



Racing Demon

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In conflict with government, torn with internal dissension on matters of doctrine and practice, the Church of England finds itself enjoying unwelcome publicity. David Hare's play, which details the struggle of four clergymen to make sense of their mission in South London, opened to universal acclaim.

Racing Demon Details

Date : Published September 3rd 2001 by Faber Faber (first published 1990)

ISBN : 9780571161065

Author : David Hare

Format : Paperback 88 pages

Genre : Plays, Drama, Theatre, Fiction, European Literature, British Literature, Literature, 20th Century

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Nick Jones says

I thought David Hare's play about the Labour Party looked interesting but then I noticed it was the third section of a trilogy, so I began at the beginning with the first one. The three plays are not narratively linked, rather each looks at a British institution. Racing Demon does the Church of England. However, I was a bit uncertain about David Hare. I like the idea of political theatre, but the reality is often very narrow. If a writer wants to make their politics clear, there is always the danger that this becomes a straightjacket, clarity excluding uncertainty or complexity, narrowing the reader or viewers response to the work. And when I started reading Racing Demon I thought it was all a bit obvious: it set out its ideas with clarity, but I suspected its seriousness was in its presentation of Big Ideas – at first it felt a little like Bernard Shaw but without the witty one liners. But it won me around as it went along. The story centres on the Reverend Lionel Espy, a vicar in a largely poor area of south London; but his congregation also includes some important Conservative MPs who don't like his political sermons and the Bishop, the Right Reverend Charlie Allen, is trying to remove him. At the same time there is a new member in Espy's team, the Reverend Tony Ferris, who has just been overwhelmed by a sense of evangelical calling and he is horrified at Espy's lack of purpose. For me the most interesting thing about the play is its uncertainty...or its balance. From my largely liberal perspective Espy is a sympathetic character, someone who is doing his best in an impossible situation, and Ferris, in is slightly bullying certainties, is unlikeable, but Ferris's criticisms of Espy, that he is directionless, ineffectual and confused in his faith and purpose, seems valid. The Church of England seems to be an institution where the good men (and they are men in the play) are doomed to failure. If the clash between Espy and Ferris illustrates opposing views of the Church's spiritual purpose, the attempts to remove Espy remind us that it is a political institution...and one with large egos. There are a series of sub-plots, such as the one drawing the strange relationship between Espy and Stella Marr – she is Ferris's former lover (from his pre-evangelical days) and comes to warn Espy of the plotting that is going on behind his back...she is also a figure of disillusioned faith. And there is a plot about a gay vicar and a tabloid journalist trying to sniff out dirt – the journalist is probably the weakest thing in the play, too much of an easy caricature. Racing Demon is a political play because it investigates a political institution, examining power and principle – its sympathies are probably obvious, but these are not shoved down our throats. Is it all a bit too clear in its purpose? A little too obvious, lacking the contradictions and emotional uncertainties of great writing? A little middle brow? I'm not certain, but overall I thought it was a fascinating work.

Catherine says

Made me queasy as it exposed the spiritual lives of its characters. So honest and sad.

David Sheen says

Although written in 1990 Hare's play still speaks powerfully into the complexity and drama of life, faith and the Church of England.
