Issues in Review 143

Context and Performance: The York Plays at Toronto

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

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Cycle at the University of Toronto in 1977. I have been present at all of the other cycle productions since then and I wasn’t about to miss this one in 1998. In fact, I saw just about every bit of it, from six am till after ten pm, by scurrying around to various acting stations when other business pulled me away from my main watching station at the first location. Back in 1977, I was one of about seven people to see the performance, still outdoors on a pageant wagon, of ‘Abraham and Isaac’. By this time, on a rainy cold day in early October, most of the audience had deserted and the unhappy persons in charge (Alexandra Johnston and David Parry chief among them) were deciding to move indoors. This was a fearful pity because, even in that brief witnessing of pageants outdoors on pageant wagons, we as (dwindling) audience experienced something of what it was like to be at a Corpus Christi cycle performance. A number of flatbed wagons, newly fitted out with refurbished wooden wheels, were recycled (as they were again in 1998) among the many separate groups, in turn, so that each producing ‘company’ had a chance to outfit its wagon with whatever superstructure it chose in the way of backdrop, curtains, and pictorial representation. In the creation sequence we saw a succession of various Gods, some thin, some tall, some short. The representations of animals varied creatively and enormously. Groups made varying decisions as to how often, and to what extent, they would get off the wagon and perform among the assembled spectators. The result triumphantly justified the undertaking. Sadly, most of the rest of the cycle had to be moved indoors, with make-believe spaces for the wagons. The loss of energy was tremendous. Lost too was the chance to see if the plays could be performed in one day. The production naturally went way over schedule. Only at the very end were the final plays able to move outdoors once again, after a night’s interval.

This history helps explain, for me at least, why the York Cycle had to be repeated. Alexandra Johnston, though no longer playing the direct supervisory role of 1977, was much in evidence at Victoria College, on home ground where other cycles had been successfully performed in the interim and now ready to prove that York could be performed in a day. The 1998 production actually did start within a very few minutes of 6 am, with a respectable crowd for that hour of the day on the steps of Old Vic, video recording camera at the ready. (In medieval York, considerably further north than Toronto and designed for an early-rising rural population, the plays would have begun much earlier.) The event did keep on schedule, amazingly. A few hangups developed when one company or another monopolized a wagon too long, delaying its turnover to the next in line, but since things were actually ahead of schedule for short pageants, this didn’t cause much of a problem and the York plays could be played through.

As in 1977 with the production of ‘Abraham and Isaac’, the weather was not kind. The crowd soon got much smaller and appreciatively lingered over details of the pictorial landscape, trying to catch up with those of the other groups of its adjacent wagons. The conclusion of the main stage reviewing stand was a rattle, quickly depending upon the walls and sense of enclosure from the rest of the wagons, one’s habitat, in which the spectators were.

The quality of the York plays was, of course, generally the same as with all cycles, remaining a high standard, though this may have been a result of the surrounding city. At Chicago, Days Duquesne, and in Sydney (Nova Scotia in Lunenburg), London, and course, many great cultural diversity has often more than made up for the York plays with a great deal of imaginative and creative. A few pageants lingered over details in the case of the York Cycle, and the differences between
represent at all of the need to miss this one in which I had to stay till after ten pm, business pulled me away. Back in 1977, I was outdoors on a rainy cold day in Corpus Christi, unhappy persons (among them) were even in that brief (dwindling) audience for a Corpus Christi Play (1998) among the `company' had a chose in the way of creation sequence, some short. The slyly. Groups made would get off the result triumphantly expense had to be moved loss of energy was could be performed schedule. Only at the again, after a night's cycle had to be direct supervisory on home ground interim and now 1998 production respectable crowd recording camera at than Toronto and would have begun. A few hangups wagon too long, were actually ahead of schedule for quite some time, there was room for a bit of slack. Of course short pageants did have to wait for longer pageants to finish at the acting station ahead but it all worked out without serious complications. Yes, Virginia, the York plays could be performed in one day!

