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Beginner's Luck? A First-Time Director Tackles a York Play

2006 was a year of firsts for me: My first term teaching abroad; my first summer term living in Cambridge; and, my first opportunity to direct a play. Although I had acted in many plays in the past, and had participated in many of those activities one does in student productions—painting sets, building scaffolding, cleaning dishes we had used in performance in the public restroom down the hall because there was no actual shop for the theatre—I had never so much as run a sound or lighting cue, and had certainly never directed. Like all amateur actors, I had made an occasional suggestion, and a few times they had found their way into performance, but I always looked at myself as subject to the director and more like a student than a teacher when I was engaged in a play. I welcomed being in a situation where I wasn't expected to have the definitive solution, but instead could be part of a larger creative performance that at least occasionally resulted in something remarkable. Beauty wasn't always the result, of course, but there were traces of it often enough that I kept doing it until other responsibilities just became to time-consuming. Even when an actor, I was aware, of course, that a director is the key to creating an aesthetically powerful piece of theatre, and moreover that he or she tends to be responsible for the lion's share of the explicit choices involved in the production, inevitably receiving some of the praise and much of the blame for its success or failure.¹

Offered under the auspices of the Arizona for Medieval and Renaissance Center Summer Program, my class was entitled 'City and Cycle in Medieval York', and included a field trip from St. Catherine's College, Cambridge, to York to attend a performance of

eleven of the mystery plays put on by the Gilds of York at four different acting locations around the city. Students also had the opportunity, if they wished, to travel up to York with me the day before the performance and attend a lecture by Margaret Rogerson on the performance history of the York cycle over the last hundred years. As that mid-July weekend was the final weekend of the York Early Music Festival students who came early could also attend some of its events, which included a lecture on music in the York cycle, and there were also opportunities to pay a bit of extra money and have one of the Official York Guides take you on a Mystery Play walk that would include stops at all of the medieval pageant stations as well as some of the modern playing places.

Despite these attractions, my class was only moderately popular. I was advised, in fact, by the ACMRS Study Abroad Coordinator to include the word ‘mystery’ in my course title, as it would likely result in an additional student or two taking the class. Although at the time I applauded myself for holding to my scholarly principles in avoiding the anachronistic term ‘mystery’ play, I eventually came to regret that I hadn’t used the term and perhaps attracted more students. I started out with two graduates and five undergraduates, but two of the undergraduates quickly changed to another class after



the first day. One needed a different kind of credit, and another was intimidated by the Middle English in the class text, Beadle and King’s *The York Mystery Plays*.² This edition is, in fact, a somewhat modernized and regularized text, but the language was still unfamiliar enough to make some

students nervous. Health concerns took a third student out of class and into the hospital by the end of the third week, which left two undergraduates, two graduates, and myself as potential class members with a scant two weeks to prepare for performance.

My students were introduced to the York plays during the first week of class, during this time they read several of the plays, a bit of performance history, and watched video excerpts from several of the 1998 productions. Nevertheless, the performance on July 16th in York was--for all the students--their first experience with live medieval theatre. It was, by and large, a fortunate encounter. The 2006 York Guild productions were varied in style and quality, some making innovative production choices while others performing in the style of past productions. One of the interesting things about the productions was the varied style of presentation, with some plays using deliberate anachronism (*The Last Judgment*), while others attempted to create a Yorkshire inflected simulacra of Biblical time (*Entry into Jerusalem*). A few productions seemed to imply a medieval time of performance (e.g. the soldiers' costumes in *The Crucifixion*). Some employed a pageant wagon extensively, while others only used the mobile pageants to transport material which could be set up on the ground (*Doctors in the Temple*). Even the vocal style could be highly varied, with some actors singing their lines, some delivering them conversationally, and many speaking different varieties of the rich Yorkshire dialect. Occasional striking special effects, such as the whale's spout in the *Creation* pageant or the use of stilt-walkers in Pocklington School's presentation of the Potters' *The Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost*, were much appreciated by the crowd. Two of the plays were particularly striking: the brilliantly realized presentation of the Cooper's *Fall of Man* pageant by York St. John University College and Smiths' *The Temptation* by

the Guild of Freemen. This last was strikingly acted on a wagon that rose up in the shape of a craggy canvas mountain, the actors Alan Lyons and Ben Fogarty brought the struggle between Satan and Christ to



