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KAREN SAWYER

Reflections on *The Resurrection*

> Make no mistake: if He rose at all
> it was as His body;
> if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
> reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
> the Church will fall. John Updike, 'Seven Stanzas at Easter'[1]

A number of factors prompted me to direct *The Resurrection* for the York Cycle at Toronto. Among them were personal conviction, practical application, and possibly a touch of predestination. Feeling, as Updike did, the weight of this key moment in salvation history, I wanted to present the play in a way that would evoke a sense of awe and immediacy in a disparate, secular audience. A more pragmatic factor was the play's relationship to my dissertation, an edition and study of the sixteenth-century Protestant play, *The Resurrection of Our Lord*. Directing the York pageant gave me an opportunity to engage with the stagecraft of a story with a long and varied dramatic history, one which extends back in time to the 'quem quaeritis' tropes of the tenth century, and across space through performances in England's parishes, household and college chapels, cathedrals, and city streets. After I had begun working on the production, I made another discovery that cemented my relationship to the York play; though I had been aware that the Carpenters had been responsible for this pageant, I learned that this guild had joined forces with others for the production, sharing the expenses with the city's Joiners, Cartwrights, Carvers, and *Sawyers*.

My thinking about the production was influenced by the work of previous directors and scholars. Pamela Sheingorn's article on the Resurrection moment in medieval drama encouraged me to think carefully about the iconographic and theological aspects of Christ's emergence from the tomb.[2] In addition, I had seen the end-on production of the pageant which the Joculatores Lancastrienses had performed at York in 1992 under the direction of Meg Twycross, and was very

impressed by the expressive performance of the actor playing Pilate, by the way the soldiers cleared playing space in the street, and by the careful attention to costume detail. Though I did not read Professor Twycross' thoughtful article on her 1977 staging of the same pageant until our own production was very close to performance, I was happy to find that her cast and mine had found similar explanations for and resolutions to some of the puzzling moments in the text.[3] Mary Magdalene's second lament after the angel has told her, 'He is risen', is one such crux. The playwright's Gospel harmonization may account for this illogicality, but the actor must still find a way to differentiate this second lament from the one she shares earlier with the three Marys as they enter. Twycross describes the change dramaturgically as 'a shift from the liturgical mode . . . back to the meditative, affective, personal mode',[4] and our own Mary Magdalene also negotiated the seeming repetition by moving from a formal expression of loss shared with her 'sisters' to an intimate awareness of the meaning of Christ's death: 'It was for my deeds he was slain, / And not for his' (ll.285–6).[5]

The Toronto production offered participants opportunities to experiment with both end-on and side-on wagon configurations. However, station 2, between Victoria Quad and Pratt Library, was less than ideal for end-on staging; the audience members would be ranged on the wide expanse of the quad, and not surrounding the wagon as they did in the narrow streets of York. It seemed to me that the alignment of the wagon was less important than the possibilities of playing to an audience on at least three sides of the wagon. The 1992 Lancaster wagon had boasted an ingenious gabled roof from which the angel descended, but this charming effect, as well as other action on the wagon deck itself, had been lost to spectators watching from second-storey windows, a vantage point that was popular in both medieval and modern-day York. These considerations made a free-standing backdrop the most desirable superstructure for our wagon.

Other design decisions gave our production strong visual impact, and these resulted from long discussions with Laurence Koppe, who designed, constructed, and painted the set. We had little guidance from the York documents, for no descriptions of the Carpenters' pageant, props, or costumes survive. The only extant records deal with arguments over cost-sharing between the guilds, an aspect of the medieval productions which resonated centuries later as the costs of implementing our design spiraled upwards!

Since the guilds used their pageants as showcases for their crafts, we figured that the Carpenters would have built something special for their pageant – something that creatively addressed the two locations demanded in the text. Inspired by the wagon used by the travelling players in the film of Tom

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a 'surprise box' of transformations, Laurence hoped to delight Toronto audiences with unexpected effects on the Resurrection wagon. The resulting backdrop, in its triptych-like structure, also drew on medieval art. It consisted of a back panel with two overlapping curved 'wings' that opened out to form an elongated semicircle, eighteen feet wide and six feet high. For the scenes in Pilate's court, the 'wings' remained closed, and their backs, which faced the audience, were draped in burgundy crushed velvet with gold accents. The triangular portion of the back panel that was not covered by these wings resembled a stone wall. We hoped to establish an environment of a richly-appointed fortress – a suitable setting for the scenes of secular power-mongering that begin and end the play. Pilate's throne sat on a black dais on the wagon deck, and its semicircular curves foreshadowed the far larger curve of the set that would appear with the Resurrection.

As Pilate's soldiers marched into the audience and back to the wagon to guard the sepulchre, stagehands removed Pilate's throne and swung open the sides of the triptych, revealing the expansive semicircular backdrop. Gilded rays of light streamed from the upper right-hand corner of the semicircle to illuminate Calvary in the distance on the left. The stone wall that had suggested stability in the court scenes was fully exposed in this dawn landscape as a fragment of broken masonry, a sign of the earthquake that the Centurion reports to Pilate early in the play:

> Each element, and everything,
> In its own manner made mourning,
> In every stead.
> All knew by countenance their king;
> That he was dead. . . .
> . . . . . .
> The earth it trembled, and like man,
> Began to speak.
> The stones that never stirred 'till then,
> Asunder creak. (ll.86–90, 93–6)

To further represent the radical impact of the Crucifixion on the fabric of the world, the set's horizon line curved with the edge of the backdrop. This resulted in a warped landscape that seemed to be viewed through a distorting lens. Finally, the dais, which had supported Pilate's throne, was revealed as the sepulchre itself.

