

Paul's Journey

In the pages of these newsletters, Paul often invited us to join him in looking back and looking forwards. Here, we look back on the immense gift of his life, and forward to what the future holds for Riding Lights.

The director of an extraordinary variety of work, Paul's productions ranged from classics such as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Alchemist* to new plays and devised work, from the West End (with *African Snow* by Murray Watts – marking the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act) to primary school halls (over 30 years of gleefully anarchic annual Christmas tours), from the sublime to the frankly ludicrous, and all infused with his characteristic insight and vision. He was the Artistic Director of Riding Lights for 40 years, until his death.

Paul was born in 1953 in Hoylake, Merseyside to parents Brance Burbridge, WW2 RAF flying ace turned Scripture Union schools pioneer, and Barbara, a Froebel-trained primary school teacher.

He was intellectually gifted: following Merchant Taylors' School (where he was Head Boy), he was awarded a first from Oxford in English and distinction in a post-grad Diploma in Theology from St. John's College, Nottingham. But he had been an 'over-imaginative' child, who built a museum of curious artefacts in the garden shed and would spend hours with his childhood friend Murray Watts recording skits on an old reel to reel tape recorder, while his sister Sarah was drafted in

In 1979 the company won an Edinburgh Fringe First for a comic revue, to provide sound effects with squeakers, pans and running water. He and Watts would later go on to found Riding Lights Theatre Company alongside Nigel Forde.

While at St. Peter's College, Oxford, Paul met two people who were to have a profound influence on his life. The first was Bernadette Goss, a Theology student with whom he went on to build a marriage, a family and the richest of lives. The second was the Rev. David Watson, who encountered Paul's early experiments in re-imagining biblical drama at a University mission, and invited him to join the community he was building at St. Michael le Belfrey church in York.

From this beginning and from within that church community, Riding Lights grew, initially an expression of radical Christian creativity – a visit to Belfast in the late 1970s saw them performing in Crumlin Road Jail and at a service of reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants at St. Anne's Cathedral – then increasingly, and at the same time, featuring at arts festivals.

In 1979 the company won an Edinburgh Fringe First for a comic revue. The show opened with Paul's unforgettable performance as a front of house manager, forced to go on stage because 'the curtain had stuck', in order to 'warm the audience up with a joke'...despite not knowing any jokes. The result was an audience crying with laughter even before the non-existent curtain had gone up.

Paul's early vision for Riding Lights was to re-discover a vernacular that communicated in the same language as that of the medieval mystery plays: to make work that was human, direct, full of knockabout warmth and wisdom, that spoke to the soul and touched the heart through its immediacy – to take the word and make it flesh. This vision came full circle when he co-directed, with Damian Cruden, the 2012 *York Mystery Plays*, an extraordinary community production on an epic scale and bursting with all the qualities that Paul had nurtured in his work over 40 years.

Much of that work was driven by a sense of mission: for many years the short, punchy biblical sketch, frequently written by Paul, became Riding Lights' stock in trade and – through a series of books – a much used and loved resource to churches around the UK and beyond. Paul cited the key influences upon this often riotous work as the Bible, *The Beano* and *Beyond the Fringe*. But the core of his work emerged as essentially prophetic: he had a gift of discernment that placed him just ahead of the curve; looking at the world through a Godly lens, then making work with Riding Lights that was prescient in its subject matter, but generally under the radar of the wider cultural landscape.

... comedy was, for him, a serious business ...

Working with a core creative team of himself, designer Sean Cavanagh and writer Bridget Foreman, many of these shows were developed through a breakneck devising

process, steered by Paul; a white-water creative ride which would go from blank page to first night in a month, tackling slavery, climate change, terrorism, science and faith, the predicament of Palestinian Christians, the challenges of parenting, dementia ... and these plays toured largely to churches, in order to say 'This is where the conversation is going. This is what is going to become important. So consider it, think about it, engage - so that your voice is present and prepared.'

This, more perhaps than anything, was his ministry; one that also led the company to having work commissioned by two Archbishops of Canterbury for performances at the Lambeth Conferences of 1998 and 2008. Not naturally given to pride, the closest he came to it was probably when in 1992 Riding Lights was awarded the prestigious Templeton UK Project Award 'for enabling audiences to hear the gospel gladly'.

... his productions frequently moved you to both tears and helpless mirth ...

