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Religion and Relevancy
In David Hare's *Racing Demon:*
Connecting the Prose With the Passion

By

Judy Lee Oliva[1]

In David Hare's 1990 award winning play, *Racing Demon,* the basic question that his characters struggle with is: do we need practical holiness or practiced holiness? The play reflects a shift in British dramaturgy in which contemporary playwrights are replacing political themes with more universal religious motifs. Peter Barnes' *Noonday Demons,* Simon Gray's *Hidden Laughter,* and Peter Flannery's *Singer* all have moved from Thatcherism into theology, debunking the state of the universe and its religious institutions instead of debunking the state.

Racing Demon,[2] the first of a trilogy completed by Hare in October 1993 with *Absence of War,* has been compared to the historical dramas of Robert Bolt, the psychological exposé of Shaffer's *Equus* and the political theatricality of Brecht's *Galileo.* Yet institutions in decline have been a hallmark of Hare's work over time from his invective against educational institutions in *Slag* to the indictment of traditional social institutions like the Masons in *Brassneck,* to the ridicule of inept international organizations such as UNESCO, in *A Map of the World.*[3] More recently, in *The Secret Rapture,* Hare searches for the possibility of goodness within the institution of the family. In *Racing Demon,* he goes one step further by questioning the definition of goodness itself and by questioning whether or not goodness and religion, if they exist at all in British society, are enough to sustain a culture that has difficulty discerning between form and faith.

Critics were quick to recognize the powerful and sometimes explosive mixture of visual theatricality, the breakdown of religious rhetoric and thematic juxtaposition in *Racing Demon.* One critic described his experience saying "at times, it is like a dash in the face with holy water"[4]. Irving Wardle says that the play compels you to "reconsider the nature of Christian virtue."[5] And Christopher notes that Hare is writing as much about "the value of doubt in every

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[2] All quotes are taken from Hare's 1990 edition of *Racing Demon* (London: Faber and Faber). The play was first performed at the Cottesloe Theatre on February 1, 1990 with Richard Eyre as director.
[3] Please see my book *David Hare: Theatricalizing Politics* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Publications, 1990) for a textual analysis of Hare's major works. I focus specifically on the issue of institutions in decline in the discussion of many of his plays.
[4] All reviews cited are quoted from *Theatre Record* (29 January - 11 February 1990), a collection of major reviews from various London newspapers, published in London. The page number in each endnote corresponds to the review pages in *Theatre Record.* This note: 185.
[5] *Theatre Record,* 186.

aspect of life, as he is about spiritual sincerity."[6] Writing in the *Times,* the Bishop of Oxford says of Lionel, the inactive protagonist: "On aesthetic, moral and theological grounds his [Lionel's] plea is for a proper, reverent reticence in our dealings with the divine."[7]

Racing Demon reflects dramaturgical strategies typical of Hare. For example, the manipulation of sympathy from one character to the next is a device seen earlier in *A Map of the World.* Tony, the young priest who is the zealot of goodness in *Racing Demon,* might easily be compared with Lambert Le Roux, *Pravda's* zealot of evilness. And Hare's trademark use of juxtaposing polar images--in this case that of flesh and faith, of the conflict between physical and spiritual needs--is most poignantly realized in *Racing Demon,* but is reminiscent of Hare's 1980s play, *Plenty.* What distinguishes *Racing Demon,* however, from Hare's previous work is how the playwright balances plot, theme, and character. He is able to theatrically demonstrate the tension between the prose and the passion as his characters question whether or not religion is relevant today. The definition of religion and the practice of religion are prevailing thematic issues that advance the plot and send the characters into fervent and frustrating spiritual tailspins. How does society connect the prose, or the out-dated rhetoric of the Anglican church, with the passion of the Tonys, who believe that positive and passionate preaching can fill the churches and save the poor but who do not deal directly with the poor or those who have problems that the church cannot readily seem to fix?