As in 1977 the expectations and desires of the audience were nicely in sync with the production, even among those many spectators for whom the whole thing was a novel experience. The whole event was a happening and the crowd soon got with it. Audience response to performances was vociferous and appreciative. Spectators learned to switch stations as necessitated by a picnic lunch or other breaks. Knowledgeable comparisons afterwards, including those of the actors and directors, gave high marks to station three because of its adjacent high walls and comparative isolation; lighting effects there for the concluding pageant of `Last Judgment' were awesome. Station one, in front of the main steps of Vic's central building, became known as the official reviewing stand for dignitaries; station two, on the lawn in the inner quadrangle, quickly earned a reputation as the spot for the picnic or beach crowd. Station three was the actors' and directors' favourite, with its surrounding high walls and sense of enclosed space. Station four was just folks, a bit separated from the rest of the event, rather too dark as evening came on. One could pick one's habitat, in other words; one could declare or fashion one's identity by the spectators with whom one chose to associate.

The quality of performance and production varied greatly, as has been the case with all cycle productions at Toronto, and one wonders as to how true this may have been in medieval York. Probably not nearly to the same extent; there, the productions were more centrally supervised and were put on by closely associated guilds, whereas this production (1977 also, and others since) called on acting talent as far-flung as the Universities of Birmingham, Illinois at Chicago, Dayton, Alberta, Connecticut, Maryland at Baltimore, Michigan, Duquesne, and Leeds, along with various college and non-affiliated groups in Sydney (Nova Scotia), Syracuse (New York), Buffalo, Moncton (New Brunswick), London (Ontario), Boston, Davidson (North Carolina), and, of course, many groups from the University of Toronto and from the surrounding city. A few were church related. This is not, strictly speaking, how the York plays were originally assembled, of course, but the geographical and cultural diversity nonetheless gave a rich diversity. The cross-fire of comparison more than made up for the occasional unevenness of tone.

A few pageants were tediously amateurish and unimaginative. We needn't linger over details. The observation is useful only as a possible insight into the differences between regular performances (in medieval York) and irregular
occasional performances in a reconstructed cycle today (in Toronto or York). Medieval performers were paid and were fined for inadequate work; their experience with their roles year after year, and with the dramatic impact of the cycle as a whole, must have made for a richness and complexity of production that is bound to be missing when less experienced groups are assembled from far and near. No rehearsal of the 1998 production as a whole was feasible, and so many of the actors and directors went into the event having seen nothing of what other pageants had created. Inevitably, in these terms, the context of production was radically different from that of medieval England. For all the inestimable advantages of reconstructed performances, today we can only try to imagine the sorts of communal interaction and reinforcement that were integrally present in a medieval town with actors and audiences all drawn from a single community.

Despite such unavoidable limitations, many pageants were splendidly apt and rewarding. The entire sequence of the creation of the world, the fall of the angels, and the expulsion from the garden of Adam and Eve went well, with special kudos due to the Birmingham players’ rendition of “The Creation to the Fifth Day”. Not only were the actors forceful and convincing but the set was outstanding in its ingenious representation (by means of opening fans and hanging displays) of the various wonders of the world that God creates. All the creation pageants invite ingenuity of design, and the devisers of the sets in this sequence did not disappoint. Fish appeared to swim in the sea and birds in the air, both in brightly coloured variety. The birth of Adam, and then of Eve from Adam’s rib, offered another invitation to theatrical inventiveness. Through the magic of theatre, the audience was aware that the devices were all patently the contrivances of trompe l’oeil, and yet the experience was one of confirming and sharing communally an archetypal legend in all its vitality. The theatrical experience confirmed a sense of faith and of cultural continuity. This all happened at Toronto in 1998 in such a vital way as to convince audiences that they really were in touch with what must have been so essential to the event in medieval York. It is through such theatrical magic that the sense of communion with the past is most vividly alive.

