THE YORK PLAYS
University of Toronto, 20 June 1998

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Precisely at 6 am, as dawn came up over Toronto, it began to rain. Lightly at first, then steadily, it fell into the courtyard below, where a young man in a slicker vainly wiped moisture from a waiting step unit, as early risers passed by under umbrellas. Twenty-one years after an ill-fated rain-diminished attempt at the first full pageant-waggon production of the entire 47 plays of the York Cycle, Toronto was taking the gamble and rolling the waggons again, in the year of El Niño. By now, the Creation ought to have been unfolding at the first station, but by the look of the sky, Doomsday had intervened. 'Oh God', I said, putting on the raingear, 'Here we go again'.

But the sight in the wide quadrangle of Victoria College was heartening — a goodly turnout of spectators, rain diminishing, clearing skies to the West. And the voice of God, proclaiming the creation of the firmament and the angels, was joyful, optimistic ... and female! This was 1998, after all. And this time it worked.

For the next sixteen hours, at four dispersed playing stations, the old plays won their ways into the affections of a new generation of watchers and listeners — unamplified, undigitalised, actual, human, bombastic, ridiculous, boring, magnificent, and moving. To make a very long story short, what happened in Toronto on 20 June 1998 was the real thing, in the flesh.

The weather brightened steadily, turning into a hot summer's day with temperatures over 30 degrees Celsius, requiring application of sunscreen to the face of Corpus Christi — and everybody else as well. The crowd came in waves, swelling by early afternoon into overflow proportions at all stations. Here and there could be seen the grizzled veterans of many decades of medieval drama scholarship and performance, from Richard Beadle (editor of the definitive edition of the *York Plays*) on down. But mostly the day and the plays belonged to the citizenry of Toronto, who had brought their kids and come for a good Saturday out.

The smell of barbecued hamburgers and hot dogs mingled easily with the medieval rhetoric. It was the children in the audience who particularly fascinated me — following the stories raptly one moment, and asking blunt

cosmic questions the next, issuing inappropriate demands, yawning in the inevitable dull moments, thrilling to the surges of spectacle, theatricality, and drama, frightened by devils then laughing at them, learning to mimic and harass them back, as each succeeding waggon drew up and unfolded its weighty message and bag of tricks.

Four strategically separated stations had been set out in and around the grounds of Victoria College, offering contrasting tests for the skills of the actors, like succeeding holes on a golf course. The first station (an easy par 4) was set against the steps of Old Victoria Hall, offering a snug sloping amphitheatre for spectators and proscenium-stage conditions, with TV cameras and sound booms recording the action for posterity. The second station (a tough par 5) spread out across a tree-covered lawn the width of the quadrangle, where audiences took refuge in the shade from the heat of the day, sharing the space with a crafts fair and bookstalls, offering distractions for the audience on every side, and acoustics that challenged the voices of the best actors. The third station (a par 3) was wedged in between two buildings, one High Victorian Gothic and the other classic 1970s Academic Modern, forming an intimate, voice-friendly meeting point for audience and actors that most closely resembled the narrow streets of ancient York. The actors loved it.

The final station (a diabolical par 4) was set up outside the quadrangle in a public street which had been blocked off for the day. Patrolled by stony-faced security guards grimly *not* attending to the plays, backed by construction sites and the glass-and-steel Toronto skyline, and roamed by puzzled passers-by and bicyclists, this venue offered perilous roughs and sand traps for all but the most riveting of the performances. But actors, as they will (and there were literally hundreds of them), continually rose to the occasion. It was at this station that one Herod, raging in pageant and street and failing to provoke the distanced audience, paused and observed 'Normally people boo when I say that.' Energised, the audience responded with suitable hostility, and the imaginative contract was renewed.

