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**Time, Meaning, and Transcendence:  
Directing *The Incredulity of Thomas***

Telescoping time. This is the idea that has given me a grip on the medieval imagination. My late husband, Raymond J. Pentzell, was the medievalist in the family, and I remember him drawing a timeline with a cross at the centre and explaining anachronism as it pertained to medieval thought. All time prior to the Resurrection was seen as leading to the cross, all time after reflected back to it. The revelation of eternal life was the one event in history that made sense of *all* life – past, present, and future. (Here he sketched concentric circles emanating from the cross like the ripples from a pebble tossed into a pond.) The spiritual effect of this focused event reverberated throughout time, from its centre, and also telescoped in, toward it.

Anachronism, it followed, was not something jarring to people of the Middle Ages, nor an indication of naivety. All periods of time became suffused with the promise held in the Resurrection, as if this aspect of time were fluid. In a sense anachronism provided a means of diving into the water of this spiritual pool. In telescopic time, now is then was now: the past and the future united in the eternal present of the Resurrection.

All life was given meaning in this context. Even the most mundane labours or aspects of life could be seen to have significance. For the medieval laity conscious understanding or even consciously noble intent was not always necessary to carry out Christian life and rituals; for instance, mental limitations or incapacities did not prevent people from being good Christians. It was enough that life's deeds were done and rituals performed, even unseen by other people or, in some cases, without one's own insight. God saw all and understood everything done in His time; it was a part of Him. On the Cross He had absolved human beings of the ignorant aspects of their humanity.

The people involved in performing the York Cycle no doubt participated for a number of reasons beyond the plays' significance as ritual in the celebration of Corpus Christi. To display craftsmanship; to take pride in talented performances and staging innovations; to remember stories about former festivals,

participants, traditions, and mishaps; to acknowledge publicly the religious, social, and business hierarchies within the community; to experience the joy and delight of festival celebration: earthly motives such as these were surely mixed with the religious, devotional motives of the people involved. But the meaning of the performance, like the Host, Christ's Body, honoured on Corpus Christi Day, was remembrance of the Resurrection – that event from which everything received meaning. Mundane motives thinned into pious ones, like drops diluted in the vastness of time's waters. (No doubt I've also diluted these concepts, retelling what I've recalled of the ideas conceived by my husband or remembered by him from other people's theories.)

Strangely – or, to a medieval mind, perhaps not – telescoping time and unexpected or unintended connections between the mundane and the significant played a role in my direction of *The Incredulity of Thomas*. The cycle connected my past with my present. I was an undergraduate, for a year, in nearby York University's acting program in 1977–8 when the York Cycle was performed at the University of Toronto. When we studied medieval theatre, David Parry spoke to my theatre history class about the production and we viewed a series of dark slides of the rainy York Cycle performance. Years before he was my husband, Ray Pentzell independently met up with Parry and the Poculi Ludique Societas and subsequently brought several plays from Hillsdale College to PLS-sponsored productions in Toronto. In 1992 I directed the last of these, Ray's adaptation of the French farce he titled *Meat Pie, Fruit Pie*. The invitation for the 1998 York Cycle was addressed to Ray, whose classes I'd taken over at Hillsdale College after his death in 1996. As a contributing director in the Cycle's production I found that my personal and academic career oddly resonated with two decades' worth of memories, reverberating from a York Cycle epicentre.

My approach to this project, however, was rooted in the mundane. Neither my colleagues in the Theatre Department at Hillsdale College, George Angell and David Griffiths, nor I had more than a general knowledge of medieval theatre. In years past all three of us had participated in PLS play festivals, liked the people we'd met, and enjoyed Toronto. Mounting a play would be a good experience for our students and it would be fun. The list of available plays had dwindled by the time we made a choice, and *The Incredulity of Thomas* was the candidate because it was short, it had a small cast, and the play's main technical problem was intriguing: figuring out a way to stage Christ's appearances and disappearances in a manner that was historically feasible. Tyler Hartford, a student in my theatre history course who had become enthusiastic about the Middle Ages, agreed to serve as dramaturge,

and another student, Jonathan Rockett (interested in magic), attempted to tackle the play's 'miracle' by hunting up the scant information available on medieval predecessors to nineteenth-century 'stage magic'.

