 Issues in Review

BARBARA PALMER, DAVID BEVINGTON, GARRETT EPP, RALPH BLASTING, DAVID MILLS, PETER MEREDITH

The York Cycle in Performance: Toronto and York

This first volume of Early Theatre, heir of more than two pioneering decades of the REED Newsletter, appropriately reviews a landmark occasion, multiple productions of the York Cycle during the summer of 1998. On 20 June the Cycle literally was brought to light of day in the Victoria College precincts at the University of Toronto by forty troupes of travelling players, drawn from two continents and three nations. Starting precisely at six o clock of the morning, these forty casts, drawn from a variety of academic and civic sources, displayed all forty-seven York Cycle pageants in procession at four discrete stations. The following month, on 12 July, eleven troupes representing city of York guilds performed eleven pageants at five stations in the ancient home of the original text.

These two remarkable productions mark an extraordinary progress down a fascinating road for early English theatre. We who are writing here have been privileged to be part of a generation of rich discovery in which academic collaboration has been both the norm and also the expectation. In 1978 the first REED Colloquium was held at Erindale College of the University of Toronto with thirty-nine scholars in attendance. One of the papers in that ground-breaking session of shared early explorations was 'Where Are the Records and What Do They Tell Us?'—a title which now seems touchingly naive as we continue to struggle with the answers. The modest tentativeness, the generosity, the anxiety of sharing what in fact might not have been worth sharing forever made its mark. In 1978 none of us had the slightest clue how much remained to be discovered. Although troubled by the occasional doubt, most of us recited the minster-to-marketplace creed with its peasant audience, simple faith, simpler drama, and civic Corpus Christi cycle norm.

That unsettling 1978 Colloquium shared another experience, watching the Poculi Ludique Societas (‘the drinking and playing group’) production of the
York Cycle 'Judgment Day' pageant. For those of us who had not attended the first Toronto York Cycle production in 1977, this performance was a revelation verging on epiphany. It also signalled what would prove to be the unique overlap in early English drama studies between academics and actors, between classroom and performance. Among the cast members of that 1978 performance for the reed Colloquium were David Parry as God; Cameron Louis as a Good Soul; R.W. Ingram, Ian Lancashire, and J.A.B. Somerset as Apostles; and Mary Blackstone as a Devil. Alexandra F. Johnston directed this particular 1978 'Judgment Day'. Over the years numerous other academics mounted a wagon or strode a platea. Even when (as a professional theatre colleague put it) one sometimes wishes the door had been locked on the English Department, this dual perspective has enriched both our knowledge and also our understanding of early drama.

For many of us, then, these 1998 productions of the York Cycle struck peculiar intellectual and emotional chords, evident here in our use of the first-person pronoun — not quite our customary voice. In some ways the productions were a memorial, a tribute, a silent and poignant gesture of appreciation to 'absent friends' who gave so much of themselves to the study of early English drama. All of us writing here have our ghosts, our own friendly shades of past productions, performers, and audience members — isles of memory indeed populated by 'sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not'. These productions, however, are also a celebration of continuity, both academic and human. In the 1977 Toronto York Cycle program, some few pages are devoted to building the pageant wagons with production manager and wainwright K. Reed Needles' drawings and painstaking explication of how to convert an Ontario farm wagon into a play wagon. For the 1998 Toronto York Cycle, schoolmaster K. Reed Needles directed his Sir Frederick Banting Secondary School students in their wagon performance of Play 28, 'The Agony in the Garden'. In 1983 undergraduate Scot W. Myers studied medieval drama with Gail McMurray Gibson; fifteen years later he brought the Sacred Stone Players of Davidson, North Carolina to act Play 35, 'The Crucifixion', in Toronto. John B. Mayberry (a cherished sprite from the PLS-on-tour 1980s as New Guise in *Mankind*, Insatiability in *The Blessed Apple Tree*, Robin Hood in *Robin Hood and the Friar*, Herman Grampas in *The Stolen Shrovetide Cock*, and the First Beggar in *The Pie and the Tart*) brought his own children to see these 1998 York Corpus Christi plays, which were so important to who we were and who we were to become.

A memorial and a celebration, these productions also were a remarkable educational experience, in remarkably different ways. As Alexandra Johnston
who had not attended this performance was a surprise, as it could prove to be the first to be staged by academics and actors, members of that 1978 generation. Elaine Johnstone, J.A.B. Somerset as God; Cameron MacIntosh directed this. Other academics and professional theatre colleagues talked on the English knowledge and also...

The York Cycle struck me on our use of the first time the productions gesture of appreciation to the study of early own friendly shades - isles of memory - delight and hurt not'. Community, both academic some few pages are manager and wain of how to con- 1998 Toronto York Wick Banting Second- er 28, 'The Agony in Second- ay 28, 'The Agony in the Sacred Stone The Crucifixion', in the 80s Pls-on-tour 1980s Robin Hood We were a remarkable Alexandra Johnston wrote in the 1983 Toronto Chester Cycle program, 'It is only in the last decade that on-going "laboratory" productions have become possible', and certainly one primary laboratory site has been the Victoria College quadrangle. Earlier productions there have tested various staging and production theories, but this 1998 performance specifically tested whether all forty-seven pageants could be played in a single dawn-to-darkness day, as they apparently were on Corpus Christi Day in medieval York. Thus for the 1998 Toronto York Cycle, single-day performance was the central focus and dominant thesis both of production experiment and of academic analysis.

