PROMPTING IN FULL VIEW OF THE AUDIENCE:
The Groningen Experiment

Philip Butterworth

Evidence, context and purpose

The *Survey of Cornwall* written by Richard Carew and printed by S.S. for John Jaggard was published in London in 1602. The work had long been in preparation with some enforced lapses in its development. The *Survey* describes social, political, and religious conditions of Cornwall up to and including the sixteenth century. In a section in the *Survey* that deals with sports and pastimes Carew offers the following description:

> The Guary miracle, in English, a miracle-play, is a kinde of Enterlude, compiled in *Cornish* out of some scripture history, with that grossenes, which accompanied the Romanes *vetus Comedia*. For representing it, they raise an earthen Amphitheatre, in some open field, hauing the Diameter of his enclosed playne some 40. or 50. foot. The Country people flock from all sides, many miles off, to heare & see it: for they haue therein, deuils and deuices, to delight as well the eye as the eare: the players conne not their parts without booke, but are prompted by one called the Ordinary, who followeth at their back with the booke in his hand, and telleth them softly what they must pronounce aloud. Which maner once gaue occasion to a pleasant conceyted gentleman, of practising a mery pranke: for he vndertaking (perhaps of set purpose) an Actors roome, was accordingly lessoned (before-hand) by the Ordinary, that he must say after him. His turne came: quoth the Ordinarie, Goe forth man and shew thy selfe. The gentleman steps out vpon the stage, and like a bad Clarke in scripture matters, cleauing more to the letter then the sense, pronounced those words aloud. Oh (sayes the fellowe softly in his eare) you marre all the play. And with this his passion, the Actor makes the audience in like sort acquainted. Hereon the prompter falles to flat rayling & cursing in the bitterest termes he could deuise: which the Gentleman with a set gesture and countenance still soberly related, vntill Ordinary driuen at last into a madde rage, was faine to giue ouer all. Which trousse though it brake off the Enterlude, yet defrauded not the

beholders, but dismissed them with a great deale more sport and laughter, then 20. such Guaries could haue affoorded.[1]

Although Carew's description of the function of the 'Ordinary' is clear, the extent to which such prompting occurred is unclear. Did the 'Ordinary' prompt in response to the actor's forgotten lines? Or did the 'Ordinary' prompt all the lines? In a paper that I published in 1992 I came to the tentative conclusion that the 'Ordinary' prompted when the actor forgot his lines.[2] Carew's description may be interpreted in this way. However, the description will also bear another interpretation in which the prompter prompts every line. This practice and the convention that it represents would not, perhaps, be worthy of consideration were it not for other contemporary and more modern examples of its use. Even so, what kind of theatre might emerge if such a condition were to prevail? What might an audience make of such practice? In order to pursue these and related questions the suggestion arose that it might be useful to augment and develop existing thinking on this topic by conducting an experiment that focused on the issues surrounding these questions.

Thus an experiment was set up to examine and understand what happens to the nature of outdoor theatre and its presentation when actors are prompted by a prompter who operates in full view of the audience and provides them with all their lines. Such a convention may be seen to be a strange practice in relation to contemporary sensibilities, understanding, and the conduct of modern theatre. If prompting in full view of the audience were not considered to be peculiar enough in its own right, the extension of the process to enable the prompter to equip the actor with every line might be considered to be even stranger. Yet, this is precisely the working problem that was selected in order to test whether such a convention works, how it works, and to examine the effect of the practice on the dynamics of the resultant theatre.

I have written a number of papers on and around this topic and the opportunity to test some of this thinking, together with that of others, through practical means offered increased scope.[3] However, it should be stated that considerable scepticism exists from some scholars as to the viability of the convention. The sparse and disparate evidence that refers to such practice is often ignored, denied, or denigrated. Reasons are often sought to downgrade the convention through questioning of the reliability of the evidence. Often such reasons are based on unacknowledged historical conjecture.[4] Within such a disbelieving context it seemed

important to attempt to test the feasibility of the convention through practical examination. Thus the work was conceived for performance at the 10th Triennial Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour L'Étude du Théâtre Médiéval at the Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen, Netherlands, in July 2001. A 'try out' of the presentation was also offered at the University of Leeds, Bretton Hall, in June 2001. The work was supported by a grant from the 'Small Grants Scheme' of the Arts and Humanities Research Board of England.

Six second–year student actors from the undergraduate acting course at the University of Leeds, Bretton Hall, were engaged to construct and perform scenes from the *Towneley Second Shepherds' Play* as the chosen text.[5] This text was selected from available English medieval ones for several reasons. The principal evidence that conditioned the experiment was that written by Carew. Since there is no evidence of a direct link between Carew's 'Guary miracle', his 'Ordinary' and any of the extant Cornish plays, it became possible to consider other available plays from the canon of extant English drama. Clearly, the choice of an appropriate text needed to be conditioned by the demands that it could make upon the convention of prompting in full view of the audience. A text that contained longer speeches as well as dialogue between characters was to be favoured in order to examined any resultant differences and their influence upon the nature of the performed and communicated work. The *Towneley Second Shepherds' Play* was capable of doing this but the deciding factor that affected this choice was that the play was well known. It was likely, therefore, that our knowledgeable audience would be able to offer increased concentration to the working of the convention, given its undoubted understanding and previous experience of the play in production. A number of scholars from different backgrounds and sometimes different disciplines were asked to submit their responses to the presentation in the form of 500–word statements. These unedited contributions are presented and discussed later.

The idea of prompting the actor with all his lines in full view of the audience would not have occurred to me as a possible explanation of Carew's description had I not seen and filmed this very convention at work in a performance of a *Representación de Moros y Cristianos* in the village of Trevelez in the Sierra Nevada, Spain in 1998. I have written about this performance and its nature elsewhere.[6] The practice is real and strongly devised with no hint of embarrassment or apology for not matching up to presentational criteria found in other modern western theatre. In its

context (part of a four–day fiesta known as the *Fiestas Populares* held annually on or around the 14 June in honour of the patron saint of the village, St Antony of Padua), this convention is accepted by performers and audience as normal and purposeful.

Medieval examples of the same and related conventions occur in England, France, Hollar, and Germany. Although this evidence has been much discussed it is necessary to cite it in relation to other later evidence in which further examples of the actor/prompter relationship is explained and amplified. Perhaps the most frequently cited evidence is that contained in the Jean Fouquet miniature of *The Martyrdom of St Apollonia*.[7] Here, a blue-robed figure stands in a theatre space with an open book and points with a baton. The same figure is seen in a lesser-known miniature atrributed to Fouquet which depicts *The Rape of the Sabine Women*.[8] Other visual material that is often cited as similar putative evidence is that of the 'Stage Director (with Promptbook) of Jacob Ruf's *Von des Herren Weingarten* (Zurich 1539)' and the 'Stage Director of Valenciennes' in the miniature by Herbert Cailleau (1547)'.[9] Further implied fuctionaries may be seen in records concerning an invitation to a rhetoricians' contest in Hulst (Zeeland) in 1483 where the statement is made: *men den bouchouwere niet bloot en ziet staen*[10] ('that one cannot see the book-keeper standing openly'). Another similar invitation to a rhetoricians' contest in Antwerp, 1496, states that: *den boackhoudre bedeckt sijnde sal*[11] ('the book-keeper will be covered'). In the accounts of the *Cambridge University Memoranda*, details concerning a production of 'A Tragedie named Dido' record that 'the Lord Robert, Steward to the Universitie, and Master Secretarie Cecil, Chancellor, to signifiye their good wille, and that things might be orderlye done, vouchsafed to hold both books on the scaffold themselves, and to provide also that sylence might be kept with quietness'.[12] In some of this evidence the process of prompting in full view of the audience is sometimes implied by visual representations of figures who are seen to occupy a performance space whilst holding an open book. Such people are sometimes seen to carry batons or pointers. The act of pointing to an individual or group of performers must at least be concerned with order, cueing, and timing. Pointing towards the performer(s) also presupposes some distance between the figure who points and the recipient. 'Cueing' is the simplest for of prompting. The extent to which this figure prompted in the later conventional sense of responding to the default of the player or providing actors with their lines is unclear.

The prompter who operates in full view of the audience does so as a consciously designated and visible agent in the communication of resultant theatre. Such visibility is also recorded in a related functionary referred to as the 'conveyor' in stage directions in the Cornish play of the *Gwreans An Bys* 'The Creation of the World'. In this instance the conveyor's primary function is not one of prompting but on of stage-managing. Another function related to this role might be considered to be that of 'directing in full view of the audience'. The evidence for this hybrid stage management/directorial role is contained in two explicit stage directions concerning the creation of Eve:

> Adam and Eve aparlet in whytt lether in a place apoynted by the conveyour & not to be sene tyll they be called & thei knell & ryse

> Let adam laye downe & slepe wher eva ys & she by the conveyour must be taken from adam is syde[13]

The first stage direction refers to the authority of the conveyour and the second one reinforces this authority and illuminates the stage management/directorial function 'in full view of the audience'. Discussion concerning the possible synonymity of Richard Carew's 'Ordinary' and the 'conveyour' has taken place elsewhere.[14]

More recent instances of actors receiving all their lines from a prompter occur in Argentina, Italy, and Germany. In addition to the Trevelez example of the prompter who offers all the lines to the actor, the same relationship is recorded in Argentina in the early twentieth century. Edward Hale Bierstadt writing in 1919 records the practice:

> The short interval between the writing and the production of the play necessitates the use of two prompters, one of whom is stationed in the prompter's box, and the other in the wings. The last reads the script aloud a few lines ahead of the cast, who pick up their speeches from him as they go along, with amazing facility. Sometimes a cast will never have read the play they are about to perform and will hardly know whether it is a comedy or a tragedy until after the opening. It would seem that productions given in this fashion would be ragged enough, but it is not so. Long training has given the players such ease in their difficult task that if one did not know the actual conditions beforehand he would never suspect them from the performance itself.[15]

Although the above example is not one that operates with the prompter in full view of the audience, the relationship between the prompter and the actor is a similar one to the one under investigation in that the actor's timing, understanding, and style of presentation is conditioned by the rôle and function of the prompter in prompting every line. Bierstadt's account refers to the actors' skill in picking up lines from the prompter as an 'amazing facility' and accounts for this ability through a process of 'long training'. The same skills, albeit in a different medium, is recorded in the production of a daily soap opera in Mexico City where the actors are fed all their lines by the prompter through an ear piece. Here, like the Argentinean example, the prompter is not seen by the audience but operates from the control room in order to deliver all the lines. He also tells the actors where to move, how to say the lines and how to respond. The female 'lead' offers the following description of the function of the prompter and an indication of the relative ease with which the process is conducted:

> It's easy, because it's one person who speaks, who tells you everything. O.K. Then they say 'Go, go to the door. Go to the door. Come back, come back, come back. O Maria I love you. Yeah, me too. Me too. Cry, cry, cry.' O.K. It's like that and it's very crazy, but it's easy.[16]

An ambiguous statement in Carew's description refers to 'the players conne [know] not their parts without booke'. Although this 'double negative' presents a problem of interpretation it surely means that the actors do not know or remember their lines without the aid of the book 'but are prompted by one called the Ordinary'. The act of learning and remembering lines is referred to by the same phrase, 'without booke', in North's *Plutarch*: 'an Oration which ... *Lysander* should have conned without book, to have spoken in open Assembly ...'.[17] Stephen Gosson in his *Apologie of the Schoole of Abuse* (1579) makes use of the same phrase in respect of remembered lines: 'And because his mashippe would seeme learned, he heyred him seruauntes with great stipendes, of which, one had Homer without Booke, another Hesiod, and nine Fidlers heads to make him an Index, of euery one of them taking some seuerall names of his acquaintance, too bee remembered'.[18] The same condition is referred to by August Wilhelm von Schlegel in 1809 when he refers to Italian actors:

> They have no idea that their parts ought to be got by heart, and hence we hear every piece almost twice over in an Italian theatre;

the prompter speaks as loud as a good player elsewhere, and in order to be distinguished from him they bawl most insufferably.[19]

German actors are similarly criticised by Auguste Kotzebue about the same time when he states, nos acteurs sont très-contens lorsque sur le théâtre ils sont parvenus à la fin de leurs rôles avec l'aide du souffleur, dont l'ils ne peuvent se passer un instant; ils ne savent rien par coeur[20] ('Our actors are very happy on the boards when they come to the end of their rôles with the aid of a prompter, without which they cannot proceed for long: they know nothing by heart'). Mme de Staël Holstein is similarly critical when she declares that Le souffleur, à Vienne, dioit d'avance à la plupart des acteurs chaque mot de leur rôle; et je l'ai vu suivant de coulisse en coulisse Othello pour lui suggérer les vers qu'il devoit prononcer au fond du théâtre en poignardant Desdémona[21] ('The prompter at Vienna used to furnish most of the actors with every word of their parts; I have seen him following Othello from one side of the scene to another, to prompt him with the verses which he had to pronounce on poniarding Desdemona'). A further nineteenth-century English example of overt prompting comes from Shropshire:

> The stage was erected on two waggons outside some building, usually in connection with a public house, and was so arranged that the players as they made their exits passed into a sort of Green Room within the building itself, where they were regaled with cakes and ale whilst awaiting their next call. As a rule, no more than two players were on the boards at the same time, except in the final scene. On the stage in full view of the audience sat the chairman with his book, who acted as Prompter and Call Boy in one. The actors received no pay, but were entertained by the innkeeper free of expense. The country folk seem to have come from miles round to the representations, as many as 1,000 people being present on some occasions; the performance itself usually lasted about 3 hours, and was followed by 'fiddling and dancing', in which the spectators joined.[22]

Reasons behind the adopted conventions so far described are not always apparent. However, evidence does point to the existence of such conventions and their presumed understanding, acceptance or toleration within their respective contexts. Such evidence has influenced the nature of this experiment.

