

# THE PLAY

## Synopsis

An abandoned church in an unnamed nation in Southeast Europe plays host to the discovery of a long-lost and forgotten fresco. Hidden behind a propaganda mural, bricks, plaster, and whitewash, this fresco could possibly revolutionize art history.

Gabriella Pecs, from the national museum, discovers the piece in question and, in order to preserve and authenticate the discovery, brings in the British art historian Oliver Davenport. Could this painting really be what it appears to be: a painting by the famed artist Giotto. The resemblance is certainly uncanny, but some evidence suggest that the fresco was done at least a century before Giotto was even born. Quarrels about the authenticity, as well as the ownership of the church property, intensify.

This painting, and the controversy surrounding it, matters. If the painting is truly as old as it appears, the Giotto cannot lay claim to being the foundation of Renaissance painting. Instead, the foundation of Western painting would be copied from an eastern style by an unknown artist, a narrative that strongly subverts the majority of contemporary art history while potentially opening up cultural revival and economic opportunity for the host nation.

As the debate intensifies, more people enter the fray. Priests and Nationalists jockey to claim the piece as part of their tradition, while tourists stop by to look at the church and are also drawn into the fray. However, they are quickly followed by a group of refugees who have been left in poverty by the fall of the empire come to take the church by force. Though they are only seeking shelter, the hopeless refugees, upon finding a church full of people, quickly develop it into a hostage situation. The refugees are differing ethnicities, and each speaks a different language. So here the conflict and the uttering of strange tongues truly begins.

## Production History

*Pentecost* was first staged at the Other Place Theatre in Stratford on Avon in 1994. It was positively received by major British critics in the *Guardian* and *London Times*. It made its American premier one year later in 1995 at Yale Repertory Theatre, where it was similarly received. Since that time, *Pentecost* has been staged regularly by regional theatres (such as The Evidence Room in Los Angeles and Burning Coal in Raleigh) as well as college and university theatre departments.

## **YUGOSLAVIA & THE BALKANS**

The Communist bloc in Southeastern Europe primarily consisted of four nations: Albania, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria. These nations each exercised varying levels of independence from the center of Communist power in Moscow. Bulgarian leadership was closely aligned with the USSR while Romania and Albania sought to steer more independent courses. Romania refused to participate in the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and Albania sought to restructure itself along Maoist lines in order to draw closer to China. Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito never joined the Warsaw Pact and operated as a highly independent player separate from the USSR.

Yugoslavia, much like Czechoslovakia and the USSR itself, was a multiethnic federation of Republics that were tied loosely together by a central government. With the fall of Communism, Yugoslavia would shatter into the following contemporary nations: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Hercegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia.



*Pentecost* takes place in an unidentified nation somewhere in this region. Though Edgar makes use of Bulgarian as the language of the natives, many of the historical experiences and references could fit any of these contemporary nations.

## CAR RADIOS

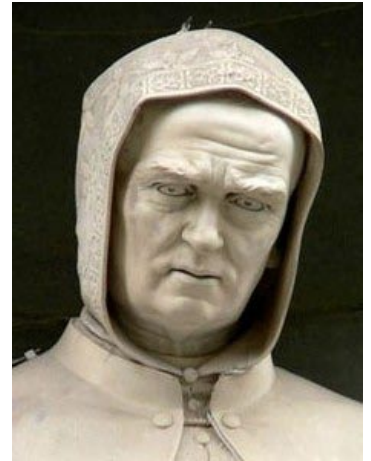
One noticeable element in the play is that many of the characters from this country tend to carry their car radios with them when they enter the church as opposed to simply leaving them in their cars. Indeed, easily removable car radios were common features of many automobile companies in communist nations (Dacia, Skoda, & Trabant, for example) as the radio could be the single most valuable item in the car itself, and also the easiest for a thief to make away with it.

As each nation emerged from Communism and instituted market reforms, many who were formerly supported by society then found themselves out in the cold. Car stereo theft was particularly common in the 1990's worldwide as well as in the former Eastern bloc.

## GIOTTO

Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337) is most commonly known simply by his first name. He was an Italian painter and architect from Florence during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. He is generally considered to be the first painter to contribute to a uniquely Renaissance style and break completely with earlier Byzantine/Medieval models of painting. Giotto was so respected for his accomplishments in painting that he was given a salary by the city of Florence in order to pursue his art by virtue of his talent and excellence.

Tradition states that he was born in a farmhouse atop a large hill, and numerous locations vie for the honor of being considered the house of his birth. However, recent research suggest that he was born in Florence proper, as the son of a Blacksmith. Little is known for certain about his father aside from his status as a "person of good standing" but it is generally accepted that Giotto is his real name, though possibly a shortening of Ambrogiotto or Angelotto.



He is known best for his decisive break with earlier painting styles, going further than his master and teacher Cimabue in his quest for a naturalism of expression in his paintings. Though many works are attributed to him, he is best known for his decoration of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padue (which is also known as the Arena Chapel) in and around 1305. This cycle of frescoes depicts the life of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. The painting at issue in *Pentecost* is noted for similarities to the Lamentation (or Mourning) of Christ from this cycle.

## SCROVGENI LAMENTATION OF CHRIST

Perhaps the most unique element of the Scrovegni cycle is that it is one of the few pieces that art historians can absolutely attribute to Giotto, about whom little is really known.

