

## **Staging *Everyman* in 2004 Urbino: A Classroom Experiment**

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### **1. Introduction**

In Italian universities the teaching of literature generally consists in the reading and discussion of primary texts with the help of selected secondary works. Of course, the choice of any type of methodological approach is up to individual teachers. Since drama also falls within the category of literature (e.g. Shakespeare's sonnets and plays are often taught together), many years ago I thought of rendering drama more 'dramatic' and understandable by always viewing it through theatrical lenses. Since in the faculties where I have taught throughout there was no course in performing arts, I felt it necessary to offer the students the opportunity of a theatrical workshop held by myself (in extra-curricular time on a voluntary basis during after dinner meetings). I have no special qualifications for that, apart from my love for the theatre and the knowledge of some practical rules of thumb in theatrics, therefore I have always been very well aware of the artistic limits of the results I was going to obtain. The students' enthusiasm and their engagement, though, have helped me overcome my fears and, since 1991, I have directed eight performances.

Another very relevant factor must be taken into consideration: I teach English Literature, a reason why I have always insisted that plays had to be performed in English. This is no small detail, because it adds further difficulties for students with no or very small theatrical training: words have to be suited to the action in a more complex way than if the performance were in the actors' mother tongue. Given these premises, i.e. theatrically untrained Italian students performing in English during their university literary courses, together with my Early Modern Drama bias, I have often relied on interludes and mystery plays, so that dramatic texts did not need much cutting and, at the same time, students could realize the theatrical power of some neglected plays. I do know very well that the original language of such texts is difficult, the more so for non-native speakers, but rehearsals (and tape recorders!) were there to help improvement.

The non-theatrical spaces available are also to be considered: none of the faculties where I have been had a theatre, or at least a space fitted for the purpose: no lighting and sound equipment, no stage, no wings. In such conditions, the choice of relatively short Early Modern pieces that had originally been designed for either pageant or hall performance was more suitable, so that the audience did not feel deprived of a 'proper' theatrical experience. Our 'theatres', therefore, were mainly classrooms, from whose white walls we had to eliminate maps and posters totally unrelated to the performance and where no special lighting was available.

Of course, one of the points I have always regarded as crucial is the audience, made up of the actors' fellow students, their relatives and some faculty staff. The spectators' grasp of the spectacle, therefore, has always been – I suppose – mainly visual (apart from those students who were also taught the recited text during their literature classes). It follows that special care had to be devoted to costumes, gestures, properties and sound effects. As for these, I have always been lucky in finding somebody able to play portable musical instruments (no musical philology was ever intended, though, and a guitar was the most common source of music), and in having students well able to sing.

In different years I directed the Towneley *Secunda Pastorum* and John Heywood's *Johan Johan* and *The Pardoner and the Frere*. In 2004 I decided that it was high time I faced *Everyman*, a play I had avoided previously on various grounds, chiefly because of its continental origins and its diversity from the other extant English moral plays. But *Everyman* was – and is – one of the second-year set readings, therefore I had to teach it anyway. This time I thought of a performance place outside the university building and I found a viable solution in the common room of a private association near the faculty (the only facilities being electric sockets and a CD player with loudspeakers). The room has red-brick walls, it having been perhaps the stables of a renaissance house in Urbino. Perhaps some original walls were eliminated in the past so that the space, now used for lectures and meetings, has chairs for the audience in the main area in front of a low (and small) dais, two arches behind the audience opening towards a further zone at the back, itself with a higher arch. The backspace closed by a curtain hanging from the arch was our tiring house. At the left of the dais (for the audience facing it) there are some steps with a banister leading somewhere to an upper (invisible) floor. The spectacle was thus tailored both to the student players and to the room, so that text and performance reflected both.