Rehearsal process

The aim, objectives, research questions, and methodology were all formulated in advance of rehearsals in order to communicate the purpose of the experiment to the actors and the AHRB. The following questions have been addressed: How does prompting performers with all their lines affect performance and its communication? How are performance conditions and resultant dynamics affected when the prompter closely follows behind each moving speaker? How does prompting in full view of the audience affect performance and communication of: (a) long speeches?; (b) dialogue between characters?; (c) periods of apparent inactivity?

Rehearsals began on 15 May 2001, with a meeting to give out scripts, discuss the context of the experiment and assess the current state of understanding in relation to the proposed task. Notes of key developments, observations, and issues were taken at each rehearsal. The actors were asked to select two distinct scenes from the *Towneley Second Shepherds' Play* in order that potential differences in the resultant dynamics might be examined. Subsequently, the two adopted scenes were those following Mak's entrance to the point where he steals the sheep and the scene surrounding the discovery of the sheep in the child's crib.[23]

Discussions took place at the second rehearsal concerning the relative dominance of the prompter as a result of his possible different functions. The twin issues as to whether the actors should know their lines and moves were also discussed. The extent to which the prompter was to be regarded as a ritualistic figure was also considered. Should the actors acknowledge the prompter in performance? This question arose because of different responses from the actors: some made eye-contact while others did not. The reason for making eye-contact was a consistent one that indicated the actors' insecurity in relation to the next cue. At this stage the actors watched the prompter for their cues.

An early condition was established that was considered fundamental to the nature of the experiment: it was that any developing acting style should be conditioned by an openness to the discoveries and demands of the experiment. Other concerns began to emerge as the two scenes were worked further. For instance, how does the actor know that he is being called upon by the prompter? At this stage the actors were unsure of their relationship with him. How were they to distinguish their lines from those of the other actors? What constituted their individual cues? Another fundamental issue arose concerning the question as to whether the prompter should act. The actor who eventually took on the rôle of the

prompter discovered that it was hard not to act. Had the rôle of the prompter been taken on by a non-actor then the issue might not have arisen. Initially, during the second rehearsal, the prompter did not follow the actors but stood in one place and cued the actors by pointing at them with a stick. This idea was tried as a means of simulating the images contained in the Fouquet miniatures in order to see how and if the presumed process worked. Given that the prompter was equipped with the stick as a pointer he needed to be positioned in sufficient space to be able to point across it to each actor. The prompter could not point at the actors if the space constricted his movement. This spatial requirement led to a condition where the actors slowly gravitated into a circle, the centre of which was occupied by the prompter who pivoted on the spot in order to point to each other. These responses by the actors were unplotted and unconscious: they developed so that they might see and hear the prompter more effectively and reliably. The effect of this arrangement was to establish the prompter as the central figure and rendered the actors as isolated ciphers.

As a result of this static condition a first attempt was made to allow the prompter to move around the space by following individual performers. Immediately, the actors became more confident in the knowledge of when they were being cued and prompted. This growth in confidence led to an unconscious speeding up of responses to the prompter, and the actors' feeling for emerging rhythms of delivery. Some problems concerning acting began to emerge during the second rehearsal. The process of being prompted on every line effectively meant that the actors only acted on their lines. They did not act between lines. So, what were they to do during such intervals? To actors who have developed their understanding of acting upon Stanislavskian principles, this concern comes as a shock to what they understand and what they think they understand.

As the second rehearsal progressed two key decisions were made: one was that the actors should make no attempt to learn their lines; to do so would be to invalidate the rôle of the prompter and the actors' dependence upon him. The second decision was that the link figure should also be prompted. This conclusion was not aimed at producing a gimmicky effect but simply reflected the completeness of this idea in respect of form and function. The task embodied in this rôle was simply to introduce and link the respective scenes for the audience.

Another issue began to emerge that was to have ramifications throughout subsequent rehearsals and performances; the actors started to

anticipate the lines from the prompter. Although an earlier decision had been made that the actors should not attempt to learn their lines, a familiarity with the lines started to grow. This was not due to a conscious effort on their part. One performer was prone to launching in on a line ahead of the prompter. This created some good-humoured banter and worked as a reference point and warning to the other actors. This humour served to concentrate efforts in further attempts to understand the prompter/actor relationship.

An influential factor here was that the actors did not readily understand the Middle English of the play. Nor did they necessarily understand what they were saying. The time and effort that was to be expended on the need to understand the language of the play inevitably increased familiarity with the lines. This process was necessary although it did affect the original condition that the actors should not learn lines.

As the prompter became more comfortable with following the actors around the space, he became more conscious of his performance. The prompter's contribution, through his growing understanding of the text, began to take on a vocal and physical emphasis that conditioned the manner of his prompting. Initially, this behaviour was unplanned but it created two important questions: what is it that the actor is following? and should the actor be prompted in the emotion of the lines?

It was clear at the end of the second rehearsal that many further questions remained to be asked and answered, but that the pressing need was for the actors to understand what it was they were saying. The actors were also asked to recognise and move away from the cultural influence of Stanislavsky. Although this was acknowledged to be difficult, it was considered necessary if the experiment was to be open enough to let the prompter's rôle condition acting style.

Stock was taken at the third rehearsal of decisions previously made and the potential permutations of the prompter's functions were laid out in order to identify them and create an awareness of possible directions that might be followed. It was agreed that the prompter could: (1) be stationary and prompt; (2) follow and prompt; (3) point and prompt; (4) touch and prompt; (5) speak softly and prompt; (6) speak loudly and prompt; (7) prompt with book; (8) prompt without book; (9) prompt with book and pointer; (10) prompt without book but with pointer; (11) act; (12) decide not to act.

The actor who ultimately took on the rôle of the prompter had not yet been identified. At this stage rôles were still being swapped around in

order to realise the main issues. Some modern preoccupations also began to gnaw away at performance in rehearsal. Given that the actors tended to act only on their lines the concern for focus became an issue. What happened to the focus of the scene under these conditions? Although it was acknowledged that this issue was of concern in the production of modern theatre its relevance in the context of the experiment needed to be questioned.

Focus is considered to be important in modern theatre because its realisation determines that which an audience concentrates upon or needs to concentrate upon. Such focus can be developed through spatial, visual, verbal, and emotional concentration. If focus is not created then the audience does not know where to look, what to concentrate upon, and how to determine that which is important to know or witness. The audience quickly loses interest to the point of disengagement with the action.

During the third rehearsal a growing realisation occurred that there needed to be clear signals from the prompter to the actor in terms of what needed to be said and done. Should such signals be vocal, physical, or visual? Although these concerns grew out of the practical needs of the actor it became apparent that such signals were also important in establishing the terms of reference of the performance for the audience. Understanding of the convention represented by the signals seemed critical to the communication and reception of the overall theatrical statement. The signals thus served a dual function. It was decided that bold signals would be necessary.

During this rehearsal the prompter started to move between actors with increased purpose and urgency. When the text consisted of sequences of dialogue, the prompter had to move more often and with increased agility. At this stage he was criss-crossing the playing space with what seemed like undue haste. This speed caused increased audience attention on the prompter. Should this be so? Discussion took place about the relative prominence of the prompter. Rather than curtail his strength, it was considered that the actors should 'lift' their performances in order to create a communicated distinction to the audience. It was resolved that the actor and not the prompter should take and create focus. The discussion about the relative strengths of the actor and prompter and their relationship brought about another realisation that was to become significant in the development of statement and style. Because the prompter enters into a close physical relationship with the actor, the power of any statement that

would normally just come from the actor was now coming from both the prompter and actor working as a dual unit. This realisation introduced a new dynamic, one that might be purposefully pursued to produce more theatrically powerful statements.

Another issue that affected the concern for focus concerned the movement of the prompter. At this stage in the fourth rehearsal plotting or 'blocking' of movement had not occurred. The actors and prompter were still improvising possible movement patterns. This led to some unfocused and confusing relationships. A means of dealing with such confusion was to acknowledge an imaginary 'laser beam' between the actors that the prompter was not permitted to cross. Thus, the prompter's use of the stage space was conditioned by an imposed restriction dictated by these imaginary 'laser beams'. This proved to be an appropriate stimulus to the prompter and one which reinforced the concern for focus through the actor.

At the fourth rehearsal it was decided to present the prompter in two modes of dress: (1) costumed as a shepherd; (2) costumed in modern 'neutral' dress. Other key issues came into clearer focus and resolution. One such issue was the one concerning the position of the actor when he/she had finished his/her lines. What should the actor do while another actor was speaking? Up to this point in rehearsals the actor in such a position would simply stand and wait for the next prompt. Although the inert actor did not necessarily detract from the focus being created by the incoming speaker he/she certainly did not contribute to the creation of it. This potential problem found resolution through its conversion into a convention. The convention demanded that each incoming speaker take responsibility to establish focus and that the outgoing speaker should end with stillness. The quality of stillness produced by this was however considered to represent a feeble 'tailing-off' of concentration and focus. It was acknowledged that this might be a singularly modern perception but one that needed to be addressed in relation to our envisaged modern audience. As a result of this thinking it was decided that the outgoing speaker should not simply 'tail-off' but should end on 'big' vocal and physical gestures that terminated in 'frozen' stillness. Such a response would not be likely to weaken attempts to create focus by the incoming speaker. However, it was recognised that this production solution was just that. There was no attempt to suggest that this might have been a medieval one. It was a production idea and not an attempt at reconstruction — even if it was known what this might be. The

tentativeness of this proposed solution took account of a recognition of the need for focus by a modern audience. There is no evidence to indicate the same requirement being demanded by a medieval audience.

It was not until the fifth rehearsal that the actors and prompter played as cast. By this time a number of key issues had emerged and further confidence developed through settled casting. The identified need to create a convention of prompting every line still needed to be reinforced on behalf of the audience. The signals to the actor also needed to be transparent to the audience. Consequently, sufficient space had to be created between the actor and the prompter that would enable an audience 'in the round' to witness all or most of the signals. Even though it was the actor who was considered to be the principal agent of focus, as far as the audience was concerned, it was the prompter who became the instigator to the development of moves, tempo, rhythm, and focus.

At the following (sixth) rehearsal decisions were made that confirmed use of costume and properties. The actors were to be costumed as shepherds and the sheep were to be made as cardboard 'cut-outs', reinforced with wire and held at the base in wooden blocks. The crib was to be of the same style and slotted together from single pieces of card.

