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A Star Is Born: Staging Choices in
The Nativity and *The Shepherds*

In June 1998 the Le Moyne College Theatre Program produced the York Tilethatchers' and Chandlers' plays, *The Nativity* and *The Shepherds*.[1] This was part of the full production of The York Plays led by the Poculi Ludique Societas (PLS) at The University of Toronto. The plays from the outset presented several challenges. First, they would be produced in tandem – that is, both plays would use the same actors and stable set for the Holy Family. This would test the theory that the originals were performed this way. Second, we were to use only one wagon, rather than two, as in the 1995 PLS production for the 8th Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour l'étude du Théâtre Médiéval (SITM), held at Toronto.[2]

While we had fun working on these puzzles, a second pair emerged as even trickier: how does a baby get born on stage, and how does a star rise and shine in the heavens? How we made our choices is a story not only of the collaboration that is theatrical production, but also of our collaboration with medieval studies scholars through their publications, their productions, and their e-mail. Our thesis is this: If you watched these plays and thought your work was a basis for any of our decisions, you are doubtless right.

Although we have produced several early dramas over the years, our field is theatre rather than medieval theatre. (To illustrate, Le Moyne's 1998–9 Theatre Program productions were *Thin Air*, a new play by Lynne Alvarez about revolution in Central America, and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.) Our way into a show is a consequence of this. If you are a medieval specialist, we hope to give you an idea of how theatre practitioners use your work.

Our final staging results from clues we find in the script itself, scholarship on these and related plays, immersion in art of the time and place, descriptions of other productions, the availability of money, people, and materials, the constraints of the spaces where we will perform, the needs of our audiences, and our own invention. We also follow the style set out by the organizers.

Scripts

We began our research by reading the script. We first had both the Bevington and the Beadle Middle English editions, as well as the Purvis translation,[3] but by fall 1997 Kim Yates had sent us her translation, which she had completed for the 1995 PLS production.[4] We also read about York, its cycle, and our guilds.

Iconography

We decided to work from the theory that this Nativity play, in its simplicity, may have been based on the vision of Saint Bridget.[5] First, in the vision, no one but the Virgin is present at the birth. Second, the Virgin is clearly pregnant at first, and the baby suddenly appears lying on her robe without any apparent labour. These visuals fit the script.

We also chose, both in costume and scenic design, to follow the Franciscan shift in iconography emphasizing the poverty of Jesus.[6] We especially looked at Dürer's Nativities. Costume fabrics for the Holy Family and the shepherds were rough; the angels wore smooth fabrics in pastel green, salmon, yellow, and dun, wings of white turkey feathers (never again), and golden crowns with white roses and candles. (We tried for medieval wavy hair, but the sky drizzled on the angels' heads while they watched *The Creation* at 6:00 am.) We designed a falling-apart stable, matching Joseph's comment, 'The roof is rent above our heads, / The walls are down on every side' (ll.17–18), and a contrasting golden star. As in much period nativity art, the beams of the star would shine down into the stable. Somehow.

We also added ox and ass puppets, heads and necks only, looking into the stable as if from a stall. The script calls for them to warm Jesus with their breath. Suspended invisibly by black wire, their heads nodded at a slight touch from backstage.

Misdirection

Since no stage directions indicate when the baby is born and when the star appears, we had to choose the precise moments by finding a logical place in the lines. Mary's speech (ll.50–6), after Joseph exits to search for firewood, clearly surrounds the birth:

Now in my soul great joy have I;
    I am all clad in comfort clear.

Now will be born of my body   ←*now you don't see him*
   Both God and man together here.
    Blessed must he be.
  Jesus my son that is so dear…
    Now born is he.   ←*now you do*

So the baby is born between lines 55 and 56. But how?

We put this puzzle aside to look for the place of the star's rising. The star has to be in place by line 78, when Joseph returns into the scene, but still outside the stable, and says:

Ah lord God, what light is this
   That comes shining thus suddenly?
I cannot say, as I have bliss.
   When I come home unto Marie
    Then shall I ask her.   (ll.78–84)

When Joseph goes in and sees the baby, he does comment on the light:

JOSEPH.   Me marvels much at this, His light
       That shines so brightly in this place.
       Forsooth it is a wondrous sight.
MARY.   This has he ordained of grace,
         my son so young:
       A star to be shining out a space
        at his birthing.   (ll.92–8)

Both these last two lines and the next ones emphasize the simultanaeity of the birth and the star's rising:

For Balaam told full long before,
   How that a star should rise full high
And of a maiden should be bore;
   A son that shall our saving be
    From all cares keen.   (ll.100–4)

Aha! said we. If the star and the birth are simultaneous, then enacting the birth is easy. The audience will watch the gleaming star rise – by the time they look back, our actress will have produced the baby unobserved. Somehow.

