

## Adapting *The Pilgrim's Progress* for the Stage

**In adapting Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* for the stage, I discovered that the work contains many striking parallels with works of English drama from both before his time and after.**

In 2000, I was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company to adapt John Bunyan's novel *The Pilgrim's Progress* for the stage. I had pitched the RSC a number of projects and this was the one the then Literary Manager, Simon Reade, went for. I had wanted to adapt the book for some time. I had been developing an idiosyncratic form of drama based on Christian tropes and imagery, beginning with my award-winning play *Fat Souls* (performed at the Warehouse Theatre, Croydon in 1993); these plays used ancient theatrical devices – directed speech to the audience, masks, metaphoric language and emblematic characters – and which told stories written like the scroll in *Revelation* 5:1, in some translations is referred to as being “written within and without” - plays which might be set in the world or in a psyche. I felt that Bunyan's great allegory has this quality.

Despite its being one of the great classics of English literature and one of the biggest selling books of all time, stage adaptations of *The Pilgrim's Progress* had been few and far between. The only major stage production I had heard of was performed in my lifetime was by the Prospect Theatre Company, on tour and at the Old Vic in 1974/5. I remember seeing a large photograph from it displayed at the Old Vic in the early 1980s, I believe showing Christian facing down Apollyon. I read somewhere that Carl Davies scored it almost a musical but know little else about it. Perhaps the fact that *Pilgrim* hasn't been adapted many times, unlike *The Canterbury Tales* or *Robinson Crusoe*, meant that it was not suited for theatre adaptation? Yet the bulk of Bunyan's allegory is written in dialogue and the characters have a vitality which makes them innately theatrical.

I was that the book was written a decade or so after the Restoration of the Monarchy and the lifting of the Puritan ban on theatre performances. Bunyan's characterisation is at times not dissimilar to that found in the Restoration playwright – there is a linkage between Bunyan's Mr Worldly Wiseman and By-Ends and Etheridge's Sir Fopling Flutter in *The Man of Mode*. Bunyan's larger-than-life characters are made to explode onto the stage. These roles are made for the kinds of fruity, refined acting that was still rife in the RSC at

the turn of the millennium. Bunyan's words cry out to be spoken and savoured by classically trained voices. Actors habituated to Shakespeare's language would relish such lines as Wiseman's "Beshrew him for his counsel!" or The Man in the Iron Cage's "I have so hardened my heart I cannot repent." A great deal of my work consisted of redacting a book of over 100,000 words to a manageable stage length whilst preserving as much of Bunyan's idiom as possible.

Whilst Bunyan's language and characterisation has much in common with that found in the Jacobean and Caroline stage writers, his sense of drama and action has analogues in much earlier English stage works. His character's actions fit with a rigid adherence to the values attached to their name is, very much like in the medieval Morality plays. Some of the action is strikingly similar. In the old play of *The Summoning of Everyman*, the title character (a close cousin of *Pilgrim's* Christian) scourges himself in penance for his sins after meeting a character called Confession. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and his companion Hopeful are scourged by a Shining One for the sin of falling for the wiles of The Flatterer. Everyman and Christian's stories end very similarly, as both of them cross the border between life and death and both end up in heaven (in Bunyan this is the Celestial City), being met by Angels. It is as if Bunyan was using the dramaturgy of the Medieval stage to shape his action.

At the time I was commissioned by the RSC to adapt *The Pilgrim's Progress*, they were staging a rare production of G Bernard Shaw's play *Back to Methuselah*. I saw this in Stratford's The Other Place theatre in late 2000. The experience of watching this enormous, verbose but wildly stimulating play gave me much inspiration for my adaptation. Shaw wrote about his affinity with Bunyan on a number of occasions and even professed to prefer him to Shakespeare - "All that you miss in Shakespear [sic] you find in Bunyan" he declares in an 1897 review of a production of *King Lear* (reprinted in *Our Theatre in the Nineties*). As my version of *Pilgrim* began to take shape on the page, it began to resemble the text of a Shaw play, which eccentric characters engaged in long, passionate arias expounding their views and attempting to convince others of their positions. Bunyan, like Shaw, can be very funny and there is much enjoyment to be had from watching the squirming of By Ends and the self-aggrandisement of Ignorance.

Even more contemporary dramatic similarities helped me adapt the scene in *Doubting Castle* to the stage. Whereas I bring Apollyon on stage and he engages Christian in a bout of stage combat, I didn't want to introduce a pantomime giant into the latter, deeply moving part of the story. Christian and Hopeful become trapped by their own existential despair and cannot move from the giant's clutches. I begin this scene with an echo of Samuel Beckett's masterpiece of existential stasis *Waiting for Godot*, as Christian announces that there's "nothing to be done" in terms of escaping. The scene progresses with the Giant present as a huge, gloomy shadow cast over the men. The two pilgrims lay on the floor of the dungeon, bemoaning their fate and no longer even communicating – they are lost in their own desperate monologues. After Beckett, the scene draws on Sarah Kane's final play, *4:48 Psychosis*, to show that the characters are trapped in their own mental crises. Of course, in Kane's plays the characters (like their author) never escape from despair; Bunyan's characters do find a way out of desperation and unlock the door into a positive, active attitude to life. This is one of the reasons I wanted to adapt him, as an alternative to the sense of doubt and hopelessness which was very apparent in much of the stage writing in the UK at the turn of the millennium.

The version I delivered to the RSC was an enormous piece. I wrote it for a large, publicly funded company and, even with doubling, it would require at least 16 actors to perform. Very soon after I delivered the piece, Simon Reade (who'd commissioned the play) left his position and the adaptation never found another supporter within the RSC. There are very few professional theatre companies in the UK that can afford something as resource-heavy as my play turned out to be and it has yet to find an alternative home. I hope that one day an amateur or community theatre group might take it up. Bunyan, I discovered through writing it, is one of the best playwrights that the British theatre never had. My adaptation bears elements of the Elizabethan and Restoration drama, Jacobean comedies and masques, Shavian political drama, the theatre of the absurd and contemporary psychological expressionism. Bunyan deserves his place on the stage, as so much of the English stage is already home to the essentials of Bunyan.