

WITNESS (PART ONE)

By
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Radius

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Background

Witness began as a series of five radio plays commissioned by the BBC for Radio Four. They were broadcast on successive afternoons during one week in December 2007, with, among others, Tom Goodman-Hill, Peter Firth, Paul Hilton and Penelope Wilton in the cast. The plays are now available on CD and as a download.

Of course, what works well on radio doesn't always work on stage, and vice versa, so there are considerable changes in this version. Some scenes have been lost, others introduced, and in the end the focus of this play is rather different from that of its radio cousin.

The crowd

On stage the crowd – made up of those who flocked to Jesus in Galilee, or were with him on the road to Jerusalem, or there in the city as he approached his death – begins to emerge as a character in its own right, with an important part to play, and anyone planning a production of Witness would do well to pay attention to this aspect of the script. The crowd is made up, not of vague and static background mutterers, but of individuals with particular lives and opinions. The crowd therefore forms a vital and inclusive link to those watching and listening.

The space

Bringing some characters on through the 'auditorium' is another way of helping the audience to feel part of the crowd. In fact, it's a good idea to give some thought to the space in which the play is to be performed. We presented the first half in an open café area which has a light and modern feel to it and a magnificent spiral staircase. For the second half we moved the audience to the Chancel, a darker, more appropriately intimate space. Other spaces – be they schools, theatres, churches – will offer other opportunities. Look at the architecture: can you make use of interesting backgrounds, different levels, unusual exits and entrances, and so on?

Speech

There are three aspects of speech you'll need to consider.

- Narrations. There are many narrators and they all have different points of view; they're never neutral. Sometimes their storytelling merges with the action so you should be aware of the switches, when a character turns from addressing the audience to addressing other characters, especially when it happens in the middle of a speech.
- Delivery. It's important to avoid a "reverential delivery". These are, for the most part, ordinary people and the story is being told as it happens: this is what I saw and what I thought at the time.
- Punctuation. Observe it. Make use of trailed or unfinished speeches, interruptions and overlapping.

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CAST LIST FOR PART ONE

Jesus	Magdalene
Andrew	Girl
Peter	Judas
John the Baptist	Rich Man
Woman	Caiaphas
The Tempter	Pilate
An Elder	Martha
Possessed Man	Mary, her sister
Members of Crowd	Lawyer
Simon, a Pharisee	Woman in crowd
Joanna	Susanna

CAST LIST FOR PART TWO

JESUS	WOMAN IN CROWD
PETER	CENTURION
ANDREW	MARY (MOTHER OF JESUS)
JOANNA	JOSEPH OF ARIMATHAEA
MAGDALENE	ANGEL
CAIAPHAS	CLEOPAS
WOMAN IN COURTYARD	BAKER
PILATE	A GIRL IN COURTYARD
TEMPLE GUARD	CROWDS - In Jerusalem, guards, soldiers etc.

WITNESS

LIGHTS UP ON A BARE ACTING SPACE. THE WITNESSES – MEMBERS OF THE CAST, APART FROM JESUS – APPEAR. THEY COME FROM ALL DIRECTIONS, PERHAPS THROUGH THE AUDIENCE. THEY TURN TO LOOK AT THE BUILDING AND AT EACH OTHER. TO BEGIN WITH THEY DON'T LOOK AT THE AUDIENCE. THEN, ALL TOGETHER, THEY TURN TO FACE THEM. THEY LOOK AT THEM A MOMENT, INCLUDING THEM. THEN THEY LEAVE. ANDREW AND PETER REMAIN. JESUS JOINS THEM. HE HAS FOOD WHICH HE PREPARES TO SHARE. PETER ADDRESSES US DIRECTLY. HE IS A PLAIN-SPEAKING MAN, FULL OF GUILT ABOUT HIMSELF.

PETER: *(Narrating)* It's early morning and we sit with him after a night's fishing. We sit on the shore of the Lake, and talk.

(ANDREW AND JESUS ARE SHARING THE FOOD. THIS IS AN ORDINARY CONVERSATION, MEN ON A BREAK, TALKING. ANDREW IS DOWN-TO-EARTH AND HAS A SENSE OF HUMOUR.)

ANDREW: I don't know: for us things don't change. Not really.

JESUS: Things *are* changing. Just look around.

PETER: *(Narrating)* I live on the northern shore of the Lake. He comes from further to the south: Nazareth.

(JESUS NOTICES PETER.)

JESUS: Peter? Are you with us?

(PETER'S NOT SURE WHAT HE MEANS.)

(Holding out the food) Do you want some of this?

PETER: Thanks.

(HE TAKES FOOD AND JOINS THEM.)

JESUS: And bread.

PETER: So you're saying it's now? All this time we've been waiting for change, and it's coming now?

JESUS: Now, of course. Can't you tell?

PETER: I'm a fisherman: I can't tell anything.

JESUS: You can tell the weather.

ANDREW: Well, yes ...

PETER: It won't be for us, though. Will it?

