

The Summoning of Everyman: a modern retelling

Les Ellison's plays enact Christian themes for the modern world, and **The Summoning of Everyman** takes the well-known medieval play and re-imagines what we understand by judgment.

The first scenes are highly entertaining: always a strong point in a play. Everyman (the role can be taken by a man or a woman) works for Goods and Chattels in the City, and is on the point of landing the lucrative Getmore, Yetmore and Keepit account. Being a fitness freak who lives on green salad, Everyman is outraged when Death comes to call: this wasn't supposed to happen in a target-oriented lifestyle. Even more unacceptable, in order to go to heaven Everyman will have to find someone to vouch for him before God. Friendship, the flatmate who is gorging on deep-fried cheddar wedges, is too lazy to accompany him anywhere, and one by one Everyman's friends and family fall away.

Gradually the theological point emerges: it's not that Everyman's friends won't help, but that they can't. Knowledge won't be any good because 'Where you're going is way beyond facts and figures. Beyond knowledge. Something to be imagined, yearned for, believed in. But not proved, not reasoned, not known for sure. That's why I can't come with you. I can't do those things.' The same is true of Strength,

Discretion and Five Wits: they have no value at the Judgment Seat. Only Good Deeds will speak for him, and Ellison has found an ingenious way of showing that good works act in tandem with grace to plead for the sinner.

The dialogue is modern, but Death, who appears in a motorcycle helmet and leathers, speaks in rhyming couplets, preserving continuity with the original and also a sense of awe. When Everyman sends his flatmate for a takeaway he has not yet seen Death in the background:

Everyman: *Take the stairs. Exercise'll do you good. And take some money or you'll be walking it twice.*

Friendship: *Sorted. I've got your wallet.*

Death: *Unseen. Yet standing in plain sight. Unheard. Yet never silent day or night.*

Everyman can be performed throughout the year, but speeches at the beginning and end relate the action to the Passion-tide narratives. With only minor changes to the text and, where necessary, to the name of the role, each of the eleven characters can be played by a male or a female actor. If necessary they can be played by as few as six actors. The play is available from Radius @£6 in electronic format.

Margaret Hunt - Spring 2016

*In the next issue of **Radius Performing:** Les Ellison on the writing of **Everyman**.*