Misdirection is a simple and effective way of creating an illusion. We knew of at least two examples from other plays – though neither were medieval. In the staging of Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, Tell must shoot the apple off his son's head (3.3). The son stands stage right with his back to the wings, apple on head. Tell stands right of centre, aiming the arrow into the wings. At this moment in the script, three characters start a fierce argument and draw swords stage left. Simultaneously, as the audience watches the fight, Tell shoots the arrow into the wings, the boy drops the apple, and a stagehand rolls an apple with an arrow through it on stage. All this takes only a second. A crowd member raises a cry, and the audience looks back to see that Tell has done the deed.[7]

A second example of misdirection in staging is in Max Reinhardt's production of Hugo von Hoffmanstahl's *Jedermann [Everyman]* for the Salzburg Festival, outdoors on the cathedral square. The play was first performed in 1920. Mathilde Danegger recalled:

> Sometimes it was almost like magic.... On the great *Domplatz* a huge table was decked, and the rich Everyman caroused there with his friends. Suddenly Death stood behind him and called him. The friends fled. Black birds flew over the square. And Everyman (Alexander Moissi) stood alone on the square. I have seen the presentation six times, and every time I have resolved: this time you will get behind the trick, now you will see when he takes away this laden table. I have never been successful. I have never noticed it, because one becomes so fascinated by Moissi, who naturally plays splendidly, by the black birds that fly over the square, and by the call of Death: 'Everyman!' It was not to be gotten behind.[8]

Clearly, if we could get the audience's eyes off Mary at the key moment, we could deliver the baby unseen. As it happened, the solution to the star and its radiances was also the solution to birthing the baby.

We also wanted to use candles since we were combining the Tilethatchers' play with the Chandler's play and using the same props in both plays. Since Joseph exits to 'get us light to see' (l.43), we gave him a candle to carry back into the stable – a comic moment, since the candlelight is now engulfed by the starlight. How could we make a star using candles? Our local chandler, Cathedral Candle Company, offered to make us the 'immense and brilliant wax taper' described by St Bernard,[9] which we would have held up on a pole in a cresset, a swiveled, cup-shaped holder suitable for large candles, as described by Clifford Davidson.[10] But we thought of the Toronto wind and rain, as well as images of wagons going up in flames, and chickened out. Instead, our star was a flat, eight-pointed gold foil wrapped object about 30"

long by 18" wide. Attached to its back were four gold fabric ribbons about 3" wide and 15' long. The other end of the ribbons were attached to a spool at the base of our wagon just upstage of the manger. The star was attached by a short length of golden chain to a telescoping pole approximately 12' long. On the front of the flat star, we mounted an open lantern holding an artificial candle with a battery operated flicker bulb.

Upstage of the wagon and hidden from the audience was our angel choir, who would astonish the shepherds in the second play. Immediately following Mary's line 'Jesus my son that is so dear' (l.55), they sang a few beautiful wordless notes, as our tallest angel slowly raised the star, which swung precariously from its chain. As the star went slowly up, the ribbon radiances unfurled and stretched down to the manger. Meanwhile, Mary, kneeling and facing slightly upstage to view the star rising, slipped the infant and his radiance out from a large pocket under the false front of her gown, and placed it on the ground in front of her on her robe. As she then said 'Now born is he,' the audience's attention swung back to Mary – and they had missed it.

This moment drew applause and astonished laughter at each of the four stations. Several audience members followed our show from station to station to find out how the moment worked. Some audience members, we are bound to say, expressed some jealous comparisons to their own childbirth labours, but divinity has its privileges. When we did this show at two Syracuse churches in December nobody laughed – the children in their Nativity pageants had been giving birth invisibly and painlessly for years.