## 2. *Everyman* for Italian students

The text of *Everyman*, in the English late fifteenth-century translation from Flemish, contains aspects and elements which reflect the cultural and religious context of its times. What will explode in 1517 with Luther's theses at Wittenberg is already in the air: clerics are censured for their abuses, Christianity is reacting to accusations by calling its members to the abiding of its severest laws, laypeople are requested to live their lives according to the Church's values. Therefore, besides the traditional admonition for a saint death and for a full consciousness of the totally unforeseeable arrival of death (along the lines of the medieval *Memento mori*), *Everyman* also includes a strong reproach to the clergy (lines 750-63), accused of being unfaithful servants of God. At the same time, emphasis is laid on the role of confession and penitence, therefore both on inner individual attitudes and on collective, external signs of them, together with their sacramental value.



My first thought was how to relate all this to 21<sup>st</sup>-century Italian students who, even if living in a Catholic country, not necessarily have been brought up according to Catholic, not to mention Christian, tenets. At the same time what troubled me was the main theme of the play, i.e. the coming of death, to be performed by young people, who perhaps seldom think of it, in the thoughtless powerful life instinct of youth. In the end, though, the students reacted positively and did their best to offer a performance which does not hide the tragedy of death, on one hand, but shows the Bitonto, Chiesa del Purgatorio values of Christian death, on the other.

Because, in spite of my many cuttings, the text remained definitely rooted in Christian doctrine, the purpose of the whole thing being not a rewriting of the play in a different culture but the creation of a spectacle able to foreground the a-temporality of the moral play and, simultaneously, its late medieval origins. Cuttings, therefore, were determined by the will to make the Christian (pre-Reformation) atmosphere perceptible, but not too obtrusive for a secularized 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience (and secularized players). The major intervention on the text was the abolition of two themes so much connected to the controversial times at the eve of the Reformation, that is, the long speeches by Confession and Everyman about the sacraments, and the dialogue between Five Wits and Knowledge about priesthood. As for this latter omission, I did not consider the passage relevant for those students at that time in that place (even if I wondered, actually, whether the scandalous behaviour of some clergy in our times might be shadowed in those words. But I decided to focus only on the theme of death, leaving aside other possible readings of the play). Another cut affected Everyman's leaving the stage in order to make confession: Everyman was always on stage and penance and absolution were shown as a consequence of his meeting the character Confession. The other major cut concerned the Doctor's final speech: the concentrated action of the definitive text was effective enough to convey the 'moral' of the play, so that I did not think the Doctor's lines necessary.

At the same time, the text of *Everyman* was adapted in order to help the students understand the role of the Reformation on later drama. This is why I inserted passages from Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* into the Catholic atmosphere of the morality, trying to make the contrast spectacularly striking. Also a very short passage was taken from *King Lear*, the Fool's lines about his not abandoning his king once in disgrace, once again to help actors and audience understand the recurrence of certain dramatic topics.

One major problem was to explain the presence, the use, and the functionality of allegory. All this had to be made visible. Once more the material conditions of the future performance suggested a way out: I had to use some doubling, but at the same time we had no funds for elaborate costuming that could help to diversify roles and characters, therefore I decided that allegorical personages had to wear masks, all of them in the so-called second part of the play, while Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods were played with no masking device. Once masks were introduced, I thought it feasible to make use of them for other sections of the text: a 'prologue' was added (which I called the 'prologue of the shadows') at the very beginning before the entry of Messenger, and an 'epilogue' just before Angel speaks his lines at the end.

My most relevant didactic intervention (academically so, not on a religious level) consisted in trying to create a performance that connected different ages of English literature: the mystery cycles (God and Angel wore golden masks), the moral play (*Everyman* itself), Elizabethan drama (Marlowe and Shakespeare), John Donne's religious poetry, and, finally, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since I thought it appropriate that what I have just called (improperly) 'epilogue' were accompanied by the repetition of the refrain from Dylan Thomas's "And Death Shall Have No Dominion". Actually the performance was about death, from the beginning to the end, basically acceptable both by a lay audience and by believers.

