

CHESTER MYSTERY PLAYS
Cathedral Green, Chester, 30 June–19 July 2003
Directed by Robin Goddard

David Mills

'Not altered in menyne poyntes from the olde fashion' were the reassuring words of Chester's Banns to their Tudor hearers about 'The Resurrection' pageant (conveniently ignoring the fact that the few alterations were the removal of earlier references to transubstantiation). Such an advertisement would not sell productions to today's Festival audiences in Chester. Each Festival Director looks over his or her shoulder to see what their predecessors have done and then seeks some new reconception to make the 'medieval' plays 'relevant' to a 'modern' audience.

So Chester's 2003 production is altered considerably from the fashion of former Festivals, which its Director, Robin Goddard, had known when he had performed in them as boy and man. First, instead of dividing the performance into three parts as in recent productions, in imitation of the three-part arrangement described in Tudor play-lists, Goddard opted to play the text in two parts, each lasting two and a half hours (including interval). He called the first, which began with the Creation and Fall and ended with the Magi and the Innocents (Plays 1–10 in the Original), 'The Prophecy', and the second, which began with the Temptation and the Woman Taken in Adultery and ended with the Last Judgement, 'The Fulfilment'. I know that part of his concern was the cost to individuals and groups who wanted to see the complete Creation–Judgement sequence and in the past had to pay for three performances. To achieve this end, he re-edited the text to produce a new redaction, not only omitting whole episodes (Balaam, Harrowing of Hell, Emmaus, Antichrist and his prophets), but also considerably reducing other material — combining the Buffeting and Scourging as a single act of violence, for example, and providing a somewhat cursory Resurrection.

This was a Director's theatre. Whereas in the past the guild-responsibility for individual pageants had been mirrored in the distribution of episodes among different local theatre groups, this production was centrally controlled, directed and produced, with some actors doubling roles across the plays between the two parts. This produced a closer dramatic coherence and overall style, perhaps reflective of the closer structural unity of the original text.

Compared with some of the sets of the past, this one is comparatively uniform, without any a strong vertical or significantly raised position. It reminded me of the back of a stately home with steps leading down from the terrace. Goddard wrote in his programme-notes that

The set itself is heavily influenced in its style by the architecture of Chester itself. The use of all the different levels, steps, arches and balconies comes from the uniqueness of the Chester rows, and the colour of the set echoes the rich colour of the stone of the cathedral.

Whereas in recent productions the audience has been placed with its back to the cathedral, here the cathedral formed the backdrop to the stage and the sandstone-painted set harmonised with it. In some past productions God has been set symbolically on high on the cathedral itself, making a particular theo-political statement, but Goddard abandoned the convention of having God set in any high place, considering it important that God, and the Devil, and their respective followers, should be present on Earth mingling among men and forming the on-stage audience to the action.

The white-robed God and the black-and-red garbed Satan (who looked disturbingly like Great Uncle Fester in the *Addams Family*) were therefore consistently present at ground level, with God in attendance as doting father at the Nativity. This strategy created some awkwardness, particularly in 'The Fulfilment', where the presence of both God and Christ together on the same level strongly suggested that Christ was being stalked by a character who adopted a limited range of attitudes of despair and grief among the stage-crowds at the Passion. The resulting theological implications were also somewhat questionable. Moreover, the Holy Spirit was notably absent, despite the stress on 'Trinity' from the start.

'We are a society of "gawpers" who enjoy "looking on" without having to take responsibility for the consequences', wrote Goddard. And so he filled his set with 'gawpers', a responsive crowd of humans and angels, and used the upper level of his set as the equivalent of Chester's Rows, the upper covered level of the city streets from which citizens could have watched the pageant-productions. The resulting blocking and mass movements were among the most notable features of a production that could readily justify its claim to be 'epic'. Tribute here should be paid to Tania Smith as choreographer, particularly given the excellent performances of 'Creation' and 'Noah's Flood'.