Simply stated, the story of *Racing Demon* concerns four clergymen of South London who struggle to deal with their religious missions alongside the Church's internal dissension on doctrine and practice, as well as the failing attendance of their parishioners. In between the main characters, Lionel, the older priest who feels that the Church no longer has a connection with most people's lives; and Tony, the younger and more aggressive curate who is out to make his mark; Hare places the Reverend "Streaky" Bacon, who often gets drunk on tequilas at the Savoy, and the old Reverend Harry Henderson, a homosexual who must in the end flee to a safe job in Malta after a newspaper reveals his secret. Young Tony ultimately speaks to the Bishop of Southwark about what he perceives to be Lionel's poor ministry. Lionel's two friends counter with a rather shady confrontation with the Bishop of Kingston asking him to intervene on Lionel's behalf to the Bishop of Southwark. Lionel's two friends imply to Kingston that should Lionel be dismissed they would feel a "moral obligation" to suggest that his dismissal was political rather than prophetic. However, having warned Lionel in the opening scene of the play to "please, fulfill [sic] your job description. Keep everyone happy,"[8] Southwark has no patience in the end. Escalating pressures of the Church, including the campaign to approve the appointment of women as Bishops, pushes Southwark to make a decision that has become a personal as well as a theological issue. His comment to Lionel is both sardonic and unsacrosanct: "In any other job you'd have been fired years ago. You're a joke, Lionel. You stand in the center of the parish like some great fat wobbly girl's blouse. Crying for humanity. And doing absolutely

[6] *Theatre Record,* 189.
[7] *Theatre Record,* 187.
[8] Hare, *Racing Demon,* 4. All page numbers below are from the playscript.

nothing at all."[9]

The Bishop's use of language in this scene is representative of one of many linguistic techniques that Hare employs to both extol and execrate the relevance of religion in contemporary British society. The cruel harshness of Southwark's comments are in opposition to audience expectation. If the most reverent speak to each other in this way and think of each other in this way; it casts a shadow on the verity, not only on their religious commitments, but also on their capacity to love and be charitable. Everywhere there are indictments; nowhere are there answers. Southwark accuses Lionel. Lionel accuses God. Both are frustrated. The opening line of the play has Lionel asking: "God, Where are you?... You never say anything...it's this perpetual absence - yes? - not being here... There are an awful lot of people in a very bad way. And they need something besides silence."[10] Where Lionel's language reveals his desperation, it also reveals his humanistic, albeit disillusioned idealism. And ironically in his desire to help people make some sort of connection between the content and form of religion, Lionel becomes the church's scapegoat. He unwisely admits to Southwark that the church is "an irrelevance. It has not connection with most people's lives. A lot of people are struggling to make a life at all. Now I feel we should be humble about this. Our job is to mainly learn.... Perhaps as the years go by, that becomes more important than ritual."[11]

Tony is the antithesis of Lionel. His language lacks the humanistic element. Hare is clever here, because Tony is not without compassion. And his ideas regarding how best to address the problems of the church are sound, if not somewhat idealistic. He tells his soon-to-be-dumped girlfriend: "I've got an idea for common worship, to try and involve the Catholics and Methodists as well. I wanted to start with a day for World Peace.. .if we could get everyone together it would be the most incredible coup."[12] Here and elsewhere his rhetoric reveals an underlying conflict between egoism and egalitarianism. His language is of facts and statistics, of rules and regulations. He says: "The statistics are appealing. We feel we've had a good Sunday if between us we attract one percent."[13] He breaks down religion much like a math problem: "Human beings can choose. We're free. Notice the message. Or ignore it. Ignore it and pay a terrible price."[14] It is also interesting to note here the different rhythm of Tony's language. His precise observations sound cold via the stichomythic style. And in the end, in his zeal to make a difference he becomes judgmental, completely convinced that his way is the only way: "All I can see is a man who's missing the obvious. Christ intervened. Lionel doesn't seem to realize.... So Lionel's irrelevant."[15] In addition, in his exuberation to heal the world, Tony's myopic view prevents him from seeing, among other things his tactless disregard for his formal girlfriend. When she remarks that "You used to wake up in the night and make love to me", he retorts, "How can I have been so stupid? I used to try and find comfort in you... In your body. It was

