

# Pentecost

by David Edgar



## A Playgoer's Guide

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 Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (*Acts 2:1*)

### The author:

David Edgar was born in Birmingham in 1948. A prolific playwright for over thirty years, Edgar has written for many companies in Britain, including the Royal Shakespeare Company. Edgar wrote *Destiny* (Other Place, Stratford, 1976; Aldwych, London, 1977), *Nicholas Nickleby* (Aldwych, 1980; Plymouth Theatre, New York, 1981); *Maydays* (Barbican Theatre, London, 1983); a version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Barbican, 1991); and *Pentecost* (Other Place, 1994, Young Vic 1995). He is the only living playwright to have had original plays directed by the incumbent Artistic Directors of both the major British companies (Trevor Nunn, co-director of *Nicholas Nickleby* for the RSC, and Sir Peter Hall, who directed Edgar's reworking of *Entertaining Strangers* for the National Theatre in 1987).

Edgar's work has been performed and/or published in Ireland, Sweden, France, Holland, Germany, Poland, Australia, Canada, Argentina, Romania, Bulgaria, Finland, Japan, Norway and Spain. American productions include *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (Manhattan Theatre Club, New York; San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle), *Maydays* (ACT, Seattle); *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Cornell University and the Actors Theatre, Louisville); and *Pentecost* (Yale Repertory Theatre, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Berkeley Rep).

Edgar has extensive film, television and radio writing credits. In addition, his stage plays *Baby Love*, *Destiny*, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* and *Nicholas Nickleby* have been televised, and *Saigon Rose*, *Destiny*, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*, *The Shape of the Table*, *That Summer*, *Entertaining Strangers*, *Mary Barnes* and *Pentecost* broadcast on radio.

There have been three volumes of his collected plays (1987, 1990, 1991), and an anthology of his shorter works (1989). He regularly writes for *The Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New Statesman* and the *London Review of Books*. He won the Tony Award and the Society of West End Theatres for *Nicholas Nickleby*, both Central Television's Eileen Anderson Award and the Evening Standard Play of the Year Award for *Pentecost*, Arts Council's John Whiting Award for *Destiny*, and the Plays and Players Best Play Award for *Maydays*.

## The story:

*Pentecost* is set in an abandoned church on the eastern part of Europe in an unnamed nation. The play begins with the discovery of a long lost fresco that possibly could hold a secret that could revolutionize the history and perception of western art as it is known.

Mostly, *Pentecost* is a clash between politics and art. The nation in this play and the church which the play is contained in, have both seen various conquerors and religions impact their culture. The most recent was a just-toppled Soviet Communist style government.

When the fresco is discovered, Gabriella Pecs of the National Museum brings in renowned British art historian Oliver Davenport to inspect the painting to see if it could possibly be what it is thought to be: a painting by the famous artist Giotto. Quarrels about its authenticity intensify. It is true that the painting has an uncanny resemblance to the style of Giotto, but there is much evidence which suggests it was painted a century before Giotto was even born. The controversy matters, because if the painting is as old as it appears to be then Giotto did not have as original a style as everyone has always credited him with. Also the emergence of modern western art would have happened a hundred years after the painting was created, which simply makes no sense at all, unless all western art was copied from an eastern painting style, from an unknown painting, by an unknown artist.

The debate heats up, and more characters enter, all trying to give their opinion on the painting. A priest comes, some tourists stop by to look at the church and get involved, but real conflict begins when a group of refugees who were left in poverty after the collapse of the empire come to take the church and all who are in it by force. The refugees are only looking for shelter because they have nothing else to hope, and nothing to lose, so when they find the church full of people, it quickly becomes a hostage situation. All of the refugees and the other characters are of different ethnicities, and speak different languages, so this is where the political conflict – and the utterance in tongues – really begins.

In the end no asylum for either side is achieved and the truth about the painting remains a mystery.

## Reviews:

"This is the meatiest new drama I have seen since Stoppard's *Arcadia*, which is, come to think of it, the only new play I have seen in the past decade whose rigor and historical depth meaningfully compare with *Pentecost's*."

– Jonathan Kalb, *The Village Voice*

"On the page at least, *Pentecost* marks a development, for this playwright, in theatrical form. It is more subtly comic and ironic than anything to date."

-- Andy Lavender, *New Statesman*

"David Edgar's undoubtedly clever but over-long, over-elaborate and over-praised *Pentecost* . . . is a play about something too -- nationalism - - but a strange breed of humanoid word-generators occupies the space Shakespeare would have left for human beings."

-- Andrew Billen, *The Spectator*

### What is Fresco?

A Painting done on freshly laid wet plaster with pigments dissolved in lime water. As both dry they become completely integrated.

Known as “true” fresco, this technique was most popular from the late thirteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries.

This guide was produced by the  
***Pentecost* Task Force**

<http://people.stu.ca/~pente/mainpage/htm>

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