

Radius Newsletter No 18



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Radius Call for Plays 2022

Radius's 2022 initiative to find new writing is taking the form of a Call for Plays in which several successful scripts will be identified and given a rehearsed reading. The scripts will also be considered for accession to the Radius Collection of playscripts.

Rules and Guidelines for the Call will be available from 21 February.

Timeline:

Window for entries: Tuesday, 19 April - 6 May

Shortlist announced: 1 August

Announcement of winning scripts: 22 August

Radius website

As you know, a year ago Radius embarked on a search for a new platform to replace the one that was falling seriously short of meeting our needs, and we finally chose the UKChurches platform which offers a hosting and management service. The transfer has been overseen by the Radius Executive Committee and progress has been slowed down by the fact that we have been rethinking the structure and content as we went along.

Before Christmas the old website was discontinued earlier than expected and as the new website was not yet ready to go we had to put a placeholder page in position. There has been no interruption of the services we offer, and as this newsletter is in preparation we are expecting to go live with the new site on or around 21 February.

The website will continue in the development phase for some months after its launch, and we ask you to be patient with any glitches. Please use the website contact form to let us know about any problems you encounter.

Radius AGM 2022

will be held on **Saturday 9 July** in London's **Crown Court Church, Covent Garden**, which has become a familiar venue for our London meetings and workshops over the years. It is easily accessible by bus and tube from the major railway stations. There will be coffee from 10.30 and **the AGM will begin at 11.30**, giving out-of-town members the chance to travel to the meeting in a day.

There will be a catered lunch and we are delighted that the afternoon session will be led by our most recent **Vice-President, the Right Rev Rob Gillion**.

More details in the Spring magazine and online.

Radius Festival of New Plays

You may remember that, before Covid, we were planning a weekend Drama Festival to take place in autumn 2020. Because the continuing uncertainty makes a weekend festival in 2022 seem too ambitious, we have scaled down the event to a single performance-packed afternoon.

The Radius Festival of New Plays will be held on **15 October, 2022**, in **St Mark's Church, Newnham, Cambridge**, from 12 pm to 5.15 pm. The timing is designed to enable people to attend just for the afternoon, although there will probably be a core of Radius members who are there for the weekend and who will be getting together for meals, worship and socialising.

When the original Festival was cancelled, two local groups were ready to go with the presentation of new plays, and we're very pleased indeed that they are going to pick up where they left off two years ago. The second half of the afternoon will see a **rehearsed reading** of successful scripts in the **Radius Call for Plays 2022**. Finally there will be a **panel discussion and Q&A**.

This promises to be an exciting afternoon, so save the date now.

RADIUS EASTER

Last year in this spot we advertised **Les Ellison's** short Easter Zoom play *The Dark before the Dawn* and if you haven't yet got to the point of live performance, Les's scenario of the disciples hearing news of the Resurrection is short, biblical and punchy. **Nick Warburton's** *Easter Diaries* is a powerful collection of five monologues intended for live performance but which also work well online, as several lockdown productions have shown. **Brenda Jackson's** *Seven Before Easter* is effectively a collection of monologues in which people involved in the Easter story are interrogated about what they did, and although this is an older script it has remained popular.

For a full-scale Easter production you can't do better than the lively **Cox / McGregor** *The Davidson Affair*, set in a modern newspaper office, or the second part of **Nick Warburton's** *Witness*, a dramatisation of Luke's account of Holy Week, first written for BBC radio. **Mike Umbers's** *Trial by Night* is a tense thriller-like account of Jesus's trials; you'd need gender-blind casting as it's - inevitably - male-dominated.

Radius's "Best Religious Drama" Project

A year ago Nick Warburton launched a project inviting Radius members and others to share their ideas about what makes a good religious play, and we have featured a range of responses in the past three issues of *Radius Performing*. The results have been fascinating, with a fairly strong bias towards plays that have stood the test of time – for instance Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Goethe's *Faust* / Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, and the 20th century classic *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller. By contrast, in the Spring issue of *Radius Performing* we'll be featuring a very recent play as a nomination for "best religious drama". Please keep the ideas coming in by emailing radiusperforming@gmail.com.

Radius Zoom Playreading group

Join other Radius members to read plays from our script library over Zoom. Next is Sean Lang's Easter play **Brother Man** on the morning of **Tuesday 15th March**. The only preparation needed is to book at least a day ahead by email to info@radiusdrama.org.uk.

This interesting play, spanning twenty years in the life of Jesus, focuses on his relationship with his brother James and the difficulty James has in accepting that Jesus is the Son of God.

From the Finborough Theatre

(artistic director Radius Vice-President Neil McPherson)

An Earl's Court Miscellany devised and directed by Catherine Harvey

Free on YouTube until midnight 25 February:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBI4Nb-jYFU>

Encounter the revolutionaries, poets, musicians and dancers of Earl's Court, its wartime and sporting heroes, inventors and romancers. Showing concurrently with subtitles on Scenesaver. *(Editor's note: I loved this anthology of verse, prose, and music, from Keats and Emily Dickinson to the melodramatic patriotism of Newbolt's "Play up! Play up! and play the game!" via rumbustious music hall songs.)*

The Garden Stories by Kate Griffin, illustrated by Marleen Starksfield-Lowe

Kate Griffin, the author of several plays in the Radius collection, has recently published a book of three linked stories beautifully illustrated by the late Marleen Starksfield-Lowe. Kate writes: "Marleen managed to depict the main protagonist Sky's knobbly knees and spectacles perfectly alongside the alternative worlds Sky finds in her imagination. The three stories are based on three gardens that Sky discovers: she learns from them that the only thing that matters is to live in the present." The book is available on Amazon.

