recent productions, from little Abingdon to mighty York, whose Mystery Plays are deservedly world-famous. The enthusiasm of the participants provides us with another connection between today and the middle ages. The best-known portrayer of Jesus, James Burke-Dunsmore, has played the part for 17 years. In medieval times, royalty were said to have been miffed when dusk made later sections of the Coventry plays too hard to see.