THE PEOPLE’S PLAY

A community theatre group’s take on the traditional Easter story of Jesus Christ’s final days brings together cast members from all faiths and walks of life.

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You can tell Easter is coming. Pontius Pilate is washing his hands, Herod is gasping for a cup of tea and Jesus has just told me that he’s sorry he can’t stay but he’s got a committee meeting to go to.

Never mind. We have time to get a couple of photos of the Messiah with his mum before actor Stuart Glossop heads for the car park. He pauses to tell me that a couple of years back he was Judas Iscariot, “so I suppose I’ve been promoted!”

The Virgin Mary, aka actress Ann Balaam, watches him leave with a sigh. “You know the last time I played this part I was five years old and had a doll on my lap,” she tells me. Decades on from that reception class nativity play Ann, now in her sixties, feels that she has come full circle.

I am at rehearsals for Poole Passion 2014 - an intriguing and moving modern take on the traditional Passion Play. Since its humble beginnings just five years ago it has grown into a powerful piece of community theatre, staged every two years.

The production is called Through the Eyes of a Child and views the Biblical story of the final days of Jesus Christ from the perspective of a nine-year-old girl.

Written and directed by Sharon Muiruri, it has developed into a major piece of theatre which combines traditional acting, a street procession, interactive crowd participation, a son et lumière and even fire-eaters. There will be five performances - four evening shows and one matinee - all at Parkstone United Reformed Church between Wednesday 9th April and Saturday 12th of April.

Refreshingly - despite its obvious Christian roots - Through the Eyes of a Child resolutely aims at inclusivity. It embraces both the religious and the secular. “It is open to everyone, interfaith
and non-faith,” explains Sharon.

In keeping with this ethos the portrayal of Christ has been multi-ethnic and non-gender specific. The last production - two years ago - featured a woman as Jesus and the time before that Jesus was Nigerian.

Since its first run in 2009 - “put together on an absolute shoe-string” - the Poole Passion has steadily attracted more interest. Now with a growing reputation, funding from the BBC Performing Arts Fund and a bursary from Poole Borough Council, it has been able to make significantly advances.

This year Sharon hopes that the play will be seen by more than 1,000 people. Amateur cast members, aged four to almost 90, have been augmented by key professionals. The production has also staged participating workshops for various charities, helping ex-prisoners and >

Poole Passion Play rehearsals with Stuart Glossop as Jesus and Ann Balaam as Mary
the homeless, and they have commissioned a group of recovering addicts to make the table for The Last Supper.

“We have a tremendous mix of both professionals and people who are doing it for fun. It’s incredibly positive,” says Sharon. “There’s this bizarre view that to find professional people in the theatre you have to go to London. That’s simply not true. We’ve got a wealth of fully trained people right here on our doorstep in Dorset.” Any concerns that such a strategy might create a ‘them-and-us’ divide, she says, have been completely unfounded.

“One of the things that came strongly through the evaluation of the last play was that the amateur cast really enjoyed working alongside professional actors. They didn’t feel at all intimidated, on the contrary it raised everyone’s game and they liked the fact that they were doing something that was semi-professional.”

I watch the rehearsals with nine-year-old Gabriel Coyne as the child, Charlie Hall as Herod and Stuart Turvey as Pilate. Stuart, who is chairman of Poole Passion 2014, has played Pilate in all the productions so far. This year’s show, he suggests, is looking like the best ever. “I don’t want to say it too loud,” he stage whispers. “But I think we’re ahead of the game.”

Talking to members of the cast it is clear that they range from seriously ambitious actors to those who just enjoy taking part. It seems to work remarkably well.

I meet the ‘almost 90-year-old’ Bob Garratt. Bob, who celebrates his big birthday later this month, has taken part in these productions since 2009. In previous years he played the High Priest Caiaphas but says he feels “just a little too wobbly” to participate at that level in this production. However, determined not to be sidelined, he has become Poole Passion’s...
See the Poole Passion Play

Poole Passion 2014: Through the Eyes of a Child is at Parkstone United Reformed Church in Commercial Road BH14 OJW from Wednesday 9th April to Saturday 12th April. There will be performances at 7pm each evening plus a Saturday matinee at 2pm. Tickets from poolepassion.com or call 01202 749085.