

## *The Christmas Plays in South Africa*

In Cape Town the Christmas plays have been performed in the Waldorf schools since the 1960's when the first schools were founded. This has become a virtually unbroken tradition, with the Shepherds' Play emerging as the favourite to be performed by the teachers for the children.

In this play Joseph speaks of being "battered by wind and snow" which is striking, because outside in Cape Town the temperature might be in the 30's°C and the shepherds in their winter clothing quite hot under the collar!

The other unusual aspect to the performing of these 'European' plays in South Africa is the fact that these plays are performed 3 weeks before Christmas. This is because our long summer holidays fall over this time and the plays are performed before school closes at the beginning of December.

Is it possible under such conditions that these plays could still have relevance for our audiences? The true gift of these plays, and for us, specifically, the Shepherd's Play, is that they bring a Universal Truth in such a simple and direct manner. The picture and experience of the incarnation of love is fortunately not dependent on the climate or place where it is delivered!

As the shepherds kneel beside the manger, the one shepherd acknowledges that the Child "in heaven had a mansion great yet here, cold and naked is thy state". The great mystery of the incarnation of love could not be told in so simple yet so profound a way. These winter pictures highlight the harsh human condition into which the Christ incarnated.

The play has a power to draw in the imaginations of the young audience and to leave these pictures resonating deeply, not just for the 3 weeks till Christmas but hopefully for their lives.

So yes, these plays have proved utterly relevant. The Truth they bring is possibly the deepest truth and the most important lesson we teachers get to share with our children. We have, with these plays, the privilege of implanting a potent seed within our children's beings.

Some years ago a parent wrote this note to the school after a performance of the Shepherd's Play:

"A few words where there should be many hundreds - to say how completely lost I became during the semi-miracle you wrought in producing that really heavenward performance. Everything as a whole and all those performing in it were so perfectly aware of emanations from the heart.

The quietness - the dignity- costumes - and avoidance of what to others would have been obvious. How inspired it all was

For me it was, as Christmas Eve always is  
The pure moment of transition from  
The every day world to the pure glory  
Of the night sky."

*Graham Scannell, Michael Oak School, Cape Town, South Africa*