urgent dramatic life.³ Nevertheless, most students—including those that went up to York with me on Saturday—saw only half the cycle. The day was warm and York beckoned with its iced coffees, draft beer, and antique stores. The students enjoyed the plays—especially *The Fall of Man* which was a strong favorite, but they were tired of sitting in the hot sun and—unless you were under the canopy that also acted as a sounding board—straining to hear the actors. For the students, it was an interesting activity, only slightly more desirable than *Jorvik* (the York Viking Museum), and—if both attractions could be squeezed into one afternoon, so much the better. I confess to some pedagogical disappointment (it had never occurred to me I would have to require them to stay for the whole performance), but I realize that my reaction nicely delineates how my perspective fundamentally differed from those of my students. For me, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to see a selection of York plays performed in city of their origin by contemporary townspeople. For the mass of study abroad students who were not taking my class, it was just another historical attraction, neither more nor less interesting than the living history museum. Even for my students, the plays were only of passing interest, especially because we had not yet decided on a specific play, production concept, or

manner of presentation. Although we had had three class meetings, and they generally understood the concept of the cycle and had read a few plays and seen video excerpts, our production was still a rather abstract and distant future event in that they had no idea what their individual role might be in whatever play we decided upon.

Ever since I had first proposed the class in September 2005, I was aware that the pageant we decided to produce would depend in large part on the number, background, and experience of the students. Because of the small class size, some plays, such as the wonderfully ambitious *York Entry into Jerusalem*, were realistically off limits, while others such as the *Crucifixion* seemed too technically demanding and dangerous for a first-time director and a relatively inexperienced cast. Certainly, I had hopes for the production. If possible, I wished to provide the class with complete creative freedom, and I tried to expose them to the cycle's production history in books, articles, and reviews of past shows.⁴ Although I wanted them to be aware of cycle's history, I also encouraged them to take an original approach, especially if doing so would allow them to more effectively use their talents or to create a more powerful theatrical experience. I also encouraged them to think about their prospective audience. I realized that the largest part of their audience would probably consist of other students involved in the ACMRS Cambridge program, I encouraged them develop their ideas with such an audience in mind.

As I soon acknowledged, material conditions often dictated certain production choices. Our cast was small, and a brief rehearsal period prohibited a play requiring one actor to memorize huge passages of text. Even more important was the presence of the play in our textbook, Beadle and King's *York Mystery Plays*. If it wasn't in the book, it

did not get considered, which excluded twenty-five of the surviving forty-seven plays from possible production. What I hoped to find was a York play in which students could utilize their talents in appropriate roles. Although neither had any acting experience, the two graduate students had a poise and maturity that suggested they could handle longer roles. Mahlika Hopwood in particular had a certain innate dignity in her delivery, while the innate insouciance of Lowell Duckworth seemed tailor made for roles in the vice tradition. Ultimately, with some prodding on my part, we decided on the Smith's *Temptation* play in that it had a small cast, no difficult special effects, and a good deal of inherent dramatic tension.

With two women and two men to play four characters, I had sufficient actors to go round, and I could have wisely reserved myself for the positions of director and stage manager. However, I decided not to go this route partly because I wanted to give everyone a chance to perform, partly because it was an opportunity to act in a medieval play, and partly because of my experience of the York production, I decided to split the character of the Devil into three roles. In making this decision, I was probably influenced by the York Mercer's *Last Judgment* as put on in 2006 by the Company of Merchant Adventurers with the York Settlement Players. Next to the *Fall of Man*, this was one of



the most powerful productions, and one of the director's innovations was to cast three actors as God. This had the effect of breaking up a long monologue, but most

obviously it worked to suggest the Trinity, Tim Holman and Ruth Ford played the Father and the Holy Spirit, respectively, with Ms. Ford being the same actress who played God in the controversial 1996 production.⁵ The two stood on the upper balcony of the pageant, while Paul Stonehouse was a superbly scruffy blue Jesus in blue jeans and a stained T-Shirt. The junkie angels lay to stage left, with their children's faces looking disturbingly blank, a kind of silent indictment of a world they never wrought.

As far as I know, Ms. Ford's casting in 2006 caused no controversy, but it effectively suggested a feminine if also stern aspect to the York *Judgment's* God, even as her casting recalled the history of past productions, providing a connection with tradition while also experimenting with new ways of presenting the divine on stage. With such a precedent in mind, the class decided to adopt the technique for our own play, making the *Temptation's* single devil into three, and combining the play's two angels into a single role. Undergraduate Ashley Wilson seemed well suited to play this role, as she projected both youthful exuberance and a certain innocence and naiveté, both qualities well suited to the slightly perplexed angels of the Smiths' play (e.g. 181-86). In effect, we chose to emphasize the three different movements of the temptation by splitting the Devil's character along the lines suggested by his three different appeals to the Savior's human nature: to the fleshly desire (that Jesus make the stones into bread), to supernatural power (so that Jesus will be protected by the angels from the consequences of falling), and to desire for worldly power (dominion over all kingdoms). I was almost too obviously type cast as the Fleshly Devil, while Nathan became the demonic one and Lowell the Prince of this World.