Also, at this rehearsal additional attention was given to the scope of the rôle of the prompter. It was becoming clear that the singular function of prompting the actors with every line was capable of expansion. This became evident when the prompter's rôle of cueing the actor was extended to elaborating the cue through demonstration. From the realisation of this, it was not a big step to considering that the prompter could also function as a director/choreographer. Demonstration of an action was regarded as a natural physical extension to cueing and prompting lines. The actor playing the prompter found this development to be a fluid and easy one. Thus, decisions were made as part of a larger concern for the structure of the presentation. Given that two scenes had been selected, it was clear that a scale of presentational problems was beginning to emerge. It was decided that this scale of issues should be presented to the audience in such a way as to operate from a position of minimal involvement of the prompter to extended ones of directorial/choreographic demonstration by him. Five scenes were to make up this scale. The first two scenes were our selected ones played consecutively with the prompter costumed as a shepherd. In these scenes the prompter was to establish the most straight-forward and simplest version of prompting. In scene three, the second of the chosen scenes was to be played again but this time the prompter was to

be costumed in modern dress. Scenes four and five were to consist of the two scenes presented with an extended directorial/choreographic rôle for the prompter.

Two apparently contradictory yet consolidated features were further defined during rehearsal: one was that the actors were now beginning to be more confident in taking responsibility for focus: so much so, that it was possible to watch the performance and to relegate, if so desired, the contribution of the prompter. Secondly, the relationships between the prompter and actors were developing to such an extent that there was a conscious enjoyment of the interrelationship of developing rhythms. The prompter's audible cue and the resultant actor's line produced a double statement which became the norm. This produced a pleasurable effect where the growing awareness, confidence, enjoyment, and skill of the actors communicated itself to the onlookers. Another aspect of the relationship became clear through instigation of action by the prompter. The actor began to relinquish responsibility for tasks that would have ordinarily been his. Effectively, such responsibility was taken over by the prompter and this created a strong dependency on him by the actor.

At the seventh rehearsal a key discovery was made about timing. It might have been presupposed that an actor who responds to the prompted line would, of necessity, slow down the process of the communicated statement. If this experiment had been conducted indoors then this might have been so. However, it became clear at this rehearsal that a predictable slowing down of delivery did not occur because of the spatial dimension of playing outdoors. The necessary vocal clarity, volume, and pacing of delivery for outdoor performance provided 'natural space' for the development of the timed relationship between prompter and actor. This was a revelation that is unlikely to have arisen outside the remit of practical investigation and reflects directly on the purpose and value of an experiment of this kind. Given the deliberateness of articulation and commensurate pacing of delivery required of the performer who operates outdoors it was possible for prompter and actor to create a rhythm of vocal and physical delivery that produced its own timing dimension, identity, and statement. This was not a 'second best' treatment but one that produced its own dynamic and integrity. It was agreed that development of this discovery should be pursued as further means of finding an appropriate acting style to the purpose of the experiment.

One of the reasons for the growing confidence of the actors was that they were increasingly able to rely on the prompter. Trust in the

prompter/actor relationship developed to such an extent that the actors only needed to be fed two of three words of the line before launching into it. At this stage the line had not been completed by the prompter but the actors could trust that the remainder of the line would be offered. However, the advantage that this timed relationship brought to the pace and momentum of the scene was affected by the actors' difficulty in hearing the rest of the line from the prompter over the sound of their own voices. This problem was fed back into attempts to define the nature of the convention. In effect, decisions needed to be made as to the length of each section of offered line. Reasons for creating breaks or pauses by the prompter varied but needed to be consciously created. The breaks between these sections arose out of the actors' capacity to hold on to the offered thought(s). Sometimes, it was necessary to offer the complete thought from the text rather than draw attention to an incomplete one. On other occasions, shorter sections were offered in attempts to punctuate and articulate meaning.

By the ninth rehearsal a number of friends and colleagues had witnessed the work's development. Peter Meredith thought that the first two scenes were probably the most engaging and that the later scenes that were conditioned by more overt directorial and choreographic functions were too excessive in their scope. He wondered whether this observation might be affected by a growing familiarity with the prompter/actor relationship as demonstrated by the first two scenes. He was also concerned that conventional relationships between 'characters' were not evident. Does this perceived lack of relationships arise out of a compartmentalisation dictated by dependence on the prompter for lines? Does it matter that conventional relationships are not developed? These questions, prompted by Meredith's responses, crystallised thinking as to what kind of theatre had emerged and was emerging from the rehearsal process. The following is quoted from notes of the tenth rehearsal:

> Today, the realisation that we have arrived at an acting style that can be described as *demonstration*. Any vestiges of naturalistic behaviour are gone. Cues remain important but the space/time available to the actors is there for them to expand or contract. Relationships [between 'characters'] have suffered in the process but this assessment can only be made when naturalistic requirements are placed on the actors to produce such relationships. What we have arrived at is that the actors need to play through each other to

the audience. Separation does not mean isolation. We are clearly somewhere on a route to 'representation' through 'demonstration'.[24]

Performances and Responses

The purpose of the performance to staff and students at Bretton Hall was to obtain responses to the work that might be incorporated into the presentation at Groningen. The performance fitted luckily and neatly between heavy showers of rain and the audience remained to discuss its reactions. The following, in abbreviated form, are the key issues and questions raised by individuals in the audience:

- when the prompter was costumed in modern dress it was possible to regard him as 'invisible' and thus concentrate on the action;
- concentration on the activities of the prompter became more pronounced as the presentation developed;
- the prompter/actor relationship could be developed further; the actor's responses to the prompter could be worked further in the production of theatrical statement;
- the prompter effectively operated as a writer;
- within the contexts that the evidence permits, is the prompter the bearer of tradition and custom?;
- does the prompter have a doctrinal function as is the case with the 'conveyour' on the Cornish text of *The Creation of the World*?;
- there was a priority to understand the language of the play;
- should the prompter act or not act?;
- the rôle of the unskilled actor in an oral culture;
- use of the 'pointer' as presented in the Fouquet miniatures.

The Bretton Hall audience was an informed one in respect of theatre, its nature and processes. The Groningen audience represented expertise in a wide range of matters medieval as well as a focused understanding of medieval drama. The discussion after the performance at Bretton Hall did not affect any structural elements of the presentation although some comments concerning clarity, focus, and punctuation were absorbed into the existing fabric of the production. A dress rehearsal was held at Groningen on the day before presentation. At this rehearsal Meredith suggested that members of the Colloquium audience should be invited to 'have a go' at acting parts of the established scenes and to do it without any pre-planning. This was considered to be a strong idea in that the

character of the performed work would be different and hopefully contribute additional perspectives to subsequent observation and discussion. It was agreed that the prompter should quickly brief the actors from the audience after the planned presentation and steer them in their performance.

The performance at Groningen went according to plan but it soon became evidence that some members of the audience could not believe their own eyes; some could not believe that the convention had taken place. A number of audience members were convinced that the actors had 'learned their lines'. One person, in subsequent conversation, went so far as to say that the presentation had shaken the very foundation of her understanding of the presentation of medieval drama. Many of the immediate responses and those that were discussed in the Colloquium on the following day have been incorporated into the unedited 500-word statements that now follow.

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Jean-Paul Debax — Université de Toulouse

Prompting in full view of the audience could at first strike one as an idle prank, inspired from the 'merry' trick played by the astute young man mentioned by Richard Carew (the *Survey of Cornwall*, 1602), who played up the 'Ordinary' (and the audience) during a performance of the Guary Miracle. It is interesting to notice that, although it interrupted the performance, the trick was a sort of success as it caused sport and laughter rather than indignation or resentment on the part of the Cornish spectators. But what will the reaction of modern spectators be at the presence of such an unlooked-for actor, who seems to have been easily accepted by the medieval audience even when it went against the usual practice?

As soon as the 'prompter' appeared in the scene from the Towneley *Secunda Pastorum* performed by Ph. Butterworth's actors, that strange figure conjured up for the image of the 'conductor' in the blue cloak represented in Fouquet's picture of the martyrdom of St. Apollonia. His rich costume, which is a sort of visual replica of Emperor Decius's robe (same colours) and put him on a part with that important character in the story, the white baton he holds in his right hand and the book (similar to a music score) in his left hand, which equate him to the conductor of a modern orchestra, make him appear as an integral part of the show. It seemed to

me that the figure of the prompter and the image of Fouquet's conductor coincided all the more forcibly as, with the successive interpretations of the scene, the prompter's part became more obtrusive, his gestures more emphatic, his voice louder, his costume more conspicuous and his relationship with the audience more cogent.

The parallel increase in the importance of the prompter and his spectacular impact are probably the key to the inner workings of the device. It shows that prompting is not in this case a mere technical contrivance meant to make up for the failing memory of the actors, or to remind them of the agreed 'mis-en-scène'. This prompter has nothing to do with his counterpart in the variety theatre who, hidden in his box, was unseen by the spectators. On the contrary, the medieval 'prompter' revived by Ph. Butterworth, in the show, as is the case with all that is to be seen on the stage, Ph. Butterworth himself when he speaks his 'links', thus taking up the part of the medieval 'expositor' (cf. Chester, *IV*; 4 comparable to Contemplacio in N. Town 8 to 13).

It seems to me that one may consider that there is a sharing of the dramatic strength in the case of a theatrical production: it can be concentrated on the actors only, and the style of the play then is realistic (fourth wall theory, 'eavesdropping' situation for the spectators); if a 'narrator' or 'poet' (cf. Gower in Shakespeare's *Pericles*) or an 'expositor' is present, there occurs a transfer of that dramatic power from the actors on to that narrator: he tends to become the privileged interlocutor of the spectators, and the actors mere puppets. Efficacious theatre could appear as the result of a tension between the two extremes just described. At one extreme, the narrator is omniscient and omnipotent, delivering a message (case of the liturgical or committed theatre). At the other end, the characters are endowed with a psychological personality, and seem to live a life similar to ours.

In other terms, that is in semiotic terms, the presence of a prompter could be taken to be a manifestation of the Destinator of the play. a divine Destinator is always implicit in religious drama, sometimes represented by a distinct character (God, Christ ...). The prompter is a dramatic embodiment of that semiotic function. His presence is more natural in religious drama than it would be in farce. In semiotic theory the Destinator is always coupled with a counterpart named the 'Destinatee' or 'Addressee': hence, the spectators' presence is enhanced by the prompter's presence; the spectators are brought to the heart of the theatrical game, and find a real interlocutor in the acting area, who may also appear as

their representative. So, in what may appear as a paradox, the action of a mediator (the prompter) fosters a more direct relationship between the two partners of the dramatic exchange.

As a conclusion, I would suggest that the introduction of a 'prompter' does not work a minor change in the reception of the play. With each degree in the intervention of the prompter we have a different play. Ph. Butterworth's experiment has reminded us of one of the fundamentals of the living theatre: the production is *the* thing.

This is *real* theatrical research.

Max Harris — University of Wisconsin, Madison

Not only did I see the experiment in prompting in full view of the audience in Groningen, but I was a participant in the final act of the experiment. Four unrehearsed audience members were invited to act a scene from Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play*. I played Mak.

The experiment made clear that, in some circumstances, prompting in full view of the audience works. As a spectator, I found the prompter unobtrusive when he merely fed the actors their lines, and I found he disappeared even further when in modern rather than period dress. I found him obtrusive when he also prompted actions. In the latter case, I started watching the actions of the prompter and listening to the words of the actors. The result was choppy: the even seemed more like a rehearsal than a performance. The obvious advantage of prompting in full view of the audience is that it enables amateur actors to perform without having to memorise their lines. Since, in my experience, amateur actors remember gestures more easily than they remember words, prompting the actions as well seemed unnecessary.

As an unrehearsed actor, I found it surprisingly easy to deliver lines this way. On a few occasions, due to an unfamiliar word in the text, I needed a line to be repeated. Had the play been in modern English or had I been able to benefit from even one rehearsal, this would not have been a problem. My gestures tended to be static and clichéd, but this, too, would have been improved with rehearsal.

Prompting in full view of the audience affects the nature of the performance in various ways. When I have seen it used in folk theatre, such as the annual Play of Moors and Christians in Trevelez, Granada (Spain), the effect is minimal. Folk players generally adopt a declamatory style of delivery that easily accommodates such prompting. In Groningen, the very well rehearsed troupe of young actors managed to combine more

sophisticated acting skills with open prompting. Quick prompting and an overlapping delivery by the actors meant that the action was barely interrupted.

