

TWENTY YEARS OF THE GLASGOW GOSPEL

Thomas Baldwin celebrates the 20th anniversary of a landmark publication.

IT is 30 years ago that a 61-year-old Church of Scotland Elder walked into the Netherbow Theatre in Edinburgh with an idea.

If anyone had told Jamie Stuart that this idea would change his life, that he would evangelise to millions all over the world – through live performance and TV, books and newspapers, tape and CD, VHS and DVD – that aged over 90 he would travel to America to perform to a TV audience of 50 million, he would have said they were joking or mad.

Jamie was working on a one-man performance, telling the Gospel story in Scots, and wanted to discuss it with the Netherbow's director, James Day. James

wasn't in that day, theatre manager Donald Smith apologised. Could he help?

Back at the Netherbow, now part of the Scottish Storytelling Centre of which Donald is the director, the two men (separated by about eight inches and more than 30 years) recall the birth of a collaboration and friendship lasting to this day. Typically for Jamie, it began with a performance.

Donald says: "We went up to the gallery, he got on a plinth and off he went. The first thing I thought was the language was fantastic, it was accessible, telling the Gospel story straight. The second thing was that I knew it was quality. It had class, it had

skill, it was top-notch.

"I knew it was a fresh development of a great tradition – the spiritual witness, the Protestant tradition of telling the Gospel story, taking it out to the world. He was also tapping into the whole extraordinary tradition of the church's involvement with the theatre."

Jamie had been an actor in the immediate post-war period, most notably in Tyrone Guthrie's famous production of *A Satire of the Three Estates* at the Festival Hall in 1948 (of which he is the only surviving cast member). However, after he got married he settled down to a profession of more reliable income: he became a

vacuum cleaner salesman.

He never lost his interest in theatre, though, and a particular admiration for one-man shows. "It's always a tremendous achievement for one person to do two hours by memory," he says. "So when in 1981) I saw an advertisement for Alec McCowen performing St Mark's Gospel had to go.

"It was in a school hall somewhere, sold out every night for a week, and I thought it was just so impressive. Then I thought – there was an English actor coming up and performing the Gospel in English. It could be done in Scots.

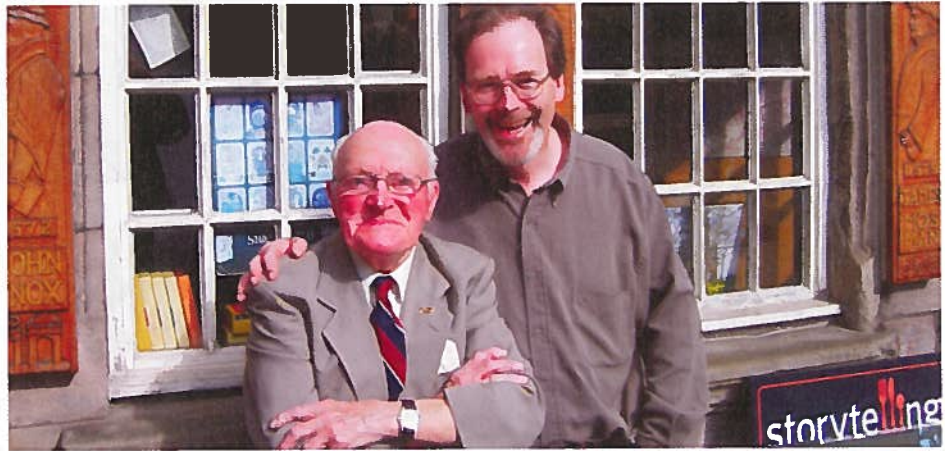
"There was a lot of prayer, a lot of help, a lot of study. I wasn't too sure about it but that's when I took it to Donald."

Meeting up once a month at the Netherbow, Jamie and Donald prepared a script that drew on all four of the Gospels. "There was a bit of art and craft went into it," says Donald. "It was Jamie's sense of which stories were needed to form the whole. It's a very successful piece of storytelling."

This isn't an entirely happy story. Jamie had been married to May for 30 years. He recounts in his autobiography that she had given up smoking following her first heart attack in 1981, but that didn't prevent a second in January 1983. She died peacefully in Glasgow Royal Infirmary on February 9. He writes: "Writing was going to be my salvation."

He says now: "I see so many people, when they suffer bereavement, they crumble altogether. I honestly feel I asked the Lord to give me strength through bereavement, and he did. I am never lonely because I have got God on my side."

At the time, the script for *A Scots Gospel* was finished and preparations for the first tour were beginning. Donald says: "I remember very vividly saying 'Jamie, we'll have to leave this, we can postpone, we can rearrange', but Jamie felt the right thing, and what she would have wanted, was to go



Jamie Stuart (left) with Dr Donald Smith

on with it. The first tour was imbued with that, on the back of bereavement. It's very sad that she didn't live to see it."

The tour began and never really finished. Starting in churches, theatres, schools and prisons around Scotland, it took Jamie to Canada twice and to New York. "It was a great joy to me to witness in that way," he says.

Then Donald called and told him that Saint Andrew Press were interested in publishing the Gospel.

Jamie still seems incredulous now. "I said 'Donald, you must be joking. Will it be a book?' He said 'Of course it'll be a book'. I said 'Donald, will I be called an author?'" (This last phrase was later appropriated for the title of his autobiography).

The first book, which appeared in 1985, was well-received critically and a reasonable commercial success. But that was nothing to the reception of its follow-up, *A Glasgow Gospel*, seven years later. Jamie says the Glasgow version is 'the language of the people', while emphasising that it is not Glaswegian slang, which he dislikes. Donald describes it as a 'more relaxed version', although he considers the first book to be 'probably a greater long-term contribution to the language'.

Be that as it may, something about the Glasgow version struck a chord. The first 3000 copies sold out in hours and the book topped the Scottish bestsellers' list. Jamie

fielded media enquiries from all over the world, and on Easter Sunday 1992 he was mentioned on ITN's lunchtime report, alongside the Easter messages from the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Glasgow's Evening Times serialised chapters from the book over the course of a week.

Since then, Jamie has published *Auld Testament Tales* - later amalgamated with the Gospel into *A Glasgow Bible* - and *Proverbs in the Patter*. There have also been the various audio and video versions, the most recent being *The Glasgow Gospel DVD*, released in 2009, in which the tales are told by various Scottish TV personalities as well as both Jamie and Donald.

Interest in Jamie's work persists: he is still travelling, still performing, all over the world. His version of Psalm 1 was Poem of the Day in The Herald on January 30.

Jamie says: "As a Christian, what pleases my heart is it is used in churches and Sunday Schools. They use it regularly and I hear about it."

Donald adds: "Also community centres, lunch clubs, fundraising dinners... It goes everywhere. It doesn't belong to the church, it belongs to the world.

"The heart of it is the story, and storytelling as drama performance. But it's also true evangelism - getting out there and sharing the Gospel with the people in front of you." ■