Like the audience, the actors were of all ages, and young people were particularly in evidence — from the winsome little girl as the Angel Gabriel in *The Death of the Virgin* to a dead-serious boy Jesus in *Christ and the Doctors* and on to a smartass young bicycle courier-messenger in the Catholic University of America's brilliant modern-dress *Slaughter of the Innocents* (directed by Roland Reed, and one of the day's highlights).

A real surprise of the cycle for me was the massive and persuasive presence of women performers in a text originally conceived for all-male

casts from York's craft guilds. The advantages of this broader casting policy began with such roles as Eve, whether decorously clad in a body suit in *The Fall of Man*, or provocatively in almost nothing in *The Harrowing of Hell*. The same could be said for the comical Mrs. Noah in *The Building of the Ark*, or the chaste Virgin Mary, iconographically correct in blue and white habit in virtually all of her 13 appearances.

But the further achievement of this production was in claiming and winning for female actors a whole succession of putatively male rôles from one end of the cycle to the other. The process began with the all-female cast of the very first play, *The Fall of the Angels* (including God, Good and Bad Angels, Lucifer and Devils, skilfully directed by Jennifer Parr) and continued right on to the Good and Bad Souls and Devils of *The Last Judgement*. This wasn't because 'there weren't enough men', as one professor claimed at the post-production discussion, but rather because the women of the 1990s were not about to be left out. In between Creation and Doomsday, we saw and heard women actors in every imaginable rôle. Among the heroic figures, the list included Jesus, Malchus, Doubting Thomas, and five of the eight Disciples at the Last Supper — a statistic that might have surprised even the Vatican. More numerous yet were the women actors cast as villains (who have in the plays, as is famously the case, all the best lines). The ranks included a Cleopatra-like Pharaoh in *Moses and Pharaoh*, one of the murderous soldiers in *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, two Satans, Barabbas, the Bad Thief, four versions of Caiaphas and/or Annas, and innumerable female Devils. Whether the Fathers of the Church (or indeed, the City Councillors of ancient York) would have approved is questionable, but the Toronto audience accepted these women performers enthusiastically. For my money (and the performance was free, incidentally, except for donations solicited by beggars in disguise from Toronto's enterprising Poculi Ludique Societas, or PLS), the powerful female presence effortlessly made the connection between these 500-year-old texts and our own multi-gendered world.

The multicultural diversity of Toronto was well represented in the audience, and mirrored in the casting of central rôles in the plays, including a Black Noah in *The Building of the Ark*, a Hispanic Shepherd in *The Shepherds*, and East Indian Mary in *The Purification*, a Black Joseph in *The Flight into Egypt*, and Asian Jesus in *The Road to Emmaus*. Overall, the effect was to redeem the enterprise from any hint of Heritage Theatre, making it a play that spoke in the flesh of our own time and circumstances.

Another crucial point of connection was the text itself, smoothly modernised and shorn of its *thee*s and *thou*s and arcane slang, yet true to the original metres, rhyme schemes, and alliterative patterns of the craggy, multi-faceted Yorkshire original. Where necessary, gaps in the original text were filled in with verses taken from or based on other cycles. Specially prepared for this production, the text was the proud handiwork of Kimberly Yeates and Chester Scoville. At the post-production discussion, one of the British contingent observed that present-day audiences in Yorkshire can understand the original without glossaries. Perhaps so — but Yates and Scoville richly deserve the thanks of directors from all over North America (at the very least) for finally creating a playable performance text of the York Cycle in Modern English.

Any major theatrical production is a vast collective act of imagination, and this one, ranging over four separate stages and seventeen hours of playing time, was particularly spacious, generous, and collective, full of spontaneity but superbly organised. Though united by a common text, the productions took individual directorial pathways of interpretation, in terms of acting styles and design concepts from minimal to lavish. Most costumes were in the traditional vein, though some of the strongest (and a few of the weakest) productions were in modern dress. Some observers found this disunity confusing; to me, it was a measure of the richness and inclusiveness of the whole enterprise.

