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The Slaughter of the Innocents

Steve Wright and I discussed choices of plays as soon as we got information about the University of Toronto festival. I wanted to do *Abraham and Isaac* and *The Slaughter of the Innocents* and Steve, *The Harrowing of Hell* and *Slaughter*. There was one brief mad moment when we contemplated asking for all three. But *Abraham and Isaac* already had been assigned and a rare moment of sanity suggested that *Slaughter* alone would be a platefull with its relatively large cast and the complications of staging horrific violence so close to the audiences. We received a grant from Catholic University's Magi Foundation and funds from the Dean of Arts and Sciences, Antonin Suziedelis.

What initially appealed to me about *The Slaughter of the Innocents* was its vivid portrayal of state sponsored terrorism which made me think most immediately of civilian victims among Iraq's Kurds and Sarajevo's Muslims. (As we re-mounted the play in early April 1999 for a performance at Georgetown University for the Medieval Academy Conference, CNN kept us posted about the continuing slaughter in Kosovo, and before that, of Rawanda, Somalia, Afghanistan, South Africa, Morocco, etc.) And now, to inaugurate the new millennium, children and their parents are being slaughtered in Chechnya. No medieval play could be more immediately and horrifyingly relevant to our time.

Then, as I began a series of close readings, and through the process of translating the text into our acting edition, I was struck by the play's complex beauty and dramatic force quite apart from its social relevance. This combination of elegant dramaturgy and social immediacy brought the company and me to the extraordinary commitment that we shared during rehearsals and performances.

Long before I settled on a specific production concept, I decided that this production must be more than a re-enactment. The fact is, I believe all theatre productions should be made to be immediate and accessible to their audiences

and not merely exercises in historical reproduction. I am aware that immediacy can be achieved without updating production elements. However, in my design of the costumes, I felt that for this play and its issues, traditional medieval garb would provide too much aesthetic distance, make it too easy to think of the atrocities merely as involving bad and innocent biblical people. Steve Wright, our dramaturge, reminded us that my concept was in the spirit of the original productions in York, combining the biblical past and contemporary design. The early versions would have also contained elements relating to the sponsoring guilds – *Slaughter* was presented by the Girdlers and Nailers.

In our production, Herod and his counsellors wore 1990s clothing with gold lamé trim. Herod wore a cape of gold with an exaggerated gold crown, its shape suggestive of a bishop's mitre. Herod's palace guards wore sunglasses and terrorist-type black stocking masks. They carried steel tools that could be used in making and shaping metal objects. They wore three-foot wide shoulder pieces from which hung seven-foot capes as they strode about on five-gallon paint buckets as stilts. Their studded leather dog collars and belts, chains, and other metal and leather accessories combined elements of the Girdlers and Nailers guilds with contemporary skinhead and neo-Nazi paraphernalia. Steve suggested these anachronisms would underscore the essential ritual function of sacred drama by liberating the biblical story from the prison of the past. ('What was in the beginning is now and ever shall be...') The mothers wore simple, unadorned, calf-length cotton floral print dresses and sandals. They carried their babies in beige blankets, which they reversed, converting them into black mourning shawls, following the massacre. The babies were made of bright red vinyl strips with pink fabric lining. They bundled them so that the pink side was visible. When Herod's soldiers snatched the babies from the mothers with their weapons/tools and tossed them into the air, the glossy red side flashed in the sunlight.

Auditions turned up a wide range of students from across several disciplines. Besides the graduate and undergraduate drama majors, *Slaughter* attracted students from the departments of English, Psychology, Medieval Studies, and the Media Studies Program. A communications major came to auditions as a member of the video crew to help produce a video of the process and the performance, was persuaded to audition, and was cast as one of Herod's soldiers. Professors Spencer Cosmos, departments of English and Media Studies, and Geoffrey Pingree, Chair of the Department of Media Studies and a member of the English Department, had expressed an interest in developing a video documentary of the project. Spencer also caught the audition fever and was cast as First Counsellor.

