

As part of the 400th anniversary celebrations of the publication of the King James Bible, the Bush Theatre in London invited contemporary ‘responses’ to the sixty-six books of the Bible from playwrights, poets, songwriters and novelists from all over the world. The 66 short pieces were performed in an epic performance cycle which included two 24-hour performances at the Bush and one 12 hour performance through the night at Westminster Abbey, in October 2011.

Trevor Griffiths chose to respond to the Book of Habaccuc, the only prophet to question the wisdom of God.

Habaccuc was memorably played by Nigel Cook, and the play was directed by Richard Twyman.

66 Books is published by Oberon Press.

Habaccuc Dreams

by
Trevor Griffiths

Dark space, cave-like, echoic. Shuffling movements off; approaching, a man's voice singing, nasal, eerie.

SONG

(Ralph Stanley unaccompanied version)

O Death

O Death

Won't you spare me over til another year

Well what is this that I can't see

With ice cold hands taking hold of me

Well I am Death none can excel

I'll open the door to Heaven or Hell

Whoa Death someone would pray

Could you wait to call me another day

*The children prayed, the preacher
preached*

Time and mercy is out of your reach

I'll fix your feet till you can't walk

I'll lock your jaw till you can't talk

I'll close your eyes so you can't see

This very air come and go with me

I'm death I come to take the soul

Leave the body and leave it cold

To draw up the flesh off of the frame

Dirt and worm both have a claim ...

He's arrived, song suspended, looks around him, tall, immensely old: Donatello's Habaccuc, redressed for now in mothy joggers, long tattered greatcoat, bristled head, fingers peeping from khaki mittens, life-tools hanging from upper body, pans, tin mugs, plates, kettle, spoons, knives, flatpack boxes; a man of the highways, rags a-flutter.

HABACCUC

Is it you Lord? Yahweh? God? Baal?

El? As in Isra'el? And Ashera, El's wife,

our woman deity long erased from the record? Here and now or
dreaming from afar. One God, many names ...

(Resumes song)

O Death

O Death

Won't you spare me over til another year.

(Bleak, remote) In this one year – twentyten to twenty eleven – one hundred and four gravel-collectors, most of them women, half of them children, the children of Canaan, doing no harm and in their own land, were slain on the beaches of Gaza by Israelite snipers...Your people, lord. Our people. (Loud) Yes, it is Habaccuc!!! The unrepentant one! The one who lives the life of the people. The one who cannot take No for an answer. Ha! Two thousand years later and more, how much longer shall I cry and thou wilt not hear, how much longer shout out to thee of violence and thou wilt not save, why show us the vicious sins committed, the deadly damage done, the monstrous grievance felt, and offer no way of ridding the world of the injustice and the terror they leave behind.

The wild anger settles. A downlight grows ahead of him; rests halfway between dim and bright; he scans it, drawn, uncertain.

Is it you, god? Or is it moonlight? Which of us ever knew? Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel? Ha. Prophet as Dreamer.

He takes a medicine bottle from his greatcoat pocket, swigs from it.

Temazepam. Bliss in a bottle. Puts paid to pathological insomnia and reasserts the subject's right to dream. Taken with appropriate hallucinogens, mushroom down the ages, say, or good grass, it creates powerful transcendence modes in which dream and real can and will fuse. Mel Brooks' 2000 year old man knew all about that. (in Brooks' Old Man's muttery East Side voice) '... Certain barks made you jump in the air and sing Sweet Sue, other barks made you drowsy and you were not to get on an animal and drive.' (Takes in audience) As perhaps now. As possibly here. Habaccuc Dreams.

The light strengthens a little; unnerves him.

It **is** you, isn't it. This is what you do. Every time. Always have done, millennium after millennium. If you were appearing in Variety and your billing were written by Spike Milligan it would read **GOD: the Sadistic Tease**. Topped only by Milligan's own bill-matter for himself: **SPIKE MILLIGAN: The Performing Man**. You still terrify me. Still. Long after belief died in my heart. Long after the vision told upon tables (takes out his notebook) crumbled to dust. Plus. I spent some seasons with Icemen, learned their ways, learned the art of throat-song, found the spirit within, the very voice of God that I remember giving me answer...back in the day. **That** may surprise ye, oh yes. Ha.

He shuffles slowly forward into the cone of light. Gazes up towards the cone's apex.

But I'm back now. And ready to speak my mind. (Finds his page. Sniffs) I have been to the ends of the earth. Over twenty five centuries. Special Envoy. Bearing the solemn promise of the One True Lord that Justice in this world and Everlasting Life thereafter will be the reward of those who believe in and obey the same one true lord etc. Lord, let me state it as clearly as I can. The people ...

Met Police sirens, two blocks away; distinct for a moment; gone. He holds up a kettle, plays it with a spoon.

(Aside: another him) Kettling. They have their ways, we have ours ... (On) The people are many things but they are not stupid. For at least the twenty five hundred years you've had me tramping the world instead of going to my grave, the verdict on whether you have rewarded the faithful and punished the evildoers is already in. You did neither. You do neither. Most people born on this earth have lived, live now and will continue to live lives of rank misery and serial injustice at the hands of the rich and powerful, whatever the system of governance and moral code in place. And not only does it not get better, it gets worse. As they see it, as we see it, you get our faith, we get nothing, the rich and powerful own the world and suck on its goodness. You see it, generation after generation, century on century, light year on light year, and you do nothing. 'Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood and "stablisheth a city by iniquity"', you had me write. Ha! Woe? Don't make us laugh, Lord. The pain's too great to bear ...