This was not merely a collective achievement, but an international one; 26 productions were from various parts of Canada, 17 from the US, 3 from the UK, and one UK/Canadian co-production. Particularly impressive was the marshalling of pageant waggons, set-pieces, and casts, using over and over the seven venerable waggons built on the framework of Ontario farm waggons in the 1970s in the golden age of PLS by K. Reed Needles and Steven Putzel, and further restored by various hands in the interim. With the addition of two new waggons, these vehicles seamlessly served all 47 plays — an achievement beyond that even of York in its medieval heyday.

By current scholarly calculation these waggons are too small, and too conceptually oriented to 'side-on' performance (that is, playing out one side of the waggon, in a proscenium or picture-frame configuration). A few attempts were made within this production to perform 'end-on' (that is, out one end of the waggon, with an oblong thrust stage along the lines of the Swan Theatre in Stratford-on-Avon). This seemed to work best when, as in the elegant *Ascension* staged by Yale University's Institute for Sacred Music, the audience was decisively moved into the right place to watch the

show. And in that case, the elevation of the Pro-Basketballer-sized Jesus by winch was a visual treat — particularly because, to the delight of connoisseurs of medieval iconography, his feet remained visible at the apogee, with the rest of him shrouded in the clouds.

Whether the action in pageant-waggon staging should all take place 'on the waggon', or whether it should spill naturally into the street and out into the audience, was hotly debated by various directors at a pre-performance symposium. In practice either extreme seemed quite effective (or indeed, ineffective), as did various blendings of the two, depending on the nature of the text and the skill of the production.

There is no space here to record all of the triumphs of this long medieval day's journey into night. Here however, in addition to those already mentioned, are what seemed to me the standout productions:

The Creation to the Fifth Day from the University of Birmingham, UK, directed by Joel Kaplan. Featuring a magically unfolding cosmos in the style of a medieval Book of Hours, this production was anchored in one of the day's most winning performances, by a RADA-bound student actor in the role of God the Creator.

The Building of the Ark and the Flood from Towson University, Baltimore, Maryland USA, directed by Ralph Blasting. Always an audience-pleaser, this comedy about the destruction of the world was led by an amiably clueless Noah who somehow assembled a ship before our eyes, and even managed to scare his reluctant wife aboard ship. Bird puppets on wires, worthy of Julie Taymore's *The Lion King*, were a special delight to the crowd.

Abraham and Isaac from the Harlotry Players, University of Michigan USA, directed by Martin Walsh. Utilising the space surrounding the waggon for Abraham's initial scenes and journey into the wilderness, this production (with the director a superbly distressed Abraham) saved the waggon for the dramatic climax, as near-tragedy turns to comic epiphany. A particularly nice touch was that Isaac (with the actor near his proper age of 30) would reappear as Jesus in *The Dream of Pilate's Wife*.

The Nativity from LeMoyne College, Syracuse, New York USA. Directed by Michael Barbour, with costumes by Kristi McKay, this play charmingly fulfilled its objective of blending the simple and the spectacular, as well as weaving two distinct play texts into a touching conjunction of earthy shepherds and cosmic events.

Christ and the Doctors in the Temple a co-production of the University of Leeds, UK, and PLS, Toronto, that was rehearsed in two places (and

different texts!) separately and then conjoined on site. PLS worked effectively from modernised version while the English performers (veterans Peter Meredith and Jane Oakshott) spoke the original text as the parental Mary and Joseph — though many of us simply mistook their authenticity for thick Yorkshire dialect. But then where did young Jesus get his Canadian accent?

The Conspiracy from the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, University of Toronto, directed by Chuck Costello. Surely one of the most unqualified hits of the production, this exploration of power politics featured strong mature actors in every role, and an extraordinary set of crossed spears and red banners. A demon puppet in the form of a Raven appeared at unexpected moments, striking a ominous note of Nemesis. Was that what Hamlet had in mind when he says 'the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge'?