Sten Maulsby, a graduate student in the Medieval Studies Program and a specialist in medieval music, was engaged to create a score from music of the period, train cast members in the use of medieval instruments, and teach the 'mothers' two plainsong pieces, the 'Vox in Rama' and the 'Ex ore infantium' from the liturgy of Holy Innocents Day, the feast celebrating the continuing presence and power of the child-martyrs in the living community of the church. Steve suggested that the chants give meaning and dignity to the otherwise absurd deaths of the children by emphasizing that they are, in fact, the first Christian martyrs. Their sacrifice both prefigures and is eventually redeemed, ironically, by the sacrifice on the cross of the only child to escape the massacre. The souls of the children are still a vital part of the transhistorical community of believers. Further, by singing these two chants, so familiar to the medieval audience from their own worship experiences, the mothers again break the historical frame in order to bring the world of the audience into the medieval world of the play. Finally, the chants are a courageous and potent act of resistance by the mothers – in the famous Quaker phrase – a way of speaking truth to power. The mothers defiantly chanted directly into the faces of the killers, asserting that their children have not died in vain and that they will live eternally as martyrs and be commemorated in the annual cycle of Christian worship long after Herod and his henchmen are gone. In our performance, at least, the soldiers are somehow moved – even partially transformed – by this courageous moment of bearing peaceful witness in the aftermath of hideous savagery. 'Vox in Rama', dealing with Rachel weeping for her children, 'for they were no more', worked beautifully to connect the Old Testament story with this one.

The more the company worked with the text at the table before beginning the blocking, the more we became aware of the dramatic sophistication of *Slaughter*. It is easy to imagine Shakespeare and his contemporaries being influenced in the construction of their works by the bold combining of serious and comic elements in mystery plays, such as *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, *The Second Shepherd's Play*, *Joseph's Trouble about Mary*, and even *Abraham and Isaac*. The humanizing of characters and making them seem local, great and lowly alike, and the combination of rough humor and tragic elements of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas, makes them close kin to the mystery plays. We came to empathize deeply with the characters, recognizing ourselves in them, but could an audience experiencing the play only once make a similar connection? We were surprised and certainly gratified that at each station in Toronto some audience members, men and women, both laughed and wept during the brief duration of *The Slaughter of the Innocents*.

To a greater extent than some plays in the Cycle, *Slaughter* whets the imagination regarding the uses of the text in performance to allow the unknown dramatist to safely express commentary and criticism of local exploiters of ordinary people. Herod, traditionally played as a dangerous but comic tyrant – in this play a ‘noble lord’, for which read ‘landlord’, ‘the lordliest alive’ – is a great egotist, threatening all who would not bow down to him. The living model in and about medieval York would have been untouchable by common people except through his representation on the stage before the whole community. Hamlet’s reference suggests that that tradition of playing Herod extravagantly was alive into the early seventeenth century:

O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious
 periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to
 very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who
 for the most part are capable of nothing but
 inexplicable dumbshows and noise: I would have such
 a fellow whipped for o’erdoing Termagant; it
 out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it. (*Hamlet* 3.2.8–14)

The Herod in this play is not conceived in historical terms at all, ie, as Herod the Great, the first-century king of Judea. His continual oaths invoking ‘Mahound’ (echoed in Tom Donahue’s brilliant set design, a backdrop of Herod’s palace which included a Gothic window and a Moorish window flanking a medieval portrait of Mahound) mark him as an exotic infidel and tyrant, a bogeyman of the post-Crusades Christian imagination.

Chad Engbers, the graduate student playing Herod, has a powerful, resonant voice for the ranting moments, and quite as importantly, he has the wit and flexibility to play Herod’s other attitudes. His sycophantic Counsellors (Cosmos, wearing a blazer with gold ascot, and Julia Benn, in a gold trimmed dress suggestive of a Middle-Eastern dancer) praise him and reinforce his positive view of his own virtues. (All quotations are from the manuscript of my 1998 translation.)

SECOND COUNSELLOR. Full well we understand
 Mahound is God veray,
 And you are lord of every land. (ll.34–6)

But Herod responds with the first indication that he may be anxious about his ‘mastery’:

But I am annoyed of new,
And blithe may I not be,
For three kings, as ye know,
Came through this country,
And said they sought a swain.

