

ALEXANDRA F. JOHNSTON

York Cycle 1998: What We Learned

Historic 'reproductions' can never replicate the original conditions of space, technical capability, or audience response. Nevertheless, it is possible to learn from such experiments and, while exercising the greatest possible caution, use them to confirm or question speculations and to raise new questions about the performance of an historic play text. The performance in Toronto 20 June 1998 was no exception. We chose to use the spaces around Victoria College, a large Victorian rococo building with adjacent lawns and Edwardian and modern halls of residence (see map, p 204). The first station played against the façade of the Victoria College building with open space and a busy road behind it; the second played in a grassy quad and the fourth towards an Edwardian dining hall from a public street that, though closed to traffic, was still subject to modern ambient city noise. Only the third station in a lane about the width of Coney Street between two halls of residence provided that proper, narrow, enclosed space of the original York spaces where the flanking buildings served as sounding boards and there was a sense of enclosure. It was at this station that the most interesting observations about the detailed method of performance were made.

The first general lesson we learned from the day-long production of all forty-eight pageants is that, contrary to much sceptical speculation, it is possible to do them all in one day. Furthermore, the cumulative effect of the entire sequence is extraordinary and powerful. Whether all forty-eight pageants were ever done at one time remains at issue but we demonstrated that it could be done. The production began at 6:00 am in a light drizzle and ended at the fourth station at about midnight. At least two hours would have been cut from the playing time had we not had trouble with the wagons. We had only eleven wagons to use rather than forty-eight and so had to re-set them as they completed their round for the next series of plays. The early sequence went so quickly that the directors of the later plays (myself included) were frantically contacting their casts and setting forward their call. However, the set of *The*

Temptation of Christ was especially elaborate and, although all prefabricated, had to be fitted into a wagon that had already been used once. Rain during the night had swollen the wood of *The Temptation* set and more than half an hour was lost shaving the posts to fit the holes in the bed of the wagon. The second major hold-up came when the director of *The Road to Calvary* added ten minutes of modern additions to make the piece more relevant to her school-aged cast. This added forty minutes to the overall playing time and 'backed up' several wagons that were needed for the final pageants. Other more minor hitches in the dressing of the wagons accounted for the extra time lost. The original production, where every guild had its own wagon, would not have had this problem. However, our experience makes great sense out of the 1476 city order that no player should play but twice in the play.¹ The delay caused by waiting for a wagon or an actor seriously disrupts the flow of the performance.

The second major lesson that we learned from the production was that, despite the vigorous academic debate that has surrounded this issue (that is reflected in John McKinnell's paper) the end-on/side-on debate is, in the final analysis, irrelevant. In most cases the most effective wagons were those that were 'transpicuous', to use McKinnell's word, or open so that the actors could be seen equally well from all sides. This was particularly evident in such pageants as *The Crucifixion* where the bare wagon acted simply as a platform for the mortice for the cross. Wagons with simple thrones or benches also worked well, as in *Christ and the Doctors* or *Pentecost*. We learned that simplicity of effect is probably best. Over-elaborate productions did not work while stunningly elegant but simple ones, like *The Creation*, did.

There was considerable debate, after the performance, about whether the wagons should have roofs. Certainly those without roofs were effective as set pieces. If the set designers had provided a back for the wagon, as many did for interior scenes, the back served as a sounding board and there was no need for a roof. The issue here is that such a suggestion is contradicted by the one medieval description of a York set that we have – the Mercer's indenture of 1433 for *The Last Judgement* – that clearly calls for 'A heuen of Iren With a naffe of tre'.² However, as dusk gathered in the Toronto production, someone remarked that the four last plays – the three on the Virgin and Judgement – emphasized, increasingly, tableaux and sound. It is in these pageants that much of the music in the Cycle is concentrated. Two of these pageants call for hoisting devices where the added strength of a horizontal 'roof' is key to the stability of the device. It is possible, then, that the York wagons were not all enclosed but only those few that needed an enclosed space for lighting effects, sound projection for singing, and the solidity needed to hoist an adult from

one level to another and have that second level there to function as 'heaven'. The issue of how the wagons were configured, therefore, has not been resolved except in the direction of practicality. What was visible at noon in York would be less visible at dawn or dusk. In the Toronto production, we learned that playing conditions were very different at different times of the day. The quality of the light, the heat, the crowds, the noise from the life of the city around us all varied during the day. The producers of the plays in the Middle Ages knew what time of day their play would be performed. It seems sensible that each guild should have a set design that suited their performance time.