### 3. The cast and the action

There were fifteen students in the cast, only two of them young men. The first decision was to split the role of Everyman in two, a girl and a boy, in order to make the mankind represented by Everyman more universal and, not a secondary reason, not to ask too much of a single actor, the character of Everyman being continuously present on stage. Of the 921 lines of the original text only about two thirds were left, to which the inserts must be added. Everyman 1 played during about 360 lines, while Everyman 2 was on stage for the remaining 315, but in the second 'part' most of the dialogue was spoken by the other characters. Fortunately the 'first' Everyman, a girl, was theatrically trained (a training acquired in private workshops outside the university); her English, as well, was fairly good, whereas the second actor playing the protagonist (a boy) had severe problems not only with his English, but also with acting. Actually, helped by his stubborn will to play the part, his achievement was nearly acceptable (the second Everyman's part was definitely shorter than the first, this helping much, even if I still had to cut the text heavily during rehearsals). Of course a possible moment for Everyman 1 to go out and be replaced by Everyman 2 had to be found: by the simple repetition of a single sentence ("My Good Deeds, where be you?", l. 485) the change occurred, E1 going out and E2 arriving and taking the 'account book' from E1's hands. This moment also signalled the silent passage from the first to the second part of the play.<sup>1</sup> The change (as nearly everything in that performance) happened in the eyes of the audience, because our 'theatre' – as I've already said – had no properly theatrical structure.

Cross-dressing was the only way to cope with my largely female cast. There was no particular intention of mine connected to gender in having girls play roles written for male actors, whereas the decision to stage a female Everyman was quite deliberate. As for Death, I decided for a male actor to signal the northerness of the play to an Italian audience: Death is male in English and German cultures, while "Morte" is female in Italian. In this case, my 'philological' point of view prevailed on the rest.

The actors playing the proper roles of the original *Everyman* were thirteen; among them doubling was used in three cases: Angel and Beauty for one student, Confession and Kindred for another, and God and Five Wits for the third. Two other students played the embedded additions: one of them the role of Faustus in the short sequences taken from Marlowe's play, and the other King Lear's Fool.

A particular problem was given by Goods and Good Deeds: there was no place where they could hide before they started speaking, and at the same time I did not want them to 'enter' as other *dramatis personae* did. They had to be there and 'discovered', so to speak, by Everyman. Therefore a table, handy in the room because it is used for seminars and lectures, was covered with a large yellow cloth, under which Goods lay (hardly breathing, I'd say) all the time till Everyman 1 went to her. The same table also hid Good Deeds underneath: the girl playing this role squatted or sat on the floor, concealed to the audience by the folds of the yellow cloth and crawled out only when Everyman 2 arrived, thus showing her feebleness very effectively when she pronounced her speech:

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<sup>1</sup> When I was at the Université de Tours (1995) I helped the director of *Tout-homme* (the title of the French translation of *Everyman* by André Lascombes) and suggested a similar division of the protagonist's role, even if it was placed later in the play.

Here I lie cold in the ground;  
 Thy sins have me sore bound,  
 That I cannot stir. (ll. 486-8)

Once the spectators had sat down, the lights were switched off and a group of bodies – all wearing white masks (of course simple and cheap plastic ones) arrived from behind the audience. They mumbled repeatedly and in higher and higher tones the sentence “Lente, lente currite noctis equi” from *Dr Faustus*: in this way the theme of the coming of death and of man’s desire to put it off was introduced. The actors were visible because two stage hands (two students who had taken parts to everything related to the performance, but did not want to play) lit them with torches which they kept moving. This was the ‘prologue of the shadows’ I mentioned before. The actors shouted their line when reaching the dais, then they went back towards the area behind the audience and disappeared into the ‘tiring house’, still speaking. Lights went on and Messenger, so far sitting among the spectators, started her speech. At the end, when saying “Give audience, and hear what he does say.”, she gestured towards the zone at the audience’s back, while the central lights went off again and a spot illuminated God, standing on a table, her back to the curtains dividing the playing area from the tiring house. A Gregorian chant filled the time necessary to the audience to realize that they had to turn round in order to watch the action. Death arrived, played by the other boy of the group, wearing a black leather overcoat and a black mask, at the sound of “Fortuna imperatrix” from Karl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*.