A particular delight, in the pageants following the creation sequence, was “Joseph’s Troubles about Mary”, as presented by the Duquesne University Medieval and Renaissance Players. I was so charmed with the peppery Joseph that I saw the production twice. The actor playing Joseph was the star. His bouncing lilt, his delight in his wife’s beauty and youth, his anxiety and disappointment at the prospect of her having been impregnated by some younger man, all came wonderfully alive, and again bridged the gap of centuries by giving husband fear against the empty against the empty against the empty against the empty...
Issues in Review 147

Tomato or York). The Fall of Eve went well, as did 'The Creation' (convincing but the placing of opening fans at God creates. The devisers of the scene in the sea and that of Adam, and theatrical inventive that the devices experience was in all its and of cultural a vital way as to must have been theatrical magic to evoke.

In sequence, was the University's peppery Joseph as the star. His anxiety and dictated by some the gap of cen-

From a scholarly point of view, a particular fascination of this cycle production was the opportunity to see how well the performance could confirm the hypothesis of using pageant wagons end-on rather than broadside. The topic was central to much of the discussion during the symposium on the preceding day, and those of us involved in that debate were eager to see the results. One pageant making special use of this method of presentation was 'The Temptation of Christ'. John McKinnell, who directed the Durham Medieval Theatre Company players and took the role of Christ, gave a significant paper on the topic during the symposium. The wagon for this pageant was fitted out with thin posts supporting an open canopy and featuring also a means of providing an ascent; otherwise the rectangular wagon, low to the ground, was sparsely designed with little more than a pair of stairs at one end.

To me, the issue of end-on versus broadside was less important than the fact that one could see through the set from any angle, encouraging acting in the round and also highlighting the colourful contrasts in costumes between the white garb of the haloed Christ and the more garish and animalistic outfit of the tempter. What became vividly clear to me in retrospect was that the 1977 cycle had consistently and perhaps unconsciously played only to one side of each set, with curtained backdrop and a pictorial effect derived (as the 1998 conference pointed out) from post-medieval concepts of theatrical space and from iconographic representations of mise en scène inspired by our ideas today (from the Limbourg brothers and others) of what a medieval scene might resemble. Most pageants in the 1998 cycle as well chose unidirectional presentation with pictorial backdrop. In this regard, the experiments with open three-dimensional staging were refreshingly new and important.

Christ's appearances before his tormenters were gripping, and the moments of 'The Crucifixion' and 'The Death and Burial of Christ' were very moving. I was interested to see how effectively 'The Dream of Pilate's Wife', ably presented by Martin Walsh and his Harlotry Players from the University of Michigan, provided a thematic idea of a contest between Christ and the devil in which the dream of Pilate's wife is a desperate move on the part of the devil to stop the ongoing crucifixion that will, ironically enough, undo everything...
the devil has plotted to achieve. The overall thematic significance of this 'plot' is not as cohesive in the York Cycle as in N-Town, where what Alan Nelson calls the 'contest of guile' is essential to the overarching dramatic scheme of the cycle as a whole, but it made excellent sense as acted.

The PLS staging of the hanging in 'The Remorse of Judas' was electrifyingly real. One was tempted to circle about behind the pageant wagon (as one could do) to see how it was brought off by means of a hanging collar. The need for this trompe l'oeil device meant that the pageant was presented in a broadside direction only, which did reduce flexibility of movement and reinforced the pictorial dimension that some more experimental pageants avoided, but the Remorse was still a highlight reinforcing the PLS's reputation for fine work.

'The Judgment of Christ', put on by the Centre for Medieval Studies with David Klausner as Pilate, made use of an especially open wagon, with a throne for Pilate surmounting an essentially bare platform. The openness gave Klausner room to rant and tear a cat in, which he proceeded to do with aplomb. Especially at station one, audiences tended to be on all sides, taking advantage of varying points of view when the design of the pageant made it possible to see from sides and rear; at station two, in their lawn chairs and on their picnic blankets, the audience seemed to expect a show to be presented in one direction only. Similarly, station three encouraged flexibility, whereas the audience for station four seemed to face only one way, from the college buildings toward the street.

