

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEDIEVAL-DRAMA REVIVALS AND THE UNIVERSITIES

*Pamela M. King*

The slim journal *Theatre in Education*, issue 5, number 25, for April 1951, carried three interestingly linked articles. First there is a report on the preparations for the forthcoming Festival of Britain, the country's great post-war self-celebration. What is specifically reported here is the outcome of Ministry of Education Circular 231 of 15 December 1950, which gave a general outline of what the rôle of schools and colleges was to be in the Festival, embodying the hope that 'most schools will find in their local history, etc., a rich accumulation of treasures and achievements that could properly be studied as part of a national festival of thankfulness and legitimate pride'. The report moves on to preview plans for the revival of the York Mystery Plays, listed alongside Cambridge's plans to stage Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Tempest or Enchanted Isle* by Dryden, Davenant, and Purcell. Norwich planned to put on Shakespeare's *Pericles* and *The Taming of the Shrew* in the Maddermarket Theatre, as well as a production by the Pilgrim Players of Christopher Fry's *Sleep of Prisoners* in the medieval church of St Peter Mancroft. In Canterbury there was to be a new play by Robert Gittings about St Alphege and the Danish invasion entitled *Makers of Violence*; in Oxford *Henry IV Part 2* and *Samson Agonistes* were being put on in college gardens. Stratford was contributing four of Shakespeare's history plays, from *Richard II* to *Henry V*; and, in Battersea Festival Gardens in London, Harold Turner was appearing in a new ballet based on *Orlando's Silver Wedding*. The reporter remarks on how London was lagging behind the provinces in what was clearly seen as a major and appropriate endeavour in patriotic drama.

The discussion of York's plans presciently adds that, 'One had the general feeling that this revival, if successful, may become a permanent feature if not of every summer season then as often at least as Edinburgh will see the revival of the "Thrie Estatis"'. Moreover the account notes that other revivals of medieval scriptural drama for the Festival were to include an adaptation by Rev and Mrs Joseph McCulloch in Chester — 'where the Chester plays have not been done in their entirety for four hundred

years' — directed by Christopher Ede and performed by a wholly amateur cast in the refectory of Chester Cathedral. Surrey Community Players were also, improbably, planning to put on the Towneley *Creation and Fall* on a horse-drawn cart with two levels, which was to be taken from street to street around ten stations in the town on two Saturdays, 19 and 26 May. At the end of the report is an advertisement for Canon Purvis's adaptation of the York Plays, published by SPCK, claiming that, 'Written originally for amateurs, the plays do not demand subtle acting but rather the direct and simple sincerity born of faith'.

A few pages further on in the journal, we find a report on another newsworthy development: Bristol University's Department of Drama was celebrating the completion of its new custom-built drama studio. The Department, the first university Drama Department in the UK, was another post-war development, founded four years previously in 1947. The studio had been designed by Richard Southern and had opened with productions of *Hamlet* and Louis McNeice's play *The Dark Tower*, directed by Head of Department Glynne Wickham, and chosen to demonstrate the flexibility of the space which could be adapted from a proscenium arch arrangement to theatre in the round in fifteen minutes.

Finally there is a report on a Colston Research Symposium, hosted by Bristol's Drama Department, on 'The Responsibility of the Universities to the Theatre'. The report notes with approval certain outcomes of the symposium. Unanimous support had been given to the views of participants Richard Southern and Nevill Coghill that it was time that the universities took over research into theatre history from the amateurs, and Professor Agne Beijer from Stockholm, Director of the Drottningholm Theatre, is reported as pleading for research to extend to the archaeology of theatre buildings. The view expressed by E. Martin Browne that drama is 'a form of creative leisure and a fruitful means of re-creation' that should be for the community as a whole was also uncontentious. The debate on whether the universities had any business training actors, or whether they should stick to the ideal of learning for its own sake, remained, however, unresolved.

Glynne Wickham kept this copy of *Theatre in Education*,<sup>1</sup> as he kept all the documents from the symposium, and they now form part of the Glynne Wickham Archive in the Bristol University Theatre Collection. He was secretary to the symposium and also directed a cast of drama students in Milton's *Comus* as an after-dinner entertainment.<sup>2</sup> The cast of participants in the symposium is worth listing because it offers a way into

the story of how this volume of *Theatre in Education* demonstrates the connection between the development of drama in the universities in Britain with the larger account of the revival of English medieval drama. The universities were represented by Agne Beijer, Professor of Drama at the University of Stockholm; Nevill Coghill from Exeter College, Oxford, a moving force behind Oxford's extra-curricular dramatic activity and Glynne Wickham's mentor; Professor A. Dalla Pozza from the Academia Olimpica de Vicenza joined Professor Agne as custodian of an ancient theatrical site; and Professor Sawyer Falk was there from the Drama Department at the University of Syracuse, New York (established 1929), where facilities allegedly outstripped anything available on Broadway. From the world of the theatre there was the director/playwright Tyrone Guthrie; Hugh Hunt and Michel St Denis attended from the Old Vic; and Gustaf Grundgens from Theatrintendant in Dusseldorf. In addition E. Martin Browne, billed as director of the British Drama League, took time out from directing the forthcoming York Play to attend, along with Richard Southern from the Society for Theatre Research and editor of its journal *Theatre Notebook*. John Garrett, Head of Bristol Grammar School; Pierre Chevrillon, the Parisian playwright; Norman Marshall, one of the moving forces behind the formation of the National Theatre; and E.A. Harding, Assistant Head of Drama at the BBC, were also there.<sup>3</sup>

Glynne Wickham's own notes suggest that discussion at the symposium eddied around how to educate audiences 'satiated' with television and radio, so that they could appreciate live theatre.<sup>4</sup> The hope was expressed that to produce graduates of drama would be to educate that audience as well as to breed a new generation of good theatre critics who could steer a prudent path between the sentimental and the destructive. Little headway was apparently made, however, towards a rapprochement between the academics, who thought drama was only properly a matter for literary study, and the hard-line men of the theatre, who thought the universities had no place interfering with their profession, despite the fact, as we shall see, that the vociferous adversaries were products of the same stable. More of that later.