When, during her speech, the girl playing God mentioned the deadly sins, two masked faces, alternately, introduced themselves by saying “I’m Proud”, or “I’m Lechery” etc., coming out of the curtains. Their masks had been decorated in gory and shiny colours by some of the students and were also used later in the performance, when two Furies arrived to carry Faustus to hell.

The action returned to its ‘normal’ place (i.e. in front of the audience, and not behind) when Death went to Everyman. The only positive effect given by the brick wall behind the two actors was the clear impression that Everyman was actually pushed ‘to the wall’ by Death, with no choice but answer the summoning. From now on the central lighting (alas, neon lamps!) was on, except during the embedded excerpts from Marlowe, when a portable red spotlight focused on Faustus, and during the ‘epilogue’ leading to Everyman’s death, when a blue filter was used.

The actress playing Faustus entered the ‘place’ from behind twice. The first time when Everyman 1 had just finished asking Death for some respite: as a parallel, Faustus pronounced the famous lines

Fair nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make  
 Perpetual day, or let this hour be but  
 A year, a month, a week, a natural day,  
 That Faustus may repent and save his soul!  
 [...] Oh, spare me, Lucifer! (V.ii.148-59)

So that Death’s following line (“Nay, thereto I will not consent,”) was an answer to both Everyman’s and Faustus’s requests. Faustus remained visible to the audience, even if in a lateral position up the steps on the left, with his back to the audience. The change of light (from normal to a diffused red) was what signalled this first ‘intrusion’, followed by

another after a short while: as soon as Everyman<sup>1</sup> had finished saying “The day passes, and is almost a-go. / I know not well what for to do” (ll. 194-5), the light changed again and Faustus, from where he stood, recited

Ah, Faustus,  
 Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,  
 And then thou must be damned perpetually.  
 Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,  
 That time may cease and midnight never come.  
 That Faustus may repent and save his soul. (V.ii.143-47)

After that, Faustus was on stage only once, in the ‘second’ part, just before Everyman<sup>2</sup>’s death. After the protagonist had accepted his end, praying God (“Here I cry God mercy”, l. 877), Faustus arrived to ask for a change in his destiny:

Oh God, if thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,  
 Yet, for Christ’s sake whose blood hath ransomed me,  
 Impose some end to my incessant pain,  
 Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,  
 A hundred thousand, and at last be saved.  
 [...] My God, my God, look not so fierce on me.  
 Adders and serpents, let me breathe awhile,  
 Ugly hell, gape not, come not, Lucifer! (V.ii.176-199)

And Lucifer appeared in the shape of two Furies (or Deadly Sins) wearing the red-painted masks, who carried Faustus away.

My purpose for this choice – as I have already explained – was to contrast Everyman’s peaceful death, his acceptance of the end, once he knows that salvation has been attained through penance and confession, with Faustus’s damnation. Devils instead of angels accompany Faustus’s death, Mozart’s music from *Don Giovanni* filling the air. Light, music and characters were so different in order to stress the divergence between pre-Reformation and Reformation drama.

I added the Fool’s lines, on the contrary, in order to show a certain thematic continuity between two eras of English drama. Soon before Everyman’s crying for God’s mercy, Good Deeds – just after Strength, Five Wits, Beauty and Discretion have abandoned Everyman – declares:

All earthly things is but vanity:  
 Beauty, Strength, and Discretion, do man forsake,  
 Foolish friends and kinsmen, that fair spake,  
 All flee save Good-Deeds, and that am I. (ll. 870-3)

These words seemed to me to offer a striking parallel with Fool’s following lines,

That sir which serves and seeks for gain  
 And follows but for form  
 Will pack when it begins to rain  
 And leave thee in the storm. (II.iv.75-8)

so as to justify the insert as an instance of the same theme in the tragic and worldly vision of *King Lear*.