To adopt such a mode of continuous open prompting for the production of a longer play from the classic or naturalistic repertoire might have appealed to Brecht. The constant reminder that the audience is watching a constructed play would encourage engaged consideration of the ideas embodied in the play rather than emotional identity with the characters. To play Ibsen or Tennessee Williams this way once might constitute a valuable experiment, but I suspect it would not be often repeated. Medieval drama, which aims at something other than naturalistic mimesis, is another matter. While the Groningen experiment could not prove that prompting in full view of the audience was a medieval staging convention, it effectively countered the argument that such open prompting would have so marred the performance as to be unthinkable.

I thought the experiment was well worth conducting and, perhaps most importantly very entertaining.

Alexandra F. Johnston — University of Toronto

I was present at the performance in Groningen on July 2, 2001. I found the experiment very interesting if somewhat disconcerting. All acting is, in some way, conventional. The masks of the ancient theatre and boys playing women's parts in early theatre are both conventions we do not use today. But experiments using masks and boy actors have been undertaken in recent years and audiences can and do adjust to these and other 'givens'. For example, in the last two years I have been asked to accept a woman playing Prospero at the Globe and two women playing men's parts (originally written for castrati) in an early Mozart opera in Santa Fe. If one is prepared to accept the convention presented by the director, almost anything, including an obtrusive prompter, is possible.

The convention works as a convention. Once the audience accepts the presence of the prompter all else follows. The performances were smooth and well presented. The final experiment with members of the audience acting the parts showed that it also works when the actors are unfamiliar with the lines — that is have not done the performance enough times to have a thorough familiarity with the lines. But the question is why do it? The Cornish evidence suggests that this was not a familiar convention in Britain and indeed was remarked upon because it was unusual.

Prompting a monologue such as still happens in southern European festivals and was demonstrated in Dr Butterworth's opening and closing remarks is one thing. However, I found that the presence of the prompter changed the entire dynamic of the play where there was interaction between the characters. There could be no question of 'naturalism'. The time lag created when the lines were being given (that increased as each variation made the prompter's rôle more intrusive) slowed the action to a crawl. The audience was not caught up in the word play, the plot and the action but rather in the acting — in the mechanics of presentation. The 'accident' was being forced upon us in a way that detracted from the 'essence'. And here, I think, is my most fundamental objection to the convention. Late medieval Biblical drama was essentially didactic — essentially a teaching tool. It is possible that medieval audiences used to the convention could strip away the prompter and respond only to the 'essence' of the performance. However, I don't believe that it would be possible for a casual viewer, one who had not been trained in the convention could respond to the didactic message that was the purpose of the production.

What I was reminded of most strongly, especially as the prompter increased his presence by demonstrating gestures as well as giving lines, was a puppet master. All depended on the ingenuity and quick wit of the prompter rendering the other actors mere ciphers, little more than costumed marionettes without initiative and creativity of their own.

Femke Kramer — Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen
1. How does the convention of prompting in full view of the audience work?

The performance appealed to me in the first place on a purely aesthetic level as a choreography. Or, purely aesthetic? There is something very pleasing in the appearance of actors or dancers moving simultaneously, or, even better, echoing each other, which was what happened during the prompting. Reassuring, even, if it follows chaotic scenes (which was not the case in your play). Such images somehow seem to remind me of the beauty of a huge flock of starlings. Or of a series of arbitrary sounds becoming a harmony.

The effect also reminded me of that of a choir attentively following the (silent) directions of a powerful choirmaster — which in a way in comparable to that of a unisono or canon dance phrase. What's more interesting: this 'choirmaster effect' was not strengthened by the increasing

power of the prompter's presence; on the contrary, perhaps: tiny instructions with big effects are more impressive than high-handed commands. The subtleties of the ensemble grew less interesting as the prompter's presence became more blatant. (I'm sure that this shows in the video I recorded.)

A comment, though, on my own words of praise: whether the prompter 'acts' with modest instructions or with big movements, in 'period' dress or in (modern) director's clothes: it's the prompter who plays the leading rôle — also figuratively speaking. This gives the performance as a whole the quality of an exercise in leadership and submission, or in power and servitude — and again: this is even stronger the case when the prompter prompts in a low key. (As a director I would have found it hard to resist the temptation to comment on this hierarchy! As you may have grasped from the brief (rehearsed) prompting scene between God and the evangelists in our *Maria*.)

2. To what extent does the convention affect the nature of the presented theatre?

Obviously, when the above mentioned mechanisms (of aesthetics, or, who knows, of deep-seated psycho-social principles) become important, the plain storytelling quality of a performance gets a secondary function, which some audience members may dislike.

What we witnessed did not primarily deal with The Shepherds (well, that is to say: I can imagine an interpretation of the character of the prompter as a shepherd. Or rather as a stern sheep dog). To me, it was a performance about acting and about representation. But this of course is caused by our focus on the technique and our unfamiliarity with this convention as an *acting* convention. I would certainly see this in a different light if I was used to the style.

But then again, when seeing a well-known play being performed, isn't the audience always focused on the way in which the play is performed instead of the story in itself? And isn't that what makes theatre interesting? I wonder, though, if audience comprehension would be at stake when an unknown or very complex play would be performed this way.

If there was something artificial in the situation, it was not in the fact that the fiction of the story was disrupted, but in the obvious fact that the actors *did* know their lines and gestures and movements very well, and still needed to wait for the prompter and perhaps resist their inclination to proceed and interact with their fellow-actors. You could see the difference

when Max [Harris] and Pam [King] and the others entered the stage. I wonder how well the medieval actors knew their rôles when they were prompted by an on-stage prompter.

Finally some stray questions and remarks

As for the big gestures and the tableau-like stills created by the actors when not speaking: we discussed this on the Harmonieplein, but I can't remember exactly what your idea about this was. Did you also try to see what happens when they do not freeze in their movement, but take a neutral position instead while the others are acting? Or go on acting whatever they are acting at the time?

Something completely different. Yesterday evening I saw a television program in which the 'actor' in a 'candid-camera'-like situation was prompted (through some radio contact device) by someone who was not visible for the victim but was visible for the television viewers. Funny, in a way, probably because of the increasingly funny situation and because of the *dramatische ironie* (as we call it in Dutch when the audience knows more than (one of) the actors). It made me wonder, though, if your experiment ever aroused laughter. Well, it obviously did when the colloquium members played the shepherds. But that doesn't count. Or does it?

My last remark is just a word of admiration: the way in which you integrate your knowledge as a researcher and your skills as a director make me envious and show me that there is a lot of sense in performing as a tool for learning about medieval theatre after all. As you may know, scholars who claim to learn from their so-called reconstructions of medieval plays make me very suspicious, because their experiments are usually only supported by *alleged* knowledge about representation styles. I'm afraid, though, that these are precisely the scholars that are suspicious about your approach, whereas they are the ones that should learn from your data and experiments.

Peter Meredith — University of Leeds

I saw Phil Butterworth's experiment three times: once in rehearsal at Bretton Hall, once in rehearsal at Groningen and once at the final performance — all in the open air. Apart from one or two adjustments of detail which were made between Bretton and Groningen, the three presentations were the same. The piece was presented with great skill and

control by the actors, and the overall effect, even after three viewings, remained intriguing and slightly worrying.

From the first I found myself absorbed by the prompter, not just his movements but also the way in which his words were spoken: looking into space rather than at the actors or anyone else. He was both visible and invisible at the same time. He inhabited a world of his own in which the words existed at a kind of abstract level; at a more ordinary level they existed in the everyday world of the 'play' and the actors. These parallel worlds were absorbing; with some similarity to the worlds of the signer and the performed play, but I wondered whether I would have been so aware of the prompter if the style of the presentation had been different. As it was, the actors' freezing when not speaking made the performance itself more of an abstraction from normality. The prompter became a sort of puppet master, with actors unable to move or speak without him. And this was a haunting and intriguing effect.

However, viewed as an exploration of Carew's piece of experiment raised a number of doubts in my mind. I was worried by the way the, broadly-speaking, 'naturalistic' dialogue (I'm not forgetting it's in a complicated verse form) was being constantly interrupted by stylised pauses and 'unnatural' action. I can see that the freezing and the stylised movement made a satisfactory theatrical event out of the experiment, but it didn't seem to me to be appropriate to the kind of performance that Carew was describing. Also the style of performance used required considerable rehearsal and skilled actors. Neither was strictly the case with Carew's performance. The extempore trial with members of the audience at Groningen was perhaps a little nearer to Carew but could hardly be said to dismiss the beholders 'with a great deale more sport and laughter' than the rehearsed performance.

Overall it was an experiment well worth embarking on. It demonstrated the ease with which a prompter can be introduced to the action, and the effect of doing so. It also made us, the audience, think seriously about the possibilities of Carew's incident. If it was to have been a closer investigation of Carew, it would, for me, have needed to shed most of its stylisation and attempted to re-create a little more closely the incident he describes. But by doing it the way he did Phil Butterworth both fulfilled his aim of investigating the effect produced by a visible and continuous prompter and created a fascinating piece of theatre.

David Mills — University of Liverpool

At the 1998 meeting of SITM Phil Butterworth argued that there was evidence for the presence of a prompter on stage in view of the audience. Having subsequently experimented with such prompting, he repeated his experiment at SITM 2001, before an audience of consisting largely of scholars attending the Congress, within an open-air circular acting space defined by chairs, using for his text excerpts from *Secunda Pastorum*. His experiment required the 'prompter' to supply the full text to each actor *sotto voce* before it was delivered; and in an additional experiment, to direct the actors.

I found it difficult not to regard those in the acting-space as other than performers and therefore could not ignore the prompter's presence or exclude him from my reading of the play. Even when costumed like the actors and only prompting, facing away from the performer, he remained distinctive with his script-copy and deliberate movement; when directing and when in modern dress, he was overtly the alterior controlling agent. Butterworth's prologue, explaining the occasion, was also prompted, transforming that too into a performance. Who was in control, Butterworth or his prompter? It became a metaphor of authority and control, analogous to other developments of the 'theatre' metaphor in medieval or Tudor drama.

Such prompting determined acting style. To allow the prompter to move briskly and unobtrusively among them in the turn-taking of speeches and supply their lines, the actors 'froze' between speeches, reminding me of our childhood game of 'statues' in which, once touched by the catcher, you had to 'freeze' till released by your ally. I imagine that the track of the prompter around the playing area had been worked out in rehearsal and had influenced the blocking. I readily adapted to this stylised mode, which did not prevent variation of pace within the action; but it would prolong a full performance considerably.

In *Secunda Pastorum* Butterworth chose a play of limited casting whose characters are not distinguished significantly by costume. The costumed prompter blended in somewhat. It would be interesting to see the effect of such prompting among a larger acting group, within a larger acting-area, in a longer play, and more diverse costuming — all, factors that might apply on a Cornish round, to which Carew's account relates. Possibly the distinctive modern dress of the second experiment would be closer to the effect of a prompter in contemporary medieval costume prompting soldiers,

Christ, High Priests, and Herod. How, I wonder, would I respond to a prompter prompting God?

Is it necessary to postulate full-text prompter or overt directing? A non-literate audience might be expected to have good oral recall and need only incidental prompts. I do not know what evidence there is for directing, but it is hard to see how a prompter carrying a play-book rather than a script could do it. A particular problem with the experiment was that it had been carefully rehearsed and previously performed, making this occasion the imitation of the experiment or rehearsal, rather than the 'brief rehearse' for which full-text prompting might seem more helpful. We were asked to suspend our disbelief that the actors did not know their lines or gestures and were waiting for the prompter. Sometimes the fiction was exposed — the prompter did not always look at his script, and on one occasion I was confident that, when directing, he stood outside the actor's sight-line. The most revealing moment was when some of the audience accepted the invitation to come up and be prompted, when their reliance on the prompter was clear. It would be interesting to repeat the experiment with various non-specialist groups.