By far the boldest innovation, however, was the prominence given to music. To some extent, that idea is of its time; musicals have been popular in

the commercial theatre in recent years, and opera is reaching a wider audience. But musical accompaniment, liturgical music, and popular song had also been an outstanding feature of Chester's sixteenth-century Plays, on which Goddard extended. With a specially commissioned score by Matt Baker, the Plays became a cross between Grand Opera and Andrew Lloyd-Webber. Music was necessarily pre-recorded, using, in Baker's words, 'the most up-to-date musical technology'. Not only was this quasi-operatic reconception at one with the epic scale of production and its emphasis on crowd and colour; it also handled the problem of the text itself. Even those who understand the language of an operatic text have difficulty in following the words as sung, and treating early English in this way has an obvious rationale — which is not to say that the words were always inaudible or unintelligible. The use of music worked better in some instances than others. It was a mistake to have the young Isaac sing his lines plaintively while his father spoke his — the play is overly sentimental as it is. The Webber impact was clear in 'The Flood', which worked as an irreverent comedy; Baker aptly called it 'a complete musical in its own right', but Britten it wasn't. In 'The Nativity' the Virgin Mary was vocally overtaxed by the bouncy arrangement of the Magnificat with its gospel-choir backing, but the setting had the right modern idiom. The combination of music, singing, and dance in chorus-rendering of 'Hosanna' for the Entry to Jerusalem was appropriately exuberant and exhilarating. Moreover, moo" background music supported the action and covered longueurs, while recurrent musical theme served to bind the sections together.

The episodic nature of the cycle was emphasised by retaining the character of Gobbet on the Green. This character, who appeared only at the start of Play 4 in the original text and has never been fully explained, was adopted by Edward Burns in the acting text used in recent productions as a multi-purpose figure who appeared between episodes, combining roles of MC, Expositor, Banns Reader, and Explicator and, in 'Pentecost', as Everyman who replaced the apostles in reciting his Creed. The role then was taken by an entertainer who also performed tricks and juggled. Goddard retained this character, which was played by Mary Lewery, wearing (for some obscure reason) a multi-coloured plumed hat and matching cloak and accompanied by a mime/magician, presumably an echo of the former Gobbet-actor. Lewery's Gobbet has a similar role to the Gobbet of the past, but in the absence of separate groups, no credits had to be announced and increasingly she became an Expositor, explaining the significance of events. Unfortunately, she was virtually alone among the main characters in having no microphone and her

voice did not always carry to the back of the stands. This was one part that perhaps this production did not require.

While the punch-up of Cain and Abel conveyed aggression strongly and convincingly — Abel did not go quietly — the rest of the production was surprising bloodless. The violent music for ‘The Innocents’ only served to emphasise the lack of tension in the on-stage action itself. Since the heart of the cycle is the enactment for our benefit of the torture and execution of an innocent human being who claims to be our God, that aspect should not be sanitised. The scourging conveyed little sense of pain (why was it inflicted by the Priests?) and it was a bloodless and pain-free Crucifixion. Without our recognition of innocent suffering and mindless brutality the point is lost.

While ‘The Prophecy’ worked well as a collection of varying modes and effects, ‘The Fulfilment’ packed too much into too short a time. The text needed to decide where its focus lay and to give that full dramatic weight at the expense of the less central material. In particular, opening a door and shining a light with a voice-over stanza is no substitute for the mystery of the Resurrection, and provided no motivation for the soldiers’ subsequent reaction. Why, at a point where the original text requires liturgical music, was there no music? In a way, this lack of structural focus paralleled the absence of the elevated God on stage. I felt that at heart Goddard was more interested in Peter and Thomas than the more numinous aspects of the Plays.

I liked the angels in differently shaded costumes forming the rainbow, and the released souls of the slaughtered Innocents as little children running up to their Father-God to be welcomed. But why were the angels wearing red face-paint on one side and white on the other, and coloured sashes, looking like refugees from Peter Pan? While the free treatment of the ‘Shepherds’ had many amusing moments (for example one mistaking Bethlehem for Bodelwyddan nearby), turning the angel’s message to comedy (unable to deliver it because the shepherds wouldn’t stop talking) and the absence of reverence from their gifts and attitude distorted the final thrust and tone of the original play. Creative writing skills needed more restraint. The ‘sexing-up’ of Mary Magdalen’s embraces of Christ looked like directorial self-indulgence and only served to suggest that Simon and Judas had a point. Why was Herod given a court of Eastern dancing girls at the Nativity and Passion? Why speak of Christ standing before him when He’s actually lying on the ground, or order Him to be clothed in white when he is already clothed in white? Why put the cross to the side of the set and at ground level rather than centrally and on high?

Despite these (and other) quibbles, I was impressed by the wholehearted commitment that Goddard had inspired in his company. While one might object that this production was more 'show' than 'play', it is good to see Chester's spectacular aspects exploited; in the past they have been neglected in the quest for community theatre. This was a performance whose energy and enthusiasm drew you in to a greater degree than is usual on such occasions. The production brimmed with confidence and the audience loved it. Goddard caught the mood of the times. As he said himself: 'It is not an intellectual exercise but a lively, original experience'. He has boldly reconceived the Plays and opened new possibilities for their presentation in the future.

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