

**STAGING THE UNSTAGEABLE:
Performing the Crucifixion in
Late Medieval and Early Modern England**

David Klausner

Through all his work on the editing of the Chester Plays and the county's documentary records, his studies of the urban background to the Plays' presentation, their theology, and their literary qualities, David Mills has always had a foot in the theatre as well. I have fond memories of being shanghaied at the last moment for the Chester *Balaam and Balaak* pageant in 1983 with virtually no rehearsal, and being given such concise and clear direction by David that rehearsal seemed unnecessary. To honour David's involvement in and his support for performance, I want to investigate the staging of the Crucifixion in early British drama — not its theological centrality to the Christian religion, but explicitly its staging and the problems presented in the public recreation of a horrific act of torture and murder. What difficulties faced those involved in mounting such a play and how were they faced? What decisions had to be made, and what can the play-texts as well as the records of performance tell us about the ways in which these problems were solved? Although the scholarly literature on most of the plays is extensive, no discussion of the *Crucifixion* pageants has looked at them broadly and comparatively, and rarely from the aspect of stage technique.

Official reaction to the dramatic representation of the Crucifixion has hardly been stable over the years. In the period of time of which some of us at least have memory, that is until the early 1950s, it was thought to be illegal in the United Kingdom to represent a divine figure on stage, although surviving pictures suggest that when William Poel produced *Everyman* in 1901, the person of God who calls Everyman to account did in fact appear on stage.¹ Only with the Festival of Britain production of parts of the York Cycle in 1951 did the taboo begin to be lifted, and even then it took almost two decades. With the Crucifixion this wariness has been particularly strong. As Stanley Kahrl wrote in 1974:

[The York Crucifixion] has not normally been staged as originally intended in the triennial productions at York of the past two decades, initially because the cathedral authorities felt that it was too much for a modern audience to take, later because it was felt that it was too difficult to enact the actual raising of the cross in a properly reverent