(ll.41–5)

The Counsellors' attempt to reassure Herod, saying that there is no threat and that the three kings will return and be forced to acknowledge that they had been fooled about a special child. They say that if they don't it will be because they are ashamed of having lied to him. Herod is not comforted; he cannot fathom what could have caused them to prophesy that a powerful boy has been born 'To wield such might and main' (l.62), and thereby wrong him, Herod. His feelings are hurt, thus opening the opportunity for humour at the expense of this brutal man. Just at this vulnerable moment, the sassy Messenger, played by Kenneth Cerniglia, arrives with all the nerve, risky behaviour, and water-bottle (which he handed to an audience member to hold for him) of a bicycle messenger in city traffic. He jumps onto Herod's pageant wagon and sits with legs swinging. With restrained glee, he informs Herod that he has met on the road other kings, 'Riding full royally' (l.87).

Herod loses his temper immediately: 'Ah, miserable boy, you've gone too far.' Since the Messenger doesn't back down, the great bully, somewhat humbled by further evidence that he may not be in full control of his destiny, asks hopefully:

Do you think they'll come back soon
As fast as they took flight
To tell me news about that star?

(ll.92–4)

The Messenger, for the moment controlling the scene, gives him the flip response, 'Nay, lord, that dance is done' (l.95). Engber's Herod whimpered through the next few lines:

HEROD. Why, whither have they gone?

MESSENGER. Back to their lands so far.

HEROD. How says thou, lad? Let be.

MESSENGER. I say, forth they are passed.

(ll.96–9)

on stage. Like the two women planted in the audience during the massacre scene who attempted to help the mothers defend their infants, the Messenger is a representative or 'voice' coming out of the familiar world of the audience and entering directly into the world of the play. Steve suggested that the Messenger is a character who, like the audience whom he represents, recognizes the vanity and pretension and futility of Herod as a posturing bully. He therefore dares to be insolent. His cheekiness is more than mere low comedy – it is another act of defiance in the face of illegitimate worldly power. The Messenger, emboldened by having successfully rattled the tyrant, mooned Herod and tripped off back through the audience, collecting his water, to considerable applause at each station. The First Counsellor spews out a barrage of invectives, but Herod has for the moment retreated into confusion and uncertainty:

Alas, for sorrow for my plight,
My woe no wight may right;
What the devil is best to do? (ll.135–7)

York's craftsmen and their audience must have been as delighted as ours to see the stage representative of their dread lord so befuddled by a commoner boy.

Herod gives up hope of catching and eliminating the threat to his crown. After Second Counsellor loyally boasts that they will 'make that baby's life be brief', Herod thinks he has been thwarted by the passage of time, which the playwright has neatly compressed:

That may ye not come near,
For it is past two year
Since that brat's birth, I fear. (ll.142–4)

This dual sense of time, both immediate and simultaneously distant enough to fit the New Testament's account, is quite sophisticated for a medieval play in its use of a device not brought to its pinnacle until Shakespeare's double time in *Othello*.

First Counsellor, in competition with his colleague, puts Herod's mind at ease. He reminds Herod of his military support which can overcome this minor setback:

Gather together in a great heap
The noble knights you keep
And bid them ding to dead

All knave children kept in arms
 In Bethlehem and nearby farms,
 To keep you peaceful in your bed. (ll. 147–52)

And Herod, the practical administrator, is quick to share any possible blame:

Certes, at your righteous request,
 And what ye suggest is best,
 I'll do, indeed. (ll. 158–60)

Engbers signalled his knights by cracking a bullwhip, and the 'noble' knights enter, hulking high on their great paint buckets, glaring through dark glasses, grunting, hawking, and spitting. Herod greets them, ironically, 'Sir knights, courteous and kind', whereupon they respond with guttural croaks, fascist-like salutes, and chest pounding. However the knights might have been played in fifteenth-century York, it is hard to imagine that the Girdlers and Nailers Guilds wouldn't have taken the opportunity to have some sport at the expense of the local noble knights whose wealth and power allowed them any excesses upon the ordinary citizens.