Christ makes three appearances at the beginning of the play to the apostles Peter, John, and James, and one at the end of the play to Thomas in the presence of the other apostles. The design of our wagon depended on how we would accomplish Christ's mysterious comings and goings. Jonathan made several suggestions: use reflecting devices, slits in a back curtain from which an actor/mask/emblem of Christ could emerge, or a trapdoor, but none of these seemed to give us the control or timing we desired. Our set designer and technical director, David Griffiths, pointed out that we had to decide whether the play should be done in a relatively realistic or in an emblematic performance style; for the latter, we could have Christ disappear by merely turning His back or drawing a curtain. To me it seemed essential that Christ be portrayed as the eating, drinking, substantial being the apostles had known in life; thus the style of the play – and the 'miracles' – should be ostensibly believable. I think it was in joking about stupid solutions to our puzzle that someone demonstrated a 'now you see 'im, now you don't' bit, stepping back and forth from behind a pillar. David turned the dumb joke into a clever trick by devising a pair of rotating hollow columns in which the actor portraying Christ could be concealed, then emerge. An opening in the column would be turned toward the audience, the actor would step out, and the opening would be spun past the actor to the back of the wagon, leaving the solid side of the column in view. The idea probably owed more to nineteenth-century stagecraft (à la *The Corsican Brothers*) than that of the Middle Ages, but the concept and the mechanics were within the realm of medieval possibility.

For the columns we used two, heavy cardboard tubes, each of which had a narrow space cut vertically to allow the actor passage from within the column, out to the stage, and back. We chose to place the wagon side-on, with a column on either side. The columns were placed on rotating bases that operated similar to lazy-Susans; a top support was attached to a crossbeam we planned to connect to the upright framing provided on our PLS-built wagon.<sup>1</sup> The fabric of the floral 'tapestry' that we hung between the columns, to mask Christ's passage from one column to another, was actually more neo-Gothic than Gothic and gave our wagon-setting the look of an 1890s medieval reconstruction in the manner of William Poel, but the cloth was in stock in our prop room and it looked good.<sup>2</sup>

In practice the column trick was a delight. Christ's first entrance surprised all of our audiences, who reacted audibly, and his repeated appearances and

disappearances involved the audience in the dramatic – or, rather, *theatrical* – irony of the effect, whereby the secret to Christ's mysterious comings and goings was known and could be anticipated by the spectators but was a complete mystery to the baffled and awestruck apostles.

Left with little more than three feet in depth of playing space downstage from the columns and tapestry, the actors were forced to move and position themselves almost in bas-relief. Again I found myself remembering Victorian rediscoveries of early English drama, recalling a student of the Elizabethan Stage Society, Harley Granville-Barker, and his intentional bas-relief style for the front-curtain scenes of his Shakespeare productions. But in our case this style made a certain amount of historical sense; in practical and aesthetic terms the actors mimicked visual art of the period. As images, the apostles were often seen by the medieval public as tableaux of figures carved in wood or stone in church decoration, or painted on altar pieces. Their bodies were portrayed in front or side positions – emotions, intentions, and significance clearly expressed in their physical attitudes. In the narrow wagon staging of our play, the restricted movements of our actors might be seen in terms of a church illustration come to life.

This bas-relief style of performance also made visual sense regarding the concept of telescopic time. The time frame of the scene on the wagon-stage was separated from that of the medieval (and Toronto's modern) audience; the apostles' revelation took place in that past situated around the Resurrection, the point in time from which meaning radiated to touch the audience of the Corpus Christi festival. The spectators watched the apostles from a distance, connected in that they were affected telescopically by the events which had taken place so long ago, yet separate, since they were not a part of the specific time and scene portrayed on the 'stage' of the wagon. This relationship between audience and characters was fundamentally the same as that of viewers gazing at figures of the apostles rendered as didactic church decoration.