However, though deeply serious in his faith, he was never sententious, and he held it and himself lightly. He recounted an early lesson when he and Watts, teenage volunteers at a Welsh beach mission, had found themselves stranded some miles away and late for a meeting at which the Lord required them. When they eventually found a bus stop, they fell to their knees, closed their eyes and prayed fervently, at which point the bus thundered past them, leaving them in a cloud of dust. He used this story as a wry reminder that we are called to both watch and pray.

He was only ever a moment away from laughter, and from arousing it in others with an infectious chuckle, a sudden 'ha!' or the merest hint of a raised eyebrow (the most dangerous one of all for anyone who ever performed with him).

Comedy was, for him, a serious business: a skilled and very funny performer himself, as a director he would wring every last drop of humour from a joke, a line, a physical moment of slapstick, and as much care would go into a moment of delicacy or tenderness, with the result that his productions frequently moved you to both tears and helpless mirth.

Silliness tickled him enormously, and a passion-piece – which proved immensely popular with audiences – was his own adaptation of Jerome K. Jerome's classic comic novel, *Three Men in a Boat*, performed at the Northcott Exeter, York Theatre Royal and on tour. In 2000, Riding Lights moved into a new home at Friargate Theatre in York, and this engine-house of theatre-making opened the way to a flourishing of more mainstream work, with an opening season of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and *The Complete Works*, a revue show built around poetry from the profound to the preposterous. Paul was drawn to satire, and his work at Friargate continued with the world premiere adaptation of the novel *Augustus Carp Esp.*, a merciless satire on religious pomposity, and productions of *The Winter's Tale*, Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo* and an award-winning new musical, *Dick Turpin*. His playfulness, imagination, rigour, humour, and intelligence made him an outstanding theatre director.

He followed in the footsteps of the One 'in whom all things hold together', and pursued a unifying vision, a wholeness, in his work and his life. Though it sometimes baffled others, from religious conservatives to mainstream theatre folk, there was consistency, for him, in directing a three-minute biblical sketch and a production of *All's Well That Ends Well*, in starting the day with prayer in the rehearsal room and then spending the morning choreographing a chase scene involving a Roman soldier, a lunchbox and a camel. In Riding Lights, he built a company that remains rooted in industry, joy and community – a community that extends to embrace members of Riding Lights youth theatres, participants at the annual Summer Theatre School and the casts of local community productions in York.

... his playfulness, imagination, rigour, humour, and intelligence made him an outstanding theatre director ...

Paul was unable to settle for less than the best possible - in anything or anyone. While this could make him exacting to work with, when coupled with his kindness and his refusal to give up on anyone, it resulted in people being made to feel that they could achieve things they hadn't imagined possible - and actually achieving them. He was an encourager and an enabler, and built lasting and deeply trusting creative friendships with artistic collaborators. He aimed to push himself and his work further by surrounding himself with artists more gifted than himself, though these proved hard to come by. He loved the company of young people and was always excited by what they brought with them of the future. He had the gift of love in abundance, and innumerable people's lives have been shaped by their friendship with him, and the paths they have walked with him.

For Paul, obstacles were to be overcome with optimism, energy and fearlessness. He was physically reckless, and would plunge up mountains, surf wild waves and occasionally dismount his bicycle unexpectedly. He had a natural resistance to matters of health and safety: as he once observed, the only time he had ever been in serious trouble while pot-holing was the occasion on which he had become wedged by the first aid tin in his anorak pocket.

Paul's love for his family was a source of deep happiness and a place of absolute safety to him,

and he relished time spent with Bernadette, his children Patrick, Caitlin, Erin, and – within the last 18 months – his granddaughter Iona. He celebrated their joys and successes, cheered them on their journeys through life, and was continuously delighted by them.

Of the scores of biblical stories he explored and re-worked, the one that most compelled him was the Road to Emmaus: two disciples so buried in their grief and introspection that they fail to recognise their friend who walks alongside them, despite him hinting heavily at his identity. He loved the inherent theatricality of it: the dramatic irony by which we know that these two mourners are being led to a moment of revelation and astonishment, followed, immediately, by a magical disappearance and a race back down the road they have just trudged along. It is a perfectly-formed piece of theatre. But Paul also found it a profound, truthful and deeply comedic story: the heart of the great Divine comedy that inspired and informed his own journey.

Paul died on 19th April 2023, following a short illness. He is survived by his wife, Bernadette, and children Patrick, Caitlin and Erin.