We hoped to reinforce the symbolism of the set design with costume choices that connected or contrasted various characters. A limited palette of

black, white, gold, and red, the last colour ranging in shades from burgundy to crimson, unified the three sections of the play. For example, Pilate and the High Priests were garbed in black, red, and gold. The three Marys entered in black cloaks but shed them after the angel's announcement to reveal a white, red, and gold colour scheme. Mary Magdalene's scarlet gown, adorned with heavy gold jewelry, recalled the red and gold vision of Christ's emergence from the tomb, and, we hoped, underscored the close relationship between these two characters so poignantly depicted in the next York pageant, *Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene*.

Yet the production needed to be much more than a pretty, symbolic picture. It was crucial that the cast find the reality of their characters within this Resurrection story, that they 'walk through the door', as Updike puts it:

> Let us not mock God with metaphor,
> analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
> making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
> faded credulity of earlier ages:
> let us walk through the door. (ll.16–20)

One breakthrough occurred when we realized that the impact of the Centurion's report to Pilate depended on a long-standing relationship of trust and mutual respect between the two characters. If we take seriously Pilate's greeting, 'Centurion, good friend old and dear' (l.57), the soldier's response, 'You have done wrong, I greatly fear, / and wonder ill' (ll.59–60), strikes Pilate like a disloyal slap in the face; and his friend's revelation is all the more disturbing since the governor is already fighting his own concerns about the events at Calvary. The personal connection also energizes the Centurion's account of the Crucifixion, for he must convince Pilate of Christ's divinity, not only to retain his position, but also to save a friendship.

Actors partnered this realistic apprehension of character with the more presentational techniques required for effective open-air wagon performance. Through interaction with the audience, the cast invited others to 'walk through the door' into the world of the play. In this aspect of the production, we drew on the techniques that Philip Butterworth had used in his 1992 production of *The Crucifixion* at York.[6] Following his example, the actors made eye contact with individuals in the audience and returned to renew that contact over the course of the play. Having actors on the ground also provided a connection; the Centurion and the three Marys never ascended to the wagon, and the soldiers did so only to guard the sepulchre. The physical

proximity allowed for intimate interaction between cast and audience members, particularly as the soldiers grilled the crowd to discover the whereabouts of the supposedly dead Christ. These characters also made entrances and exits through the crowd, with mixed results. Since many audience members were sitting instead of standing right next to the wagon, off-wagon performance was visible to a large number of people, but it was hard to move audience members settled comfortably on the grass (or on a lawn chair) out of the way. Off-wagon work had to stay close to the wagon, a practice which would have been equally important in the crowded, narrow streets of York.

As my cast and I rehearsed the moment of the Resurrection, I wondered how this central mystery of the Christian faith would be received. Updike refutes any attempts to soften it as an allegory or spiritual event, and insists on its supernatural character:

> It was not as the flowers,
> each soft Spring recurrent;
> it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
> eyes of the eleven apostles;
> it was as His flesh: ours. (ll.6–10)

Christ must be clearly human, but clearly 'other'. However, the sight of a human figure climbing out of a sepulchre can be awkward, even anticlimactic. In order to avoid what *The Raising of Lazarus* director Doug Cowling described as a potential 'jack-in-the-box' effect, I sought to emphasize Christ's majesty through sound and silence, mask and gesture. If one is only encountering the play as a text to be read, one loses the impact of these elements; the stage directions for this crucial moment are quite brief, and the Resurrection is over before you know it. On stage it's quite a different matter. A thunder sheet signalled that something momentous was about to occur, and audibly divided the Resurrection from the action preceding it. Since Christ has no lines in the York play, the only other sound at his rising is the angel's song 'Christus resurgens'. A stunning, gilded, full-head mask created by Theo Dragonieri, and liberal use of gold body paint strikingly differentiated the resurrected Christ from the mortal figure of the Passion sequence. Though the body paint acquired a greenish cast over the course of the performance, it still encouraged us to consider Christ's transformed flesh in a way that a gold body suit could not. As he emerged in triumph from the sepulchre, his outstretched arms echoed the curve of the backdrop, a gesture which the angel and Mary Magdalene also used each time they bore witness with the words 'He is risen'.

The audience's enthusiastic reaction to the moment of resurrection testified both to the power of theatre and to the power of the story we were enacting. At least one audience member confessed that the sight sent a shiver down her spine. That struck me as one of the most exciting ways the production could have affected a viewer, for it suggested that she sensed how big, how incomprehensible, how frightening, even how mysterious that moment is.

> Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
> for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
> lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
> embarrassed by the miracle,
> and crushed by remonstrance. (ll.31–5)

Notes

1 For the full text of the poem, see John Updike, *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (New York, 1965), 72–3.
2 Pamela Sheingorn, 'The Moment of Resurrection in the Corpus Christi Plays', *Medievalia et Humanistica* ns 11 (1982), 111–29.
3 Meg Twycross, 'Playing "The Resurrection"', *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett*, P.L. Heyworth (ed) (Oxford, 1981), 273–96.
4 Twycross, 'Playing "The Resurrection"', 294.
5 All quotations from *The Resurrection* text are taken from the modernization by Kim Yates and Chester Scoville prepared for the Toronto production.
6 Philip Butterworth, 'The York *Crucifixion*: Actor/Audience Relationship', *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992), 67–76.