The experiment neither proves nor disproves Butterworth's hypothesis, but it has valuable potential for further questions and approaches to production. Is God really an 'on-stage prompter' — could he move among his creation putting words in their mouths? And my colleague, Simon Palfrey, immediately became interested when I told him and wondered if Ancient Gower in *Pericles* could be a distant echo of an on-stage prompter.

Lynette R. Muir — University of Leeds

As part of the audience for the 'experiment in prompting in view of the audience' presented by Dr. Butterworth at the Groningen congress, I much appreciated the effort made by all the cast (and producer) to recreate this so-called medieval practice. I do not personally accept that such a practice actually existed: Carew's story is not at all convincing, but this experiment raised some very interesting questions about audience and actor in medieval theatre and especially for the differences in scale of the performances.

On the continental stage, for example, where large casts were scattered about a huge stage, two surviving director's books — the *Frankfurter Dirigierolle* and the Mons director's copy — only contain the first and last lines of the speeches and are designed to direct stage action rather than language but would such work if done in full view of the audience (which is

by no means certain) spoil the impact of the drama? Does a conductor's baton prevent the audience enjoying a Wagner opera? I think it is with this kind of drama rather than with nineteenth-century realism that the medieval plays must be compared.

An analogy that struck me particularly was with the late German Passion Plays where in certain scenes a speech may first be sung in Latin and then spoken in German. In one of these plays, the *Redentiner Osterspiel* (1493) performed at the University of Leuven in 2000, the scenes of the guard at the tomb and the act of Resurrection presented interesting parallels. The guards, having settled down to watch, a watchman sang a 'verse' and then addressed the guards warning them to stay awake. This was repeated four times with each guard answering once: a formalised scene which worked effectively and atmospherically.   The act of Resurrection was introduced by angels singing (in Latin) and quoting the scriptures, then the angels round the tomb spoke the same lines in German. This could have been equally impressive but unfortunately in this production the singers were a male group in a fixed location near the Heaven, while the angels at the tomb were female (though this was not blatant till they spoke). The effect was a distancing of the audience from the effect of the music and a distraction from the atmosphere of the scene. Nor was it much better when Jesus arose, for the choir sang his Latin (he should have sung his own) and he only spoke the German in a rather inadequate stage voice. To some extent, then, the singers were prompting the speakers and this aural as well as visual separation of the two elements was counterproductive, whereas the earlier scene with the watch had been effective.

Prompting in view of the audience (even when well done as it was by Butterworth's group), at best slows down and at worst breaks up the rhythm of the piece. It was particularly fatal to the comedy. Serious text can stand it better because (for a medieval audience in particular) it could have an almost antiphonal effect.

Thomas Pettitt — University of Southern Denmark, Odense

Whatever the historical authenticity of the practice (which merits further exploration in its own right), overt prompting brought out something authentic in the play.

Most obviously in the verse: the actors were mainly fed the dialogue in complete-line units, the hiatus between the units insufficient to be distracting, but enough to signal the poetic form; rhymes for example were

more emphatically registered than usual. I do not recall the production of a medieval play in which I was more aware that the text was in verse.

The same is true of the overall dramaturgical effect. The presence of the prompter did not destroy the sense of a plot moving forward as interactions between characters, but it was enough to underline that the performance was artwork, not a slice of life. This is, in my view, exactly the kind of alertness to artifice with which medieval theatre was experienced: modern productions which try to present 'real' human situations and feelings are often frankly embarrassing. The use of the prompter was a useful way of restraining such illusionistic tendencies on the part of the players and spectators. On the other hand there was a paradoxical compensation in the circumstance that the presence of the prompter was a guarantee that there would be none of the mistakes (or the worrying about the likelihood of mistakes) which can spoil amateur performances: so we could relax and attend to the matter.

The balance was best (felt most natural) when the prompter was dressed in modern clothes, but did not emphatically direct the performance. There was something odd (in the first run-through) about what appeared to be one shepherd feeding lines to other shepherds: perhaps a 'standard' medieval garb for the prompter (the medieval equivalent of jeans and T-shirt) would have been most appropriate, making him part of the world of the performance but not part of the world of the play.

To my mind neither the historical nor the dramaturgical integrity of the experiment is compromised by the actors having to a degree become familiar with their parts: it would be unnatural if they hadn't.

Robert Potter — University of California, Santa Barbara

At the recent Colloquium of SITM, a triennial international conference of medieval theatre scholars meeting in Groningen, the Netherlands, I observed an experimental performance of excerpts from the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play*, and at the request of Dr. Philip Butterworth of Bretton Hall, Leeds University prepared this summary of my experiment.

The stimulus for this experiment is a narrative in the antiquarian Richard Carew's *The Survey of Cornwall* (1603) purporting to describe a curious performance convention in the playing of the Cornish mystery plays. Carew relates that the amateur actors in these plays did not learn their parts, but rather were prompted to perform them by a functionary known as the Ordinary, 'who followeth at their back with the book in his hand, and telleth them softly what they must pronounce aloud'.

Though the authenticity of this second-hand (or perhaps third-hand) account has been seriously questioned, it seems to receive some substantiation from the famous Fouquet miniature of the *Martyrdom of Saint Apollonia*, which shows a figure with a book and baton seemingly conducting a dramatic performance. In the field of medieval theatre much has been learned in recent years through the medium of performance, testing the scripts and discovering their full meaning by presenting them in contemporary actuality. Thus in the case of Carew's description it seems well worth experimenting with practical performance techniques, to explore the dynamic of a conventional style of acting of this sort. I applaud the initiative of Dr. Butterworth in preparing and presenting such an experiment in a highly appropriate context.

The student performers had been rehearsed in a performance of the play which included a prompter figure. Dr. Butterworth gave an eloquent introductory speech explaining the technique that would be used, and the set of variants that he would utilise; he also took pains *not* to frame the various arguments about Carew's narrative, but rather urged the audience to judge the effectiveness of the performance on its own terms. This seemed to me an astute choice. And indeed the entire experiment was not merely well-theorised, but also carried off in a highly professional manner.

In the first performance sequence the prompter was dressed as one of the shepherds, and thus as unobtrusively as possible. I noticed that the staging seemed unusually rigid, and that the pronouncements of the prompter seemed to disturb stage blocking (i.e. movement of actors in the stage space). The convention only seemed effective when the prompter's back was turned to me. Unlike the conventionally 'invisible' black-clad stagehands of Asian theatre, the prompter was all-too visible. By his very presence he became a stage witness to an act of theft and the overhearer of a conspiracy of which the other shepherds had no knowledge. This placed him in a morally ambiguous position, and his lack of response (since his whole function was to pre-prompt actors in their lines) was disturbing. To the extent that he seemed to indicate actions as well as words, he resembled a puppeteer — a rather intrusive and aggressive one at that. It was notable that the extensive humour of the scenes became lost in the process, particularly the numerous visual 'sight gags'. In this respect it ranked well below impromptu class readings I have done of scenes from this play, with untrained and unrehearsed class members.

As for the other actors, they seemed (for all of their well-rehearsed skill) consistently one step behind. I believe this was because they were unable

to listen to one another, in the normal theatrical way. The presence and intervention of the prompter created a huge barrier in time and space. In the course of my work with student actors over the years, I have found that they are generally incapable of *acting* a scene (as opposed to reciting it) until they have memorised it. But once they have done so, the barrier of the script, and the process of deciphering and then expressing the thoughts behind the lines, give way to the listening, responding, and believability of true acting.

In the succeeding performance sequence, the prompter's rôle was altered in various ways. First, he was presented in ordinary street clothing rather than in costume. This gave him the appearance of a Stage Manager, rehearsing a group of actors in their lines ... indeed a group of actors not sufficiently 'off book' and therefore unable to 'own' the play for themselves as yet. In two further sequences the prompter's rôle was expanded, and he became like a Kindergarten teacher, attempting to cajole his young charges into doing the school play by acting out all the rôles and shouting the lines to the children.

In the final series of performance sequences, volunteers were used, rather than rehearsed actors. These performers, though (as participant scholars) well familiar with the classic script of the *Second Shepherds' Play*, seemed very confused and distracted by the prompter's interventions, and proved unable to repeat their lines accurately.

Thus I can only conclude that the use of a visible and audible prompter in a contemporary performance would be a disturbing factor in the best of circumstances. Whether this would have been true in the original Cornish circumstances, or in other medieval contexts, is less certain. It might emphasise the ritual, as opposed to spontaneous, nature of a given text, and thus create a certain distancing — as may be seen in the work of avant garde directors such as Richard Foreman, who preside over and visibly 'direct' their works, drawing focus away from the actors and onto themselves. But this seems at odds with the presentational, storytelling nature of medieval theatre and acting, as we generally think of it.

My thanks and congratulations go to Dr. Butterworth and his students for a rigorous and stimulating exploration of what otherwise would have remained a merely theoretical possibility.

Elsa Strietman — University of Cambridge

The experiment in Prompting in Full View of the Audience had the effect of making me realise how much, in theatre in general, I rely on the illusion

created on the stage. That illusion was destroyed by the prompting, more so when the actors were in modern dress, even more so when they also mimed the gestures. The *Shepherds' Play* became a postmodern play in which the prompting became the mirror action of the play itself. This, in turn, had, for me, the effect of rendering the medieval text alien, of creating a far greater distance between what I know of the medieval play and medieval plays in general, and what I saw before me.

As I have no expertise at all in drama or theatre, the experiment became just that: an experiment based on a thin bit of seventeenth-century evidence with regard to prompting. It did not therefore provide me with any insight into medieval theatre. At the same time I realise that that expectation may not have been what had prompted (!) the experiment in the first place.

The artificiality of the prompting became even more marked when the experiment was carried out with actors volunteering from the audience. Their need to pay attention to the prompter in a manner very different from the original actors, rendered the play into a comic episode, comic in a different register from the innate comedy of the *Shepherds' Play*.

Taking into account the fact that there is evidence from various other theatre traditions (Japanese and Spanish for instance) of a similar prompting style, this particular experiment surely taught actors and audience a number of things; personally, it showed me how much I expect, and wish for, the sustaining of illusion for the duration of a play.

Elza C. Tiner — Lynchburg College, Virginia

I had two responses:

1. At times, when the prompter was working in tandem, well coordinated with the actors, I was able to ignore him partially. On the other hand, when I did not notice the prompter, I had the sense of a God-like presence, directing and fore-knowing the actions of men, who yet, at the same time, maintained their free will. Such free will was evidenced in the moments when the actors stopped to listen to the prompter, or leaned back to catch a correction. The prompter like the Boethian god, lived outside of, and yet inside the time frame of the play.

2. On the other hand, I had the sense that this was a kind of rehearsal, and that it took great skill to maintain the gestures and the quick attention and delivery of the lines. Thus, it might have been prearranged, to look spontaneous, or at least practical, like improvisations.

Melissa Trimingham — University of Leeds

I was powerfully struck by the stage dynamics revealed by these pieces, something that practical work is in a unique position to reveal. The stage device of the prompter works, and works well, in two apparently opposite ways.

In the first mode of operation, which opens the performance, the prompter, whether in costume or not, is unobtrusive, and glides from performer to performer, slipping lines to them quietly, cueing entrances and so on with slight gestures. The audience (taking evidence from personal experience and the testimony of those watching) is capable of largely ignoring this figure, continuing to hold its belief in the scene presented. It seems an audience is very willing to be deceived, and it will happily adopt a stage device, if it is set up clearly and handled consistently, in order to sustain that belief. A good parallel perhaps is a Bunraku puppeteer who openly manipulates the puppet but whose presence does not destroy the illusion.

The second dynamic witnessed, which closed the performance (at Bretton Hall), stresses the 'performant function' of the prompter. The prompter becomes an active directorial figure, drawing out the performance from each actor, and contributing an equal share to the energy on stage. This may seem to be the opposite of the unobtrusive prompter, but it reveals exactly the same propensity of the audience to key in, willingly, to the 'stage language' offered by the piece. What is especially noticeable here is how well this figure works theatrically, and the delight that the audience takes in the performant, as opposed to the semiotic, means of theatrical communication on stage. It seems on this stage that the stage devices in themselves offer pleasure and sustain belief more effectively than any Stanislavskian 'naturalism' could do.

