

## Silent Night

by Jonathan Lee

That night Mum and I went to see Miss Reiner's production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which I was too young to be in, but was advertised through posters in our school dining room as a year-end extravaganza – for all ages.

According to a cutting I have kept from the time, the *Dumfries Chronicle* dubbed it "the High School's most ambitious show to date" and for many it was also the most controversial. Graeme Henderson, who played Judas Iscariot, told me that Miss Reiner, our new Head of Music and Drama, had already received seven complaints before rehearsals had even started. Surely it was inappropriate to perform a show about Jesus's death but had nothing about his birth, especially at this time of the year for God's sake? Wasn't it true that a famous bishop had once called a Hollywood movie by the same name blasphemous? Wasn't this the very opposite of suitable for all ages?

It was well known that several complaints had come from parents unhappy about the influence our new music teacher was having on their children. According to Peter Lipsel, who played the Apostle Peter, this was because Miss Reiner had once been an actress in a morally dubious film in the early seventies, though no one in school was ever able to verify this. For her part, Miss Reiner - who was a good friend of my mother's through the Amateur Dramatic Society and often came to our home - said she never understood any of it. She had no qualms about her past and she only wanted her pupils to enjoy music and question things. She certainly had nothing against God. "I believe in him too," she told us.

Although Miss Reiner's defence was vigorous, her most ferocious critic continued to be Mr Baxter our Maths teacher. He was an Elder at St Leonard's and from what I could gather from snippets of my parents' conversations, the vociferous ringleader of the detractors. He ran a Bible club after school. I went to it once with Brian Hardy, who told me his mother forced him to go every week. The week I attended Mr Baxter recounted the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the book of Genesis. He told us that the people's sin was so abominable that God rained burning sulphur on them engulfing whole communities in a baptism of flames. Almost everyone was destroyed. "Almost" he repeated, raising a solitary finger towards heaven for emphasis. I found the story impossible to believe and never went back to Mr Baxter's club, much to his apparent dismay.

Despite the complaints and furious letters to the headmaster, *Superstar* proceeded as planned on the last day of term and Mum declared that she would show her support by buying Miss Reiner some flowers. That afternoon the assembly hall was so packed our janitor Mr Moffat ran out of chairs and late-coming parents were forced to sit squinting on window ledges from the far end. Emma Johnston, who played Mary Magdalene, unquestionably the most beautiful girl in our school, stood on a box under a pale spotlight and sang a solo about not knowing how to love a man. I turned to my mother mid-song and saw her dabbing her right cheek with a tissue.

The show, as the *Dumfries Chronicle* states, was “a triumphant vindication of Miss Reiner’s convictions”. At the finale, the whole assembly hall stood and applauded as fake military men with plastic machine guns walked off stage and Brian Humphries, who played Jesus, ascended into heaven in a pyrotechnic puff. Miss Reiner appeared on stage at the end, cried a little and kissed me on the cheek when I handed her the flowers.

Mum and I walked the long route home that night under an icy sky, our breaths appearing like cartoon balloons. It was only four days till the Big Day and I began thinking about relatives from far away places descending on our home for turkey and paper hats and the Queen’s Speech. I thought of Miss Reiner too, winding her way along the A709 to the village she lived in twelve miles away. I imagined her playing the *Superstar* soundtrack full blast as she drove, singing every lyric in triumph.

At last Mum and I turned into our road, walking past familiar windows illuminated with fairy lights and plastic Santas on front doors. At the end of our street lived the Hobarts, who had constructed, as they did every year, a life-size nativity scene in their front garden complete with lowing oxen. Two silver angels guarded their front gate, trumpets pointing upwards, anticipating the moment when something unexpected might once again appear from the clouds. For a few seconds I thought I heard the sound of thunder and then a distant flash - a momentary flare illuminating the night sky. It made me think of Mr Baxter at Bible Club. “One day Jesus will return you know, but it will be different next time. He won’t come back as a baby in a manger. No - this time it will be in righteous holy anger and believe me, it will be ten times worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. You’d better be right with God, for that day will be truly terrible.”

When we returned to the house I noticed the television was on in the living room. I pushed the door open and saw Dad standing frozen on the sheepskin rug, staring at the TV. On the screen was a passport-sized photo of a man who worked in a garage. His accent was local. He said, “aye, like a fireball fallin frae the sky.” A rolling ticker tape appeared with an emergency number to call.

Mum walked in behind me and said, "What is it?"

Dad shook his head. It was strange to see him like this, a tall brave man, stupefied against a backdrop of twinkling lights and angelic cards floating on the mantelpiece. He pointed to the screen. As the local man continued to talk a photo appeared of a village high street on a sunny day. I instantly recognised it. At the far end of the high street was a war memorial with a statue of an angel on top. Beneath it two young women with ponytails and crop-tops pushed prams along the pavement.

"What's happened?" Mum said her voice now agitated.

Dad didn't answer. A man appeared from a TV studio in Newcastle. He was bald and wore a blue blazer with gold buttons. The presenter called him an Aviation Expert.

The presenter said, "Is it possible that this could be what some are saying it is?"

The Aviation Expert had a face like slate. "Yes," he said, "in my opinion, it is. Planes don't just fall out of the sky."

A photo of a Boeing 747 was shown and a map of Europe. A yellow arrow hopped from Frankfurt to London. Then it moved straight up to Scotland before coming to rest like a Christmas star above a village twelve miles from our home.

Mum started saying, "Oh my God" over and over.

Dad said, "you'd better call her," and Mum rushed into the hallway and started spinning numbers into the plastic dial on the phone. She dialled and re-dialled, and re-dialled again, then stopped abruptly, her face pale. "I can't get through," she said. "The line's dead."

The news presenter appeared once more. "We have been receiving reports tonight that at five minutes past seven, air traffic control lost all contact with Pan Am Flight 103 travelling from Frankfurt to Detroit. We have also heard multiple eyewitness accounts of a huge explosion over the town of Lockerbie. Emergency Services are at the scene and have appealed for the public to stay away from the area. I stood by the fireplace unable to move, thinking this was impossible to believe. For the second time that night my Mum started to cry.

Twenty years later I am still haunted by the inverted series of events that night. My obsession has led me to keep hundreds of magazine articles and newspaper cuttings from the time that I still keep in a box at home. Most of them cover well-worn topics on Libyan politics, airport security and Scottish legal matters. But the piece that means most to me, the one I still read religiously every year, is page fifteen of the *Dumfries Chronicle* from 28 December 1988. Though a little frayed now

and yellow with age, it contains a short but fitting tribute to Miss Cassandra Reiner, including a photo taken backstage of her receiving one final ovation from a rapturous assembly hall forty-seven minutes before she was gone. And if I take a magnifying glass and look very closely I can just about make out the blurred faces of my mother and me standing four rows from the front of the stage, clapping and cheering like fanatics, as if Miss Reiner's life depended on it.

*1,498 words*