achievements of the 1998 York Cycle in Toronto were impressive. Their level seems to have increased during the fifteen years that I have been watching Toronto performances mainly because of two factors. First, designers and directors have learned to value the simplicity of the wagon stage. Clear designs based on well-defined icons carry the meaning of the pageant to spectators near to or far from the platform. Second, there is now a confidence in outdoor wagon performance. No longer as apprehensive about engaging the audience, directors are learning to let the plays speak for themselves. In the process, perhaps we’re getting closer to what the York Cycle was: a presentation of a community to itself, perhaps with their attendant foibles, but safe in the knowledge that they were among friends.

Ralph Blasting

**Acting The Text: York Mystery Plays In York, 12 July 1998**

‘The first Guild production of the Mystery Plays for over 400 years’ was the billing given to Jane Oakshott’s production of eleven plays from the York Cycle. The pragmatic requirement that each play should have a sponsor was a major factor in determining the shape of the series of plays produced. Seven of the surviving York guilds performed, or sponsored others to perform, those plays in BL: Additional ms 35,290 for which their medieval counterparts had been responsible; local church and community groups contributed four further plays. The sequence performed on that dull, wet Sunday in York was therefore eclectic (Plays 2, 3, 5, 18, 28, 36, 37, 41, 42, 47), with no ‘Nativity’, ‘Trial’ plays, or ‘Resurrection’. It was performed at five stations, at two of which there were stands for paying spectators.

While standing among the spectators at the side of the acting area in St Sampson’s Square (station four, one of the stations with a stand) watching the eleven plays, I wondered what the modern post-Christian, unfamiliar with the biblical narratives, was making of this sequence as it cut from the Fall directly to ‘The Flight into Egypt’. What contact could these plays now establish with us, accustomed to the immediacy of video and cinema? At worst, we might read them as people dressing up and pretending to be medieval people, imitating an imitation. On the other hand, the new eclecticism might have the potential to reveal new significances and, by changing the rhythms of performance and the sequencing of material from those in our manuscript and Bible, make us appreciate the power of the plays as theatre.

Inevitably, different groups approached the challenge in different ways and with varying degrees of success. In my report, I focus on two very different
plays which generated productions that were, in their own terms, equally successful but embodied quite different concepts of theatre.

The first of these, 'Creation to the Fifth Day', originally assigned to the Plasterers and here performed by the Guilds of Building with the College of Further and Higher Education, appears in the manuscript as the second play of the cycle, a 'tell and show' play following the conflict and comedy of 'The Fall of the Angels'. In this production it began the sequence. Its new position removed it from the shadow of MS Play 1 and gave it new prominence. As a text, it is unpromising - 172 lines spoken by God which serve as a series of cues for what must have been spectacular scenic effects. Richard Collier, in *Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play* (Hamden, Conn, 1978), characterizes its style by 'its lack of imagery, its denotativeness, its blandness and abstractness' (54). For the modern audience, unconvinced by creationist theology and accustomed to extravagant visual effects on TV, video, and film, a condescending distance seemed the most likely response. Any theatrical image they might have could well be of the ebullient Brian Glover in *The Mysteries*, raised aloft and exulting in his own power.

York's production made its illusion its theme, both visually and textually. The drab, small wagon with its dull curtain, the insignificant world, proved a toy-box of tricks as, on command, the backdrop of hills appeared, cut-out blue waves bobbed, the sun and moon popped out, the side-pieces opened to reveal trees behind which revolving disks revealed alternately fruit and flowers. This 'child's pop-up book' reflected with each new device the ingenuity of its constructors. The audience responded appreciatively rather than condescendingly, laughing and applauding each device.

On top of the wagon was a cartoon-like cut-out of God. The opening lines boomed out as a disembodied voice from behind. In almost anti-climactic contrast, the actor-god walked on at ground level. Though dressed in white with a red cloak and a nimbus, his human face was not masked or gilded. He carried a blue plastic folder from which he read his lines. Whatever unrevealed practical necessity lay behind this arrangement, the play script was visible and concrete in the hands of its performer. His positioning beside the wagon rather than on high allowed him to move smoothly between the roles of play director, in issuing cues ('I publysch my power/Noght by my strenkt, but by my steven', 30–1); of audience, viewing the result with evident appreciation; and of divine authority, as at the end of each 'show' his voice rose in triumphant conclusion. Importantly, as audience he looked not only at the stage but also at us, so that his contemporary 'creatures' became part of his theatre and our enjoyment of the 'shows' became part of his pleasure.
Divorced from ‘The Fall of the Angels’, his lines

My hegh Godhede I will noght hyde
All-yf sume foles be fallyne me fro  

referred exclusively to us spectators, and ‘My bllysynge haue ye all’ appropriately encompassed both show and audience. In contrast to Glover’s tone, this was a gentle, humane God, at one with humankind. His undisguised human face, whose expression conveyed anticipation and enjoyment of audience response, confirmed that relationship. (My quotations are from Richard Beadle’s 1982 edition, The York Plays. A generally faithful but modernized version was used by all except the Lords of Misrule in their play of ‘The Ascension’. ‘Mummy, why were they speaking Scottish’, a little girl asked after their performance. ‘That wasn’t Scottish, dear. That was Middle English. That was why we couldn’t understand it.’)

