

James Roose-Evans

Theatre director, Anglican priest, spiritual guide, prolific writer and founder of the Hampstead Theatre Club

LUCY LETHBRIDGE

IN HIS TRIBUTE to James Roose-Evans, whose funeral took place on what would have been his ninety-fifth birthday, Rowan Williams remembered that two weeks earlier James had sent him a Christmas letter. He had included with it a photograph of the Franciscan friary in Glasshampton where he had spent many hours, and in his accompanying letter he wrote the "words that once came to me in meditation: God is an endless journey". It was characteristic of James that he should have brought together so many of the strands which bound his long and eventful life: friendship, fellowship, the spirit of an ancient place, of the interiority of meditation and of a Christian feast rich with all the meaning and ritual which were the centre of his life as a theatre director, Anglican priest and spiritual guide. Above all it was about the journey of life. That he should have been thinking of Christmas had, as Rowan Williams put it, particular resonance because Christmas "is something to do with the unceasing journey of God into the centre of the world, including the centre of the human heart".

It was typical of James that he should have sent the letter early, worried that the Christmas post might be delayed. He took care to keep his friendships in repair. And he never stopped writing: letters, diaries, latterly emails and, of course, books, which he produced at a prodigious rate. In 2018, aged 90, he published *A Life Shared*, about his 54-year relationship

with Hywel Jones, who had died five years before. Welsh-speaking Hywel, puckish and witty to James' more theatrically flamboyant, had been at his side when he founded the Hampstead Theatre Club, the Bleddfa Centre for the Creative Spirit in Wales and when he entered the priesthood in 1981. (James had converted to Catholicism but later reverted to Anglicanism.)

Born in 1927, he was the child of an unhappy marriage but it was a gift for friendship that helped him escape into his own life. His memoirs are bursting with friendships made, cultivated, remembered and enjoyed. He took these relationships deeply seriously. Among his best-known theatrical productions were two plays about friendship in letters: *84 Charing Cross Road*, about American writer Helene Hanff and an antiquarian book-seller in London; and *The Best of Friends*, based on the correspondence of Dame Laurentia McLachlan OSB of Stanbrook Abbey and George Bernard Shaw.

I first met James when I interviewed him for the *Catholic Herald* in the early 1990s. He had just published his book on ritual, *Passages of the Soul*, and had just founded something called Newspaper Workshop, in which participants created costumes out of old newspaper for role-play and rituals. At the time I thought this entertainingly eccentric but over the years it was his unfailing and energetic commitment to finding meaning in fellowship that made him such a staunch

and persevering friend. And he remained to the end so alive to new ideas, or rather perhaps new ways of exploring ancient wisdom.

On the first Sunday of every month, he gathered about him a group of friends who would sit together in silent meditation for half an hour. He called it The Silence and it was summoned (typical James) by the low boom of a Tibetan sound bowl. In its combination of sharing and conviviality (wine and cheese straws), it somehow seemed in its simple way a summation of a life's work. About three years ago, I was honoured to be invited to be part of the group, and they have shared their memories. In these fragments from a few of the many who loved him, I think he can be found: "I owe my life to him ... A man of incredible goodness, enlightenment, humility and compassion"; "His mantra, God is Present, God is here, God is Now, has been invaluable"; "Half a dozen or so years into my long friendship with James I had a dream about him, and waking thought: 'I must ask him to be my spiritual guide', but even as the words formulated in my mind they were replaced by the deep recognition that he already was."

Actor Kevin Trainor shared James' home for the last seven years and looked after him to the end. From him, this memory: "Old men ought to be explorers," he often said, quoting T.S. Eliot. So I say: "Not fare well but fare forward, voyager." And from all James' friends, a ringing Amen for the final journey.

James Roose-Evans, theatre director, writer, Anglican priest, born London, 11 November 1927; died London, 26 October 2022.



He took care to keep friendships in repair. And he never stopped writing

PHOTO: ALAMY, DONALD GOOPER

EDITORIAL

Editor: Brendan Walsh
Chief Leader Writer: Clifford Longley
Assistant Editor, Home and Digital: Ruth Gedhill
Assistant Editor, Foreign News: James Roberts
Production Editor: Iain Millar
Chief Subeditor: Charles Hebbert
Rome Correspondent: Christopher Lamb
Staff Writer: Madoc Cairns
Arts Editor: Joanna Moorhead
Literary Editor: Maggie Fergusson
Editorial Consultant: Alban McCoy
Newman Intern: Patrick Hudson
Letters Editor: Guy Keleny

THE TABLET

www.thetablet.co.uk

1 King Street Cloisters,
 Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY
 Tel: +44 (0)20 8748 8484
 Email: thetablet@thetablet.co.uk

THE TABLET TRUST: CHARITY NO. 1075324

**DISPLAY, RECRUITMENT
 CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING & INSERTS**

Lisa Smith
 Email: lisa@ottwaymediasolutions.com
 Tel: +44 (0)1903 534041
 Mob: +44 (0)7958 046147

**COMMERCIAL, MARKETING
 & ADVERTISING**

Chief Executive Officer:
 Amanda Davison-Young
 Email: enquiries@thetablet.co.uk
Fundraising and Events
 Email: adyoung@thetablet.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTIONS
www.thetablet.co.uk/subscribe
 Tel: +44 (0)2058 438736;
 Email: thetablet@subscription.co.uk

DIRECTORS

Mike Craven, Chair; Ben Andradóttir KSG, Catherine Baril, Jimmy Burns OBE, Amanda Davison-Young, Cathy Galvin, Katherine Jeffrey, Carmel McConnell MBE, Paul Wallely CMS, Brendan Walsh, Sarah Walsh.