Some of the plays following 'The Resurrection' seemed to drag out the already-long day. But 'The Last Judgment' (Handmade Performance, Toronto) more than made up for the wait to the end. Not everyone approved of seeing (and hearing) the chief devil with a boom-box, but the effect of diabolical figures on a high top of the set, menacingly waving their cloaks to the tune of rock music, was tremendous. Female devils, vamps in very modern hookers' attire, added to the gritty effect of apocalypse now. The producers of this pageant were as anxious as anyone about the timing of the whole day's production: they didn't want to go on too early! Their effects demanded late twilight and even (at stations three and four) darkness, and, with some luck and real skill on the part of the organizers, they got their wish. Especially at station three, with dark shadows cast up on the walls of the surrounding buildings, the effect was unforgettable. This last pageant was a stunning ending to a remarkable day.

Barbara Palmer has asked: do anachronisms like boom-boxes and tight leather skirts cause us to lose something in the art of translating medieval plays for modern and immediate effect? I saw the effect of both the chief devil and his vamps as part of a question is: did they enhance or detract from the overall effect? The 'Last Judgment' did not cheapen the experience after all; it was not their responsibility to update life in the noughties to be more in touch with modern life than to perform as they conceived.

Playing in all directions

One should expect to pull nearly everyone among disparate audiences, into a space all counts, into a space where some element of each audience could be catered to in some way. I saw the effect immediately upon entry. I saw the blacked-out space, saw the plays, I saw the empty stairs and the empty hall, saw the people scattered around, saw the noughties, I saw the room and the people and the effect, together, and I saw it all. The 'Last Judgment' was a highlight, and the audience seemed to enjoy it, while the four-pageant show by was the lead of the evening, itself to boo and to jeer.

Some groups found this better than others, and the audience itself.

for modern and immediate effect? I saw the effect of both the chief devil and his vamps as part of a question is: did they enhance or detract from the overall effect? The 'Last Judgment' did not cheapen the experience after all; it was not their responsibility to update life in the noughties to be more in touch with modern life than to perform as they conceived.
for modern audiences, or do the updating connections provide an intensity and immediacy that can link devils and henpecked husbands and human suffering to the way we live today? I don't think a simple yes-no answer to such a question is possible, as the varying reactions to the stridently post-modern 'Last Judgment' demonstrate, but I know that for me the effects of 'relevancy' did not cheapen my appreciation of the performances we saw in Toronto this June. That the York Plays are living entities is nowhere more evident than in their responsiveness to a wide range of interpretation. Those plays were themselves, after all, vividly anachronistic in their own late medieval context, choosing to update biblical and exegetical narrative into the immediacies of parish life in the north of England. Even if some purists were not amused then and are not amused now, we today can offer these plays no more fitting tribute than to perform and savour them in the same free spirit in which they were conceived.

David Bevington

Playing in all directions: The York Plays, Toronto

One should expect unevenness and inconsistency in a production that attempts to pull nearly four dozen dramatic pieces from medieval England, divided among disparate groups with various degrees and kinds of talent and experience, into a satisfying whole. The 1998 York Plays in Toronto delivered on all counts, including the satisfying whole.

I saw the entire cycle except for 'Adam and Eve in Eden', the pageant that immediately preceded my own 'The Temptation and Fall'. Of course, what I saw was not quite what anyone else saw; much depended upon where one saw the plays. Some I watched more than once, in order to see how they played to different audiences. And they were different: the first audience, on the stairs and grand entrance to the old college building, was the most settled and focused, while the much larger, constantly changing group loosely scattered around the second station could be the most or least responsive, depending mostly on the actors' abilities to make themselves seen and heard; the third enjoyed by far the best acoustics, but not always the best sight lines, while the fourth, with all the street traffic, construction noises, and passers-by was the least likely to get involved, even when prompted by Herod himself to boo and hiss.

Some groups and individuals handled the differences between audiences better than others, just as some were better able to project their voices, or just hold an audience's attention, but some were held back by specific production