Radius on Soho Radio

Radius member Anna Wheeler recently did a half-hour interview about the Society on Soho Radio. There are some fascinating insights into religious drama and you can listen to the podcast by searching for this link: <https://www.mixcloud.com/sohoradio/soho-service-23012022/>. The interview included Anna's choice of music, and it's a bonus to hear Dame Judi Dench's stunning performance of Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns".

Congratulations to the Arts Centre Group on their 50th anniversary. **Long-standing ACG member** (and also Radius member) **Tony Jasper** has compiled a celebratory edition of their magazine *The Cut* looking back over the achievements of half a century, from the vision of founder members Nigel Goodwin and Cliff Richard to the global Zoom meetings of the recent past. May they go from strength to strength!

Volunteer opportunities Help Radius reach out

Radius is keen to raise awareness of our events and resources connecting faith and drama. To help members share in that we plan more regular updates through a Mailchimp e-newsletter.

Our new Communications and Publicity Committee is building a pool of volunteer support for regular and one-off tasks which can be done from home. If you could help, please get in touch to find out more. Examples include sourcing images, preparing event publicity, making promotional videos or placing news releases. We would also like to know of members with current experience of publicity via digital channels who could offer advice from time to time.

To help us share ways to explore faith through drama more widely, just send a brief message with "Publicity" in the header to info@radiusdrama.org.uk and one of the Committee will be in touch to discuss interests and opportunities.

Copy dates for the magazine: 28 February; 6 June. Anyone can submit an article or review, and copy should be sent to Margaret Hunt at 7 Lenton Road, The Park, Nottingham NG7 1DP; 0115 941 3922; radiusperforming@gmail.com.

Three Murders on the Orient Express

Murder on the Orient Express: 1974, dir Sidney Lumet; 2010, dir Philip Martin; 2017, dir Kenneth Branagh

In 2021, for the second Christmas running, there were three different televised film versions of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* over the festive season: the classic star-studded version from 1974 with Albert Finney as Poirot supported by Lauren Bacall, John Gielgud and other luminaries; the 2010 film from David Suchet's monumental television of the whole Poirot series; and the 2017 version in which Kenneth Branagh directs himself.

Each film has a slightly different take on the story but I'm particularly fascinated by the Suchet version in which Poirot is a devout Catholic who has painful religious scruples about letting the murderers off scot-free at the end. If you don't already know who is guilty and prefer to remain that way, please stop reading now as the spoilers are about to start cascading like the Alpine snow which halts the Express, giving Poirot 24 hours to solve the crime.

The victim, Ratchett, is a child-murderer who was acquitted at trial and whose crime has had a devastating effect on the lives of the murdered child's family, their friends and their employees. Twelve of those damaged people pack the carriage where the murderer is travelling and kill him in the small hours, each of the twelve making a distinctive knife wound.

In the book Christie hinted at a moral framework for the story by making Colonel Arbuthnot remark to Poirot that "trial by jury is a sound system", implying that Arbuthnot sees the conspiracy in which twelve people exact revenge as having a judicial aspect. The point is incorporated into the dialogue of the 1974 film with Sean Connery as Arbuthnot. At the end of that film Poirot himself tacitly acknowledges the justice of their cause as the conspirators drink a silent toast, meeting each other's eyes in a solemn recognition of a mission accomplished. I've always been uncomfortable with this scene: it's in danger of being moving, and I have to remind myself that they're celebrating getting away with murder.

In the Branagh film the characterisation of the conspirators as executioners dispensing a deserved outcome is made a major theme; several of the suspects assert to Poirot that they are not murderers, and in the denouement Poirot himself makes a clear statement echoing their claim.

Each of the films has a preamble to explain what Poirot is doing in Istanbul, where the story begins. In the book he has been saving the honour of the army in some unspecified way, resulting in the suicide of an officer, and in the Suchet film this is expanded into an accusation that Poirot has been too hard on the officer. His response is that the officer chose his own path. In this film, Poirot then witnesses a shocking street scene where a woman is stoned by a mob for adultery. The incident is also witnessed by Mary Debenham, a young woman conspirator who is conducting a clandestine romance with the Colonel. Played by Vanessa Redgrave in 1974 and Jessica Chastain in 2010, hers is a key role in arousing Poirot's, and the audience's, sympathy. Debenham is profoundly shocked by the stoning, questioning whether this is justice, whereas for Poirot, "*mais oui*, it is shocking, but it is the law".

On the night of the murder, Poirot and the victim occupy adjacent cabins, and they simultaneously kneel down to say their prayers, Poirot using his rosary and Ratchett tormented by guilt but also praying for his own safety. Poirot's rosary is in evidence at key points as the solution unfolds and it appears again at the denouement where the detective accuses the murderers of operating a "kangaroo court" to dispense vengeance rather than justice. As the snowbound train finally creaks into life, there is no jubilation or congratulation. The murderers fear that when the body is unloaded at the next station, Poirot will give them up to the police. Even if we know the outcome, we experience tension with the silent conspirators as Poirot approaches the police contingent, and share their relief when it becomes clear that he is letting the outside investigators believe the easy explanation of a motiveless intruder.

Suchet's face in close-up during the long walk to the police post conveys a mind in agony, suggesting that Poirot is unable to decide until the very last minute what he is going to do. It's an acting masterclass, and he fingers the rosary once again. On the face of it, he is setting aside his deepest principles. In the context of Miss Debenham's compassion for the stoned woman, however, it's possible that we're being shown Poirot's slow acceptance that justice should sometimes be tempered with mercy.

Whatever your conclusion, it's a film that directly opens up some profound issues. And with a star turn by, among others, Eileen Atkins as Princess Dragomiroff, it's also highly entertaining.

Margaret Hunt