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## Translating a Medieval Religious Text Into a Contemporary Theatrical Experience

By

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### Introduction

Medieval English drama is removed from our contemporary American audience temporally, geographically, and ideologically. The printed forms of the plays that we possess were for the most part written down between 1500 and 1600, and represent plays produced on an island across the Atlantic Ocean as early as the middle of the fourteenth century. They were put on as cooperative efforts by civic and religious guilds that organized annually to engage in an act of worship as well as to outdo one another. How may we, in the last decade of the twentieth century, relate to a performance of these plays?

### Religion and Daily Life

There are a number of problems inherent in the attempt to communicate this kind of drama to a modern audience. The English language has changed significantly since the fourteenth century when these plays were regularly performed.<sup>1</sup> Our society has changed as well. The most significant societal change in terms of its effect on modern productions of these plays concerns the relationship between "secular" and "religious" life. When these dramas were being performed, they were an outgrowth of the work of the church. Even those plays that were performed entirely by craft guild members and sponsored by the town government had a religious purpose. In *Medieval Theatre* Glynne Wickham asserts:

the drama associated with Corpus Christi was directed towards the frivolous rich and the covetous tradesman in an effort to re-dedicate society to Christ and Christ's service in the remembrance that Christ had died to save mankind...the Corpus Christi Cycle plays were as much a civic response to this message as an ecclesiastical initiative. Market-squares were thus as

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<sup>1</sup> William Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 248.

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appropriate a platea or acting-place for these performances as convent churchyards, laymen more desirable as actors than clerics, and civic wealth as necessary to finance productions of these ludi as clerical scribes to provide the texts.<sup>2</sup>

Guild performers, clergy or laity, considered all of their work, whether farming, preaching or shoeing horses, to be the work of God. As Wickham has written,

a mentality which regarded toil as itself a devotional exercise, a return of thanks to the Creator for the endowments of skill and bodily health...was the unquestioned view of the guilds, all of which existed in the service of a Patron Saint as well as for the better conduct of trade and the regulation of employment.<sup>3</sup>

Though being at church was not the same as being at work, the harsh, black-and-white distinction we make today between "Church and State" or "Religion and Society" did not exist.

### **Festivity and Celebration**

There is another element that distances modern audiences from this drama: the festive, celebratory experience of the plays. Meg Twycross acknowledges that:

There was no such thing as casual theatergoing: each of these plays was the centrepiece of a special occasion for a close-knit community. The mystery plays were at the same time a religious festival and a tourist attraction: their players could draw on a charge of heightened religious emotion and civic pride which we can never recreate.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) 67.

<sup>3</sup> Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages, 1300 to 1660* (London: Routledge and Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1959-1963) 127.

<sup>4</sup> Meg Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," Richard Beadle, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 37.

R. T. Davies describes the "celebratory function" of the cycles that functioned "as a species of both worship and self-realization...[to act] out the destiny of mankind under God." The medieval people who came together for this experience were enjoying a summer festival that "indulged "an entire community's many-sided and diversely satisfying activity on a public holiday".<sup>5</sup> And John Marshall has written, "What distinguishes medieval drama from that of our own time as much as anything else is its religious sense of festive occasion".<sup>6</sup>

### Contemporary Revivals

Some of the twentieth-century occasions on which full cycles have been produced have attempted to recreate this "festival" atmosphere. Among them have been English town revivals<sup>7</sup> and the occasional cycle festivals at the University of Toronto, sponsored by their resident production company, *Poculi Ludique Societas* (PLS). This group of students, faculty, and alumni of the University of Toronto's Medieval Drama Program produces local and touring productions of short medieval plays as well as organizing occasional international festivals at which entire cycles are produced. For example: the York Cycle was produced there in 1977;<sup>8</sup> the N-town Passion was performed there in 1981;<sup>9</sup> and the Towneley Cycle in 1985.<sup>10</sup> These festivals feature performance groups from the United States, Canada and the world. Together they play one whole cycle or parts of one over a period of days. This shared experience creates a bond among the participants. Milla Riggio describes the 1985 Toronto Towneley Cycle performance and its effect this way:

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<sup>5</sup> R.T. Davies, ed. *The Corpus Christi Play of the English Middle Ages* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1972) 47.

<sup>6</sup> John Marshall, "Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays," Beadle, *Companion*, 296.

<sup>7</sup> See John R. Elliot, Jr., *Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1989) and Marshall.

<sup>8</sup> See Sheila Lindebaum, "The York Cycle at Toronto: Staging and Performance Style," *Medieval English Drama: A Casebook*, ed. Peter Happé (London: Macmillan, 1984) 200-211.

<sup>9</sup> See Twycross 59; and Martin Walsh, "The Harlotry Players: Teaching Drama through Performance," in Richard K. Emmerson, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* 29 (New York: MLA, 1990) 133.

<sup>10</sup> See Walsh 137; and Marshall 295.

