

ARE WE REALLY AS BAD AS THIS?

Brian Cutler reviews the recent production of Hare's *Racing Demon*, performed by Cuckfield Dramatic Society in Holy Trinity.

One of the objects of the reordering of Holy Trinity was to make the space more suitable for community use, for the staging of dramatic productions, as well as concerts and other activities, a possibility. When Jim Knight asked if he, with the Cuckfield Dramatic Society, might put on a performance of Hare's *Racing Demon* the response therefore was a resounding yes.

But how do you do it so as to benefit from both the space and the beauty of the building? Jim Knight's answer was simple, but not so it deceptively simple, using the minimum of furniture, no props, no scenery and where appropriate the inbuilt features of the building. Given the use that Hare makes of the characters talking to God whilst in church it was a wonderful setting, enhancing the enjoyment of this intriguing play.

Racing Demon, the first of a trilogy by Hare about the Church and its institutions in the 1990s, is about the dear old Church's slowness to respond to the realities of modern life. It is also about the downfall of the central character, Lionel Espy (*Laurence Leng*), team rector in a parish in south London, whose ministry has become increasingly concerned with social action, or inaction in some eyes, than about preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments, a task of which he is reminded by Charlie Southwark (*Philip Robinson*).

Lionel is assisted by the all-things-to-all-men Reverend Streaky, Bacon (*Alan Carter*) and the quiet thinking Henderson (*Paul Davey*), and supported by his lovely wife Heather (*Chrys Tarr*). Into this already somewhat chaotic mixture is thrust a dynamic, enthusiastic and energetic curate, the Boyd Tony Ferris (*Paul Buse*), who is de-

The central story line is relatively straight forward. One bishop determined to remove Lionel from his post because he is seen as failing, one team rector determined not to be moved, once he has been convinced of the danger, one curate bent on changing everything, and nearly everyone else intent on making sure that nothing actually does. This institutional inertia is epitomised in Charlie Southwark's suffragan, Gilbert, Bishop of Kingston (*Bill Colbourne*) who at one point extols the virtue of setting up a committee to defuse any and every situation.

Among the many issues that concern Hare, perhaps the most significant is the relevance of the Church's message and its liturgy to the modern world, particularly to an inner city community. This is illustrated in the failure of both Lionel and Tony to respond appropriately and empathetically to the needs of Stella (*Samantha Oliver*) who has become the victim of domestic violence. However, he also succeeds in raising a number of other questions that troubled the church in 1991 and still trouble it today. Should the church ordain women, or now consecrate them as bishops? What is the church's attitude to homosexuality, particularly amongst the priesthood, or to Freemasonry? Gay priests is the subject of a sub plot involving Harry, his boy friend Ewan (*Andy Squires*) and Tommy (*Peter Bowman*), a tabloid journalist determined to expose him.

Although I have seen the play previously, I do not recall so vividly the impact that the demands of the ministry is shown to have on close family members. Frances is doubly traumatised, firstly from her upbringing in the vicarage of her father and secondly by having Tony taken away from her by the demands of his church. Heather is so stressed by her virtual estrangement from her husband that she has a stroke and is unable to respond when he turns to her for support in the closing scene. Only the relationship between Harry and Ewan survives as they fly off to the Mediterranean sun!

Thank you CDS for bringing *Racing Demon* to Cuckfield and to Holy Trinity. Congratulations to everyone involved. It worked and was a tremendous success. Having had to relate to the diocese and to bishops in recent months, I can confirm that Hare is not that far off the mark, although I doubt if any of the priests portrayed here would have made a certain recent short list!

Brian Cutler