Probably our most revisionist decision was the choice of Mahlika to play Christ, a choice that was the result of our read-throughs of both *The Fall of Man* and *The Temptation* during the third week of class. She had a self-possession and quiet dignity about her that allowed her to be a natural Christ. Particularly effective was her dismissal of the Worldly Devil, when she acted Christ, saying,

Cease of thy saws, thou Satanas,
 I grant nothing that thou me asks,
 To pine of hell I bide thee pass
 And wightly wend,
 And won in woe, as thou ere was,
 Without end. (157-62)

Interestingly, Ms. Hopwood was probably the most overtly religious of the students. Although I didn't quiz students on their religious beliefs, she was also among the most devout of the cast members, choosing to go to Mass at York Cathedral while I went on the Mystery Play walk offered by the Official York Guides. Whether either of these activities made her a better *imitatio Christi* or me a better demon, I can't be certain, but Mahlika projected a calmness that was wholly appropriate to the part she played. In both rehearsal and performance, she projected a natural certainty that contributed to her convincing defeat of the devil, while her obvious femininity suggested the beauty and loving nature of Christ.

Different members of the class discussed several production concepts, although in general it was difficult to get the students to make suggestions or reach a consensus. One idea that we incorporated into the final production was to visually and verbally pattern



some of the rhetorical struggle between the Devil and Christ on the theatrics of professional wrestling. This is not as far fetched as it might seem in that hyperbolic boasts so commonly made in professional wrestling are conventional, almost obligatory bits of characterization for

demonic characters in medieval plays. The roman candles, elaborate costumes, and thundering sound effects provide at least a few superficial similarities between drama devils and professional wrestlers. Nevertheless, as a class we were painfully limited in what we could do; we had neither the time nor the skills to block out a sophisticated wrestling match, and to have the Devil and Jesus grapple seemed to work against the play's emphasis on the Savior's self-control. In practice it was limited to a few Hulk Hogan poses and Mr. T. verbal inflections, especially from Lowell.

Ultimately, I chose to do an in-college performance rather than a more public one, in part because I was unfamiliar with the mechanics of offering a public performance in



Cambridge. Did I need a permit? Could we use squibs? Where could we change? A performance in the College on the last day of class at least allowed for some audience—mostly fellow students from America. Indeed, St. Catherine's provided a

number of intriguing possibilities for staging, including the main courtyard, the commons room, and the chapel. They all had various advantages and disadvantages, and I doubt it would have been possible to get permission for all of them, but I eventually settled upon a small courtyard to the right of the chapel as ideal for our purposes. Although we had no wagon, our chosen acting space allowed for spatial dynamics in performance. Using the wall around a circular garden plot as a stage, Mahlika's Jesus was elevated above the Devils and the audience. While it occurred to me to use the circular plot as a kind of *mappa mundi*, rather after the manner of the famous *Macro Castle of Perseverance* diagram, in point of fact I didn't consider this possibility for long, as the audience was not in a position to even appreciate the garden's circular shape. In truth, I was also somewhat worried how the groundskeepers would react about these American visitors trampling their shrubbery. Ashley Wilson, playing the angel, was on stage left of Mahlika at ninety degrees around the circle. The 'good' characters were thus on the same horizontal plane, one distinct from the devils and spectators, an elevated plane suggestive of a stage of spiritual maturity that the others had not yet achieved. This courtyard was a fortunate staging area in other ways too. It had a wall dividing it from the main section of the college; this had the effect of creating a certain intimacy, although the new portion of the college, looming behind the actors, worked against this. The dividing wall also allowed the actors' voices to



bounce off, trapping the sound so that projection was not as large a problem as I had feared it would be. The courtyard also had a stairwell leading down to the basement of the science building, the entrance providing a naturally hell mouth which we opportunistically seized upon, so that the devils suggestive of the World, the Flesh, and the Devil might appear to come from the bowels of the earth.