But in performance this is not the relationship the audience had or has with the character, Thomas. Here is an instance, I argue, where it makes no sense NOT to have an actor enter from the audience, from the platea. Thomas serves as a telescoping device; the playwright, I believe, uses the character to connect us to the time and place enacted by the other characters on the pageant wagon. The audience needs to identify with Thomas so it can move with him to the scene with the other apostles. We are conveyed through time by Thomas, from present to past, and we are expected to move with him empathetically as he passes from incredulity to belief. Like the audience, Thomas hasn't seen the risen Christ with his own eyes. He knows what

he *has* seen – Christ’s death. This is a fact none of us has trouble accepting, be we believers or non-believers. Thomas has taken in his experience vividly and reacted strongly to it; he describes Christ’s wounds in painful detail: ‘wide wounds wan ... and wondrous wet / ... with blows full hard was he beaten / ... [a]ll nailed through his hands and feet’ (ll.109–11).<sup>3</sup> This is a person who seems rooted in tangible particulars, someone whose understanding is formed viscerally, at a level at which we can all relate.

Thomas’ lengthy entrance gives the audience the opportunity to identify with the character, but I think the playwright also has provided time for the actor to travel. Thomas has the longest speech in the play, thirty lines (five six-line stanzas. At most, Christ speaks only four stanzas at a time). The message is made plain in Thomas’ first two lines, ‘Alas, for sight and sorrows sad, / Mourning makes me amazed and mad’ (ll.98–9).<sup>4</sup> The emphasis of the speech seems to be in its sound: open, plaintive ‘ohs’ and ‘ahs’; alliterative consonants (‘s’, ‘m’, ‘g’, ‘l’, ‘d’, ‘w’, ‘f’, ‘n’, ‘b’) used sparingly in the speeches of the other characters but given free rein in Thomas’ speech, combining with the wailing vowels to create a sound of unbridled grief. It is a sound that grabs the audience’s attention and makes emotional sense of the speech, should the listeners fail to catch individual phrases or words as Thomas wends his way through the throng.<sup>5</sup> This speech was not written for purposes of plot development or religious instruction. I expect it would be tedious if delivered by an actor standing before us. It appears to be an ambulatory speech and in his twenty-third line (l.120) Thomas tells us where he is going: ‘To my brothers, now I will wend.’ The description of the ‘woeful’ apostles, which begins the following stanza, allows the moments needed for Thomas to mount the steps of the wagon and in the last two lines, ‘God bless you brothers, blood and bone, / Where you now stand’, Thomas greets the other apostles, indicating that he has arrived at their room and is entering the wagon’s ‘stage’ space (ll.126–7). The journey of Thomas and audience from the present-day (as well as ambiguous) time/place of the platea to the specific, situational past enacted on the pageant wagon is complete.

The actress in our cast who portrayed Thomas found that ‘playing in front of the audiences in the different areas of the university was amazing’. Spectators became engaged in the action: ‘As I walked through the crowd, acting, I saw their faces. ... The children quickly moved out of the way and stared in awe. I felt like I had a great presence in the crowd.’<sup>6</sup>

Those who imaginatively journey with Thomas from doubt to belief, do so in the next sixty lines of the play.<sup>7</sup> I chose to make the action in this portion of the play more three-dimensional and physical and almost comic in the way

obstinate Thomas is passed from apostle to apostle before he is abruptly confronted with the serious fact of a living and breathing Christ. In the brief Communion that was taken before Thomas' entrance, eating and drinking gave the other apostles a shared, unquestionably sensory experience with Christ. By touching Thomas I intended that the apostles attempt to convey to him the tangibility of their divine encounter. And it is in touching that Thomas finally comes to believe in the reality of the risen Christ, once he feels those 'wide wounds wan' that had so plagued him in memory.