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Discussion of audience response

It is heartening to witness the variety of responses inherent in the above 500 (or so)-word statements. Such variety points to the complex interaction that is possible between performers, the performed, and their witnesses. The respondents were guided in their articulated responses by iteration of the purpose of the experiment: 'May I simply repeat the question with which we are concerned: (1) *how* does the convention of

prompting in full view of the audience work?; (2) *to what extent* does the convention of prompting in full view of the audience *affect the nature of* the presented theatre? These are the principal questions with which we are concerned.'[25] It can be seen that these open questions are in line with the ones described earlier (**Rehearsal process**) and the ones recorded on the flyer presented to the audience (**Appendix 1**). In the discussion that follows it will be necessary, therefore, to focus attention on the declared purpose of the experiment.

Motivation for the experiment arose out of my interest in the available evidence and also in an abiding fascination for those pivotal features and processes that (1) enable the conversion of a dramatic text into a theatrically communicated statement and (2) contribute to the identification of its nature. The prompter who offers all the lines to the performers fits exactly into this territory.

But why conduct such an experiment in the first place? [Johnston]. The reasons are interrelated. I am of the strong conviction that theatre is in a privileged and perhaps unique position to be able to interrogate itself as a means of creating understanding about it. The quality of insights experienced and developed through disciplined, practical experiment is capable of enriching and promoting such understanding. Secondly, Carew's statement has frequently been denigrated for external rather than internal reasons. Some scholars have attempted to find explanations as to why the content of Carew's statement cannot be true.[26] Such responses are sometimes not reasoned; they are simply instinctive and/or suspicious ones based upon theatrical conditions and experience of the modern age. The opportunity to test the internal content of Carew's description through practical experiment was a logical development of an investigation that might have been expected to have taken place previously and yet had not done so. The inherent issues of Carew's statement had not been tackled. The idea had either been dismissed as fanciful or given little thought. However, such an unusual convention is likely to have produced a different kind of theatre to one in which such a convention did not operate. If this was so, what were the terms of engagement with its audience and what sort of theatre is likely to have resulted? Although the experiment confined itself to the evidence provided by Carew the participants were aware of other related medieval and later European evidence of the same and similar prompting conventions.

In setting up such an experiment it was inevitable that there would be both opportunities and limitations upon the adopted conditions [Johnston,

Kramer]. Although investigation of the fundamental concerns in Carew's statement could be isolated for practical examination, the cultural, traditional, and theatrical contexts could not be duplicated or recreated. So, it was clear that the experiment would and could not attempt reconstruction or re-creation [Muir] of the event described by Carew. Nor could an experiment of this kind hope to prove or attempt to prove the historical accuracy of Carew's observations [Harris, Mills]. However, the mechanism of prompting in full view of the audience and its theatrical effect could be examined.

Of major concern, although referred to in only one statement [Meredith], is the factor concerned with playing in the open air. It became clear through rehearsal and performance that the space/time dimension available to the actors and prompter bore a direct relationship to the possible scale of performance required and stimulated by open-air conditions. The actor could create time and space in the delivery of his lines that found a rhythm that included the time taken to listen to the prompted line. Momentum of the scene was carried through the actor/prompter relationship where it would normally (without a prompter) be communicated through the actor/actor relationship. The actor who was fed a stanza or a longer speech could maintain momentum through a conscious and concerted 'double act' with the prompter. This caused some concern [Meredith] because it replaced an otherwise conventional ('naturalistic') and expected relationship between actor and actor or character and character. The prompter and actor created a joint statement that conditioned a new dynamic. Some respondents acknowledged this new condition in positive term [Debax, Mills, Pettitt, Trimingham] whilst others regarded it critically [Meredith, Johnston, Potter]. Two respondents thought that the changed dynamic slowed down the performance, 'to a crawl' [Johnston] and 'at best slows down and at worst breaks up the rhythm of the piece' [Muir]. Others relegated importance of this concern: 'Quick prompting and an overlapping delivery by the actors meant that the action was barely interrupted' [Harris]; 'the hiatus between the units insufficient to be distracting' [Pettitt]. If naturalistic concerns for timing, pace, and rhythm are held up against the delivery of this work then it is possible to claim that the presented work was 'slowed down'. Since the work was anything but naturalistic in its intention or presentation such criteria may need to be reconsidered.

It is perhaps not unnatural for a modern audience to filter its responses and assessments to an experiment such as this through naturalistic

expectations — whether these be conscious or unconscious. A number of respondents have focused on the absence of naturalism in the work. Sometimes such identification is referred to as an inherent weakness. On other occasions the changed style and resultant dynamic is accepted as operating by different generic rules. For instance, one respondent says: 'I found the presence of the prompter changed the entire dynamic of the play where there was interaction between the characters. There could be no question of "naturalism"' [Johnston]. Another respondent states: 'I was worried by the way the, broadly-speaking, "naturalistic" dialogue (I'm not forgetting it's in complicated verse form) was being constantly interrupted by stylised pauses and "unnatural" action' [Meredith]. Another 'worried' responses states that: 'This, in its turn, had, for me, the effect of rendering the medieval text alien, of creating a far greater distance between what I know of the medieval play and medieval plays in general, and what I saw before me' [Strietman].

The above observations are real and accurate yet critical, 'worried' [Meredith], 'disconcerted' [Johnston], or 'disturbing' [Potter] in that naturalistic expectations are not fulfilled. Another response creates different meaning and understanding through the same and similar observations: 'The presence of the prompter did not destroy the sense of a plot moving forward as interactions between character, but it was enough to underline that the performance was artwork, not a slice of life. This is, in my view, exactly the kind of alertness to artifice with which medieval theatre was experienced: modern productions which try to present "real" human situations and feelings are often frankly embarrassing. The use of the prompter was a useful way of restraining such illusionistic tendencies on the part of the players and spectators' [Pettitt]. The same point is referred to by another witness when he says: 'The constant reminder that the audience is watching a constructed play would encourage engaged consideration of the ideas embodied in the play rather than emotional identity with the characters' [Harris].

In this experiment the rôle of the prompter was taken on by an actor. There is no evidence of this happening in any of the historical or modern examples cited earlier. In these cases the prompter is the prompter who exists by virtue of his function in his given context. However, some of the insights about the prompter's rôle have arisen by virtue of an actor taking on the rôle of the prompter. Again, there is no evidence of this having occurred in any of the examples offered earlier. The extent to which the

prompter should or should not act the rôle, in our experiment, therefore presented functional and stylistic issues.

In the first three of the five presented scenes the actor did not act the rôle of the prompter: he simply performed the function of the prompter and did so quietly. The audience could hear him prompting but could probably not make out all the words with which he prompted. He followed each actor at a distance that operated within a range of up to one metre. In scenes four and five the prompter took on additional functions in respect of an overt form of directing. It could be said that this rôle was acted although this was not the intention. His function was an obvious and animated one. This function involved prompting; prescribing the path down which the actor should travel and the rate at which this should be done; marking the actor's destination; prescribing movement and its dimension; and giving example through the prompting as to the attitude and emotion that the actor should use. All this was done rapidly through economical, physical signals. Unlike the first three scenes the prompter offered lines through degrees of intense and expansive whispers. The audience was easily able to pick out these lines. Although the function of the prompter was to direct, he created a dynamic whereby the actor effectively echoed the vocal and physical statement of the prompter. One audience member says: 'The prompter becomes an active directorial figure, drawing out the performance from each actor, and contributing an equal share to the energy on stage' [Trimingham]. Another audience member says: 'There is something very pleasing in the appearance of actors or dancers moving simultaneously, or, even better, echoing each other, which was what happened during the prompting ... whether the prompter "acts" with modest instructions or with big movements, in "period" dress or in (modern) director's clothes: it's the prompter who plays the leading rôle ...' [Kramer]. The relationship between the statement and its echo is referred to by another witness in an attempt to determine a re-arranged location of communicated dramatic strength: 'there is a sharing of the dramatic strength in the case of a theatrical production: it can be concentrated on the actors only, and the style of the play then is realistic (fourth wall theory, "eavesdropping" situation for the spectators); if a "narrator" or "poet" (cf. Gower in Shakespeare's *Pericles*) or an "expositor" is present, there occurs a transfer of that dramatic power from the actors on to that narrator: he tends to become the privileged interlocutor of the spectators, and the actors mere puppets' [Debax].

Several responses refer to the relative visibility/invisibility of the prompter. Recognition of this scale varies with the respective functions and dress of the prompter. One person says: 'The experiment in Prompting in Full View of the Audience had the effect of making me realise how much, in theatre in general, I rely on the illusion created on the stage. That illusion was destroyed by the prompting, more so when the actors [the prompter] were in modern dress, even more so when they also mimed the gestures' [Strietman]. Another audience member declares: 'As a spectator, I found the prompter unobtrusive when he merely fed the actors their lines, and I found he disappeared even further when in modern rather than period dress. I found him obtrusive when he also prompted actions' [Harris]. One person described the issue by saying that he 'could not ignore the prompter's presence or exclude him from my reading of the play. Even when costumed like the actors and only prompting, facing away from the performer, he remained distinctive with his script-copy and deliberate movement; when directing and when in modern dress, he was overtly the alterior controlling agent' [Mills]. Another respondent claimed that: 'He [the prompter] was both visible and invisible at the same time' [Meredith]. When the prompter was costumed as another shepherd he was declared to be so 'as unobtrusively as possible' and yet 'Unlike the conventionally "invisible" black-clad stagehands of Asian theatre, the prompter was all-too visible' [Potter]. Another witness refers tot he same assessment by saying: 'The costumed prompter blended in somewhat' [Mills]. One respondent states that: 'I was able to ignore him partially. On the other hand, when I did not notice the prompter, I had the sense of a God-like presence, directing and foreknowing the actions of men ...' [Tiner]. Another witness declares that: 'the prompter, whether in costume or not, is unobtrusive ... The audience ... is capable of largely ignoring this figure, continuing to hold its belief in the scene presented' [Trimingham]. One response likened the world of the prompter to that 'of the signer and the performed play' [Meredith]. According to one audience member: 'The balance was best (felt most natural) when the prompter was dressed in modern clothes, but did not emphatically direct the performance' [Pettitt].

A number of the respondents likened the rôle of the prompter to that of the puppeteer. Such responses provide a useful analogy in terms of responsibility for the instigation of action. Both the prompter and the puppeteer initiate action which is respectively completed by the actor and puppet. To one respondent the prompter as puppeteer seemed distasteful: 'To the extent that he [the prompter] seemed to indicate actions as well as

words, he resembled a puppeteer — a rather intrusive and aggressive one at that' [Potter]. One witness says: 'What I was reminded of most strongly, especially as the prompter increased his presence by demonstrating gestures as well as giving lines, was a puppet-master. All depended on the ingenuity and quick wit of the prompter rendering the other actors mere ciphers, little more than costumed marionettes without initiative and creativity of their own' [Johnston]. Another member of the audience says: 'The prompter became a sort of puppet master, with actors unable to move or speak without him. And this was a haunting and intriguing effect' [Meredith]. A further response contextualises the concern as follows: 'It seems an audience is very willing to be deceived, and it will happily adopt a stage device, if it is set up clearly and handled consistently, in order to sustain that belief. A good parallel perhaps is a Bunraku puppeteer who openly manipulates the puppet but whose presence does not destroy the illusion' [Trimingham].