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even when divorced from its religious origins, a communal event such as this production powerfully creates its own ambience. The festival transcends the particularities of production. . . . the event created a sense of shared community that gave it momentum to absorb weak productions and dramatic inconsistencies.<sup>11</sup>

Riggio's comments suggest that this festive, community celebration may be one of the best ways to approach these plays in the twentieth century, whether it is possible to recreate the exact medieval experience or not.

Harvey Cox's study of modern festivity suggests that our summer concerts and art shows can only approximate the experience of these celebrations. He claims "our celebrations do not relate us, as they once did, to the great parade of cosmic history or to the great stories of man's spiritual quest".<sup>12</sup> Cox goes on to define "festivity" as "the capacity for genuine revelry and joyous celebration,"<sup>13</sup> attributes which seem uncommon today. However, this idea of bringing together a group of people for a collective community effort, whether that community is intellectual, religious or geographic, is probably one of the best possibilities for understanding what medieval cycle production might have been like.

### **Medieval "Time" in Religious Dramas**

Another challenge to the modern producer of medieval drama is the idea of time. The medieval mind understood time differently than modern man does. Eleanor Prosser has described it this way: "the crowds that gathered to watch the mystery plays were not witnessing a dramatized 'history' of a dead past, but a living demonstration of present truth".<sup>14</sup> Time was not linear and causal; but time as presented in the cycles: time which began because God caused it to begin in creation and which will end when God causes it to end at

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<sup>11</sup> Milla C. Riggio, "Festival and Drama," in *Emmerson*, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969) 4.

<sup>13</sup> Cox 7.

<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Cycle Plays*, *Stanford Studies in Language and Literature* 23 (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1961) 53.

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Doomsday. God's "time" is "an eternal present in which yesterday is as much today as tomorrow, for He is outside time and knows all always"<sup>15</sup> and man's time is only a brief second of eternity. The cycles connect the audience with eternity by reminding them of the relative insignificance of human history and achievement. Harvey Cox says much the same thing about the function of celebrations (which is what the cycles were) for a society: "Celebration...reminds us that...history is not the exclusive or final horizon of life".<sup>16</sup> Man's potential for good is greater in this view of time, for Man can do anything when connected with the Eternal Creator. The present is important because choices made in it will affect eternity. The past is interesting and valuable not because it illustrates mankind's achievements or demonstrates the causes of social conditions, but because it may provide the impetus to remedy the present. The future is the hoped-for bliss of Heaven, the Eternal.

Medieval thinkers and theologians divided time into seven ages. The first five ages include the events of the Old Testament from Adam through the prophets. The sixth age is the Age of Grace, which includes Christ's lifetime and ours. The final age will begin with Doomsday and reconnect human time with eternity.<sup>17</sup>

Related to the medieval concept of time is the lack of a sense of "historicity" in the Middle Ages. The English townspeople who saw these plays had little concern for the proper historical period of the drama or story. They considered time to be connected by what was outside of and superior to it, not by a succession of historical events or ideas.<sup>18</sup> As John Marshall asserts, "Medieval drama presents the biblical past in terms of the medieval present".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Davies 45.

<sup>16</sup> Cox 46.

<sup>17</sup> V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966) 119-20.

<sup>18</sup> Kolve 119.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall 179.

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## The Production Experiment

Clearly, I do believe that it is possible to make such an attempt, and that it can be rewarding and theatrically effective for an audience. In developing a recent performance of the N-town Passion sequence, I drew on: a basic knowledge of stagecraft, both medieval and modern; the interesting and complete stage directions of the N-town Passion; considerations of the space; the expected audience; and my sense of what the "occasion" of this performance might be like. The project was conceived as part of my Master's thesis research, with an eye to understanding something about the possible salutary relationship between religion (specifically Christianity) and theatre. The production was to be staged in a Presbyterian church in Lansing, Michigan, for what I expected to be an audience composed of three groups: interested Medievalists; church members; and family of the cast. The fact that the play was being produced during the Lenten season provided some immediacy that would have been lacking at any other time of year.

With these considerations in mind, I first developed a simplified and modernized script. In producing it, I employed a blend of modern and medieval methods best suited to the space, script and audience. The production attempted to communicate some "flavor" of performance as medieval audiences experienced it, though it by no means recreated the production situation.

### A. Script Development

The first step in this process was the development of the script itself. The genesis of the production script for this experiment was selecting R. T. Davies' edition of the N-town plays, and specifically the Passion sequence. Writing the script involved two steps for most sections. First, each scene was shortened to its "essential" lines, updating archaic or unknown words and maintaining much of the poetry. Next, for some sections (particularly the opening and closing scenes), a complete prose paraphrase summarized the meaning in modern English. While William Marx argues that complete modernization of the language "would destroy the medieval character, meanings, and poetry of the play",<sup>20</sup> costume, music, and other elements

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<sup>20</sup> William Marx, "Medieval Religious Drama in Modern production," Diss. Mich. State U, 1991 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1991, 9216333) 13.

