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Afterwards

My responses to the problems and challenges of participating in the 1998 Poculi Ludique Societas reconstruction of the York Mystery Cycle have been set forth in an article published last year in *Medieval English Theatre* ('Staging the York Creation and *Hortulanus*: Toronto 1998', vol 19, 129–43). Because of the peculiarities of academic publication, the journal volume is dated 1997, one year before the performances it documents! Yet it is to this piece that I refer those interested in a director's account of *The Creation* and *Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene* as performed by the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts of the University of Birmingham in Toronto in June 1998. In the pages that follow I would like to draw some more general conclusions about the Toronto York Cycle, setting it within the broader contexts of performance reconstruction and historical interpretation. My task, I should say at the outset, has been made immeasurably easier by Stephen Johnson's excellent study of Handmade Performance's *Last Judgement*, a play whose radical reinterpretation of its subject I particularly admired in Toronto. Indeed, the setting of that play in what Johnson terms an 'imminent future', together with his decision to light it as if it were a live CNN television feed, resulted in one of the most effective revivals of a medieval play I have seen since I began to work with the Poculi Ludique Societas some three decades ago. All this of course raises the problem, touched upon by a number of the preceding essays, of what we mean by revival. Johnson's essay is helpful in suggesting that while historical reconstruction and contemporary interpretation are extremes at either end of a continuum, in practice most exercises in reviving plays from the distant or not-so-distant past necessarily involve both processes. Even what Johnson calls 'true historical re-creation', defined as an attempt to imitate the physical and vocal manifestations of past performance, are compromised at the outset by the impossibility of producing 'historical' spectators capable of reading such stagings.

My reconstructions of Victorian melodrama undertaken with Vancouver's Adelphi Screamers a decade ago attempted to revive the nineteenth-century

practice of using generic 'melos' – musical cells of no more than a few bars each – to guide emotion and organize moral experience. In staging plays at the Vancouver and Edmonton Fringe Festivals as well as at commercial venues, we were able to draw upon a cache of material that is both more complete and more specific than anything medievalists can lay their hands upon. Alfred Cooper, for example, Music Master at a number of theatres in the southeast of England during the 1860s and 1870s, has left theatre historians a sheaf of some fifty themes and segues – designated furiosos, agitatos, misteriosos, and the like – designed to provide accompaniment and support for stock characters and stock confrontations. In our productions we used Cooper's compositions as we believe they would have been used in their own day to underpin a broad but precise physical performance style. In rehearsal, moreover, we drew upon period acting manuals, from Leman Rede's *The Road to the Stage* (1827) to Hugh Campbell's *Voice, Speech and Gesture* (1895) to recover a gestural vocabulary for our troupe, adopting the practice of period actor Henry Neville, who divided stage space into separate radii for colloquial, rhetorical, and epic movement. This material was supplemented by film clips of Victorian and Edwardian ensemble playing from the Paper Print Collection in the U.S. Library of Congress (see J. Kaplan, 'Exhuming Lady Audley: Period Melodrama for the 1990s,' *Themes in Drama* 14, J. Redmond (ed) (Cambridge, 1992), 143–60). Yet from the outset we realized the bastard nature of our endeavour. We might be able to use archival research to reclaim for our own period earlier modes of gestural performance, but to late-twentieth-century eyes the stage conventions of 150 years ago were more likely to be read as radical challenges to realism or naturalism. Indeed, similar responses have been reported by colleagues in my home Department at the University of Birmingham whose performance reconstructions have taken them into areas as disparate as nineteenth-century Russian drama and the early modern dance theatre of Kurt Jooss and Doris Humphrey.

If we begin, then, by admitting that all attempts at performance reconstruction are effectively compromised by our inability to provide period spectators – or, more to the point, a method of authentic period reception – what precisely are projects like the York Cycle at Toronto trying to do? And what, in the end, are they capable of achieving? It is not an easy question to answer because at the outset one imagines that the Poculi Ludique Societas and the Cycle's co-ordinating committee had aims and objectives different from many of the project's participating groups. And, if the preceding essays are anything to go by, the participating groups had aims and objectives vastly different from one another. Some groups contained or were led by seasoned

medievalists who sought to use the Cycle as a laboratory for applied research, conducting arcane debates about end-of-wagon vs side-of-wagon playing or how far actors could effectively stray from their pageants. Other groups paid sophisticated homage to their Victorian and Edwardian forebears, figures like Harley Granville-Barker and William Poel or groups such as the Elizabethan Stage Society, suggesting that their reconstruction took its place in a continued rethinking of how the theatrical past is mediated by the theatrical present. Still others had only an approximate idea of what was medieval, filling out expectations of period performance by reproducing illustrations from medieval picture books. The point is not that some approaches were learned and others were not. It is rather that, in my admittedly personal response to the Cycle, there was no direct relationship between the academic credentials of a group and the manner in which its pageant seemed to work upon audiences. Indeed, in some instances acute and perceptive theatre scholarship seemed to get in its own way. It is one thing, for example, to embrace end-of-wagon playing in the relatively confined spaces of the original York route. But to continue in the face of Toronto's station 2, a sunken pathway facing a vast grass lawn, seemed positively perverse. Indeed, it amounted to throwing away the advantages of a present venue – and it was the station that attracted the largest crowds – for the theoretical advantages of one that, at Toronto at least, simply didn't exist. The same might be said of the manner in which various pageants addressed their audiences. The crowd at Toronto was an unusual group. There were, as critics of the Cycle have been quick to point out, spectators of all ages with many families in evidence. There was also considerable expertise in the watching of medieval plays; many had been coming to Poculi Ludique Societas productions for years, and quite a few had vivid memories of the previous rain-drenched mounting of the York Cycle in 1977. These spectators were familiar with processional playing, direct address, and medieval anachronism.

What was lacking in twentieth-century multi-cultural Toronto was belief – both literal belief in the Cycle's message of salvation, and a casual acceptance of its off-hand misogyny and racial bigotry. When the first of these was present, in the workshop production of *The Incredulity of Thomas* performed at a religious retreat by Gwendolyn Waltz's group, the play's reception was unlike anything I witnessed during the Cycle itself. Indeed, the paradox at Toronto was that while many of the performing groups were drawn from churches and religious institutions, the knowing audiences for whom they performed remained, by and large, unashamedly secular. And here the most successful productions – provided that a minimum standard of actorly skill was in

evidence – were those that chose to begin by building upon the expectations and sensibilities of their very unmedieval spectators. Recycling *The Slaughter of the Innocents* as a study in state-sponsored terrorism, or recognizing that *The Judgement Before Pilate* has a political meaning that can be underscored by citing videotaped images of the beating of Rodney King seem to me to be particularly apt examples of how these plays can work to move contemporary crowds. Indeed, as more than one director has observed in the preceding essays such techniques are entirely medieval in their use of anachronism to connect past and present. I would add that they are also medieval in the manner in which they point forward to *The Last Judgement* and the 'imminent future' of the Cycle's close. I know that there was both popular enthusiasm and (some) scholarly head wagging over that pageant's use of boomboxes, leather jackets, a martial arts Jesus, and floodlights picking out lost souls in the black of a Toronto night. But there must have been other knowing and entirely secular spectators who, with me, were glad that afterwards they did not have to walk back to their rooms alone through the darkened streets of a medieval town.