[9] 88.
[10] 1.
[11] 3.
[12] 5.
[13] 17.
[14] 75.
[15] 78.

crazy. I realize now I was wasting my time."[16]

What Tony, Lionel and the rest have in common is a devout earnestness to address both the content and form of religious practice. However, they each differ in their worldview, which directly effects the way in which they conduct their personal and professional lives. Hare devises an interesting contrapuntal linguistic technique to highlight the variations of perspective. He does this by giving different characters the same words and phrases, the implications of which are vastly different, depending upon who is saying them. For example, Lionel is the first to use the word "irrelevance" which, as you will recall, he uses to describe how he believes people feel about the church. Frances, Tony's girlfriend, uses it to describe her relationship with Tony. "You've started not to look at me. Aren't I irrelevant?"[17] Later, Harry speaks about the transcendent nature of the human being with: "I am the vessel. I am only the channel through which God's love can pass. That makes me, as a person, totally irrelevant."[18] And finally Tony uses it, as mentioned earlier to describe Lionel. In sum these four examples propose that the church, relationships, human beings, and God's messengers are all irrelevant, so what is left?

Hare also uses similar phrases to subvert character. Frances cautions Tony with "As long as you're honest."[19] Later, Lionel's advice to Tony sounds similar: "As long as you do it from the heart."[20] The point here is to raise questions regarding Tony's underlying motives.

The word "conscience" in another example of how the repetition of a word or phrase begins to create a heightened sense of tension as it is repeated in different situations by different characters. Harry says Lionel is not so much a man of faith as a "man of conscience."[21] Ironically, Tony speaks about his consultation with the Bishop concerning Lionel's ineffectiveness as a priest as "an issue of conscience."[22] Harry throws the word back to Tony regarding Tony's disloyalty to Lionel: "Why risk the damage? I mean the damage to your own conscience."[23]

The contrapuntal device is used on a very simple level to advance contrasting interpretations of a world view. Tony observes that "the parish is in a very bad way."[24] Lionel says "lots of people are in a bad way."[25] Tony's observation reveals that from his point of view, it is the lack of action and responsibility within the church that is causing lack of faith and that is why people are in a bad way. Lionel's observation reveals that from his point of view people are in a very bad way not because of the church, but because that's the way the world is. Another

[16] 76.
[17] 9.
[18] 26.
[19] 7.
[20] 20.
[21] 47.
[22] 53.
[23] 60.
[24] 53.
[25] 1.

example is found with Streaky and Tony concerning the practice of religion. Streaky stays: "The whole thing's so simple. Infinitely loving. Why do people find it so hard?"[26] Whereas Tony says "Loving God is so much harder than it looks."[27] The most interesting, most complex, but perhaps somewhat undeveloped comparison of worldviews is between the two major female characters of the play, Frances, Tony's ex-girlfriend, and Heather, Lionel's neglected and ill wife. Both speak of dreaming and escaping. Frances, who becomes good friends with Lionel, advises him after she realizes they have become too close emotionally: "It's nice of course. I enjoy it. Sitting here, playing chess. Letting you imagine... But it isn't real. Don't be stupid. You have a sick wife.... You're not allowed any pleasure. Except the pleasure of dreaming."[28] Ironically, Heather's lines reflect a similar sentiment when she says to Lionel at the end of the play: "I've always dreamed of escaping my body. And one day I shall."[29] Whereas Frances plans to escape from organized religion by fleeing to a place where no one has heard of God, Heather's wish is to escape by death. Frances feels it a waste to only be able to dream and she feels that that is what most religious people do, is to dream. Earlier in the play she says to Lionel: "It all seems such a waste... Of a human being. To have his mind all the time on something else. Always to be dreaming."[30] However, only through dreaming has Heather been able to survive. Only through death will she know happiness and freedom from physical and emotional pain. Throughout the play these two women serve as Lionel's albatross and falcon. Heather is the albatross who weighs Lionel down with her sickness and inability to make him happy; and Frances is the falcon who hunts for an alternative way to live once she sees Lionel's unalterable position.