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of spectacle can provide a sense of the Middle Ages for an audience unfamiliar with Middle English and Latin, while shrinking the distance between the auditors and the script.

### Lucifer's Prologue

The Demon's Prologue may be taken as an example of this process, as it is the only section that was entirely rewritten. It was adapted through a process of three steps. Lucifer's original introduction reads this way:

I am your lord, Lucifer, that out of hell came,  
Prince of this world and great duke of hell.  
Wherefore my name is cleped Sir Satan,  
Which appeareth among you a matter to spell.  
I am nourisher of sin to the confusion of man,  
To bring him to my dungeon there in fire to dwell

. . . . .

For I began in heaven sin for to sow  
Among all the angeles that weren there so bright  
And therefore I was cast out into hell full low,  
Notwithstanding I was the fairest and bearer of light.  
Yet I drew in my tail of those angeles bright  
With me into hell, taketh good heed what I say.  
I left but twain against one to abide there in light,  
But the third part came with me--this may not be said nay

. . . . .

Behold the diversity of my disguised variance:  
Each thing set of due natural disposition,  
And each part according to his resemblance,  
From the sole of the foot to the highest ascension.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Davies 235-37.



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The first attempt at modifying the language, maintaining the poetry, produced the following:

I am your lord, Lucifer, that out of hell came,  
Prince of this world and great duke of hell.  
I encourage sin to keep humans confused  
To bring them to my dungeon there in fire to dwell

. . . .

I introduced sin to the sweetness of heaven  
Among all the angels that were there so bright.  
And therefore I was cast far down into hell,  
Though I was most beautiful and shining with light.  
But I took my share of those angels bright  
With me into hell--pay attention to me here—  
I left just two against one to live there in light,  
But the third part came with me--this truth is clear

. . . .

Look how diverse my disguise may be seen:  
Each thing perfect for its own occasion,  
And each part according to my present need,  
From the sole of my foot to the top of my crown.

My first prose draft of this introduction read:

Hello. I am Lucifer, ruler of Hell. My goal is to bring all humans to Hell with me. I created sin in Heaven where there was none: for that I was cast down into Hell. But I am not alone there--I took one-third of the angels with me!  
See how common my costume may seem? Perfect to the occasion, convincing and disarming--all according to my purpose.

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Finally, the paraphrase of the entire speech was revised into its performance form, which began:

Good evening. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lucifer, king of hell. Oh! I see some of you have heard of me. Good! My goal in life is to lure all of you to come and live here with me. See how normal I look? I always suit my clothes and appearance to the occasion, whatever it may be. I must seem convincing, disarming-- all according to my own purposes.

Yes, it was I who first introduced sin, there in the dull holiness of Heaven. That's what got me thrown out. Seems I wasn't appreciated there. But I was: one-third of the angels came with me to Hell. They work with me there now. (91)

Minor changes were made in the speech during rehearsal, but the sentences printed above remained practically unchanged from that step to production.

### **Finding the Essence of Each Scene**

Condensing scenes required a similar process. Initially the performance was only to include Passion I, which concludes with Jesus' Arrest. Passion Play II was added in order to provide the scenes that complete the Passion story and Resurrection. The Crucifixion and Resurrection had to be included. Beyond that, four trial scenes (Before Caiphias, Before Pilate I and II, and Before Herod) were incorporated as background important and inter-related enough to include. Peter's denial was eliminated for the sake of time.

The Dream of Pilate's wife sequence was eliminated early, considering time and shortening the cast of characters. The change this made in Pilate's character became clear later. If Pilate's effort on Jesus' behalf is not motivated by the warning from Satan that he will suffer for killing the Christ, then he must be acting out of conscience. The reasons for this change are due more to the characterization of Demon than they are to Pilate, however. In the play, the reason that Demon comes to Pilate's wife is that he has decided that killing Jesus is going too far and that if Jesus ends up in Hell, He will destroy it. Demon hopes to use Pilate's wife to reverse Pilate's decision to support the Jews' complaints.

A melodramatic sensibility is added when Pilate instead struggles with his own conscience over Jesus' fate. Jesus' assurance to Pilate suggests that he will not suffer so harsh a fate as Demon has predicted: "The one who betrayed me to you is more at fault than you" (Scene XII, 111). In this arrangement, when Pilate delivers the sentence at the end of the scene he is reluctant but forced by the Jews to do so.

Demon's speech of victory before the cross comes next, using the text of his message from the introduction to the Dream of Pilate's Wife. The speech functions as a reminder of Demon's goals and presence.

The Harrowing of Hell scenes were eliminated because Jesus' victory over Demon is clear as soon as He rises from the dead. It is not necessary to see Jesus physically defeat him at this point when the focus is on the audience's response to Jesus' success.

Initially the script cut from the Crucifixion straight to the Resurrection without any Burial. Instead of adding the scene with the Centurion, Joseph and Nicodemus, the production presents the Burial in dumb show using Pilate, the soldiers and the other leaders. It connects directly to the Setting of the Watch.