JESUS: Yes. Why not?

PETER: Because what you're talking about ...

ANDREW: (*A laugh*) Oh, you know what he's talking about, do you?

PETER: No, listen. He said 'kingdom', he's talking about a 'kingdom'.

ANDREW: We've got a kingdom.

PETER: Not ours, though.

ANDREW: No, it's the kingdom of Herod Antipas. Who's subject to Rome ...

PETER: And he wasn't talking about Herod ...

ANDREW: Which means we're all subject to Rome. In the end. So what difference does it make?

JESUS: This is God's kingdom.

ANDREW: We go out, we fish, the days go by. You'd hardly know.

JESUS: It'll be God's kingdom, Andrew. Not Herod's, not Rome's. That's the difference.

PETER: But it's still a *kingdom*. And I'm a man, not a king,

JESUS: Well?

PETER: I have a man's failings.

JESUS: Like all men.

PETER: Yes, but ordinary, with, I don't know, weaknesses. So how is this a kingdom for me?

JESUS: Because it'll be for everyone.

PETER: (*Flaring*) How? You don't know what I think, what I've done. You don't know me!

(*JESUS LOOKS AT HIM.*)

JESUS: I know you well enough, Peter. What you are. And I'm telling you: this will be God's kingdom. And it'll be for you. You can look at the Lake, can't you, and know the weather?

ANDREW: We have to, what we do.

JESUS: Or the sky. You can tell from the clouds. They roll in from the west and it means rain. Or the wind blows in from the south.

ANDREW: It'll be hot, a south wind.

JESUS: So you look at the signs and you say what'll happen. Well, look at the other signs. Signs of the times. They tell you things too – if you only had the wit to interpret them.

PETER: And the signs say a new regime is coming? Here?

JESUS: In Galilee. Now.

PETER: Small beginnings, then.

ANDREW: So what's it like, God's kingdom?

JESUS: What's it like? It's like ... I'll tell you what it's like. A man takes a mustard seed, a tiny seed, and he plants it and it grows, and it goes on growing – and in the end it's a tree.

PETER: And that's it?

JESUS: That's it. Small beginnings, Peter. But one day birds will come and find shelter in its branches.

PETER: (*Narrating*) Folk ask us: who is this man? They want to know how it all began. It began with John.

(*WE HEAR THE BAPTIST'S VOICE BEFORE WE SEE HIM.*)

BAPTIST: *(Narrating)* Once there were prophets in this land. Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel ...

(AS THE BAPTIST ENTERS JESUS AND ANDREW LEAVE. THE BAPTIST IS STRONG AND KNOWS HOW TO WORK A CROWD. HE DOES THIS NOT MERELY BY SHOUTING.)

PETER: *(Narrating)* And they lived apart. They saw how things were and they said what they saw. They spoke God's word. Without fear.

BAPTIST: *(Narrating)* And that's the path I chose.

PETER: *(Narrating)* John.

BAPTIST: *(Narrating)* I went away from towns and crowds. To think and pray. Into the wilderness where I held in my mind the world, and how it was wandering down ways that were wrong, away from God. And when the time was right ...

PETER: *(Narrating)* Now. Precisely now. Tiberius Caesar Emperor in Rome, Pontius Pilate governing Judea on his behalf, and Galilee under the rule of Herod Antipas, who also serves Rome.

BAPTIST: *(Narrating)* Now. I come back to face the people.

PETER: *(Narrating)* And once more there's a prophet in our land.

BAPTIST: *(Narrating)* To face them with wrongs that cling to them like dirt, and to see them washed clean of those wrongs.

PETER: *(Narrating)* This is what he does: wash away all that's wrong.

BAPTIST: *(Narrating)* In the waters of the River Jordan.

(A WOMAN COMES FORWARD. SHE'S CURIOUS, PROBABLY A BIT SCEPTICAL.)

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* I wasn't stirred up to go but everyone's talking about the Baptist, so I've come anyway.

(A CROWD ALSO BEGINS TO APPEAR. AS ALWAYS WHEN THE CROWD APPEARS, THEY COME FROM ALL DIRECTIONS. IT'S ALMOST AS IF THEY'RE PART OF THE AUDIENCE.)

To see.

BAPTIST: *(To the crowd)* You know what's written: "What is crooked make straight, what is rough make smooth." The crooked and the twisted. It's got hold of us and we want to be released from it! We want ... liberation!

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* He's right about this nation. There was a time when it was great and now it's broken apart and run by foreigners. He's right.

BAPTIST: You can be free!

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* He holds on to them while the waters of the Jordan wash over them.

(AS HE SPEAKS THE BAPTIST HOLDS OUT HIS HANDS AND PEOPLE APPROACH HIM FOR 'BAPTISM'.)

PETER: *(Narrating)* As if he's washing the dirt and the dust from them. And they come up streaming. Clean.

BAPTIST: Look! Look at you! What're you doing here? What do you want? Tell me!

(NO ONE ANSWERS.)

You come scuttling down to the river. Look at yourselves! What are you after?