On that score, I must allow, the Toronto experiment proved very little except that modern wagons can tool around the short, almost hermetically-sealed academic circuit of Victoria College's paved sidewalks to play 47 pageants at four stations in seventeen hours. From that experiment, rewarding as it was on various grounds, we certainly 'know' perhaps even less than we thought we 'knew' about York's original playing places and performance conditions. Two very pragmatic sessions at the Leeds 1998 International Medieval Congress, sessions heavily populated by surviving attendees of both 1998 cycle performances, pointed to any number of unanswered questions: actor endurance, stamina from one station to the next, speed and pace of performance, uniformity of pageant dressings, reconsideration of York records which had seemed quite clear before this remarkable 1998 performance year. David Palliser addressed contemporary York street widths, 'paving' materials, shop encroachments, public conveniences, and lighting. Margaret Rogerson sketched in crowd control, ale, and the constabulary. I, for one, cannot factor how some 47 pageants could have been performed in a single day on a presumably near-annual basis at some twelve to seventeen sites within the City of York for some two centuries.

That deficiency in imagination admitted, a quite different focus will forever dominate my central perception of the 1998 City of York guild performance, namely a wide-eyed recollection of what was and is required from a community infrastructure to produce a single civic multiple-pageant event. We already know these things in theory, mind you, since we have digested the York volumes and stage-managed parts of cycle productions and taught extant cycle texts to our students and read enough medieval socio-economic-cultural-civic history studies to choke the proverbial horse - and even, perhaps, prided ourselves on being efficient administrators in earlier lives. Nevertheless, this 1998 City of York production compelled me to appreciate the sheer amount of community cooperation required to bring forth the least of these pageants.

My tardy eureka profited from some fine papers at the two International Medieval Congresses and two colloquia which surrounded these York Cycle
productions (where I learned much about medieval crowd control, sanitary facilities, street width, and civic lighting), but it primarily was prompted by observation of the York pageants and crowds on the day itself. Jane Oakshott, executive and artistic director of the York Mystery Plays 1998, later explicated at the International Congress some of the challenges this production faced and the ways in which those challenges were met. On the day, however, I found myself noting the York waits, the livery-clad wagon crews, the smooth timing as one wagon after another rolled into place, the North Yorkshire police gently moving crowds from the wagons' path but clearly attentive to less gentle modern dangers, the proximity of dustbins and public toilets and a cup or pint, the condition of York cobblestones in the rain—civic infrastructure, buttressed by reminders in the play program of gratitude to city council and dean and chapter of York Minster and local knitting club and wagon construction and storage places and change ringers and...the community cooperation which produced this remarkable event.

After the two productions, under the tactful prodding of the Early Theatre editor, I circulated potential key questions as a sort of 'what we learned in performance' focus for our reviewers' thoughts. Those six questions rambled into embarrassing Joycean paragraphs as my reach clearly exceeded my grasp, but the broad topics of those six paragraphs asked our reviewers to think about changes in the questions we have learned to ask after twenty years of performance; an awareness of the difference between regular performance and irregular occasional performance; the whole question of contexts and communities; multiple dimensions of audience analysis; performance variations among different stations; and the often heated discussion of relevance and modernization. In the rich diversity of these reviewers' observations, reconciliation would be reduction, except to note two clarifications. They did not all see the same pageant at the same station, and the performances could vary appreciably in playing time, audibility, crowd reaction, and even actors: the two Toronto Christs and two Mary Magdalenes of the University of Birmingham's Play 39 changed costumes in the arch between stations two and three. Second, both of the two awkward Toronto gaps between pageants, each about twenty minutes, were caused by wagon-dressing rather than actor problems— which makes one rethink some early records and regulations. Rain-drenched wagon wood swelled out of line from a blazing sun and had to be carpentered back into fit; and the 'Crucifixion' and 'Ascension' pageants followed too hard upon each other to use the same wagon without delay in redressing it.

Finally, what did I, who saw all forty-seven Toronto pageants, all eleven York pageants from these two some astonishment in drama, the civil seems to have been at the end of me on. I had read as after another, did the remarkable a weary audience of appearance.

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York pageants and many of them more than once, at different stations, learn from these two extraordinary productions? Primary in my own musings is some astonishment that what in 1977 we thought a norm of early English drama, the civic Corpus Christi cycle, after twenty years of REED research, seems to have been an anomaly. I learned that there are textual benedictions at the end of many York pageants as the play concludes and the wagon moves on. I had read and taught these blessing lines but hearing them delivered, one after another, directly to us as audience members is quite different. I noted the remarkable amount of spectacle called for in the Cycle’s final plays, when a weary audience is perhaps most susceptible to near-magical effects, miracles of appearance, disappearance, and transformation in the dusky light.

These two decades of performance have taught us much. We have learned that there can be many reactions to a performance, calling for a variety of emotions other than the intellectual — appreciation, in an audience's frank applause for properties, and amusement, for instance. We have learned much about iconography, and we have a way yet to go in our studies. On the stage-right hand of approbation was the hideous yellow smoke which rose from Cain's sacrifice or the Nativity tableaux which imitated a Nottingham alabaster until the beasts' heads gently swayed and their breath warmed the baby in the manger below them. On the left hand of iconographic judgment were angels in Adidas, various visible modern undergarments, and numerous Crucifixion liberties from sandals to carelessly slack wrist ropes to missing stigmata and misplaced wounds.

We have figured out how Cain can count his cheating tithe and any number of other difficult pieces of text which resisted classroom explication but came clear in performance. We have learned that we need to project our voices — and we have become impatient with adult players who are not audible. We have learned how to handle the monologues, which were thought flat or set pieces back in 1977 and which we now know demand good acting — and we learned much of that lesson from David Parry, the Expositor in more ways than one. Above all, we have learned that pace, speed, delivery, action, reaction, and interaction between actor and audience are as important to the effective performance of these plays as to any other piece of effective theatre. We have learned that the texts of the York Cycle need no academic apologists.

Barbara Palmer

Context and Performance: The York Plays at Toronto

I attended, and even briefly took part in, the first production of the York