Music

Because we first produced our play in the fall of 1997, we did not yet have music assigned by the PLS. What we did about this corresponds eerily with several of Richard Rastall's theories on medieval practice – not because we intentionally followed his theories, but because we worked under constraints similar to those he describes.[11] Rastall says of the civic cycles: 'The organizers and actors alike were non-musicians whose business was never liturgy', and so it was with us, largely. We turned to our medieval and liturgical musician friend Sheila Murphy, who said she would compose period-style settings to suit our singers, script, and staging. She also rehearsed the singers. We had already decided to use our children to play the angels, for practical reasons: first, it was cheaper – they had to come with us to Toronto anyway, and they did the work free; second, they had the choral training in the right style; third, they were experienced and dependable performers. Four angels created

a sufficient multitude of the heavenly host for one pageant wagon, and four angels often appear in Nativity art.

We then had to figure out just where we wanted music – in both senses. We assumed, as Rastall says, 'the play texts do not always specify what piece is to be sung; [also] the plays may have included heavenly music where there is no indication of it'.[12] Hence, we felt free to insert the a capella 'ah' over the raising of the star. In *The Shepherds* play, we also knew a MS leaf was missing, which had probably contained the angels appearing to the shepherds.[13] To make a complete script, Yates had filled in with a passage from the Coventry Shepherds' play.[14] This passage contained a rubric for a 'Gloria in excelsis deo'. However, it did not contain the angels' announcement of the birth and directions to the manger.[15] In the York script, the shepherds repeat what the angels have told them:

> An angel brought us tidings new,
> A babe in Bethlehem be born
> Of whom did speak our prophesies true.
> And bade us meet him there this morn. (ll.94–7)

Because these lines restate – or even translate – the angelic message (*Luke* 2:10–12, 'Be not afraid ...'), we decided to add all our angels singing the announcement in Latin, both to match the 'Gloria' and to contrast heaven and earth. The message could have been spoken and/or in English just as well, or delivered by one angel as in *Luke* (2:9). But we felt freer to add a song than speech. Also, we had all these singers and a willing composer. We placed the message thus:

> SHEPHERD 1. This star with piercing rays so keen
> What think you two that it might mean?
> [The angels sing 'Nolite timere'.]
> SHEPHERD 3. Ah now is come the time foretold
> By ancient fathers from of old
> That in the winter's night so cold
> A maid should bear a flower so bold. (ll.57–62)

After Shepherd 1 says 'I can sing it as well as he / ... If ye will help, sing on! Let's see / for thus it was' (ll.82–6), all the shepherds sang an off-key imitation of the 'Gloria' they had just heard. For their travelling-to-Bethlehem music, we copied the PLS production in using 'Nova, nova.' In retrospect, we wonder how the shepherds could suddenly have known the whole story

of Mary to which 'Nova, nova' relates. Perhaps another production could try a different song.

Did using one wagon work?

Staging both plays using one wagon and one Holy Family worked very well for this production, particularly in terms of practical considerations. It streamlined the exchange of wagons, saving time. By practising mounting our set on the wagon (our setup time was about 15 minutes), we closed up a twenty-minute gap in the overall production. Waiting for a second wagon to free up might have caused a major delay. It also simplified our transportation needs – another wagon would have demanded a second set of some sort and necessitated another vehicle to get it to Toronto, plus more crew. Historically, too, if the Tilethatchers and the Chandlers shared sets and props, they could have relied on each others' expertise and avoided having to duplicate the stable, Joseph's candle, and the star. Artistically, having the second wagon to indicate the shepherds' fields and to allow them some physical distance from the Nativity wagon would have been nice.

Final Thoughts

As always in our forays to Toronto, these shows were a mixture of researching the hard work others had already done, taking from it what we could practically use, taking advantage of a mix of experienced actors and young, strong actors (our teen angels told us they could easily do another dozen stations), and adapting to the realities of the performance space(s) and circumstances. The York Plays in Toronto were tremendously good fun for us.

Notes

1   Le Moyne College is a Jesuit liberal arts college in Syracuse, NY. The Theatre Program is currently part of the English Department. Our company included faculty, staff, students, and children. Director: Michael B. Barbour; scenic designer: Karel Blakeley; costume designer: Kristi McKay; composer: Sheila Murphy; actors: Mary – Amy Halpin; Joseph – Neil Novelli; Shepherds – Matt Riley, Juan Villa, Sean Pratt; Angels – Alec, Rosalind, Jessica, and Fiona Barbour; stage manager and offstage alto angel – Moira Kelly; dramaturge – Susan Becker Barbour; puppet maker – Kendra Lawton; star maker – Liz

Donnelly; asst. stage manager – Stephanie Higgins. For a succinct description of the Le Moyne production, see Michael Barbour and Susan Barbour, Report on The York Nativity and The Shepherds, *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 38 (1999), 127–130. Photographs of the Toronto performance appear at the following websites: <www.lemoyne.edu/academic_affairs/department/ theater/index.htm>, <www.arts-sciences.cua.edu/engl/toronto/york98.htm>, <www.artemis.austinc.edu/acad/hwc22/Medieval/York/york98.html>.