At the Colloquium discussion on the day after the presentation a number of witnesses expressed their conviction that the actors knew their lines. The implication was that the experiment was not truthful or that it was invalid because of this perceived condition. I knew, as did the actors, that they had not learned their lines. Indeed, during a conversation over a meal later that day, the actors were adamant that they did not know their lines and could not have done the performance without the specific aid of the prompter. However, the perception by a number of people in the audience that the actors did know their lines was real and spoken with conviction. Even though I was able to explain the circumstances surrounding this concern, the reasons offered were insufficient to dislodge some witnesses from this strongly-held response. It was a factor that the actors had become more familiar with their lines by virtue of having to understand what they were saying. The Middle English text was initially incomprehensible to the actors. The act of understanding these words created a growing familiarity. Some further familiarity must have occurred through the process of rehearsal. However, perhaps the strongest element to condition this perception by members of the audience related to the skill of the actors. Although the skill of the actors is referred to elsewhere by witnesses it was not mentioned in this context. Not only did the actors concentrate on picking up cues with precision but 'overlapping' the remainder of the prompter line became a matter of executed pride particularly since this 'overlapping' had presented a problem that was confronted in rehearsal. This practice demanded more of the actors' skill

in sections of the text that rapidly changed between characters. The actors took great delight in attempts to develop such 'overlapping' and maintain and develop momentum and rhythm. Less concentration on this concern appears in the written statements received from audience members than it did by those who spoke at the Colloquium. Some of the written responses are as follows: 'If there was something artificial in the situation, it was not in the fact that the fiction of the story was disrupted, but in the obvious fact that the actors *did* know their lines and gestures and movements very well, and still needed to wait for the prompter and perhaps resist their inclination to proceed and interact with their fellow-actors' [Kramer]. One witness confirmed the operation of the convention by saying: 'it also works when the actors are unfamiliar with the lines — that is have not done the performance enough times to have a thorough familiarity with the lines' [Johnston]. Another audience member who took part in the final sequence of the experiment states: 'As an unrehearsed actor, I found it surprisingly easy to deliver the lines this way. On a few occasions, due to an unfamiliar word in the text, I needed a line to be repeated. Had the play been in modern English or had I been able to benefit from even one rehearsal, this would not have been a problem. My gestures tended to be static and clichéd, but this, too, would have been improved with rehearsal' [Harris]. One person who was convinced that the actors knew their lines states: 'We were asked to suspend our disbelief that the actors did not know their lines or gestures and were waiting for the prompter. Sometimes the fiction was exposed — the prompter did not always look at his script, and on one occasion I was confident that, when directing, he stood outside the actor's sight-line' [Mills]. It should be said that the prompter did know many of the lines. He was permitted and required to operate with or without the script.   Whether the actors knew their lines or not was of little consequence to one witness: 'To my mind neither the historical nor the dramaturgical integrity of the experiment is compromised by the actors having to a degree become familiar with their parts: it would be unnatural if they hadn't' [Pettitt].

   One of the principal research questions focuses upon the presumed difference in dynamic produced by the effect of the prompting convention on scenes involving dialogue and those consisting of longer speeches. Over longer speeches the prompter and the actor are capable of developing variable momentum and rhythm that is conditioned by meaning in the text. The same point may be made in terms of shorter speeches or dialogue in which characters engage. Here, the onus to instigate cues, momentum,

and rhythm is focused on the prompter who needs to operate swiftly in order to signal changes in speakers and movement. The potential rate of such development is different in its character to that established through longer speeches. Here, the relationship conditioned through rapid statement and its echoed response builds an accumulative effect that is capable of quick changes in direction and meaning. Such dialogue is capable of creating accelerated pace and concentrating energy and responsibility on to the developing rôle of the prompter.

Another question with which the experiment engaged concerned periods of apparent inactivity during the action of scenes. Given the actor's dependence on the prompter it was clear that there would be a vacuum created when actors were not speaking. Under naturalistic conditions the actor would be encouraged to maintain the life of the character, relationships, action, belief, and momentum of the scene through a developing interaction with other characters and scenographic conditions. The life and belief in the scene would not be broken because a given actor did not speak. The conventional naturalistic axis for this life is through the actor/actor relationship. Here, this relationship was missing and replaced by one between the prompter and actor and the actor and audience.

In early rehearsals we witnessed such a vacuum. The prompter moved to prompt each actor in turn leaving a 'spent' actor behind. What was the actor to do? Initially, attempts were made to maintain the life of the scene as would normally occur under naturalistic conditions [Kramer]. This did not work. The reason it did not work is because the actor conventionally creates a thorough understanding and feeling for the intention of the scene. Here, the actor only knew that which he was fed by the prompter. So, it became clear that it would not be possible to reproduce the conventional naturalistic life of the scene. At this point the actor who had completed his lines was permitted to let the momentum of the acted line/action simply dissipate in order that he might arrive at a state of stillness. The effect of this was to create a sense of the action stopping and starting. Any momentum or flow to the action was short-lived through the staccato production of lines. The focus of the scene was also lost. It was not known whether these perceived problems occurred in any of the previous or current examples of such a convention. However, it was considered that a modern audience, even one consisting of medieval specialists, would not maintain its interest/engagement with such a stop/start presentation. The production idea that emerged to deal with

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this concern involved the outgoing actor 'freezing' his action. Although it was considered that this was a modern solution its adoption was thought to be appropriate in response to a modern problem. 'Freezing' the action is not known to have been a medieval convention and is unlikely to have occurred. The execution of this idea promotes focus and momentum for its success depends upon instantaneous creation and ending. However, the quality of stillness produced by 'frozen' action frequently carries reverberated significance of that which precedes it. With hindsight, it might have been possible to create a more gentle and timed convention out of a discernible and visible 'melting away' of the actor's energy to a point of stillness. Although such an idea might have brought the presentation nearer to the spirit and letter of Carew's evidence it may not have satisfied the perceived requirement of the modern audience. One audience members says: 'I can see that the freezing and the stylised movement made a satisfactory theatrical event out of the experiment, but it didn't seem to me to be appropriate to the kind of performance that Carew was describing' [Meredith]. This respondent also refers to another effect that the idea created: 'the actor's freezing when not speaking made the performance itself more of an abstraction from normality' [Meredith]. However, the act of 'freezing' created a different response from another audience member: 'the actors "froze" between speeches, reminding me of our childhood game of "statues" in which, once touched by the catcher, you had to "freeze" till released by your ally. I imagine that the track of the prompter around the playing area had been worked out in rehearsal and had influenced the blocking. I readily adapted to this stylised mode, which did not prevent variation of pace within the action; but it would prolong a full performance considerably' [Mills].

The extent to which the prompter and his functions affect the nature of the presented theatre is referred to by a number of witnesses. When the prompter was dressed as a shepherd 'I noticed that the staging seemed unusually rigid, and the pronouncements of the prompter seemed to disturb stage blocking (i.e. movement of actors in the stage space). The convention only seemed effective when the prompter's back was turned to me' [Potter]. One person states: 'To me, it was a performance about acting and about representation. But this of course is caused by our focus on the technique and our unfamiliarity with this convention as an *acting* convention. I would certainly see this in a different light if I was used to the style' [Kramer]. To another person the prompter 'inhabited a world of his own in which the words existed at a kind of abstract level; at a more

ordinary level they existed in the everyday world of the "play" and the actors. These parallel worlds were absorbing' [Meredith]. Another witness states: 'The parallel increase in the importance of the prompter and his spectacular impact are probably the key to the inner workings of the device. It shows that prompting is not in this case a mere technical contrivance meant to make up for the failing memory of the actors, or to remind them of the agreed "mis-en-scène". This prompter has nothing to do with his counterpart in the variety theatre who, hidden in his box, was unseen by the spectators. On the contrary, the medieval "prompter" revived by Ph. Butterworth, is *in* the show, as is the case with all that is to be seen on the stage' [Debax].

One member of the audience objects to the convention by saying: 'The audience was not caught up in the word play, the plot and the action but rather in the acting — in the mechanics of presentation. The "accident" was being forced upon us in a way that detracted from the "essence". And here, I think, is my most fundamental objection to the convention. Late medieval Biblical drama was essentially didactic — essentially a teaching tool. It is possible that medieval audiences used to the convention could strip away the prompter and respond only to the "essence" of the performance. However, I don't believe that it would be possible for a casual viewer, one who had not been trained in the convention could respond to the didactic message that was the purpose of the production' [Johnston]. Clearly, late medieval Biblical drama was 'essentially didactic'. The objection here suggests that the overt function(s) of the prompter do not promote such didactic purposes and the 'casual viewer … who had not been trained in the convention could not respond to the didactic message'. It may be said that the convention examined in this experiment is similarly not one in which its audience has been trained. It is inappropriate and unnecessary to compare a presumed medieval audience with that at Groningen. However, that which the audiences may have in common is that they presumably respond to the terms of reference of a production. The terms of reference condition the communicated statement. A medieval audience was presumably just as capable as a modern audience in responding to the terms of reference of the performance. If the work is communicated through the involvement of an overt prompter then this affects conditioning of the terms of reference. Consequently, an audience does not need to have 'been trained' in the convention; it receives training 'on the job'. This is particularly so if the purpose of the work is didactic. A number of audience members at Groningen refer to the convention and

its effect upon the nature of the production in creating a distancing effect [Pettitt, Potter, Strietman]. Such an effect may also be considered to support a didactic purpose and function.

A number of audience members sum up their responses as follows: 'While the Groningen experiment could not prove that prompting in full view of the audience was a medieval staging convention, it effectively countered the argument that such open prompting would have so marred the performance as to be unthinkable' [Harris]. The working of the convention is referred to by one witness: 'The convention works as a convention. Once the audience accepts the presence of the prompter all else follows. The performances were smooth and well presented. The final experiment with members of the audience acting the parts showed that it also works when the actors are unfamiliar with the lines' [Johnston]. Another audience member is clear that: 'such prompting determined acting style' [Mills]. One witness refers to the convention and its effect on the verse: 'overt prompting brought out something authentic in the play. Most obviously in the verse: the actors were mainly fed the dialogue in complete-line units, the hiatus between the units insufficient to be distracting, but enough to signal the poetic form; rhymes for example were more emphatically registered than usual. I do not recall a production of a medieval play in which I was more aware that the text was in verse' [Pettitt]. The prompter's presence is seen as ambiguous by one witness: 'The prompter like the Boethian god, lived outside of, and yet inside the time frame of the play' [Tiner]. According to one member of the audience: 'The stage device of the prompter works, and works well … What is especially noticeable here is how well this figure works theatrically, and the delight that the audience takes in the performant, as opposed to the semiotic, means of theatrical communication on stage. It seems on this stage that the stage devices in themselves offer pleasure and sustain belief more effectively than any Stanislavskian "naturalism" could do' [Trimingham]. The rôle of the prompter is seen to have a fundamental effect on the communication of the play: 'As a conclusion, I would suggest that the introduction of a "prompter" does not work a minor change in the reception of the play. With each degree in the intervention of the prompter we have a different play. Ph. Butterworth's experiment has reminded us of one of the fundamentals of the living theatre: the production is *the* thing' [Debax]. A number considered the experiment to have been well worth pursuing [Meredith, Harris, Potter]: 'Overall it was an experiment well worth embarking on. It demonstrated the ease with

which a prompter can be introduced to the action, and the effect of doing so ... But by doing it the way he did Phil Butterworth both fulfilled his aim of investigating the effect produced by a visible and continuous prompter and created a fascinating piece of theatre' [Meredith].

Of the five presented scenes, the first three, in which the prompter follows the actors and prompts every line, works in terms of the mechanics of the action, the represented convention and its theatrical communication. Of these three scenes, some divergence of response occurred in respect of the dress of the prompter. Some regarded the modern dress of the prompter in scene three as presenting the convention at its strongest. Others preferred the relative anonymity of the prompter when dressed like other actors as shepherds. Extension of the prompter's rôle to include a directing one, as developed in scenes four and five, seemed to take the convention too far for some people. Certainly, there is no specific evidence upon which to base such behaviour although there is a fundamental theatrical logic to its development from more simple actions of the prompter. It is the case, however, that the function of the Cornish 'conveyour' in the *Gwreans An Bys: The Creation of the World* moves some way down this path in his stage-management rôle. Many in the audience found the development of the prompter's rôle to be a fascinating one that made for some engaging theatre even though his directing rôle was found to be unnecessarily excessive and/or irrelevant by some.

The visibility/invisibility of the prompter remains and perhaps should remain an intriguing enigma which is capable of creating differently perceived responses according to functions within the rôle. Audience members refer to the prompter as being both inside and outside the action at the same time. Such duality of function and perception of it seems to be inherent in the concept of this kind of prompter. F.E. Halliday offers an interesting example of this kind of duality when he refers to the prompter 'as invisible as the referee in a football match'.[27]

The convention in both its simplest and extended forms clearly affects the acting style of the work. The resultant style is various described by witnesses even though it is clear that the style is not 'naturalistic'. The absence of naturalism and its conventions is seen by some as a weakness and by others as an inevitable consequence of decisions taken to pursue the aim and objectives of the experiment. The realisation made in rehearsal that the emergent acting style fitted 'somewhere on a route to "representation" through "demonstration"' is clearly echoed by some of the audience responses.