From this point on no scene was completely eliminated, though each was condensed drastically. At first the play ended with Mary Magdalene's message to the disciples that Jesus was alive, though an epilogue from John the Baptist about the importance of repentance was intended to frame the story, paralleling the Prologues of John and Demon which open *Passion Play I*. An Ascension scene was added as a conclusion instead. This brief "Ascension" piece provided a resolution for the production text, concluding with a reprise of the "Hosanna" which had welcomed Jesus in the Entry into Jerusalem.

## **B. Themes**

The primary conflict in the *Passion Plays* of the N-town cycle stands between Law, represented by the Jews, and Grace, represented by God through Jesus. The final performance script for this contemporary production was therefore titled *Law and Grace*. There are two

primary views of law contained in this text. The conservative view of the Pharisees venerates Law above all else: "It is far better for one person to die to preserve our law, than to see the law destroyed, along with our society" (Caiphas, Scene V, 100). Opposing this position is the image of the merciful Christ as the fulfillment of the Law. Christ's Grace, offered as an alternative and successor to the Law, is not considered by the Jewish religious leaders. What Jesus calls redemption or forgiveness, "perfect peace between God and Man" (Scene III, 98), is seen by the Pharisees as a threat to their power and control.

### C. Staging

#### Medieval Staging Practices

There is a form to the staging of the medieval period and particularly to the N-town Passion Plays. This method may be described as *loca-platea*, or place-and-scaffold, staging. It features two primary acting areas: the *platea* (also called the "place"), which refers to the audience-level performance area;<sup>22</sup> and the *loca*, or locations, defined in and around the *platea* and raised up on constructed platforms called scaffolds. A scaffold may also be called "scaffold, stage, house and tent".<sup>23</sup> The scaffolds can indicate general or specific *loca*. In this kind of specified staging arrangement, there was always a scaffold for Heaven and some kind of "Hell," though Anne Cooper Gay finds that in treating the N-town Passion Play I as a discrete drama, no Hell is required. She describes a total of six "stations" (i.e., *loca*) for the performance of this play, at least three of them on elevated stages.<sup>24</sup> Other scaffolds might indicate different locations at different times. For example, in the N-town Passion, the same "council-house" may have served both as the "little oratory" where the Jews plot Jesus' destruction and "the Temple" where Maria Virgo goes to await the Resurrection at the end of *Passion Play I*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Twycross 59; and Richard Southern, *The Medieval Theatre in the Round* 1957 (London: Faber, 1975) 17-49.

<sup>23</sup> Twycross 60.

<sup>24</sup> Anne Cooper Gay, "The 'Stage' and Staging of the N-town Plays," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 10 (1967) 136.

<sup>25</sup> See Alan H. Nelson, "Some Configurations of Staging in Medieval English Drama," in *Medieval English Drama*, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972) 133-47; and Martial Rose, "The Staging of the Hegge Plays," *Medieval Drama* ed. Neville Denny, *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies* 16 (London: Arnold, 1973) 210-19.

In the production described within this article, almost every location was used to indicate more than one setting. For example, the main stage level (B), which served as the Upper Room for the Last Supper scenes in Passion Play I became the Mount of Olives and the hill of the Crucifixion later in the story (see below: "Playing Space;" also drawing).

Plays, especially medieval ones, "were intended to be seen and heard, not read...they were designed for a general audience which was more accustomed to hearing its literature than to reading it silently".<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is important to play these dramas in front of an audience to determine and illustrate their theatrical viability. As Meg Twycross has written, "if we take them seriously as theatre, they will work".<sup>27</sup> Richard Beadle says: "modern revivals...propose a variety of delights, insights, questions and problems which previous studies...have seldom sought to address".<sup>28</sup>

### Stage Directions

Most of the stage directions in N-town's Passion I and II are in English, though a few are in Latin. Elsewhere in the N-town manuscript, the overwhelming majority of the stage directions are given in Latin. For example, in the Noah play, after Noah agrees to build the ark, the stage direction follows: "*Hic transit Noe cum familia sua pro novi* [Here Noah crosses with his family to get the ship]".<sup>29</sup> Many directions simply introduce scenes or describe entrances and exits, such as "*Hic incipit de suscitatione Lazari* [Here begins the raising of Lazarus]"<sup>30</sup> and "*Introitus 'Moses'* [Enter 'Moses']".<sup>31</sup> These are sparse and simple directions that give little indication of the specific arrangements of the playing area.

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<sup>26</sup> Beadle xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Twycross 37.

<sup>28</sup> Beadle xv.

<sup>29</sup> Davies 96.

<sup>30</sup> Davies 221,

<sup>31</sup> Davies 109.