There are lesser examples of Hare's linguistic devices to advance plot, theme and character. Harry and Streaky's word games with Kingston in scene eleven have them incorporating Kingston's phrases into their own responses, thereby manipulating the meaning to reinforce their cause. Further, as the tension in the play grows, Hare employs sacrilegious metaphors that create a derisive humor but also comment on the subversive undercurrent of the situation. The metaphors range from a fairly harmless description of Tony as a "combustible curate,"[31] to a more caustic description of the Bishop, as Streaky says: "His brass balls clang as he walks."[32] Hare uses the last lines of the play as a final comment on faith. Frances says: "I love that bit when the plane begins to climb, the ground smoothes away behind you, the buildings, the hills. Then the white patches. The vision gets bleary. The cloud becomes a hard shelf. The land is still there. But all you see is white and the horizon. And then you turn and head towards the sun."[33] The passage almost sounds like a journey heavenward, of a blissful move towards God. Instead, it is a description of a very real flight in an airplane. There is no spiritual epiphany, but there is faith. Faith that even though one cannot see the land, it is still there.

[26] 63.
[27] 57.
[28] 69.
[29] 96.
[30] 66.
[31] 44.
[32] 60.
[33] 98.

Hare's linguistic techniques in *Racing Demon* are subtly created but powerfully employed. Such linguistic devices work well with the inherent visual theatricality found in the church setting. Hare is a master image-maker and creator of moments. He unifies the play with a variety of theatrical choices, force-framing the visual picture while at the same time juxtaposing images which help to reify the development of theme and character. Where language and visual technique work best together are in the private monologues that Hare gives many of the characters when they pray to God.

The opening scene is the first monologue and presents Lionel kneeling at prayer asking: "God. Where are you?"[34] The next monologue is scene five where Tony is at prayer. His opening lines, in contrast to Lionel's are revealing: "You know I'm damned if I get this. I'm damned if I know what the hell's going on."[35] In the third monologue Frances' words to God begin with: "This is stupid. May I say I don't even believe you?"[36] In the fourth monologue Lionel concludes the first act still pleading for answers: "You show me the way. Go on. You explain why all this hurt has to come. Tell me. You understand everything... Why do the good always fight among themselves?"[37] Hare uses these first four monologues to portray the existing skepticism of religion, even in the inner circles of the church. Theatrically, this device endows the play with a kind of spirituality that exists when one is alone with his or her private thoughts. It also places God as the central figure, the absentee character who is both absent onstage and seemingly absent in British society.

The four monologues in the second act serve the same purpose but the pleas are more desperate, more personal and more theatrical. For example, the first monologue of act two shows Streaky entering the church carrying a single candle. He is drunk. Unlike the others, Streaky is the only one to find happiness in his job and he cannot understand why everyone else finds goodness and happiness so difficult to come by. He admits: "Lord, I have no theology. Can't do it. The whole thing's so clear. He's there. In people's happiness. Tonight, in the taste of that drink. Or the love of my friends."[38] Hare juxtaposes Streaky's happiness with Harry's utter despair in scene five where Harry asks God: "Oh God, please help me. I don't know. Teach me Lord. How do you fight without hate?"[39] Hare concludes the play with monologues by Tony, Lionel and Frances onstage together, but each unaware of the other. It is a final tableau in which the playwright provides the audience with three views of the state of religion, three views of society, and three views of individuals who are stymied in their goals to do good.

Everyone in *Racing Demon* is trying to do good. But good is defined differently so they end up at cross purposes which results in the cross, and what it stands for, having no real purpose. But instead, like the set, designed as a cross by Bob Crowley, the cross serves as a symbol that we all recognize but get little meaning from anymore, much less comfort and still

[34] 1.
[35] 21.
[36] 38.
[37] 49.
[38] 63.
[39] 72.

less any real help. Everyone's proverbial cross is bared, via the state of the human condition. Everyone seems to be suffering from the gulf between the church's pragmatic dogma and the parishioners' disillusionment regarding the value of faith in a world of growing ills. Everyone seems to have an unholy alliance where they cannot connect the prose and the passion because religion seems to be more an issue of propriety rather than prophesy.

