



Holy Trinity Church in Cuckfield, West Sussex will play host to Cuckfield Dramatic Society's production of *Racing Demon*

# A Demon in the Church! ...But No Exorcism Necessary

**West Sussex society moves into the village church as award-winning play returns to its spiritual roots**

BY PAUL DAVEY

## Early theatre in the church.

Theatre and churches have a long association in England. Most early theatre in England was religious starting with liturgical drama around the time of the Norman Conquest. Priests acted out biblical stories to a largely illiterate population that did not understand Latin anyway. In time the language used changed to English, the location moved into the churchyard or marketplace, and tradesmen's guilds took over the acting. Dramatisations became more sophisticated and more stories, and even comic scenes were added.

By the 14th Century theatre was a popular form of entertainment taking place on temporary stages (such as wagons) in town squares or in the grounds of churches. As well as mystery plays telling biblical stories, miracle plays told the stories of the lives of saints.

When Henry VIII broke away from Rome in the 16th Century he banned these dramas to suppress any

expression of Catholic doctrine. Secular acting filled the void, first in small companies of an aristocratic patron, then during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I into purpose-built playhouses.

## Skip forward 500 years...

In 1990 David Hare's *Racing Demon* was premiered at the NT winning several 'Best Play' awards.

Widely considered his finest work, its story of clerical conscience and conflict explores the complex problems facing British society and the Church of England in the 1990s. It remains surprisingly topical, covering divisions over women priests and bishops, homosexuality, failing social services and the relevance of the church to ordinary people. Hare brings all this to life through individual stories, making the drama about people not religion.

Lionel, a tired team rector in a deprived inner-London parish, is struggling with his faith, and with his bishop, who wants to remove him. His new curate Tony, has developed

"an evangelical tilt" and is railing against what he sees as a cosy middle-class club. Tony's girlfriend Frances, a non-believer, finds his new morality and zeal increasingly disturbing. Meanwhile another member of the ministry team is being threatened by an unscrupulous tabloid hack. Through their relationships, actions and inner thoughts we learn what drives each character and start to feel for and even laugh with them, before their flaws are revealed.

Making the characters sympathetic and bringing in some light relief and comic touches in the midst of the pathos is testament to David Hare's skill as a master playwright.

## 25 years on, *Racing Demon* enters the church.

Holy Trinity Church in Cuckfield, West Sussex, dates from 1090. With notable features from 13th-19th Centuries, it's a particularly beautiful village church.

But even grade one listed churches have to change with the times and needs and, in 2012, Holy Trinity was 'reordered' with its first major interior update in 150 years. As well as new underfloor heating, the dark Victorian pews were replaced with new light-oak chairs. In part this was to open up more secular use of the building,

by and for the local community.

So, forsaking their usual home at the village's Queens Hall, with stage and proscenium arch, Cuckfield Dramatic Society has risen to the opportunity and will present *Racing Demon* in the church from 12-15 November. Ticket sales will go towards the loans that funded the reordering.

While some scenes are set in a church, in other scenes, Holy Trinity will double as the Savoy Hotel and a nightclub. With echoes of Elizabethan theatre, the sets will feature some dressing but no scenery flats. Lighting and the performers' skills will transport the audience in what promises to be a poignant, moving production.

**When:** 12-15 Nov, 7:30pm

**Where:** Holy Trinity Church, Church St, Cuckfield, W. Sussex RH17 5JZ  
[www.cuckfielddramaticsociety.com](http://www.cuckfielddramaticsociety.com)

## PEWY!

Even that BBC bastion of rural England, *The Archers*, has covered 'church reordering' in a 2007 storyline.

The controversy over the removal of the pews in Ambridge reached not only the radio soap's characters, but also listeners with a vote on the programme's website.