The stage directions in English of the Passion Plays are much different. They are longer, more specific and more descriptive than the other comments. Alan Fletcher calls them "after Chester . . . the next richest in English mystery drama".<sup>32</sup> For example, R. T. Davies renders the stage direction preceding Annas' first line in *Passion Play I* as follows:

Here shall Annas show himself in his stage, besein after a bishop of the old law, in a scarlet gown and over that a blue tabard, furred with white, and a mitre on his head after the old law, two doctors standing by him in furred hoods, and one before them with his staff of estate, and each of them on their heads a furred cap with a great knop in the crown, and one standing before as a Saracen, the which shall be his messenger.<sup>33</sup>

This stage direction provides a general description of where Annas will appear, tells us who is with him, and describes his clothing very specifically. The issue of why they would be dressed as bishops rather than Jews will be addressed below.

The most important feature of the stage directions in English in the N-town Passion plays is the locations they describe. As seen above, Annas appears "in his stage," presumably some sort of scaffold or platform. Anne Cooper Gay argues: "the use of the word 'stage' must, in connection with this cycle [N-town] be limited to refer to a scaffold".<sup>34</sup> When the priests, Annas and Caiphas, meet with the judges Rewfin and Lyon, the stage direction says: "Here the bishops with their clerks and the Pharisees meet at the midplace and there shall be a little oratory with stools and cushions cleanly besein like as it were a council-house".<sup>35</sup> This describes not only the position ("the midplace") and the location ("a little oratory"), but also suggests the furnishings ("with stools and cushions...like as it were a council house").

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<sup>32</sup> Alan J. Fletcher, "The N-town Plays" in Beadle 178.

<sup>33</sup> Davies 241.

<sup>34</sup> Gay 140.

<sup>35</sup> Davies 245.

These stage directions can also suggest something about the staging and the "cues" of the production. Having established the "council-house" and Simon's house, the play alternates between these two *loca*, suggesting that action is continuous in both places. It was not necessary in early productions to ignore the actors in the inactive location consciously, because these settings were somehow equipped with curtains to open or close. After Jesus and his disciples have entered Simon's house for the Passover supper, the stage direction says, "in the meantime the council-house before-said shall suddenly *unclose* showing the bishops, priests and judges sitting in their estate like as it were a convocation".<sup>36</sup> Similar directions accompany the subsequent shifts from one place to the other.

### Playing Space

The production space was a circular church chapel with a flat, hard floor and ceiling and a raised stage at one side, with steps leading up to it (see drawing). The Last Supper was performed on this stage (B), as were the Setting and Story of the Watch, and the Resurrection. The tomb was placed at the upstage left corner of this stage (F). An extension of this stage at the center (C), juttred approximately eight feet out into the audience area (A--described here as the "place" or *platea*). On this extended stage the Agony, the "scaffold" of Pilate, the Crucifixion and Ascension were staged. The downstage left corner of the existing stage (E) served to suggest Herod's "scaffold" for the trial there, while the "council-house" of the Jews was played on a standard 4 x 8 platform in "the place" at stage right (D). Several characters, as described above, made entrances from the rear of the chapel, and it was here (G) that the disciples were gathered when they received the news that Jesus had risen. Most of the remaining action happened in the "place," also called the *platea*, at floor-level (A). Even the scenes that were located primarily in another area made use of the *platea* as an extension of their location. Meg Twycross describes the "place" as the "No Man's Land into which the characters descend to converse, fight or otherwise interact".<sup>37</sup> For example, at the opening of Scene II, Caiphas introduces himself from the "scaffold" (D), but then steps from it to greet Rewfin near the center of "the place" (A).

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<sup>36</sup> Davies 255. (*italics mine*)

<sup>37</sup> Twycross 58.

My production design for staging this script was based on the concept of *alternating locations*. The location where the Pharisees did their plotting was always in sight of the audience. Similarly, the Last Supper tableau was visible even when the Jews were arguing among themselves over what to do with Jesus. Limited access to the performance space prior to the performance precluded the construction of complicated built scenery, (which is what scaffolds enclosed by curtains would be). Standard 4' x 8' platforms were chosen as a simplified alternative, using light to isolate the areas.

## D. Directing Techniques

### Focus

The control of focus in this type of theatre, where the action takes place in front of, among, beside and behind the audience, must be achieved primarily by action or sound. For example, in the transition mentioned above between the first Last Supper scene and the second Conspiracy scene, Jesus finishes with the words to Simon, "This reward I shall grant thee present" at which the curtain around the council-house set would open, making a noise and drawing attention as Annas immediately began speaking with "Behold! It is nought, all that we do!".<sup>38</sup>

My production made use of this technique to a small degree. Because of the close proximity of the different areas to one another, the speaker drew most of the attention, especially if she or he spoke from behind or otherwise out of the sight of the audience. On those occasions when the focus changed from the front of the room to another location, it was the attention of the speaker to the new character or the change of speaker to the entering actor that drew the attention of the audience, even though they were forced to sit facing the front. The transition of the Prologues will serve as an example. When Demon finished speaking at the front and noticed John the Baptist walking in at the back, she looked at him in disgust, and then walked off. Just as she turned to go, John spoke, and the audience shifted their attention to him.

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<sup>38</sup> Davies 255.



