

HEARD AND SEEN
POP PASSION PLAY

*A Man Dies*¹ is a modern passion play written for a youth club and produced on television, and it typifies one method of making the Gospels sound topical. Another, familiar approach can be found in David Kossoff's bible stories on radio and television: here much of the modernisation doesn't exist above a verbal level, and serves mainly to dilute the tough historical reality; the basic assumption is that Christ and the apostles, like the royal family, are really just like us underneath all that distorting historical accretion. The beatnik translations of the Gospels a few years ago represent another technique, a wholesale transplantation of idiom which makes the original largely redundant, reduced to a structure on which contemporary meanings can be hung. *A Man Dies* uses the third, compromise technique of correlating biblical and modern events, juxtaposing a reference to the crossing of the Red Sea with a slide of Dunkirk, and following up an account of Christ's activity among the poor with a lyric about the British class-structure. In this way, at least, the urge to introduce a Mother's Pride loaf into the Last Supper scene is resisted, but the Brechtian method lays itself wide open to the kind of facile and irrelevant link-up of meaning which the Dunkirk analogy suggests. Later on, the technique becomes a built-in compulsion to demonstrate the obvious: the audience is treated to the sound of running water at a reference to the Jordan, and a remark about Christ's curative powers cues a slide of surgeons at work. What happens, in an attempt to cross-fertilise past and present, is a vulgarisation of both, and this crudity is part of a general over-simplification of attitude.

The crudity is there, particularly, in the satirical lyrics about modern materialism, which read, significantly, like Auden: throughout the play there is a slick, generalised rejection of a caricatured pagan society, based on stock notions about the 'telly' and the vacancy of the man in the street, and, as with Auden, the cheapness of the response is part of the cheapness of feeling under attack. What comes across in this sort of clichéd satire is not so much social criticism as a kind of sneer. The traditional social satire of the revue can suggest, in Christian hands, an ultimately unintended rejection of society as such, a movement away from the world, and unless the analysis is considered and the positive values clear, this will always be a damaging charge. In this way, the real radicalism of this play suffers by the over-simplifying revue-structure, which forces attitudes to flash across smartly, without depth. The crudity is there, again, in the stale, uncritical use of teenage clichés, the incessant jiving (Christ, Judas, the crowd, Pilate, all jive whenever they've got a spare moment), the black jackets and flick knives of the guards and the baddies, the *yeah yeah's*: it isn't just that some of these conventions (the black jackets, for instance) are a surrender to a middle-class stock notion and a reinforcement of it, but that, by making teenage culture self-conscious in this way, you drain it of value.

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The most disastrous experiment in television teenage Christianity was the *Sunday Break*, where a group of Ordinary Teenagers showed that Christianity was really quite a cheerful, hep affair by jiving whenever the moral discussion threatened to get too stuffy and grown up. What was most depressing about the programme was the bourgeois respectability of the teenagers involved, the clean, bouncy youthfulness of a pop-drinking, fairisle-sweater culture. *A Man Dies* manages to avoid this kind of respectability, but it fails on the other hand to exploit fully the significance of Christianity as a cult of rebellion which cannot be respectable, which sides with the intense, uncompromising, rebellious rockers against the uncommitted, affluent, liberal mods. The play has been performed twice on television and once in the Albert Hall, and the fact that such a basic, preliminary clearing of ground should have won such popularity seems ominous for the state of Christianity and the Christian drama. What has to be said is that, given the necessity of showing the relevance of Christianity and telling its story in this simple way, the future of the Christian drama lies with plays about Christians, not about Christ. The dramatic techniques which will be needed are not those of the stylised, patterned movement of this play, acted on television with a devout but somehow depressed correctness, but those of social realism, the sweat of making Christian belief live in strikes and sit-downs. The danger is that the Christian drama, having already missed the tide of the '50's drama of protest, will remain fixed in a preliminary stage, telling the story of Christ in different ways and mistaking modern techniques for modern meanings.

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Reviews

NICHOLAS OF CUSA AND MEDIEVAL POLITICAL THOUGHT, by Paul E. Sigmund; Harvard University Press and O.U.P.; 56s.

Although the Great Schism had been finally brought to an end by the Council of Constance, the aftermath, in ideological respects, was almost worse than the troublous years of the Schism itself. Virtually every one of the basic premisses relative to the principles of public government was, if not openly disputed, at all events doubted and queried. The period witnesses the impact of the fashionable theses of government, such as original location of public power in the people, representation, consent, accountability of the Ruler, and so forth, upon the hitherto unquestionably accepted tenets, such as the descending thesis of government, monarchy, the acceptance of law given by superior authority to (and not made by) the subjects, the theoretical impossibility of