'Representation' is generally well understood in mainland Europe through examples of modern remnants of earlier folk and theatre traditions. Here, there is every attempt to faithfully 'represent' characters and events; attempts are not made 'to be' characters or present situations 'as if' they are inseparable from real life. Terms of reference point to the theatrical act as 'representing' reality. Within this sort of context, 'demonstration' of action is often the means by which representation is fulfilled. This makes for a different kind of theatre where illusion can still exist but within differently framed terms of reference.

Clearly, much more work needs to be done in attempts to identify the nature of presented theatre as determined by the nature of acting. Even if prompting in full view of the audience was an unusual convention in the sixteenth century, the kind of theatre that resulted needs to have been usual.

University of Leeds

APPENDIX 1: THE LINK SCRIPT

[The length of each prompted line is indicated by the // symbol.]

Welcome to our experiment with the medieval convention // of prompting in full view of the audience. // This work has been generously supported by a grant // from the Arts and Humanities Research Board. //

Some of you may know of my interest in this convention // and may have even read some of my papers on the subject. // However, the opportunity to test some of the thinking behind this convention // through practical means // determines the purpose of this presentation. //

The principal evidence with which we are experimenting // is that provided by Richard Carew in his *Survey of Cornwall* of 1602. // You have copies of this account. //

Today, when and if prompting takes place in the theatre // it does so in response to the actor forgetting his or her lines. // We wish to take this experiment beyond this condition // by concerning ourselves with a prompter who prompts all the lines. //

Carew's account does not tell us // how much prompting is delivered by the prompter. // We do not know whether the prompter just gave an

occasional prompt // or whether he offered all the lines. // For the purposes of this experiment // we have assumed that the prompter offers all the lines. //

So, what kind of theatre results if the performers are provided with every lines? // What sort of conventions might operate // to communicate the work to an audience? // We would like you to keep these questions in mind // as you witness two scenes // that we have taken from the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play*. // We will play the scenes in different ways. //

The first scene marks the arrival of Mak, the sheep stealer, // to meet with other shepherds. // In this version, the prompter is also dressed as a shepherd. //

[*The scene is played.*]

Our next scene is the well-known one // where the sheep that was stolen by Mak // is discovered by the Shepherds. // Mak and his wife have attempted to hide the sheep in their house // by disguising it as their baby. // The prompter will still be dressed as a shepherd. //

[*The scene is played.*]

At this point in the play Mak is punished by being tossed in a canvas. // Now we will play the second scene again // but this time the prompter will be in modern dress. // What differences, if any, does the change of costume produce? //

[*The scene is played.*]

In the next version we will again take the first scene // but this time the prompter's rôle will be expanded. //

[*The scene is played.*]

Next, we will concentrate on the second scene // and again the prompter will take on more responsibility. //

[*The scene is played.*]

This concludes the presentation. //

[*The 'link' person now talks to the audience without being prompted.*]

There will be an opportunity to discuss your responses to the work at the Colloquium session tomorrow afternoon. One further thing: now it's your turn. Are there four people who would like to have a go at this convention? Four people, preferably, who will be at the Colloquium tomorrow afternoon. Anthony will brief you.

[*The prompter briefs the volunteers.*]

Basically, we are going to do the first scene again. There are four parts; Mak and the three shepherds. Do you have any preferences as to who you would like to play? [*Parts are determined.*] I will give you your lines. You'll know it's your line because I'll point at you like this. Put in as much movement as you wish. All I'm going to do is to provide you with the lines as we did in the first two scenes. If you wish to put in movement or gestures then please do. Are you ready?

[*The scene is played.*]

APPENDIX 2: 'FLYER' TO GRONINGEN AUDIENCE
Société Internationale pour L'Étude du Théâtre Médiéval
University of Groningen July 2, 2001
Prompting in Full View of the Audience:
A Medieval Staging Convention
An Experiment

What kind of outdoor theatre is produced when actors are prompted in the delivery of *all* their lines? How far can the rôle of the prompter be extended? These questions and other related ones condition the purpose and nature of this presentation.

Come and see this experiment where scenes from the *Towneley Second Shepherds' Play* **will form the basis of the investigation**.

The event is led by Dr Philip Butterworth and performed by second-year acting students of the newly created School of Performance and Cultural Industries in the Faculty of Music, Visual, and Performing Arts at the University of Leeds, UK.

CAST:

1st Shepherd : Sam Lambshead
2nd Shepherd : Jayne Powell
3rd Shepherd : James Jackson
Mak : Alistair Binney
Mak's wife : Lia Ponton
Prompter : Anthony Olsen
Links : Philip Butterworth

NOTES

I would like to thank all those colleagues who have submitted their responses to this work in the form of 500-word statements. Their contributions form an integral part of this research and I am fully aware of some of the risks that they have taken. Thank you.

1. Richard Carew *The Survey of Cornwall* (S.S. for Iohn Iaggard, London, 1602) 71–2.

2. Philip Butterworth 'Book Carriers: Medieval and Tudor Staging Conventions' *Theatre Notebook 46: 1* (1992) 15–30.

3. Philip Butterworth 'Jean Fouquet's *The Martyrdom of St Apollonia* and *The Rape of the Sabine Women* as Iconographical Evidence of Medieval Theatre Practice' *Leeds Studies in English 29* (1998) 55–67; Philip Butterworth 'Prompting in Full View of the Audience: A Medieval Staging Convention' in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe* edited Alan Hindley (Brepols, Turnhout, 1999) 231–47.

4. E.K. Chambers *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 volumes (Oxford UP, London, 1903; reprinted 1967) 2 140; Henry Jenner 'The Cornish Drama' *The Celtic Review 3* (1906–1907) 360; R. Morton Nance 'The Plen An Gwary Or Cornish Playing-Place' *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall 24* (1935 for 1933–34) 209; F.E. Halliday *The Legend of the Rood* (Duckworth, London, 1955) 30; George E.

Wellwarth 'Methods of Production in the Mediaeval Cornish Drama' *Speech Monographs 24* (1957) 213; Richard Southern *The Medieval Theatre in the Round* (Faber, London, 1957; reprinted 1975) 87; J.W. Robinson 'Three Notes On the Medieval Theatre' *Theatre Notebook 16:2* (Winter 1961/62) 61; A.M. Nagler *A Source Book in Theatrical History* (Dover, New York, 1959) 51; William L. Tribby 'The Medieval Prompter: A Reinterpretation' *Theater Survey 5* (1964) 71–2; Robert Longsworth *The Cornish Ordinalia: Religion and Dramaturgy* (Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass., 1967) 105; Natalie Crohn Schmitt 'Was there a Medieval Theatre in the Round, Part 2' *Theatre Notebook 24:1* (1969) 18–19, note 33; Glynne Wickham *The Medieval Theatre* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974) 83; William Tydeman *The Theatre in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge UP, 1978) 143, 214–15; Paula Neuss 'The Staging of *The Creacion of the World*' *Theatre Notebook 33:3* (1979) 125, note 25; Jane A. Bakere *The Cornish Ordinalia: A Critical Study* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1980) 13; Paula Neuss *The Creacion of the World: A Critical Edition and Translation* (Garland, New York, 1983) lxvi, note 42; Brian Murdoch *Cornish Literature* (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1993) 43; Brian Murdoch 'The Cornish Medieval Drama' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited Richard Beadle (Cambridge UP, 1994) 216; Gloria J. Betcher 'Makers of Heaven on Earth: The Construction of Early Drama in Cornwall' in *Material Culture & Medieval Drama* edited Clifford Davidson (Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 25: Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo, 1999) 115-119.

5. *The Towneley Cycle* edited Peter Meredith, 2 vols (School of English, University of Leeds, 1989) *1* 83–98.

6. See note 3.

7. Jean Fouquet 'The Martyrdom of St Apollonia' from *Les Heures d'Étienne Chevalier* (c 1452–1460) Musée Condé, Chantilly. See also *The Hours of Etienne Chevalier: Jean Fouquet* introduction Claude Schaefer (Thames and Hudson, London, 1972) PLATE 45.

8. BN MS Fr 20071 fol. 9^r. See also Philip Butterworth 'Jean Fouquet's *The Martyrdom of St Apollonia* and *The Rape of the Sabine Women* as Iconographical Evidence of Medieval Theatre Practice' *Leeds Studies in English 29* (1998) 55–67 and PLATE 2.

9. A.M. Nagler *A Source Book in Theatrical History* (Dover, New York, 1959) 52.

10. P.J. Brand 'De geschiedenis van de Hulsterse rederijkers' *Jaarboek Oudheidkundige kring 'De Vier Ambachten' Hulst* (1960–1961) 118.

11. E. van Autenboer 'Een "landjuweel" te Antwerpen in 1496?' *Jaarboek de Fonteine 29* (1978–79) 144. I am grateful to Femke Kramer for supplying me with access to this reference and the one in note 10.

12. *REED: Cambridge* edited Alan H. Nelson, 2 vols (Toronto UP, 1989) *1* 231.

13. *Gwreans An Bys: The Creation of the World: A Cornish Mystery* edited Whitley Stokes (Williams and Norgate, London, 1864) 28 line 339; 32 line 388.

14. Chambers *Mediaeval Stage 2* 140; Neuss 'Staging of the *Creacion of the World*' 123; Nance '*Plen An Gwary*' 203; Butterworth 'Book-Carriers' 22–3.

15. W.J. Lawrence *Old Theatre Days and Ways* (Harrap, London, 1935) 30–1.

16. Clive James *Postcard from Mexico City* directed by Robert Payton, executive producer Richard Drewet (Carlton UK Television, 1996).

17. Sir Thomas North *The Lives of the Noble Grecians & Romans, compared together, by that Grave Learned Philosopher & Historiographer Plutarch of Chaeronea* (John Hayes for George Sawbridge, Cambridge, 1676) 517.

18. Step[hen] Gosson *The Ephemerides of Phialo, deuided into three Bookes, The first, him swarue: without kindling his choler, or hurting himselfe. The second, A Canuazado to Courtiers in foure pointes. The third, The defence of a Curtezan ouerthrowen. And a short Apologie of the Schoole of Abuse, against Poets, Pipers, Players, & their Excusers* (Thomas Dawson, London, 1579) 91ʳ.

19. William Schlegel *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* translated John Black; 2 vols (Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, London; William Blackwood, Edinburgh; John Cumming, Dublin, 1815) *1* 313 note.

20. Auguste Kotzebue *Souvenirs De Paris, en 1804* 2 vols in 1 (Barba, Paris, 1805) *2* 67; Lawrence *Old Theatre Days and Ways* 33.

21. Mᵐᵉ La Baronne De Staël-Holstein *De L'Allemagne* 3 vols (H. Nicolle, Paris, 1810; reprinted London, John Murray, 1813) *2* 286–7; Lawrence *Old Theatre Days and Ways* 34.

22. Sir Offley Wakeman 'Rustic Stage Plays in Shropshire' in *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society 7* (1884) 384; *Shropshire Folk-Lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings* edited Charlotte Sophia Burne, part 2 (Trübner, London, 1893; reprinted EP Publishing, Wakefield, 1974) 494.

23. *The Towneley Cycle 1* 86–66 lines 190–295; 94–95 lines 566–628.

24. My production notes 13 June, 2001.

25. E-mail to contributors of 500-word statements 25 July, 2001.

26. Nance '*Plen An Gwary*' 209; Tribby 'The Medieval Prompter' 71–2; Crohn Schmitt 'Was there a Medieval Theatre in the Round, Part 2' 18–19, note 33; Tydeman *Theatre in the Middle Ages* 143, 214–15; Neuss 'Staging of *The Creacion of the World*' 125, note 25; Bakere *Cornish Ordinalia* 13; Neuss *Creacion of the* lxvi, note 42; Murdoch *Cornish Literature* 43; Murdoch 'Cornish Medieval Drama' 216; Betcher 'Makers of Heaven on Earth' 115–119.

27. F.E. Halliday *The Legend of the Rood* (Gerald Duckworth, London, 1955) 29.