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## Clothing and Costume

There are three possible approaches a modern producer may take to costuming the Jewish conspirators. First, they may be clothed as Catholic bishops, as they were for medieval performances. That is how they were dressed for the production of this experimental script. Second, Annas and Caiphas might appear as Jewish priests of the first century according to the latest historical research in order to place them accurately in the time of Jesus. Third, it is possible to dress them in something entirely different. This could mean putting them in generic black robes like "Demon" wore. One might also dress them as their modern equivalents in terms of power and authority, either within the church, the government, or the judicial system. Also within this range of possibilities is the chance to portray them as anything or anyone else at all, as Shakespeare and other playwrights are often updated or uprooted to such locations as Nazi Germany or the American West.

The intent of updating costumes is placing the drama in a context that is familiar to the contemporary audience, if there are contemporary parallels to the characters and the costume clearly indicates what the parallel is. Alan Fletcher takes the concept a step farther and says that the familiarity is really just a "hook" to draw the audience into the world of the play and to accept it on its own terms. By incorporating contemporary references, the play "*defamiliarises* the here and now," making it an apt subject of and location for criticism and change. The audience is aware of this illusion and follows the arguments of the drama more clearly because of this awareness. A variety of arguments is employed in order to explain the single Divine purpose in ways which the entire audience may understand.

The potential problem with keeping the Jews and the soldiers in the medieval age is the possibility of creating a work that will be perceived and valued only as a "museum piece" or a social document. Such a danger can be averted by the use of modern language and the undated religious robes worn by Caiphas, Herod, and Pilate.

Lucifer presents a unique problem. The prologue itself includes a long description of Lucifer's clothing, which is gaudy and excessive. He introduces this with: "Behold the

diversity of my disguised variance".<sup>39</sup> This suggests that the actor playing the role was dressed much as the gentlemen of the day, rather than in a red suit with horns and a tail. I translated this image to modern times by dressing the woman I had cast as 'Demon' in a modern black pants suit in which she appeared to be herself. Her entrance in this outfit was an attempt to have her seem to be a modern person beginning or narrating the play until she introduced herself as Lucifer. This kind of shock for the audience was intended to jolt the audience from modern times to the world of the play.

It is not clear whether the Lucifer prologue of *Passion Play I* had the same effect in its original. Lucifer may have been dressed in layers, and taken on a variety of disguises. Even if he were dressed more like the audience than the characters, his line "that out of hell came"<sup>40</sup> combined with the presence of the hell-mouth or hell scaffold on the setting, suggests that he made his entrance from Hell, immediately indicating his identity to the audience. Though the costume choice was appropriate and effective, it is not clear whether or not it was entirely true to the original production style.

### Staging Miracles

The central actions of any Passion play are Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. The method of staging these miracles must be a vital consideration for any producer. Both actions are described in the stage directions, but they are not specific and do not make clear just how realistic the indications of these actions were. The Crucifixion calls for the soldiers to "pull *Jesu* out of his clothes, and lay them together. And there they shall pull him down, and lay him along on the cross, and after that nail him thereon".<sup>41</sup> The dialogue indicates the soldiers have to stretch Jesus to fit the nail holes. Several possible stagings come to mind: the cross may have had nails already pounded into it, so the actor portraying Jesus could hold onto them as the soldiers pounded on them, making it look as if they were being pounded through him; the soldiers might have carried the nails and then placed them in pre-drilled holes in the cross; It seems likely that the actor playing Jesus in reality would have been roped to the cross beam (as

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<sup>39</sup> Davies 237.

<sup>40</sup> Davies 235.

<sup>41</sup> Davies 306.

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Richard Beadle suggests in his edition of the York plays<sup>42</sup>), with a platform for his feet. None of these speculations may be confirmed. In such ambiguous cases, pantomimic action can be powerfully suggestive in ancient and modern drama for the performance of familiar mythic actions.

In the interest of simplification and symbolic distance, I chose to pantomime the action of the Crucifixion, creating an imaginary hammer, nails, and cross. The cross was represented by a six-foot long wooden dowel, painted black, that Jesus held across his shoulders and on which He supported his arms. The effect presented Jesus standing in a cross-like position without creating a realistic first-century Judean or fifteenth-century English cross.

For the Resurrection, we took an even more stylized approach. The tomb was placed offstage. The Resurrection was cued by a recorded brass fanfare and a bright white light on "the tomb." Jesus walked on triumphantly with his hands held high. He strode to center stage and began his speech to the audience from there.

The final miracle in the production version was Jesus' Ascension into Heaven from the Mount of Olives. Alan Nelson's article "Some Configurations of Staging" suggests that beneath the scaffold for Heaven a hill was constructed which represented the Mount of Olives, where Jesus goes to pray during the Agony. He appears in the same place for the Ascension. During the Agony, an angel descends to Jesus to offer him the host and chalice, and at the end of the Ascension, Jesus rises into heaven out of sight: "*Hic ascendit ob oculis eorum*".<sup>43</sup> Nelson suggests that a winch arrangement was permanently installed in the Heaven scaffold and that it was used to lower the angel, remove the angel, and finally to accomplish Jesus' Ascension.<sup>44</sup>

For this production, the Ascension was left largely to the imagination of the audience. Jesus stood at center stage with the disciples and Maries gathered around him in the *platea*, or floor level, looking up. After He gave them the Great Commission and promised to always be

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King, eds. *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 211.