Costumes were a combination of manufactured and ad hoc. The ready-made elements were a halo with appropriate glitter, devil's capes, carnival upper face masques, and horns that could be supplied with a battery to flash off and on. All of these were purchased at local costume shops. My idea was to pass the devil's horns from actor to actor as each one played Satan, a concept that probably owes something to improvisational game of Changing Emotions, an acting exercise in which actors must alter their behavior according to an object they hold that has a particular emotion or character type assigned to it.⁶ In performance, my idea proved unfortunate, as the horns weren't properly on Nathan's head and promptly fell off, laying on the ground for the remainder of the play. Carnival half masks, although modern, suggested the medieval practice of face painting so that Mahlika and Ashley appeared gilded. I also got some theatrical face paint with which I painted the lower half of my face a bright red. I consciously did this in imitation of Dan Noake, whose impressive make up had materially contributed to his powerful portrayal of Satan in the *Fall of Man* play in York three weeks earlier. The various actors playing aspects of the devil all managed to find a more or less vaguely demonic shirt to wear, from my too tight 'God's busy. Can I help you?' T-shirt with a Devil's face, to Lowell's 'I'm not dead yet' one, to Nathan's wholly appropriate ASU Sun Devils shirt. The women's costumes were largely sheets, but many

props that I had bought to experiment with—angel sock puppets, wooden snakes, and kazoo, were discarded before the performance. One effect we kept and used were squibs, small cloth packets of explosive power that would give off a satisfying crack if hurled against the ground. I had bought a box of fifty of at the Ely folk festival on my first night in Cambridge, where I had also picked up the sock puppets and other small props I thought might be useful in drawing the class into the spirit of performance, although only a few of them ended up being used in the performance. The squibs were, if anything, too successful, as they addictively attractive to the men in the cast, so I doled them out carefully, as we needed to save some twenty or so for our actual performance.

I kept the blocking simple; again, this was probably more the result of the compressed rehearsal time frame than a conscious artistic choice. I had considered having all of the devils hiding behind the circle, or entering from behind the audience, but the discovery of the stairwell resulted in a decision to have us all come up from there. The



two actors who were not ‘in action’ would freeze while the actor involved in presenting a particular aspect of the devil could move about, soliciting Christ or the audience as seemed best. Mahlika and Ashley, playing Jesus and the angel, entered first and took up their positions, which they wouldn’t shift from until Mahlika finished her final speech

and left through the crowd and the archway leading to the main courtyard of St.

Catherine's. A couple of small props in addition to the squibs were added, pretty much on



the day of performance. As the fleshly aspect of the temptation, I offered Jesus an apple, which I then tasted and spit out, a bit of stage business I believe was intended to suggest how the Devil's presumed victory was turning to ashes in his mouth in a not-so-subtle allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In a parallel bit of action, Lowell's worldly devil threw coins among the crowd shortly before offering Christ all the kingdoms of the

world. The coins worked well, in large part because they made a nice ringing sound when landing on the cement blocks of the courtyard, while the apple seemed to fall rather flat, perhaps in part because it was relatively difficult for the spectators to see what I was holding.

Given our compressed time frame, rehearsals were comparatively minimal, with only one semi-dress rehearsal the day before. Part of reason was undoubtedly my own difficulty in memorizing my lines, although I had mastered much longer parts previously with no problem. As a result, I was loathe going off book, and had a hard time requiring others to adequately learn their parts when I had such difficulty with my own. One partial remedy was to truncate my lines and—indeed—about sixty lines or so were cut from the

play as a whole. This helped, but didn't fully ameliorate the situation, and even on the day of performance I visibly struggled to come up some of my lines.

The final day of class was something of a performance day for the ACMRS Summer Program, as other classes also culminated their terms with the performances of scenes from Shakespeare or imagined historical mini-plays about the peasant's revolt. The audience was small, of about twenty to thirty people, mostly other Arizona students. The performance was a relative success despite problems. To respond to the question poised by my title, beginner's luck would seem to have operated in my case. We got



through the performance, although not really with flying colours and most of the problems I can trace to my failures of direction. Inevitably, some planned effects either did not work off or didn't come off as well as I had hoped. For example, I also had forgotten to stress to my cast some elementary dos and don'ts of stage acting such as standing still when another actor was speaking. As mentioned above, the devil's horns proved an awkward prop to

handle; I had to steady it on my own head a couple of times, and they fell off of Nathan's head almost as soon as he started moving. With more rehearsal and some sticky tape, this could have perhaps been avoided. More embarrassingly, I wasn't adequately prepared for my cue and exited too early, being followed by Nathan who wisely decided it would look

