

**Honorary Awards Ceremony,
17 November 2010**

Citation - John Constable

Award of Honorary Fellowship

Citation read by Mike Molan, Executive Dean, London South Bank University.

Pro Chancellor. Our next honorary fellow is, to say the least, deeply immersed in the local community. An uncoverer of hidden histories, a champion of the downtrodden and neglected, a channel for the spirits of the forgotten past, his extraordinary imagination and creativity have helped breathe new life into ancient traditions, bringing local mythology to life for a whole new generation of south Londoners. He is John Constable.

John Constable is a playwright, poet, performer, community activist and historian. After reading English at Cambridge University, he travelled widely through Europe and the Far East with various theatre groups before settling in Southwark, an area with which he has forged deep personal and artistic links. The buried history of this ancient part of the capital has been his inspiration ever since.

As a writer, John's credits include the plays *Black Mas* and *Tulip Futures* and stage adaptations of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* and Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast*. His radio adaptations of John Wyndham's novels *The Kraken Wakes* and *Chocky* have been released on DVD as part of the BBC's Classic Radio Sci-fi series.

However, he is probably best known as the writer of *The Southwark Mysteries*, an epic cycle of poems and Mystery Plays. John started writing the first poems in 1996, inspired by the story of the Winchester Geese – medieval prostitutes who lived and worked in the area, under the licence of the Bishop of Winchester.

Its location on the south bank of the river meant Southwark lay outside the laws and prescriptions of the City of London. The 'Liberty of the Clink' as the area was known, in reference to the notorious Clink prison, was a licentious place, full of theatres, taverns and brothels. According to contemporary historian John Stow, the Winchester Geese were 'forbidden the rites of the church...and excluded from Christian burial.' Instead, they were buried – alongside the paupers of the parish – in an area of unconsecrated ground called the Cross Bones Graveyard on what is now Redcross Way.

John describes the birth of the poems as a mystical event. 'When the Goose came to me, she wanted to tell her story. All I did was write it down and then try to understand what it meant.' As John's fascination with the story deepened, the original group of poems expanded to include a cycle of contemporary 'Mystery Plays' and a 'Glossolalia' of local esoteric history and folklore.

John worked closely with the Dean of Southwark Cathedral, Colin Slee, to turn his somewhat bawdy tales into a dramatic work that would both draw on the medieval mystery tradition and speak directly to Southwark's present-day residents. 'I was keen to embrace the theology and learn as much as possible,' John says. 'At the same time, I wanted to stay true to the spirit of the Goose: the story wrote itself, and it is what it is. It was an interesting balance.'

It's a balance that seems to have worked. The Southwark Mysteries was first performed at the Globe Theatre and Southwark Cathedral on Easter Sunday 2000 to great critical acclaim, by a cast made up of both professional actors and local people including many school children. The plays were staged once more at Easter this year, with a core professional cast of 18 and a much larger community cast – truly a play for the people.

That performance marked the culmination of a three-year programme of guided walks, drama workshops and performances led by John and drawing on the history and mythology of the local area. He conducts regular guided walks in Borough and Bankside and, through his alter ego John Crow, conducts the annual Hallowe'en of Cross Bones and holds a monthly vigil for the 'outcast dead' at the site of the Cross Bones burial ground, now well established as a site of local significance.

The Southwark Mysteries was delivered by SOUTHWARK MYSTERIES, a grass-roots organisation of which John is artistic director. He is also patron of REWRITE, a Southwark-based charity that works to involve young people in drama and creative writing. The charity brings together young people from different cultural, social, international and economic backgrounds with the aim of breaking down barriers and prejudices, and raising public awareness of issues relating to refuge and asylum.

Pro Chancellor, for his vision and imagination, for his deep commitment to our local area, for his work in reclaiming lost histories and, above all, for his belief in the transformative power of writing and drama, I present to you John Constable for an Honorary Fellowship.