The production taught us something about the relationship between the wagon and the street as playing areas, testing the ideas presented by Margaret Rogerson, Ralph Blasing, and Martin Walsh in the Symposium. Some of the spaces were quite open, especially the second station where, if a director wanted to, the action could take place over a widespread area much of it away from the wagon. However, plays directed that way lost focus and the energy of the text was diffused. In the more crowded conditions of the third station playing on the street level meant that the actors were not visible to much of the audience standing in the street. This issue is not new to modern reproductions and some scholars have argued that the medieval audiences were accustomed to this and that the auditory experience was as important as the visual one. This may be so, but it is certainly more satisfactory to be able to see the actors as well as hear them and frequently the actors can only be seen if they are on the raised space of the wagon. The exclusive use of the wagons, however, does fly in the face of much of the textual evidence, as Martin Walsh has argued. Nevertheless, the 1998 production demonstrated that the closer the action is to the wagons and the tighter the use of space even when the actors are not on the wagon, the more effective the play.

It has often been remarked that the York Cycle is the most verbal of all the plays dramatizing Creation to Judgement. The effect of the plays depends as much or more on the *words* as on the visual effects so evident in the other cycles. As both Richard Beadle and I argued in our papers, the poetry is carefully crafted, full of rhetorical devices and carefully structured images that recur throughout the plays. In order for the verbal sophistication of the text to be properly displayed and appreciated, we discovered, the playing space had to be as close as possible to the configuration of the streets of York. Only one station, the third, provided such a space in Toronto and the different impact of the text in that space was palpable.

One feature of the dynamics of space that was, to me, quite unexpected was the strain on the actors of projecting their voices over large open spaces.

The city order preceding the *Ordo* of 1415 speaks of the need to have ‘good players well arayed & openly spekyng’.³ In the production, an interesting twist on the acting situation in York in the Middle Ages arose. Some of the companies used split casts in order to give as many students as possible the opportunity to take part. This raised the question of the stamina of the actors and the strength of their voices. David Klausner played the long and demanding part of Pilate in *Christ before Pilate 2* with vigour and panache. I asked him, as the wagon moved away from the fourth station, if he could have managed eight more performances and he replied, ‘Probably not – two more but then the voice would give out’. Professor Klausner is a trained singer as well as an experienced lecturer; he knows how to use his voice. Here again we have support for the idea that each of the acting spaces on the pageant route had close and intimate acting spaces. There is no evidence of double casting in the York records. The actors must either have been phenomenally well trained in the use of their voices or the situation of the original production was such that they never had to shout to be heard.