more like we planned it that way if we both went off together. Nevertheless, Lowell delivered the last part of his temptation speech with aplomb, so that Mahlika was able to deliver her final lines in relative dignity, with her exit line ‘I will wend’ (210), being particularly effective in the way it suggested the start of Christ’s ministry and his taking on of the human condition, walking and wending through the world. In some ways her descent from the garden wall, with a chair and an overturned wastebasket serving as a makeshift stairway, was the most effective bit of stage business as she came down,



passed serenely though the audience, and passed serenely through the open gate to St. Catherine’s main courtyard. Although two of the devils had exited early, most of the audience didn’t seem to notice or greatly care if they did. Although it seems

perverse to look at this as a potential advantage of a medieval dramatic text, from the standpoint of the director, it is comforting to realize that—in most performance situations (SITM conferences excepted)—most spectators will not be familiar with the play you are performing and that they may well overlook gaffes that seem astoundingly obvious to you.

The question becomes, what did I learn from this experience and—far more importantly—what have I learned that will be valuable to other directors or scholars of

medieval theatre? Certainly, I learned that little things count and material conditions can be important determinants of actually appears and occurs on stage. One wonders, for example, if the Smiths' longstanding controversy with the Guild of Cutlery makers (aka the Bladesmiths) might have added to the dramatic tension of a particular performance,⁷ but neither the records nor the play register seem to document such performance details. Having said that, let me add that sometimes big things count surprisingly little—most of the audience is there to be

entertained and (occasionally) edified and they are not necessarily inclined to be demanding or check your performance against the play text in the manner of the York City Council. Institutions like classes or or even guilds can have a good deal of innate inertia; if a play is part of the design of the class, or a traditional activity of a guild, a play will tend to get done, with the



members themselves able to come over a surprising number of obstacles—even a first time director—in having a show go on. As Geoffrey Rush, playing Philip Henslowe in the film version of *Shakespeare in Love*, exclaims to his creditor about the seemingly impossible prospect of ever performing any theatrical production in the face of multitudinous creative, personal, social, and financial obstacles creative ‘It’s a mystery’.⁸

Photographs by Marie Scherb-Clift

Notes

¹ My career up until last summer had, to a large degree, straddled theatre and drama. Employed as a Professor of English, I had written literary criticism including some of what would generally fall under the heading of Performance Criticism, as well as a few reviews of performances of medieval plays. In addition to the plays I reviewed, I had probably seen about a dozen medieval plays in production that I hadn't reviewed, and acted in about fifteen more, although only one of these was actually a medieval play. The Cambridge Study Abroad program course thus offered a unique opportunity to me, one that had the potential to be a real high point of my career.

² *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*. Ed. Richard Beadle and Pamela King. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Parenthetical references to line numbers are to this edition, which was the one we used for our production. The standard scholarly text of the complete cycle is *The York Plays*. Ed. Richard Beadle. York Medieval Texts, 2nd Series. London: Edward Arnold, 1982). Photographs by Marie Scherb-Clift.

³ *The York Mystery Plays, 9th & 16th July 2006*. York, 2006. All cast names and production information for the July 2006 York productions are from this program.

⁴ John Elliott, Jr. *Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989; Barbara I. Gusick, 'A Review of the York Millennium Mystery Plays'. *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 40 (2001): 111-32; Jane Oakshott, 'York Guilds' Mystery Plays 1998: the rebuilding of dramatic

community', in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*. Studies in the Peoples and Cultures of Northern Europe 1. Ed. Arthur Hindley (Brepols, 1999). 270-89; Bob Potter, 'The York Plays: University of Toronto, 20 June 1998'. *Medieval English Theatre* 19 (1997): 121-8; Rogerson, Margaret. 'Everybody Got their Brown Dress': Mystery Plays for the Millennium'. *New Theatre Quarterly* 17, no. 2 [66] (2001): 123-40; Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

⁵ Kenneth Lucas, 'Playing God', *Bolton Evening News*, March 5th, 1996.
 Accessed on March 30th, 2007 at
<http://archive.prestwichandwhitefieldguide.co.uk/1996/3/5/857867.html>.

⁶ In this acting exercise, the actors hold two objects, which they pass around. Their emotions change depending on which object is in their hand. I am probably most familiar with the game from *Whose Line Is it Anyway?*

⁷ *York*. Records of Early English Drama. Ed. Alexandra Johnston and Margaret Rogerson. 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 45-6, 59-60, 123-4, 174-5, 186, 252.

⁸ Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard. *Shakespeare in Love*. Dir. By John Madden. 1998.