In our Toronto performance the representation of these wounds was, unfortunately, limited. The mundane intervened. The midsummer heat had worked chemical changes on the spirit gum, which was stored in one of our college vans, and we found ourselves with a spirit gum crisis shortly before our actors were due to take their places. This was a particular problem since four of our five actors were women portraying men, including Christ. We got their beards and moustaches to stick but, in their rush to don costumes, we neglected to apply red makeup to the hands and feet of the woman acting the role of Christ; the wound in her side, which the actor playing Thomas probed with her finger and pulled out a red ribbon of 'blood', was sewn into the Christ costume, so only one of the 'wounds five' was visible.

In his review of the 1998 production of the York Cycle in the first issue of *Early Theatre*, 'Playing in All Directions: The York Plays, Toronto,' Garrett Epp mentions the 'non-effect' our production achieved in reversing the English medieval and Renaissance stage convention of beardless boys playing men (151). This switch did not escape our attention, but it was adopted from necessity. I cast the play from the people available for the summer trip, most of whom were women. Roles were cast in terms of acting characterizations and vocal qualities, rather than by gender. We decided to 'equalize' the actors' physiognomies by adding facial hair to the softer features of the women playing Christ, James, and Peter. John, portrayed by a man, remained barefaced, and Thomas, acted by a woman, also was beardless since the character has a boyishness we wished to emphasize. In Toronto several people commended me for my feminist casting of Christ; however, my aims were purely theatrical. A high-school student in our community had a gentle grace and intensity that worked for the aspect of Christ brought out in this particular play.

After our performances, and on the drive back to Michigan, the cast discussed other plays and how our own play meant more to us once it fit into the context and grand scale of the cycle, but it wasn't until I solicited reactions for this paper that I discovered what these actors had learned, performing in the York Cycle. Before Toronto they had presented (after not quite twelve hours of discussion

and rehearsal) a workshop production for a group of Baptist women on retreat, and (with about three more hours of rehearsal) three performances in May to small audiences at Hillsdale College, held indoors because of a rainy last week of classes. 'The most obvious difference between outdoors and indoors is volume. Outside your regular stage voice just isn't loud enough.... The same thing with pronunciation and articulation', said Heather Harris (Paul). 'You have to exaggerate ... if you want the audience to understand your words'. Meghan Austin (Christ) made a comment, echoed by the others, that the audiences at the midsummer production 'expected that type of a play. The crowd was also into the whole 'festival spirit' thing'. Catherine Bilow (James) had studied the text of the York Cycle in graduate school but never as a living production.<sup>8</sup> She was delighted that the plays still thrilled audiences when they were brought forward in time, and she was struck by the continuity of life on the fringes of the production: people restraining dogs, eating, holding babies, just as they would have in earlier centuries.

I was particularly interested in the actors' comments about their identification with their roles. We had talked at length about the external differences to which modern actors must adjust in acting medieval plays, but the actors gave me insight about the internal ones. 'In one sense it was weird because it WAS Jesus that I was playing', Meghan wrote. '[It] was extremely hard ... to do Him justice, and play the part as it should have been played. I absolutely loved being a man, however.' Jen Ferrell (Thomas) also spoke about crossing gender lines: '[I]t was extra difficult to stretch my imagination to understand how Thomas would have been played if I were a male actor, if I were more connected to my character through gender.' On presentational acting she remarked, 'It is really amazing how [it] works.... I felt as if Thomas were an extension of myself, a puppet to manipulate for the audience to watch and understand'. James Mallinson (John) further articulated this idea:

I guess what struck me most about performing in the York Cycle was how little ... any of the plays ... called attention to themselves, or how the plays' parts [weren't] written to bring out any particular actor. Of course there was some fine talent behind many of the performances, ... but I kept getting this vibe throughout the whole day that the plays were always pointing somewhere else. The open air and simplicity of the settings really gave me a sense of intimacy with the audience, but it was never my character who was intimate with the audience.... Instead, I felt like it was just me who was working on a personal level with them and I was using this warmth to point back to the character I was portraying. I wasn't really trying to be John, I was just trying to make the audience think about the real John.

