

Why are theology students drawn to the stage?

By Francesca Simon

I've been excitedly rushing around to rehearsals of the stage show of my Horrid Henry books, which opens today, and it's very strange to see all these characters I've created come to life. Fifteen years ago, for instance, I arbitrarily decided that Henry had red hair - now these poor actors, living people, are having to deal with the consequences. Out with the hair dye...

- Horrid Henry hasn't been the only theatre in my life this week. Josh, my son, is appearing in his first play at Cambridge - Ayckbourn's Bedroom Farce - and he asked us to come and see him. We seem to have got past the "oh my parents are so embarrassing" stage and he's discovered we're rather fun. Or maybe my high spirited side is coming out after dealing with the youthful Horrid Henry actors all the time. During the play he has to get out some real 1970s clothes. And my husband, Martin - for reasons best known to himself - had kept choice items of his wardrobe from back then.

Martin has a curious fondness for his hippy days. He actually ran off to India and lived in an ashram, so I think his wardrobe is the least of his sins. One can laugh, but now those clothes are in high demand for parties. Original purple high-waisted flared velvet trousers and purple satin shirt? Sartorial gold.

The other revelation of Bedroom Farce is that half of the actors in it - including Josh - are studying theology. Trevor Nunn did Cymbeline for the Marlowe Society at Cambridge last year and he said that half of his cast were theologians, too. Who knows why? There must be something about the philosophical spirit and the interest in ritual that draws them to the stage.

- On Wednesday, I went to prison. It was my fourth visit, for PEN, an organisation that tries to get inmates interested in books and writing. I went to HMP Wellingborough in Bedford for a programme called Storybook Dads, to assist prisoners who are fathers make books for their own children. It helps them to stay in contact with their children and to improve their literacy. For so many of these men, prison is what their families do. And if anything can help their children to break that habit, it's fantastic. The prisoners are always very interested and always ask very detailed questions. I took them 25 copies of Horrid Henry Robs the Bank. I told them it wasn't a training manual.

- Much occupying my mind has been the cast party that I'm hosting at my house on Sunday. I'm 53; the Horrid Henry cast are mostly in their early twenties. What do they dance to? Can I introduce them to the Monkees? I don't think so. Meatloaf - Bat out of Hell? Maybe. So I've been on a crash course in modern pop music, and now I understand what Girls Aloud are all about. I don't think my neighbours are quite so sure: I've just had the windows cleaned and they have been able to see in and watch this mad woman dancing around her kitchen.

- For a little calm, or so I thought, I went to see the giant Richard Serra sculptures at the Gagosian gallery. But I'm not very spatial. In fact, I have no sense of direction. Getting lost is nightmarish for me and you have to walk through the sculptures. Thankfully I went with a dancer

from the cast, who was, of course, very spatially aware. Without him, I think I'd still be there now.

Horrid Henry - Live and Horrid! is at the Trafalgar Studios, London, until January 11