Where Medieval figures were flattened and depicted in largely two dimensions, the figures of the Lamentation occupy a compressed space with some natural elements and the use of forced perspective in a manner that makes the painting resemble stage sets. Of particular note in the Lamentation is the way that the viewer almost seems to have a role in the piece itself.

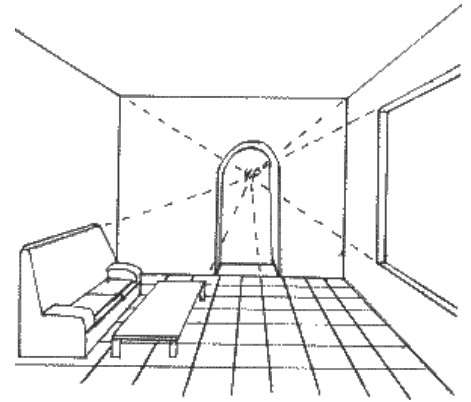
Giotto's depiction of the human face also set him apart from his contemporaries. The realism of his figures was noted by 19<sup>th</sup> Century critic John Ruskin who wrote "He painted the Madonna and St. Joseph and the Christ, yes, by all means... but essentially Mama and Papa and Baby."



## VANISHING-POINT PERSPECTIVE

Burning Coal Theatre- The Iron Curtain Trilogy: Pentecost

The idea of the Vanishing Point is the cornerstone of perspective in the visual arts. The idea is, essentially, that there is a point on the horizon where two parallel lines will intersect in the viewer's vision. Single-point perspective or "forced perspective" has the receding parallels moving perpendicular to the plane of the eye. This, therefore, posits a specific point for the eyes (such as is used in Giotto's Lamentation) that places the viewer in a specific point in space and can also be used to heighten the feeling of being a spectator to events as opposed to simply a viewer of a painting.



The use of perspective is one of the characteristics that defined Renaissance art and helped to separate it from Medieval and Byzantine art styles before it.

## THE TOWER OF BABEL

*Now the whole world had one language and a common speech ... They said to each other... "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them... So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. --Genesis 11:1-9*



The linguistic diversity of Southeastern Europe is substantial, with large variations in language and dialect in a relatively small space (roughly the size of the American Plains States). And at one point in the play, a character compares the situation in the church with that at the tower of Babel. Though all people shared a common language in the beginning, the confusion of the tongues at Babel explains the origin of linguistic variety. We should also pay attention to the purpose behind the confusion of tongues. The Lord scattered them because "...then nothing they plan will be impossible for them..." Thus confusion of language makes things more difficult for man, keeping him from acting with one accord with all of mankind.

**Activity:** Review the play for instances of mixed signals, missed communication, or people working at cross purposes. Do you find this similar to the story of Babel? How much more could be accomplished if the characters understood one another better?

## PENTECOST

*And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. --Acts 2:1-6*

The miracle of the Pentecost, from which the play takes its title, is the reversal of the Babel miracle. When the Apostles were gathered after the death of the Christ, the holy spirit descended upon them and when they spoke, each person heard their speech in his own language, effectively transcending the miracle at Babel.

**Activity:** Why do you think that Edgar entitled his play "Pentecost" as opposed to something else? Is there a moment in the play that could be seen as a Pentecost miracle? What is it?

## FRESCOS



One of the major methods of generating a durable painting is that of Fresco painting. In it, the pigments are dissolved in water and painted onto a layer of wet lime plaster. The pigments are then absorbed and crystalized by the bicarbonate in the plaster, which then dries and creates a very strong bond and the painting becomes, in essence, part of the wall. This is a process known as buon fresco.



Another technique, known as fresco secco, is painted on a layer of plaster that has already dried. Although it is less durable than true fresco technique, it does allow for a greater variety of pigment materials to be used, as in buon fresco only certain pigments will react properly with the plaster. Secco is often used to correct mistakes made in the painting of the original work, as any changing of a buon fresco would require that the entire section of plaster be scraped off.

Moving and conserving frescoes is a difficult and meticulous process which generally necessitates removing the fresco from the wall by soaking it into a support bandage of cotton soaked with polyvinyl alcohol. The wall can then be treated and a new base layer of base exchange resin and the fresco reattached. As is noted in the play, frescoes can also be mounted in such bandages and transported.

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Using a piece of Silly Putty™ and a newspaper, find a picture or article that you want to preserve. After transferring, try to transport the picture to another piece? What difficulties did you face? How much more difficult would it be if the piece was larger? What if you spread the putty thinner?
- Try to explain an event to your classmates without using words. Since you all speak the same language, do not speak, but instead try to make yourself understood as if you did not speak the same language. What frustrations do you experience? Start with simple concepts, like eating. Try more abstract concepts.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Preshow

- 1.) When approaching a show called *Pentecost*, what is your reaction? What expectations does it create in your mind??
- 2.) Examine the promotional material for *Pentecost*, what do you think it is about?
- 3.) When you enter the space, take a close look at the set and design before the play begins. How has your perception been changing as the show approaches?
- 4.) Why do you think Burning Coal may have chosen to perform this play?

### Post-show

- 1.) How did the show meet your expectations? Were you pleasantly surprised? Have you ever been to a play before? Have you ever been to Burning Coal before?
- 2.) If you had to sum up the story of the play in one sentence, to tell a friend what the play was “about,” what would you tell them?
- 3.) What do you think the fate of the painting is going to be?
- 4.) Compare the painting on the stage with that of the Scrovegni chapel in Padua. What differences do you find? What are the similarities in style?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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