

*Reckless Abandonment*

## GOD ON TRIAL

On MASTERPIECE CONTEMPORARY

Sunday, November 9, 2008 at 9pm ET on  PBS®

Who is to blame for the greatest of all crimes? Facing extermination at Auschwitz, a group of prisoners solemnly weighs the case against the Lord God, in *God on Trial*, airing on MASTERPIECE CONTEMPORARY, November 9, 2008 at 9pm on PBS (check local listings).

Antony Sher (*Primo*), Rupert Graves (*The Forsyte Saga*), Dominic Cooper (*The History Boys*, MASTERPIECE's *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Duchess*), and Stellan Skarsgard (*Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Mamma Mia!*) head the stellar cast of this harrowing drama about believers and non-believers coming to terms with a world drenched in evil and suffering.

Also starring are Stephen Dillane (*John Adams*, *The Cazalets*), Jack Shepherd (*A Cock and Bull Story*), Blake Ritson (*Mansfield Park*), and Eddie Marsan (*V for Vendetta*).

Celebrated screenwriter Frank Cottrell Boyce's script is based on the often told—but unconfirmed—story that a group of Auschwitz survivors, their faith tested to the breaking point, convened a rabbinical court to weigh the evidence against the Almighty.

The drama begins with the terrible ritual of prisoner arrival and “selection” for death or hard labor. Unsure of their appointed fates, a group of inmates waits in the barracks—hopeful, despairing, defiant, resigned. They fall to discussing God and impulsively decide to put him on trial for abandoning his chosen people.

Schmidt (Dillane), a rabbi, volunteers to serve on the rabbinical court, which requires three judges. The German Baumgarten (Skarsgard), a professor of law, admits to not knowing much about the Torah but knowing how to run a trial, and he agrees to head the proceedings. Mordechai (Graves), who has fallen away from Judaism and is incarcerated with his orthodox father, Kuhn (Shepherd), insists on being God's chief accuser on the panel.

No copy of the Torah is on hand, but Akiba (Sher), a rabbi from a small village in Poland, is a “living Torah,” a devout Jew who has committed the scriptures to memory and can cite any passage relevant to the case.

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Amid the sound of prisoners outside being marched to the gas chamber, the trial unfolds, addressing the age-old problem of theodicy: how can there be evil in a universe ruled by an all-powerful, benevolent God? More to the point, has God gone back on his promise to ensure the survival of the Jewish people?

Jews have a long tradition of arguing with God over such questions, and Schmidt notes that the name Israel means “he that wrestles with God.” But the Holocaust provides grounds for no mere argument; it is seemingly conclusive evidence against the accused.

Nonetheless, Jews speak out in God’s defense. The Flood and the destruction of the Temple are cited as previous instances of purification, when the Almighty sacrificed many of the best Jews to bring about a greater good. Furthermore, free will means that Jews are not powerless; they have a choice—though as the cynical Moche (Cooper) points out, “If God gave out free will then he gave our share to the Nazis.”

And so they wrestle, back and forth, as the hour approaches when the guards will assemble those among them, still uncertain, who must die. Even under such pressure, they reach a verdict...and a surprising conclusion to this shocking but respectful proceeding.

*God on Trial* is a coproduction of Hat Trick Productions Ltd. and WGBH Boston. It is written by Frank Cottrell Boyce (*Welcome to Sarajevo*), and directed by Andy DeEmmony. The producer is Jemma Rogers. The executive producers are Mark Redhead (*Bloody Sunday*) for Hat Trick Productions and Rebecca Eaton for WGBH. Matthew Goode (*Brideshead Revisited*, *Match Point*) is the host of **MASTERPIECE CONTEMPORARY**.

**MASTERPIECE** has been presented on PBS by WGBH since 1971. Rebecca Eaton is executive producer. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and public television viewers provide funding for **MASTERPIECE**.

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