Music, as already suggested, was recorded and taken – actually for few seconds each passage – from commercial CDs. It went from medieval music to the twentieth century, with Pink Floyd’s “Money” to introduce Goods. The only onstage sound was a drum beaten eight times during Death’s speech to Everyman: the sounds marked Death’s words as menacing and inescapable.

While most actors wore contemporary and casual clothes (all girls wore blue jeans except Everyman1 and Goods), some care was taken to underline unavoidable points and meanings in the play. Besides having golden masks, God and Angel wore long white robes to distinguish them from the worldly creatures. For similar reasons, Confession was clothed in a long red robe, as a remembrance of the salvation made possible by Christ’s sacrifice. The ‘garment of sorrow’, of course, had to be there, together with the scourge offered to Everyman by Confession. Everyman2, though, did not put it on, but it was laid on his shoulders by Knowledge and Good Deeds, this being effective all the same. The Fool had to be recognisable as well and therefore he arrived wearing a fool’s cap and bells. Only the girl playing Faustus had a ‘formal’ costume: she wore a black suit and tie. In black, as already mentioned, was also Death. On the whole, only some costumes were symbolic, others plain and quite normal. The more gorgeous, of course, was for Goods: a long, colourful dress, while Kindred and Cousin had identical coloured shirts. As for Everyman’s soul, I had thought of a doll, but I didn’t want some spectators to giggle exactly at the moment of the climax of the play (i.e. the confirmation of Everyman’s salvation), therefore I decided for an azure veil to be raised by Angel at the end.

#### 4. Final remarks

I am fully aware that my production eclipsed many sides and nuances of the dramatic text, certainly it was naïve, given also the practical difficulties we had to solve due to logistic problems, since the venue we performed in was not “fluid”, as Marion O’Connor calls the spatial solutions of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 1997 *Everyman* (1999: 23). For example: God was on high, but the audience had to turn round on their chairs to see him; entrances and exits were through the audience, since there was some room left between the rows of seats, roughly arranged in two groups. Also a sort of corridor was handy on the left hand side facing the stage, between some spectators standing against the wall and the last chairs. *Everyman*, though, did not effect a proper journey, but simply walked on the dais, or sat on its border. Our *Everyman* really was, using Bob Godfrey’s words, “exploratory practice” (2000: 116). An additional note for the cast: in my previous productions I had always had to face the problem of a scanty number of students ready to work with me at a performance, whereas this time I had many of them. Therefore I did not use much doubling, but I had to shorten many parts because of the students’ lack of training (and, of course, to be content with what they could do at their best). Stage hands helped in the performance and one student also in a short acting workshop held before (and also during) rehearsals. In the end, the experiment – I am convinced – worked, in spite of its many defects and drawbacks. And if on the one hand the performance insisted on the theme of death, on the other it did not altogether abolish the metaphysical dimension of the text.

My initial purpose, i.e. to link the performance to the students' syllabus, was attained especially through the inserts: apart from what I have mentioned lengthily, I wanted the added phase improperly called 'epilogue' to be a sort of chorus arriving silently on stage during Knowledge's lines "Methinks that I hear angels sing / And make great joy and melody" (ll. 891-2), and then saying the first words of John Donne's "Holy Sonnet X", "Death be not proud". At the end of Angel's speech, all the players on stage pronounced "And death shall have no dominion" over Everyman's body lying on the floor, while Angel still raised Everyman's soul. My intention in doing this was to draw a red line throughout various texts (included in the list of the students' set readings) all connected, though differently, with the theme of death, of Christian death in particular. Furthermore, the choice of Mozart's music presided to another wish of mine: to bring the students to realize the possible links between modern myths like Faustus and Don Giovanni, so relevant and persistent in western culture.

The whole adventure ended up perhaps resembling an end-of-term show with limited theatrical values, but I still think it was worthwhile: the students were happy about their performance, new friendships were born, and my aim had been achieved: they, and the audience, had seen how theatrical the play is, how it is necessary to tailor a text on the cast available, how it is possible to manipulate a play without eradicating it completely from its original contextual culture. How, at last, the theme of death of an old medieval play is always 'contemporary' and never out of fashion.

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