The Agony in the Garden from Sir Frederick Banting Secondary School of London, Ontario, directed by PLS veteran K. Reed Needles. This spaciously expansive epic, with marching soldiers and a well-choreographed sword fight for Peter and Malchus, proved that well-trained High School students can be the equal of any performers. The comedy of the sleeping Disciples (with friends like these, what does Jesus need with enemies?) was particularly welcome in this grim context.

The Remorse of Judas, another PLS production, directed by Paul Babiak. Taking a high-concept interpretation, the director double-cast Judas with two skilled actors, one male and one female, offering a contemporary perspective on a character too often mistaken for a conventional villain. The schizophrenic action developed in front of an ambivalent medieval and modern faux-stained-glass window.

The Harrowing of Hell from the Department of English, Shepherd College, Shepherdon, West Virginia USA, directed by Thomas R. Papeika. A predictably delightful change of mood and pace after the agonies of Calvary, this no-holds-barred comic romp turned on a confrontation between a barking Drill Sergeant Jesus and a chorus of slinky devil-floozies.

The Resurrection from the Department of English and the Newman Centre, University of Toronto, directed by Karen Sawyer. This was a visual treat from start to finish. Stunningly costumed with black and gold robes for Annas and Caiaphas, it featured an unfolding panorama backdrop and a sensational appearance of the Risen Christ, resplendent in golden mask and makeup.

The Last Judgment from Handmade Performance, Toronto, directed by Stephen B. Johnson. Darkness had fallen over Toronto by the time this powerful production appeared, but the performers had planned it that way, and came with their own lights. Angry and postmodern in its textures, with a stern God blazoning distorted electronic music from a boom box, this finale evoked both fear and pity, in the joyful surprise of the Good Souls and the terrified disbelief of the Damned.

Needless to say, not every production among the 47 reached anything like this level of achievement. Among the less successful I feel constrained to mention one particularly regrettable effort. The York *Crucifixion* is probably the best-known play in the Cycle, and one of the recognised world masterpieces of medieval drama. Brief, brutal, viciously ironic, horrifying in its realistic portrayal of the workmanlike executioners and their spiritually-distanced victim, this play deserves nothing less than a great performance. Instead, we were given an inept, amateurishly acted, and flatly undramatic shadow of a performance by the Sacred Stone Players of Davidson, North Carolina USA. It failed even to acknowledge such obvious and crucial actions as the stretching of Jesus' limbs to fit the mis-bored nail holes. This sadly missed opportunity was, thankfully, a rare exception to the general level of skill in this memorable production.

Great credit and thanks must go to the University of Toronto and the organisers of Toronto's PLS, notably to the indispensable Alexandra F. Johnston, Kimberly Yates, David Klausner, and all the others who worked so very ably to produce this most complicated of all possible plays. Fittingly, the whole production was dedicated to the memory of David Parry, Artistic Director of PLS from 1975 to 1986, and Eileen Allen. Without the vision and passion of David Parry, such a grand undertaking would never, perhaps, have been planned in the first place. It was heartening to see the torch being passed to a new generation, as Parry's daughter Evalyn acted the role of Herod's son in *Herod and the Magi*.

The magnitude of Toronto's achievement in finally realising the full multi-station pageant-waggon production of the entire York Cycle can scarcely be overestimated. After centuries of neglect, and decades of scholarly speculation over whether such a performance was feasible or ever had been, the full glory of the York Plays as a theatrical and theological extravaganza has now begun to dawn upon us. It is a seventeen-hour play in 47 parts played out over numerous localities for a free-flowing, overlapping audience by a cast of human beings of every description, united in a communal effort to recreate in one magical summer's day the entire

history of the world. Only when the last actor's voice fell silent, deep into the Toronto night, did any of us truly realise what had been accomplished. Before, in its totality, the York Plays only existed in theory. Now the word had become flesh, and dwelt among us.

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