

# Putting the wit into Wittenberg

James Cary's family-friendly take on the Reformation is playing at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. He talked to Sarah Meyrick



A quizzical look at the Reformation? Left to right: Anna Nicholson, Cameron Potts, and Anna Newcombe in *A Monk's Tale*

OF ALL the events, lectures, and articles to mark the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation this year, perhaps the most unexpected is a 59-minute, family-friendly show made up of sketches and songs. As the pre-publicity material says, "Who knew the Reformation could be such fun?"

*A Monk's Tale* — described as *Horrible Histories* meets Monty Python — is running for three weeks at the Edinburgh Fringe, followed by a nationwide tour this autumn. It's an entertaining gallop through the events that led to one of the greatest political and social upheavals in Europe; and shows how the advent of the printing press — the social media of the day — set off a chain of events that changed the world.

THE play is the creation of the comedy writer James Cary, whose previous credits include the TV shows *Miranda*, *Bluestone 42*, and *My Family*, and radio output such as *Another Case of Milton Jones* and *Hut 33*. The last show he took to Edinburgh was *The God Particle*, in 2013.

So, who is it for? "I tried to write for those with and without any knowledge of the Reformation," he says. "But, if you already know about the Reformation, you'll get all the jokes. That's like the *Horrible Histories*. They give you the facts you need to know to get the jokes."

So far, the audience has been predominantly Christian. It was previewed at Cary's own church, St John's, Yeovil, and at Spring Harvest and Word Alive. "In Edinburgh, we expect a slightly more secular audience. But, even if you're dragged along [by a friend], you should basically get it."

He wrote it partly as a follow-on from *The God Particle*, and partly because the anniversary is such a big one. "The Reformation is one of the most significant movements in the last thousand years, but most people won't notice it," he says.

"Also, from a career point of view I would like to do more Christian stuff, taking the experience I've gained from working in the secular world. Too often the Church has to 'make do' with people at the beginning of their careers. They may be very well-meaning but not particularly professional. I think we can do better than that."

He also wanted to do the show to see what was possible. "My kids are nine and seven, and they really enjoy the *Horrible Histories*; but even they've noticed that *Horrible Histories* has absolutely no interest in religion. They can tell that, when they see church stuff represented."

WRITING it has proved very challenging. "I can honestly say it's the hardest thing I've written in the last 15 years, by a mile. Very early on, I started to regret it." It went through many iterations; the title gives a clue that an early version was inspired by the *Canterbury Tales*. "At one stage, I was using the story of St Thomas à Becket to explore the cult of the saints and the power of the Church, which can seem quite baffling today. But that just didn't work. Once I realised there were going to be songs, like *Horrible Histories*, it wrote itself [faster]."

He collaborated on the music with James Sherwood, another comedy writer whose work includes BBC Radio 4's *The Now Show* and *The News Quiz*, and who has a background in choral music.

CARY is pleased with the take-up of the show, although he regrets it won't be staged in any

cathedral. The take-up from schools has also been lower than hoped. "But we've done pretty well. I was hoping to get 30 dates booked, secretly hoping for 40. We have about 45 for the tour. That's important, because it means we'll get our money back, and that means the actors will get properly paid."

It's a three-person show: the actors Anna Newcombe, Anna Nicholson, and Cameron Potts are all 15 or so years younger than Cary, who is 41. "That's stimulating for me and useful for them," he says. "I really landed on my feet. I got lucky with these guys, and the fact that they are Christians helps. It helps that they have a similar vision for the show."

Cary is a conservative Evangelical. His parents were occasional churchgoers, but he was not brought up to read the Bible; he came to faith at school at Monkton Combe, near Bath. He is also a lay member of the General Synod. "I love the Bible and I love Jesus and it just sort of bothers me that the C of E is continually slightly moving away from the supremacy of scripture," he says.

"I felt I should be part of the solution rather than complain. I thought, if Cranmer can watch two friends being burned at the stake and then be burned at the stake himself, I'm sure I can stand for Synod. And it's really interesting. I enjoy being with other Christians who see things differently from me."

How does being a comedy writer fit in with his faith? "At one level, I go about my work like anyone else," he says. "I guess I sort of need to resolve a theology of comedy and how it works so I don't waste my time. My argument is that sitcom is profoundly Christian in format. It's incredibly moral: if you tell a lie, you get found out. If you are proud, you are humbled. It's always a morality tale."

HE HAS written about the oddity of living in two worlds — one Left-leaning, atheist, socially liberal, and pro-choice, and the other much more conservative. (Last year he was the only comedian David Sillito, Media and Arts Correspondent for the BBC, could find who would publicly admit to being pro-Brexit.)

As he says, there are not many Christians in the world of comedy writing. "[They] tend to be graduates who are secular, and generally they don't know any Christian people; so I tend not to get hostility, because they have no idea. Maybe they have a mad uncle or an aunt who's a Christian, but that's it."

It helps that writers are generally master of their own destiny. "No one can make you write something you don't want to. I sometimes do stuff that some Christians find surprising, like write a comedy about bomb disposal. They might slightly freak out about the

language I use, but that's how soldiers speak, and you have to be truthful to the world. I have to figure it out for myself."

Cary studied theology at Durham University but always wanted to write comedy. "The reason I write is because I love comedy and I

want to understand how it works, like a crossword. I've no interest in writing stuff that isn't funny."

SO INTERESTED is he in the process, that he blogs on the technicalities of sitcoms, and produces podcasts, all of which have helped him to find work over the years. "For example, that's how I found a script-editing job I'm working on for a show going out on RTE in Ireland. It's a credibility exercise. But it's also about trying to sound clever."

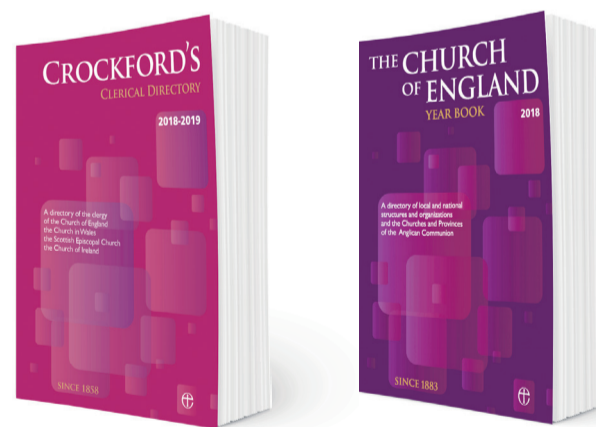
And the work keeps coming in. "It's relentless at the moment. I'm working on a new series for BBC Radio Wales called *Be Lucky*, which is recording in September, and there's a CBeebies show going out later this year, maybe early next year. I'm also doing a show for UK Gold called *The Rebel*, starring Simon Callow."

For now, though, he just hopes that people will come to *A Monk's Tale* and enjoy it. "We sold out with *The God Particle* in 2013, but that venue only held 80. This one has a capacity of 150. I'm quietly confident."

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