In contrast to this short visual creation play, ‘The Death of Christ’, performed for the company of Butchers – the company originally responsible – by Howdenshire Live Arts, represents one of the most complex and ambitious plays in the cycle. It contains multiple action, stark emotional interludes, and, at 416 lines, is textually lengthy. Moreover, its complex thirteen-line stanza with strong alliteration and repetition draws attention to itself. Whereas in the ‘Creation’, text serves spectacle, here the text is the vehicle for emotion and action. In the manuscript this complex play follows the closely focused ‘Crucifixion’, and represents the culmination of the ‘Trials’ sequence with their social resonances and cynical brutality and self-interest. In this production, it followed the no less complex play of ‘The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal’. Sufficient to say that that play was not realized with strong conviction, so there was a contrast of competence.

The director of this production had clearly grasped the potential of the wagon-theatre for audience involvement. The wagons were usually some twenty feet from the front of the stand towards which they played. In this production the distance was approximately halved by introducing a long ramp from the ground to the wagon. Representing, presumably, the slope of Calvary, it enabled ready movement between ground and stage, foreshortening the audience distance and thrusting the actors closer to the front rows of spectators. Soldiers and Mary entered through the audience and addressed them directly, casting them as potential opponents and allies respectively, to be kept at bay or appealed to for assistance.

The notable feature of the production was the performance of the actors playing bishops and priests and their contemporaries. The contrast between representing and their role was striking.

Unhappily, the actors playing bishops and priests were a youthful middle-aged company. The playing of petty cloaks over their shoulders gave new life to a familiar gesture and made the role of the rector of petty women. One of the actors went on, ‘That wasn’t Scottish, dear. That was Middle English. That was why we couldn’t understand it.’

In the production, the actor playing the Arch of Triumph was well-nourished, and to his roles as a pathos and the back of the audience, each actor. The emphasis was on the focused playing. The structure and the emphasis on the role which fell to the actors was poured out.
In contrast to the God of the 'Creation', they occupied their characters, constructing and realizing plausible psychologies. While the contrast between the two figures is evident within the text – the one representing authority, the other emotion – both actors gave added significance to their roles.

Uninfluenced by the cosy alliance of pleasure and power between the priests and Pilate in the 'Trials', this production took the bold step of casting a youthful Pilate, arrogant but insecure, in a world where everyone else seemed middle-aged or elderly. The age gap from the older, more confident priests gave new point to the insistence that the Crucifixion was their responsibility and made the refusal to change the superscription a sort of youthful display of petty authority for its own sake. In turban and red robe, echoing the red cloaks of his soldiers, the young Pilate moved anxiously about as the action went on, scanning the audience, pondering his position, delivering his alliterating lines with a pent-up impatience. Mary was cast in total contrast to the arrogant youth – a rather plump, plain middle-aged woman in black cloak and white wimple. This figure, looking old enough to be Pilate's mother, had a pathos in her helplessness that was intensified when her way up the ramp to her son was barred by the soldiers. Her stanzas are rhetorically powerful in their rhythms and repetitions, but this actress' strong and feeling delivery fully exploited their emotive force.

In theory at least, the three crosses with their burdens should provide an emotional and meditational focus but I found, as I often do, that a modern, well-nourished man lounging slackly on the cross supplied an inadequate stimulus to compassionate response. But the crucified Christ became merely the backdrop to a contrast in tone and style between two powerful stage presences, each as fascinating when silent as when addressing the audience or fellow actors. The crosses and their burdens seemed incidental and actions directly focused on them – the drink, Longeus, the deposition – suffered accordingly. The structure of the play is too diffuse but its director had wisely placed the emphasis upon the theatre of emotions and a 'Stanislavskian' conception of role which engaged the audience directly and strongly.

These two productions represent polarities of theatre, each admirably suited to its particular play. They respected the text and were alert to its possibilities and to the visual impact of theatre. Not all the productions in York fulfilled those requirements. But the experiment generated several unexpected and theatrically effective interpretations and held the audience even when the rain poured down.

David Mills