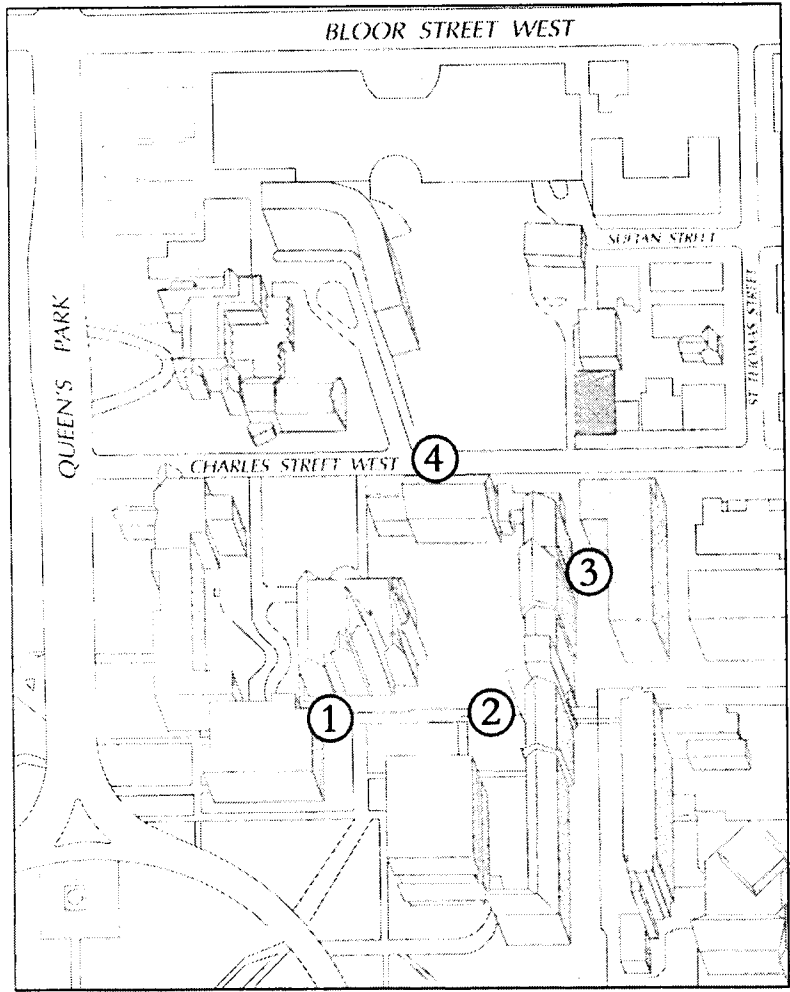
Finally, and, to me, in the most significant revelation of the production, we come to the question of the location of the audience to whom the plays were addressed. In modern productions we have been carried away by the idea of street theatre – that somehow the primary audience was on the street with the wagon and the players. This has driven much of the discourse about end-on/side-on. We have all grown accustomed to standing (often with umbrellas in the way) on a level below the wagon crushed in a crowd of enthusiasts trying to see the play. Several papers in this collection allude to this phenomenon. But I think we have been mistaken all this while. At the third station in Toronto, some of the windows of the residence overlooking the playing space were of the bedrooms of some members of the Conference, who were able to hang out their windows and see the performance taking place below. They had the comfort of their room, a retiring space if the play grew tedious, and superb acoustics and sight lines – especially if the wagons had no roofs. The evidence we have of actual audiences in York are the mayor and council, who saw the play at the eighth station from a room on the second (first) floor of the Guildhall overlooking the end of Coney Street, and the dean and chapter, who saw the play from the chamber over the gate of the Minster Close. These were the most important people in town. Evidence from Chester suggests that second-storey chambers were rented for the play and that leases for the tenants who lived there all year made provision for the room to be available for rent during the play.⁴ David Palliser gave a deeply revealing paper at the Leeds Congress in July 1998 in which he described

what the actual streets must have been like – beaten-down mud with open sewers running down the middle full of animal and often human excrement. Such conditions were not unusual for late medieval and early modern cities but if an audience member could do so, I would suggest that they would find raised viewing spaces in the houses that lined the route. Some audience members must have been crowded around the wagons but I have become convinced that the audience to whom the play was directed was the one seated above. Like the later court masque, where the audience was the monarch seated on a raised dais, so here the primary audience was on a plane slightly above the wagon bed rather than below it and so able to see all the action on the wagon and in a tight configuration around it.

'York 1998' is an experience now in the past. Some veterans of such ventures over the last twenty years have been heard to say that we have now learned all that we will ever learn from such reproductions. Perhaps this is true. But what this production did was introduce a whole new group of people to the York Cycle in all its power and complexity. What follows are Director's Notes from ten of the pageants. Some are from experienced academics and practitioners, some are from experienced directors coming fresh to medieval drama, others are from graduate student directors learning by doing, and still others are from interested directors from the community theatre. With these ten samples we have tried to give a flavour of the variety and richness of the 1998 production.

Notes

- 1 Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds), *York*, 2 vols, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto, 1979), 109; hereafter referred to as REED *York*.
- 2 REED *York*, 55.
- 3 REED *York*, 25.
- 4 Laurence M. Clopper (ed), *Chester*, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto, 1979), 80–1.



Map of Victoria College (University of Toronto) playing sites, 20 June 1998.