

# Story Of A Controversy

(Continued from previous page)

Robert Speaight, who plays the part of Jesus, of "personifying the God-head."

Others said that Singapore fell because these plays were broadcast, and appealed for their removal before a like fate overtook Australia; which gave some wit the chance to write thanking the BBC for the plays which (ending in the following October) "made possible the November victories in Libya and Russia!"

## The Language of the Plays

On this same question of the language used, here is the author herself, quoted from her preface:

God was executed by people painfully like us, in a society very similar to our own—in the over-ripeness of the most splendid and sophisticated Empire the world has ever seen; in a nation famous for its religious genius and under a government renowned for its efficiency. He was executed by a corrupt church, a timid politician, and a fickle proletariat led by professional agitators. His executioners made vulgar jokes about Him, called Him filthy names, taunted Him, smacked Him in the face, flogged Him with the cat, and hanged Him on the common gibbet—a bloody, dusty, sweaty and sordid business.

If you show people that, they are shocked. So they should be. If that does not shock them, nothing can. If the mere representation of it has an air of irreverence, what is to be said about the deed? It is curious that people who are filled with horrified indignation whenever a cat kills a sparrow can hear that story of the killing of God told Sunday after Sunday and not experience any shock at all.

Technically, the swiftest way to produce the desirable sense of shock, is the use in drama of modern speech and a determined historical realism about the characters. . . . Tear off the disguise of the Jacobean idiom, go back to the homely and vigorous Greek of Mark or John, translate it into its current English counterpart, and there every man may see his own face. We played the parts in that tragedy, nineteen and a-half centuries since, and perhaps are playing them to-day, in the same good faith and in the same ironic ignorance. But to-day we cannot see the irony, for we, the audience, are now the actors, and do not know the end of the play. But it may assist us to know what we are doing if the original drama is shown to us again, with ourselves in the original parts. . . . The question is, are we at this time of day sufficiently wondering and impressed? Above all, are we sufficiently disturbed by this extremely disturbing story? Sometimes the blunt new word will impress us more than the beautiful and old. 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man,' said Jesus—and then, seeing perhaps that the reaction to this statement was less vigorous than it might have been. He repeated it, but this time using a strong and rather vulgar word meaning 'to eat noisily, like an animal'—chew? munch? crunch? champ? (But in the end, I was pusillanimous, and left it at 'eat,' not liking to offend the ears of the faithful with what Christ actually said.)

## Examples from the Plays

Those are some of Miss Sayers's own comments on the language question. Listeners will quickly find out for themselves the actual effect of the modern speech she has used. The first dozen lines of the first play for instance, are as follow:

### SCENE I. (JERUSALEM)

The Evangelist: The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. . . . Now, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the King, behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.

(The rattle of dice and the sound of a lute). Ephraim: Four, six, two. . . . Oh, stop strumming, you idle monkey! Your throw, Captain.

Proclus (throwing dice): Five, three, six. Ephraim: You win, Proclus. . . . What was all that noise in the street last night? Right under the palace windows—disgraceful!

Proclus: A bunch of fools who'd got hold of some rumour or other. (throws dice) Aha! three sixes. Beat that if you can, my Lord Ephraim.

Ephraim: You have all the luck. . . . Rumour? What about?

Proclus: Oh, nothing. Just an excuse for stoning.

Boy: They're saying in the market-place that Judea is to have a new king.

And as a brief example of Miss Sayers's unsparing realism, here is a short sequence from the last play, at the foot of the Cross:

Second Soldier: Come on, come, let's have the next . . . got him stripped?

Third Soldier: Yes. Here you are.

Fourth Soldier: This one won't give trouble. Third Soldier: Dunno about that. He wouldn't drink the myrrh and vinegar.

First Soldier: Why not?

Third Soldier: Said he wanted to keep his head clear.

First Soldier: If he thinks he can make a getaway.

Fourth Soldier: Ah! he's only crazy. (Persuasively) Here, my lad—don't be obstinate. Drink it. It'll deaden you like. You won't feel so much. . . . No? . . . Well, if you want, you won't. . . . You're a queer one, ain't you? . . . Come on, then, get down to it.

First Soldier: (whose temper has been soured by the black eye): Kick his feet from under him.

Second Soldier: No need. He's down. . . . Take the feet, Corvus.

First Soldier: Stretch your legs. I'll give you king of the Jews.

Second Soldier: Hand me the mallet.

Jesus: Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing.

(His voice breaks off in a sharp gasp as the mallet falls. Fade out on the dull thud of the hammering).

## A Challenge to Christians

Finally, here is a paragraph taken from near the end of the author's preface, in which she turns her defence into a challenge to all Christian people:

Not Herod, not Caiaphas, not Pilate, not Judas ever contrived to fasten upon Jesus Christ the reproach of insipidity; that final indignity was left for pious hands to inflict. To make of His story something that could neither startle, nor shock, nor terrify, nor excite, nor inspire a living soul is to crucify the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame. And if anybody imagines that its conventional presentation has of late been all that it should be, let him stop the next stranger in the street and ask what effect it has had on him. Or let him look at the world to which this Gospel has been preached for close on 20 centuries: *Si calvarium, si sepulchrum requiris, circumspecte*. Let me tell you, good Christian people, an honest writer would be ashamed to treat a nursery tale as you have treated the greatest drama in history; and this in virtue, not of his faith, but of his calling.

## Titles of the Plays

The 12 separate plays are entitled as follows: "Kings in Judea" (the Nativity and political background of Herod's Court); "The King's Herald" (Christ meeting John the Baptist and the Disciples); "A Certain Nobleman" (a sidelight on the humanity of Christ); "The Heirs to the Kingdom" (friends and foes of the Heavenly Kingdom dividing into opposite camps); "The Bread of Heaven" (the miracle of loaves and fishes); "The Feast of the Tabernacles" (with many characters, Christ, Disciples, Romans); "The Light and the Life" (described by the author as "the lull before the storm"); "Royal Progress" (the contrast of values between this world and the next); "The King's Supper" (ending with the words "then all the disciples forsook Him and fled"); "The Princes of this World" (the trials); "King of Sorrows" (Calvary, with sequences showing the Roman attitude to an "insignificant episode" involving an "insignificant man"); "The King Comes to His Own" (the Resurrection).

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