Shouts, confused cries, people being chased, slap of running feet on roadway under Victorian vaulted bridge, a clue perhaps to the scene's actual location. He listens. It fades.

The years spent schlepping the world have taught me much. This is some world. These are some people. It wouldn't take a lot. It wouldn't take a lot. (He rubs a mittened hand across his bristled head, tired suddenly. Eases down to the floor.) I was going to say something else, about Babylon, culture, science, maths, well before the greeks, not a mention in the good book...And something quite trivial, about me being allegedly conveyed to Daniel's lion's den prison in Babylon to take him a lunchbox as a sign that the Lord would protect him. An angel picked me up by the hair of my head and flew me to Babylon, 600 miles away. Stood by presumably. Brought me back. Didn't happen. (Shows it) This is my hair. (Grabs it. Too short) Always. Donatello knew it. Why didn't God? (Looks around him) Because he was never there. Like now? He's not here. Maybe he never was. We just filled in the silence. But no, wait, I think, I know his voice, I know it, it is part of me. But then the seasons with the Icemen, where shamen teach the sacred art of throatsong, which Tuvans call the Voice of God.

Levers himself to his feet. Resumes his place in the cone of light. Finds his place in the notebook.

In the days before the fall of Jerusalem you spoke with me in the Cave of Eli, I had asked you to spare the lives of the children of Bet Heim from the bloody spears of Babylon. After a long silence you answered (Shows notebook) I wrote it down in my table, 'I find it in my heart to care.' I took it you meant they would be spared. They weren't. What did it mean? God Lies – Hold The Front Page!? I read the line out loud several times, trying to recall tone and rhythm, and suddenly I was in throatsong. Only I couldn't say that line, the line I'd written in my tables, the voice wouldn't say that line. The line it said, over and over, was not *I find it in my heart to care* but (He draws exaggerated breath, sucks the lungs full. Reaches chill deep within.) *I find it in me ... (Drone) hard to care.* (Sniffs)

This you'll remember in response to a plea to spare the lives of the children of Bet Heim. *I find it hard to care.* The Voice of God.

He turns, begins to move off, picks up the song. Smoke wanders through the downlight.

O Death

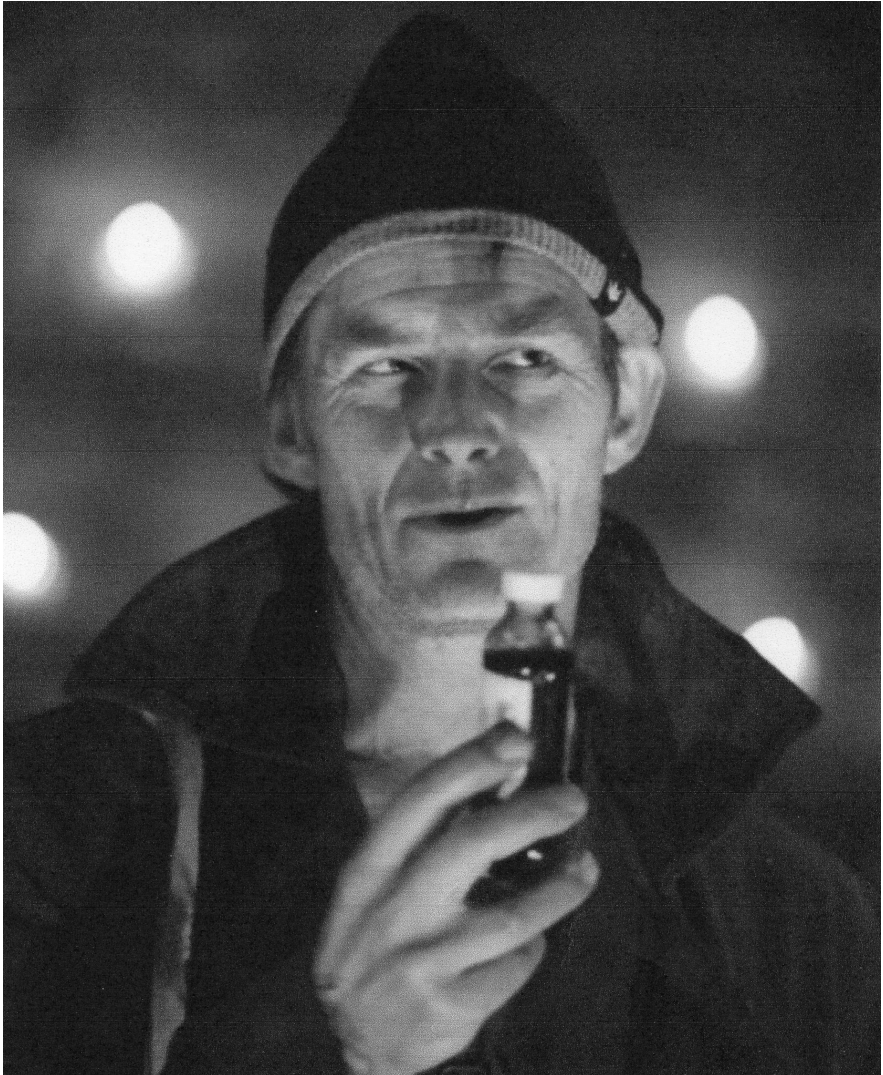
O Death

Won't you spare me over til another year

Won't you spare me over til another year

Won't you spare me over til another year

END



Nigel Cook as Habaccuc