<sup>43</sup> Davies 360.

<sup>44</sup> Nelson 134-35.

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with them, the play concluded with a reprise of the song that had welcomed him in the Entry to Jerusalem.

### Audience

The audience was seated facing the raised stage (B). The floor level playing area (A) between the audience and the stage was the variable "place" where many actions took place. The "place" included the aisles through the center and around the outside of the seating area. As many scenes as possible were staged in this *platea* in an attempt to involve the audience in the action of the play. Both Prologues and much of the Conspiracy were played here, as were Jesus' Arrest and His four Trials. Those who came before the cross stood in the "place" too. In the Ascension scene, the disciples stood on the floor looking up at Jesus on the platform (C) as he spoke. When He finished, they all joined in the "Hosanna," facing the audience. Even the actors who were not on-stage came on and finished the song; then they all walked out through the center aisle.

The audience is an important character in this play. Demon's Prologue is addressed directly to the crowd, as is the sermon of John the Baptist. Jesus (or Jesus' Spirit) talks to the audience about His work of Resurrection following His suffering, and the need for repentance: "Man, and thou let me thus gone / . . . Such a friend findest thou never none, / To help thee at thy need"<sup>45</sup> ["If you let me go today without following, you will miss the friend who knows your need" (Scene XVII, 118)]. Jesus also includes the audience when He speaks to his disciples both at the Last Supper and at the Ascension. In staging the Ascension, the disciples faced Jesus and the actor playing Jesus addressed them and the crowd. Meg Twycross described the value of this device, suggesting that among other things the production of medieval drama has taught us "it is possible to look the audience full in the face".<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Davies 331-32.

<sup>46</sup> Twycross 37.

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## Evaluation Script

The process of developing and producing a performance script from a medieval religious play has led to a number of conclusions. Paraphrasing and updating language is not as simple as it first appears, because there exist a nearly infinite number of possibilities when one attempts to make medieval references sensible and meaningful today. The loss of poetry by modern paraphrase is worth the sacrifice if the audience can relate to the play as a somewhat contemporary experience, rather than a relic of an unknown age.

## Themes

N-town's Passion sequence presents a unified story that may be read as a conflict between Law and Grace. The protagonist is Jesus and the antagonists are the Pharisees. Jesus offers new life and new Law by coming to Earth, dying and resurrecting. His victory over death becomes Man's victory over sin. The language of the plays includes many levels of understanding. Repeated productions would make different emphases. This production emphasized the ideas of Law and Grace, while another might point up the commercial considerations of Judas and the Pharisees.

## Production Methods

Concerning presentation, again many modes are possible. It is best, however, to base any production design or technique on the *loca-platea* staging described in *Passion Plays I and II*, which is an effective, interesting and flexible plan. To prevent the production from becoming too archaic, costumes should be updated for at least some of the characters, such as Rewfin and Lyon, the judges, for example. Characters like these were touchstones for the audience of their day and may be rewritten or at least re-costumed to illustrate their role in modern society. Miracles may be effectively staged without expensive special effects, particularly in an age of film when theatrical effects often appear inferior to those in the movie theater. A sense of symbolic ritual may be maintained as well by limiting the "realism" of these effects.

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## Audience Relationships

The production audience was similar to the medieval one in another important way: most of the audience members knew one or more of the actors personally. When the cycles were put on by a town and its guilds, most of the audience members knew the performers from everyday life. R. T. Davies has written, "Medieval folk were more used than we are to responding to the role a man was performing as distinct from . . . the man himself, more used than we are to responding to a priest or a king than to Robert or Richard".<sup>47</sup>

Acquaintance with the performers was not the only connection the audience made with the performers, then or now. In terms of physical contact, the Prologues brought the actors into direct relationship with the audience. Demon moved all the way around the audience; John walked up and down the center aisle. Elsewhere in the play, characters entered from behind, around and through the audience, implicating the observers as a part of the action or at least as co-inhabitants of the acting-place, the *platea*. For example, before His Crucifixion Jesus was led out the center aisle of the church. The arrest party in an earlier scene entered from the back of the room and approached Jesus and His disciples through all three aisles.

This audience-performer connection could have been made clearer and stronger in a number of ways. First, the entire performance could have been turned into a worship service, framed by liturgical readings and responses. In a similar manner, the "Hosannas" which welcomed Jesus and praised Him at His Ascension could have included audience participation, requiring effort on the part of the audience members and identification with the actors and their characters who welcome Jesus, condemn Him, and then praise Him as they say good-bye.