The play then moves into the phase which, countering the buffoonery of the royals and nobles, shows them also to be mortally dangerous and even sadistic. Following the initial threats to the women, the knights in this production pulled the black stockings over their faces, suggesting in our time Herod's action through his knights would be considered to be state-sponsored terrorism. The knights advanced on the mothers and their babies. The mothers rose out of the front row of the audience, as a reminder that we non-combatants have a direct connection with the victims of the cruelty to come, as we have to civilians currently elsewhere in the world. The knights, with their weapons associated with metal and leather crafts, snatch the children from the women. The children flashed blood-coloured as the knights tore them apart and tossed the pieces in the air. The two women planted in the audience rushed to the mothers, who tried unsuccessfully to pass their babies to them. The mothers screamed and stooped to pick up the pieces, cradling them in their arms while chanting the 'Vox in Rama'. The soldiers returned and one of them extracted a single strip of the red vinyl, and slowly raked it with his weapon. The women, more in the attitude of the mothers the Digby Play than the York Cycle, attacked the knights with their fingernails while ululating in the Middle Eastern manner. They turned and sang again their grieving plainsong as the knights approached Herod's pageant, having shed their broad shoulders, elevating buckets, stocking

masks, dark glasses, and weapons. Now, without their props of power and violence, they appeared younger, scared, and vulnerable as they huddled together to face the prospect of reporting their outrages to Herod. The courts-martial testimonies of soldiers following the My Lai massacre come to mind.

Herod appeared with his counsellors, prepared to reward his knights for carrying out his orders. At this point the women, having collected from the ground the scattered pieces of their children, sang the 'Ex ore infantium', and they slowly marched single-file past Herod's court and the knights, each woman pausing to look into Herod's eyes before continuing past him and out of sight behind the wagon. Herod's salutary greeting to his knights, having been interrupted, moved to the central question, 'Did they kill the one he most feared?' The knights answered truthfully that they killed all that they found but could not be sure they had found the baby Jesus. Engber's Herod then 'out-Heroded' himself, roaring his anger and frustration, 'Ye lie, your note is naught!' (l.311) All the killing was for nothing. The knights, now simply 'young soldiers', looked at each other and let that horrible irony sink in as Herod commanded to all, including the audience members, that we are to follow him, for he will not rest until that child is dead.

A powerful contribution to the dramatic irony that permeates *The Slaughter of the Innocents* is brought about by its place in the York Cycle. In the previous play, *The Flight Into Egypt*, we witnessed Joseph and Mary carrying their child safely across the border into Egypt; so our awareness of the meaninglessness of Herod's massacre of the other children was immediate and present throughout our performance. There is only one brief reminder of that escape, when one of the mothers says that the child they sought had already fled; more is not needed for we witnessed it, live, just before Herod's first entrance. This also is a good illustration of the awareness of other parts of the cycle and their interconnectedness by the individual York playwrights.

Our company members carried banners representing the Girdlers and the Nailers Guilds as they moved from station to station. The Girdlers' banner was draped with sixteen studded belts and straps of various styles; the Nailers', with an iron tavern puzzle, an iron shelf brace, and various chains and small metal objects. A banner proclaiming these guilds stretched above the pageant backdrop as a kind of outdoor portable billboard. Steve suggested that this mini-procession with the banners and wagon stage and musicians and marchers, comprising a kind of unscripted performance in its own right, had the effect of helping the cast play two roles at once – not just the characters of the biblical story, but also the members of the Girdlers and Nailers Guilds, which in the Middle Ages was a crucial source of one's identity – a

place of work and mutual support and worship, a lifelong membership in a true extended family. Our cast understood and expressed their role as guild members very effectively. While we discussed this 'second role' in conjunction with studying the text, the company didn't really internalize this element until they were engaged in doing the work of moving the heavy stage and banners and instruments and equipment from place to place. It required them to maintain their dual roles for the duration of the performance. Spontaneously, in performance, one of the cast members signalled the troupe that it was the moment to move to the next site by shouting, 'Girdlers and Nailers!' They answered together, 'Hoh!' and began the procession. It also entirely redefined the performance, since it was now conceived of not only as the 16-minute scripted action, but as a seamless dramatic experience from the load in through the four stations to the striking of the set from the pageant wagon, leaving it bare for the the next guild's scenery. This full integration of text, performance, and guild procession, in the context of the whole Cycle before and after our contribution, provided us with the richest possible experience of not just medieval drama but of Theatre itself.

For further information and photographs, see Steve Wright's web site at <www.acad.cua.edu/as/engl/toronto/york98.htm>, and Chad Engbers' at <www.campus.cua.edu/~engbers/ourprod.htm>.