

# Remembered horrors of a religious education

## The Christian Brothers at The Playhouse, Sydney Opera House until November 3

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Ron Blair's one-man play *The Christian Brothers* deals with a significant social issue—education in a religious school and a system of teaching that he exposes as violent and incompetent. First produced in 1975, the work has consistently resonated with audiences who recognise in it their own school experiences. While the play deals with a specific type of schooling, it also raises a number of more universal questions about education.

Ron Blair was born in 1942 and attended a Roman Catholic Christian Brothers' school in the Sydney suburb of Lewisham. He hated his education and reportedly wrote the play to get it out of his system, presenting the order's teaching methods as narrow, authoritarian and brutal.

For the current production, the Sydney Theatre Company has brought most of the play's original team together, including director John Bell, designer Larry Eastwood and actor Peter Carroll as the unnamed elderly Christian Brothers' teacher. Carroll's performance is masterful and has been deservedly acclaimed by local critics. He brings an unrelenting energy to the role—at once brittle and smug then launching into angry rages. Carroll, who was also educated by the Christian Brothers and has played the part many times, has said that he strongly identifies with the teacher and his situation.

The play is set in the 1950s. The teacher fronts his (imagined) classroom of boys, lashing out with his leather strap, verbally abusing his students and constantly warning them they risk eternal damnation—all in the course of a series of Poetry, History, French and Physics “lessons”.

A jittery character, the Brother's teaching technique consists of extracting the prescribed correct answers from his students on pain of the strap. The play culminates with the class clown, a rebellious student represented by an empty chair at the front of the stage, being beaten to a pulp.

*The Christian Brothers* not only reveals how damaging such a regime is but also delves into some of the reasons for the teacher's behavior. Blair focuses attention on the

teacher, invoking considerable sympathy for him, while moving the audience emotionally backwards and forwards from shock, to laughter, to fear.

The play's opening scene immediately highlights the Brother's central flaw. Carroll enters the classroom—the setting is deliberately sparse: a large blackboard, a crucifix, a lift-up desk and one wooden chair—dressed in the white collarless shirt, black soutane and trousers of the Christian Brothers order. He recites Keats' “Ode to a Nightingale”, which has, as its central point, the understanding that humans are not simply spiritual entities. We only live by embodying flesh. Without ears to hear, the nightingale would sing in vain.

But these conceptions are at odds with a religious worldview that divides everything into two categories: good and evil. Particularly antithetical, as far as the Brother is concerned, are the spirit and the body. This is one of the major themes of the play: the Brother's unease with his own body, his sexual anxieties and frustration. He is bound by the church's vow of celibacy and subject to all of the psychological pressures that flow from an unnatural lifestyle enforced in the name of giving glory to God.

The pledge of chastity has very material roots in the desire of the feudal Church to ensure that its wealth and property were not dissipated to the progeny of the clergy. But the God-fearing Brother, convinced that the worst punishments in hell are reserved for the fallen, considers that even thinking about sex is sinful. As for his students, it is his moral responsibility to warn them against “impure thoughts” or “touching themselves”. The tensions caused by such views initially provide some amusing moments.

Beginning a history lesson on the French Revolution, the Brother turns quickly from the subject of hunger to lust. This reminds him of a lewd picture from a tabloid magazine that he earlier confiscated from a student. He sets it alight in front of the class, timing its burning with a stopwatch and grimly reminding his charges that they face an eternity of

hell for a minute's pleasure leering at the picture.

A French language lesson follows with the Brother conjugating the reflexive verb *deshabiller*, "to undress". Becoming increasingly agitated, with pieces of breaking chalk flying across the room as he stabs at the blackboard, the Brother begins: "je me deshabilille, I undress myself, tu te deshabililles, you undress yourself..." The tension rises until a vulgar interjection from one of the students leads to four cuts from the Brother's strap and another round of prayer.

But the play reveals another side of the teacher. In the Christian Doctrine lesson he confides in the boys, telling them about his own school days and why he became a Brother. Lonely and impressionable, he was flattered by his teachers, who were also Christian Brothers. Under pressure and in a state of adolescent hysteria, he imagined a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. "The most beautiful woman I have ever seen. All around her body was this light, emanating out of her in a slow, steady stream, giving off a sort of hum, like high tension cables. She was wearing a mantle of blue light and she smiled at me and nodded." The next day he applied for entry into the Christian Brothers.

However, as the tone of the play darkens and, in a fit of rage, he beats the rebellious student, the Brother admits that his visionary experience is wearing thin and hardly sustains him now. He wonders aloud about what it might be like with a wife and a mortgage but knows there is no escape and declares that "there's nothing more comic than an old man who is both broke and looking for a wife". Yet, "...just to see her one more time... Just once. Then all his doubts and terrors would be gone and he would be young again."

A pitiable figure, he takes a tin of blue paint from his desk, turns the overturned chair upright and proceeds to paint it, while chanting a litany to the Holy Virgin. The student is either dead or comatose.

This strange behaviour points to another element in the play. It is not accidental that *The Christian Brothers* is a monologue. It is bound up with the Brother's attitude to his students. Education for him is a one-way process. The students are simply empty vessels into which he pours "knowledge". Or, as he says at the end, they are objects to which he gives "an undercoat, a primer, and then a first coat to be going on with". The students have only to memorise the facts and regurgitate them when required. Any other response is unwanted and probably sinful.

The teacher's attitude to his students is shaped by the religious belief that they are born in sin and have to be taught to be good. There is nothing of value within them. In fact, any creative spirit they possess has to be suppressed. This authoritarian outlook explains the Brother's violence towards the students; necessary, he thinks, in order to maintain control and get them working.

He regards his students as neither children nor young men. In the lesson on Keats, he reads out two lines of the poem, directing the students' attention to the particularly evocative images they contain. This sets the students thinking. But the Brother is so insensitive, so mechanical and distant even from his own lesson material, that upon catching the student in the chair "daydreaming" he gives him three lashes with his strap. He ridicules students when they give unwanted answers.

In the reviews of the play and in the Sydney Theatre Company's program notes, there is a tendency to dismiss the authoritarian school regime as a thing of the past. The program, for instance, devotes an entire page to listing the Christian Brothers "thriving new ventures". What the play reveals, however, was not exceptional and continued well beyond the period in which it was set.

Beginning in the early 1990s, a number of former students publicised documentary evidence of widespread sexual and physical mistreatment of students by the Christian Brothers over decades. A West Australian psychologist investigated the Christian Brothers and found that a staggering 52 percent of boys at their institutions had been sexually abused and 88 percent physically abused. The Christian Brothers first denied the charges, and then, after being forced to hold their own investigations, tried to minimise the extent of the practices.

These revelations, coming 20 years after *The Christian Brothers* was written, only make the play more compelling and the questions that it raises crucial.

The play also has a broader significance to the current situation. In conditions where resources for public schools are being cut back, governments are boosting "discipline" to clamp down on the social problems and tensions within classrooms. Progressive educational concepts such as child-centred learning, the development of natural talent and the encouragement of self-expression are under attack, and suspension, expulsion and corporal punishment are being brought back.

In raising issues that go to the heart of education, Ron Blair's play not only challenges the Christian Brothers' order, but is a healthy antidote to conservative views on educational practice now gaining ground in Australia and elsewhere. The Sydney Theatre Company's staging of *The Christian Brothers* is an important and welcome artistic contribution to any serious discussion on this subject.



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