Jen said, as a Christian, for her these plays made the Bible truly the 'Living Word'.<sup>9</sup> All of us were struck by their power, regardless of our religious backgrounds. And we were humbled at the way in which our input – acting, directing, and design – played merely a supporting role to the text. In our workshop production for the women of the Baptist retreat, whom we didn't know and we viewed as no more than a try-out audience, the actors had barely memorized their lines and we had no costumes (the actors dressed in black and pinned yards of fabric to their shoulders, and the three bearded characters applied their facial hair). Christ appeared and disappeared by stepping in front of and behind a screen. We got through the performance in a somewhat homely and rocky manner, and exited the room feeling some embarrassment. Yet the play had worked. The women followed the actors from the room and kept them near for quite a while. Several spectators were still drying their eyes from crying. Many were so moved that they repeatedly clasped and touched the actors as if seeking a blessing. They commented about the depth of emotion and identification that they had felt with the characters. Of course the retreat atmosphere was one that encouraged religious catharsis, but in this respect it was all the more like that of the medieval Corpus Christi Day. We were, frankly, dumbfounded.

These texts, alive in performance, transcend interference from the mundane (spirit gum crises, economic shortcuts, unsteady acting, academic and theatrical interest rather than religious intent) to connect audiences with a super-textual meaning, which deeply reverberates. Here is their power.

## Notes

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- 1 When we arrived in Toronto we found that the dimensions and placement of the framing had been miscommunicated in spite of several e-mail discussions. It took hours of work, by our people and those in the PLS scene shop, to right the mistake. David Griffiths suggests that, for the next festival, accurate mechanical drawings be distributed as a means to encourage designers of an ambitious technical bent. Although medieval plays can be effectively staged quite simply, those performed in the Gothic period – especially after several hundred years of theatrical experimentation (like those of the York Cycle) – were probably affected by the impulse to embellish, which seems to infuse amateur theatre. The aesthetic 'less is more' is usually adopted by professional artists; 'more is more' is frequently the decorative principle in folk and popular art.

- 2 Tracy Wigent, our resident costume designer, put together the curtain as well as the costumes. For the apostles we had hoped to appliqué their respective symbols onto their robes to aid in character identification, since we surmised from visual representations that this would have been a medieval practice, but the idea was quashed in the end-of-the-semester crunch. We were proud as the Scriveners, however, to display our guild's symbol – the quill – on the hinged, scrollwork lintel atop the columns of our wagon. Non-performing but hard-working scriveners who pulled the wagon, set props, and worked the column trick were David Griffiths, George Angell, Katie Stark, Tyler Hartford, and Gwendolyn Waltz.
- 3 We used the translation provided for this performance by Chet Scoville and Kim Yates.
- 4 In the following line (l.100) Thomas says, 'On ground now, may I go un-glad', differentiating his location, walking 'on earth', from that of the apostles' room, but might the playwright also be making it clear where the audience should look, particularly if the actor *is* meant to enter through the audience?
- 5 Coaching the actors in speaking verse, I had them choose two or three words in each line of their speeches that, if spoken without the connecting words, would still impart the sense of the speech. These words were to receive emphasis so that the distractions and ambient noise in outdoor performance would be less likely to interfere with communication.
- 6 Correspondence: Jen Ferrell to Gwendolyn Waltz.
- 7 Thomas reaffirms his connection with the audience when he tells us to witness with him the truth of Christ's resurrection ('Mankind on earth, behold and see, / This blessed blood' ll.184–5). In our production we chose for Christ to include the audience from l.190 ('every wight') to the end of the play, exhorting them to share with others what they had witnessed with Thomas, and including them in the benediction.
- 8 Catherine Bilow also provided the plainsong chant of Jean Tisserand and relevant verses from the Easter hymn, 'O Fili et Filiae', which the cast sang while setting up and exiting the wagon at each station. For the processional from place to place Catherine found verses from the Chester Corpus Christi Cycle, which were set by James Holleman, a music professor at Hillsdale College, to a medieval melody. Both songs told the plot of the doubting Thomas episode; we used these songs as repetition is employed in folk tales and myth, to reinforce the story.
- 9 Correspondence and conversations: Meghan Austin, Catherine Bilow, Jen Ferrell, Heather Harris, James Mallinson to/with Gwendolyn Waltz.