

Acting out the Bible brings it to life

Drama has been part of the Church since medieval times. It can still be used to deepen faith or to witness to others

IT was quite emotional when Carol Young heard Jesus declaring that she had been healed.

Carol was actually acting as a Biblical character in the Havant Passion Play. The 'Jesus' who spoke to her was the actor James Burke-Dunsmore. But it helped Carol to understand better how it might have felt to encounter Jesus in the flesh.

It was the second time she had performed as part of **Havant Passion Play**. The first time, in 2015, she was one of the temple guards and had plenty of crowd scenes to participate in. The second time, in 2017, she played the woman who had been bleeding for many years, and had one main scene to rehearse.

For Carol, who goes to St John's Church, Rowlands Castle, it crystallised the importance of drama and role play as a way of understanding the Bible. Time spent in rehearsal understanding the background behind each scene, and the personalities of those who met Jesus, was invaluable.

"Ten to 15 years beforehand, I'd been in about a dozen plays with Southsea Shakespeare Actors, so I was aware of how powerful drama could be," she said. "This was such a good opportunity to do an outdoor production that explained Jesus's life and death.



Scenes from Havant Passion Play in 2017: (above left): Carol Young acts as the woman healed by Jesus, played by James Burke-Dunsmore; (top): the woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus; (above right): Jairus' family show their delight after Jesus raises their daughter from the dead

"I was working long hours during the first Passion Play, so had to beg for time off to attend rehearsals. It wasn't easy, but it was so rewarding. I had fewer rehearsals for the second one, because I was in one specific scene. But it was interesting how the role developed during rehearsals.

"James was also the director and writer, and helped us to understand the society in which this was taking place, the way people behaved, and how to understand your character.

"Bible stories can be over-familiar

when you've heard them for years. This was a good opportunity to see what actually happened in more depth. Everyone was struck by the crucifixion scenes in both productions. You could sense that it was affecting people, and I hope it made them think.

"It also helps with our personal faith, and it's also good to get to know people from other churches and denominations. It was lovely to realise that any differences in worship didn't matter – it was helping to portray the life of Jesus and deliver the good news that did."

Carol will also be part of this summer's Passion Play, which takes place on August 17-18 in Havant Park. As before, the cast will include worshippers from churches of all denominations across Havant, Leigh Park, Bedhampton, Rowlands Castle and further afield. It will be free to attend, and the cast hope passers-by will stop and watch.

During the spring, James Burke-Dunsmore, who also plays Jesus in the acclaimed, open-air production of 'The Life of Christ' at Wintershall, near Guildford, will hold workshops and then firm up

a script. Anyone interested can see www.havantpassionplays.org.uk for details.

'You could sense it was affecting people and made them think'

The cast of Havant Passion Play are also hosting another theatrical event. 'Voices for Easter' is a one-man show written and performed by Kevin Walsh, a professionally trained actor. It takes place on Saturday 9 March, at 4pm and

7.30pm, in St Michael's church hall, Leigh Park. It illustrates the Easter story from the point of view of those who met Jesus. Tickets, priced at £7 or £10, are available on 01243-371074.

The life of Jesus will also be acted out in **Brighstone** this Easter, when villagers perform their Passion Play on April 20.

Inspired by the late Rev Derek Stevenson, who masterminded a passion play in 2006 that was seen by 400 people, director Chris Biggs has already written and directed three Nativity pageants in Brighstone, as part of its Christmas Tree Festival.

He said: "My main aim is to present the Easter message to as big a crowd as possible drawn from a new generation of islanders. Many will not have heard of Jesus and how and why he died and of his promise of eternal life.

"We live in a very visual age with all of us spending so much time on screens. With this in mind, I've chosen scenes from the gospels which will be visually attractive while making sure the language can be easily understood. An enormous audience from all over the island would be fantastic."

The play will start with Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which will involve using donkeys from the Isle of Wight Donkey Sanctuary. It will include the Last Supper, Garden of Gethsemane, the trial, as well as Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection.

Cast members will come from all walks of life, and have strong connections to the village. The Cantus Vesperi choir will provide some moving sacred music, and pupils from Brighstone Primary school will act and sing in the play too.

