

Playing with Power: ‘The Trial, Flagellation, and Crucifixion’

The Graduate Centre for Study of Drama’s production of ‘The Trial, Flagellation, and Crucifixion’ was a thoughtful and tonally coherent exploration of the text that engaged productively with medieval staging conventions while making the play dramatically effective for a contemporary audience. Strong direction from Alysse Rich, excellent production values, critical engagement with the text, and moments of great emotional power marked this pageant as one of the highlights of the cycle.

The largely naturalistic acting was solid throughout; actors clearly communicated the sense of their lines while generally preserving the flow of the verse. Scott Moore’s Herod was especially strong; exuding malice and caprice in equal measure, all the laughs he elicited were well-earned and appropriate both to the tone of the production and the acting tradition of stage Herods. Paul Stoesser’s handsome and flexible set design effortlessly accommodated the play’s many shifts in locale, and the mechanism of the crucifixion itself was ingeniously simple and effective. Rich made excellent use of the space, marching characters through the audience and interspersing members of the ‘mob’ among them, some of whom rose up to assist in the crucifixion. The effect was jarring, making the audience complicit in the violent and disturbing action.

One of the theological issues that Rich explored was that of Christ’s own complicity in his crucifixion. This involvement was most apparent at the beginning of the production, when John and Jesus handed out costumes to the other players, a move echoing or borrowing perhaps from the film production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.¹ It seems to have served Mikelle Virey well in his nuanced performance as Jesus: though his suffering was palpable, he conveyed a sense of being more than a mere victim. Though John remained unidentified until the end of the play, his role as evangelist and author was cleverly implied by the quill pen he carried in his back pocket and through his watchful presence, haunting the action from the sidelines and from behind the curtain.

Program notes inform us that one of the production’s goals was to explore ‘the nature of anti-semitism in this play and its period’. Caiaphas and Annas wore yellow badges in the form of the Ten Commandments as prescribed by an edict of Edward I. This detail effectively brought into focus the medieval tradition of marking stage Jews as other, and its implicit critique was restated more insistently toward the end of the play. At the



Fig. 8. The Crucifixion (Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, University of Toronto). Courtesy of Heather S. Mitchell.

moment of Jesus's death, the Jews onstage donned yellow badges marked with Stars of David, suggesting the legacy of anti-semitism linked to this pivotal moment in history. Strikingly, John stepped into the action at this point and also inscribed Caiaphas's tablet badge with a Star of David. Despite the moment's bracing anachronism and interpolated quality, it did not detract from the emotional force of the scene that immediately followed. The centurion's conversion was startlingly powerful, and emblematic of the intelligence and sensitivity with which the Graduate Study for the Centre of Drama produced this play.

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Notes

- 1 Melvyn Bragg and Norman Jewison, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, directed by Norman Jewison (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1973), Theatrical Release.

'The Ascension': Blood and Roses

Day two of Chester 2010 was about Jesus's presence. The audience saw Jesus as a baby (doll), a young man, and an adult; at the end of the day, during 'The Crucifixion', Jesus's bleeding or dead body was emphatically there, sometimes within inches of the audience. His presence on day three, however, was problematic. Is his body in the grave at 'The Resurrection'? Is the body on stage in 'The Antichrist' that of Christ or the Antichrist? The opening and closing plays on day three are also chaotic and noisy, with large casts spilling over to the surrounding ground. Three central plays, however — 'The Road to Emmaus', 'The Ascension', and 'The Pentecost' — confront this issue of presence and absence with a serenity that embraces but ultimately conquers the human anxiety of the faithful on stage and in the audience. Chester 2010's 'The Ascension' (directed by dance and drama professor Artemis Preeshl, with additional coaching by English professor John Sebastian, both of Loyola University New Orleans) captured the constantly shifting moods of despair, anxiety, hope, and confidence that the play represents. Jesus absents himself through his ascension, but also remains as a real yet