Finding the sense of unity with a modern audience requires some of the techniques of staging, technology and script organization delineated above. Updated contemporary references and costumes may help in this regard, and a modernized script is necessary, though the degree of modernization will vary from one production to another. William Marx writes that he attempted to make as much as possible of his modern performances clear to the

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<sup>47</sup> Davies 49.

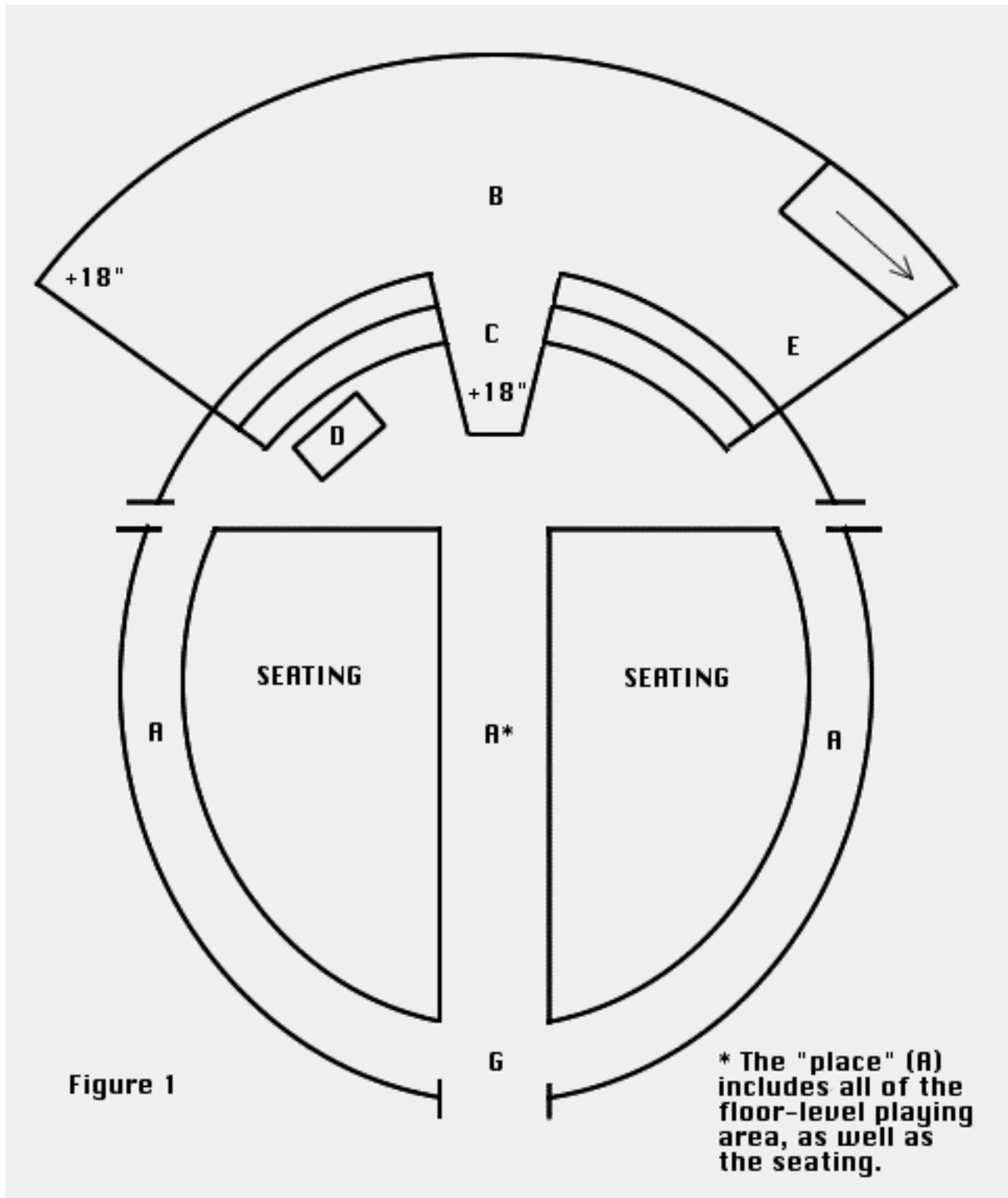
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audience through actions, in order to retain most of the Middle English and some of the Latin words.

### **Conclusion**

This production provided a valuable theatrical experience in three primary ways for different groups of people. For the initiated, it was a religious experience. Those who did not care for, or agree with, the message might have been interested by the medieval staging ideas or the epic qualities of the story itself. And for those who might not have accepted the message initially, but became convinced, the play functioned as a dialectic, sermon or argument that concluded with a "conversion."

Whatever the methods, this drama can be significant and interesting to a modern audience. If its message is true, it will continue to be an important story until the "Doomsday" it describes comes to pass. It is important as well as a glimpse into the life of another age. Performing medieval plays illustrates, as Meg Twycross has written, that "medieval theatre" is "different, and often highly sophisticated."





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