2 Diana Wyatt, Review of TheYork Nativity Sequence, *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 35 (1996), 137–9.

3 Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982); David Bevington (ed), *Medieval Drama* (Boston, 1975); J.S. Purvis (trans), *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (London, 1957); Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds), *York*, 2 vols, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto, 1979).

4 Although Kimberly Yates and Chet Scoville later revised the scripts for the June 1998 production of The York Plays, they graciously allowed us to perform with the earlier version which we had already produced in Syracuse in December 1998. In this paper, we are quoting from the earlier version.

5 See Clifford Davidson, *From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (New York, 1984), 17–19, and J.W. Robinson, 'The York Play of the Nativity', *Studies in Fifteenth Century Stagecraft*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 14 (Kalamazoo, 1991), 60–80.

6 Davidson, *From Creation to Doom*, 18. We looked at many, many examples of early art. Some collections we found most helpful were: Marcel Belvianes, *The Virgin Mary Through the Eyes of the Painters* (London, 1951); Estelle May Hurll, *The Madonna in Art* (Boston, 1898); Peter Streider, *Albrecht Dürer: Paintings, Prints, Drawings* (New York, 1982); Clara Erskine Clement Waters, *Angels in Art* (Boston, 1898). We were influenced by the work of children's book illustrator Tomie De Paola, himself a student of medieval art.

7 Fredrich Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*, Karl Breul (ed) (Cambridge, 1949).

8 'Manchmal war es auch wie Zauberei. ... Auf dem grosser Domplatz war eine riesige Tafel gedeckt, und der reiche Jedermann zechte dort mit seinen Freunden. Plötzlich stand der Tod hinter ihm und rief ihm. Die Freunde entflohen. Schwarze Vögel flogen über den Platz. Und der Jedermann (der Moissi) stand allein auf dem Platz. Ich habe die Vorstellung sechsmal gesehen, und ich habe mir immer wieder vorgenommen: Diesmal kommst du hinter den Trick, du wirst jetzt sehen, wenn er diese gedeckte Tafel wegnimmt. Es ist mir nicht gelungen. Ich habe es nie bemerkt, weil man so fasziniert wird von dem Moissi, der natürlich herrlich spielte, von dem schwarzen Vögeln, die über den Platz flogen, und den Rufen des Todes: "Jedermann!". Es war nicht

dahinterzukommen.' Dieter Kranz, quoting Mathilde Danegger in 'Ich glaube an die Unsterblichkeit des Theaters,' ['I Believe in the Immortality of the Theatre'], Max Reinhardt, *Schriften: Briefe, Reden, Aufsätze, Interviews, Gespräche, Auszüge aus Regiebüchern* [*Writings: Letters, Speeches, Conversations, Interviews, Discussions, Excerpts from Promptbooks*], Hugo Fetting (ed) (Berlin, 1974), 410–11. [Wandering the Victoria College quad during the afternoon York Plays revealed the literalness of the expression 'get behind the trick.']

 9 Quotation from J.W. Robinson, 'The York Shepherds' Play and the First Shepherds' Play', *Studies in Fifteenth Century Stagecraft*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 14 (Kalamazoo, 1991), 81.

10 Clifford Davidson, *Technology, Guilds, and Early English Drama* (Kalamazoo, 1996), 54.

11 Richard Rastall, 'Music in the Cycle Plays', *Contexts for Early English Drama*, Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (eds) (Bloomington, Indiana, 1989), 198–9.

12 Rastall, 'Music in the Cycle Plays', 199.

13 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 130.

14 'The York Nativity Plays – Poculi Ludique Societas, University of Toronto', *Performance Programme, 8th International Colloquium, SITM*, 2–9 August 1995.

15 K. Yates (trans), 'Play XV: The Chandlers – The Shepherds', unpublished (see note 4).