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* I came because the others did.

BAPTIST: There has to be a reckoning!

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* In this nation, but in your own self, too.

BAPTIST: I'm talking about the wrongs inside you! And you! And you!

PETER: *(Narrating)* Wrongs inside me.

BAPTIST: That's what's brought you crawling out from under the rocks today. The need for a reckoning!

PETER: *(Narrating)* To put things right before it's too late. What will they say about you when you die?

BAPTIST: How will you be judged? What God wants is true and deep change, change that bears fruit. It's there on the tree, for all to see. I tell you, my friends, the axe is ready to strike and where there are trees that bear no fruit, the axe *will* strike. At the very roots. Those barren trees will come down. And they're bound for the fire!

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* The way he speaks – so full of passion and heart – I all but step forward myself. And I begin to wonder ...

PETER: *(Narrating)* Who is he?

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* Is he a prophet, like in the old days?

PETER: *(Narrating)* Or is he more than that?

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* Is he the one we've been waiting for? Because we've been told: someone will come. A new king in Israel.

PETER: *(Narrating)* The Christ, the Messiah ...

WOMAN: *(Narrating)* To lead us to freedom. Is this the time? And is this him?

BAPTIST: Not me, no! There's a better baptism than this. It'll be the spirit of God, more like fire than water, like a purifying flame. And whoever brings that will be greater than me, far greater. He'll know the good fruit on the tree when he sees it.

(JESUS COMES FORWARD. HE STANDS BEFORE THE BAPTIST.)

You want to be baptised?

JESUS: Yes.

BAPTIST: *(Beat)* I know you.

JESUS: Yes. Our mothers were kin.

BAPTIST: Jesus?

PETER: *(Narrating)* And John baptises him, like everyone else.

(JESUS KNEELS AND THE BAPTIST HOLDS JESUS'S HEAD.)

He prays, and the Holy Spirit comes down to him.

JESUS: Like a dove, out of the air and light above me. There's a voice. A voice speaks. "This is my son ... my own dear son ... whom I love so much."

(JESUS STANDS.)

PETER: *(Narrating)* And this is the beginning: when Jesus goes to John to be baptised, and is touched by the spirit of God.

WOMAN: *(To Peter)* But then what? Nothing. He walks away.

(THE BAPTIST AND THE WOMAN LEAVE. THE CROWD DISPERSES.)

PETER: *(Narrating)* He walks into the wilderness. To be alone.

JESUS: *(Praying)* God's son ... the Son of God ...

PETER: Alone in the wilderness.

JESUS: And hungry ...

PETER: What's in his mind?

JESUS: What the psalms say. That I need not fear the terror of darkness.

(THE TEMPTER APPEARS. HE SPEAKS QUIETLY. DURING THE FOLLOWING JESUS SOMETIMES SPEAKS THE THOUGHTS OF THE TEMPTER, AND SOMETIMES THE TEMPTER SPEAKS JESUS'S THOUGHTS. SOMETIMES THEY SPEAK TOGETHER, AS IF WITH ONE VOICE.)

TEMPTER: Why hungry? There's no need.

JESUS: That the Lord will save me, keep me safe, under the cover of his wings.

(THE TEMPTER MOVES IN TO JOIN JESUS).

TEMPTER: Even here there's food for someone like you. Stone becomes bread. You can make ...

JESUS/TEMPTER: ... bread from stones ...

JESUS: No.

TEMPTER: Why not?

JESUS: I fast! I'm fasting. There's more to man than a need for bread!

(THE TEMPTER CLOSSES ON HIM.)

TEMPTER: *(Pointing)* Look. A wilderness stretching away below you.

JESUS: A path to distant lands.

TEMPTER: Where you can rule.

JESUS/TEMPTER: All powerful.

JESUS: No.

TEMPTER: Yes. Power.

JESUS: No, there's another path.

TEMPTER: You just take one step. To achieve what you want. A leader! And the world will take notice.

JESUS: No. The ways of God, not the ways of man!

TEMPTER: The first step, one step.

JESUS: No! Serve God and worship him. The ways of God, not the ways of man!

TEMPTER: *(Making him look)* Now where? Can you see? Picture it.

JESUS: Jerusalem.

TEMPTER: The Temple. The court of women, the court of Israel. The heart of the nation. If they only had a sign.

JESUS: To show them what I am.

TEMPTER: They'd know.

JESUS: The Son of God ... My Father's house ...

TEMPTER: No harm will come. Throw yourself down. What's the word of God? His angels will take care of you.

JESUS: No harm! No harm!

(JESUS TRIES TO GET AWAY).

JESUS: Almighty Lord, my refuge and my strength ...

TEMPTER: They'll bear you up in their arms ...

JESUS: Keep me from temptation ...

TEMPTER: And all who see that ...

JESUS/TEMPTER: Will know who you really are!

JESUS: No! This is his word: you do not tempt the Lord your God. You do not test Him. *(Loud)* Leave me alone! Leave me!