The proceedings of the symposium were summarised in a broadcast on the BBC Home Service on the 6 April by V.C. Clinton-Baddeley under the title, 'Much Throwing About of Brains'.<sup>5</sup> Clinton-Baddeley noted that until recently the idea of studying theatre in university would have been 'fantastic', but since the 1920s things had begun to move with the revolutionary productions of the provincial repertory companies. Since

World War II there had been a further shift into state adoption through the foundation of the Arts Council and plans for the National Theatre, and the Society for Theatre Research had been formed. Given the new-found state sponsorship of the theatre and the increasing interest in research into its history, he continues, the universities could no longer afford to leave it out of the curriculum. He endorsed the view of Oxford's Nevill Coghill, however, that drama was not a large enough subject on its own for a degree, and that university involvement should be at the level of specialist postgraduate study and, in particular research. He too noted Richard Southern's observation that theatre research had too long been a matter 'for a devoted few at their own expense'.

What the records of the symposium do not record directly is that in the same year, 1951, as well as finishing his own doctorate, 'Medieval Pageantry and the Court and Public Stages of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries',<sup>6</sup> Glynne Wickham founded the Bristol University Theatre Collection,<sup>7</sup> the archive to which his own papers as well as the huge image collection which Richard Southern had amassed,<sup>8</sup> now belong.

The story of how the history of university drama, and that of the revival of interest in the production of medieval plays, in England, and how they are intertwined — what we might call the road to 1951 — is inevitably complicated. I cannot do justice to it all in this paper. Nor do I know it all. (There is at the very least a nice, publishable, doctoral dissertation here for someone). What I hope to do, however, is to demonstrate that a simple evolutionary pattern to revival led by theatrical innovators — William Poel, Nugent Monck, E. Martin Browne — is not the whole story. Also, I am aware, that in offering this particular new strand to that established account, I am writing part of our own history. If this is worth doing, it is a tribute to the maturity and legitimacy of our field of study, born both out of academic interdisciplinarity and practical experimentation. Nor is the history of academic involvement in the story of the revival of medieval drama of itself a simple one, as it cannot be wholly detached from the much larger history of experimental reconstructions of the plays and playhouses of Shakespeare, as in its early days, our field hitched a ride along with the more apparently 'important' history of Shakespeare's theatre. And finally, because everyone involved was an innovator, this story is intimately bound up with the development of avant-garde twentieth-century theatre.

Glynne Wickham (1922–2004), who is at the centre of this study, needs no introduction. His is one of the great names in medieval and early

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PLATE 5: Glynne Wickham (1 July 1981)

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modern theatre scholarship. He was the first Professor of Drama at Bristol, England's first university department of drama, instrumental in separating the study of drama from English studies, and in building connections between university drama on the one hand and the professional theatre on the other. His work, especially the huge *Early English Stages* project,<sup>9</sup> was in the vanguard of academic studies in suggesting that if we once freed ourselves from the tyranny of the surviving script we could see the medieval theatre as a much more exciting and multifarious beast. It was his treatment of medieval theatre as theatre history, rather than as poor relation of English literature, that built on the work of E.K. Chambers by not only drawing scholarly attention to Latin tropes, late imperial Roman comedy, tournaments, processions, and entertainments at banquets, but by searching out pictures of them — and all before the Records of Early English Drama project had been thought of.

The influences on Glynne Wickham which set him on his own road to 1951 are there among the cast of characters at the symposium. He shared with representatives of the whole spectrum of interest in the debate — Tyrone Guthrie for the professional theatre, E. Martin Browne for community drama, and Nevill Coghill for the academy — a background in Oxford University drama, in particular the Oxford University Dramatic Society, popularly known as 'OUDS'. E. Martin Browne had been the first, as an undergraduate of Christ Church College, having a walk-on part in *As You Like It* in 1919.<sup>10</sup> Going up to Oxford initially in 1940, and returning after war service in the RAF, Glynne Wickham found his place with others who had been engaged since before the war in the struggle to see the earliest surviving English play texts understood as performable theatre and returned to performance.

OUDS is itself a venerable institution with a very long pre-history. The history of university drama in Oxford (as well as in Cambridge) is, moreover, as any attentive reader of *REED* knows,<sup>11</sup> as least as old as the plays which were revived there when Glynne Wickham was a student. Alan Mackinnon, who founded the Society in 1885, understood its spiritual pre-history as deriving not from 'saints' plays' and 'miracles' but from the Boy Bishop ceremonies which ran in parallel with the more official dramatic entertainments produced in city and university for the monarch and visiting dignitaries.<sup>12</sup> The office of Boy Bishop transmuted into Prince of Revels and the particular accounts of the legendary Tommy Tucker's hapless tenure of the position in 1607, though barely relevant to the present discussion, are irresistible as a scene-setter:<sup>13</sup>

After long uncertainty and an enormous amount of discussion, it was decided to make the first appointment by formal election. The general choice fell on a Mr Thomas Tucker, who in after life obtained the third stall in the Cathedral Church at Bristol. No sooner was he aware of his new dignity than he instantly hid himself (being of a retiring disposition) and for sometime managed to elude his over-zealous subjects: he was, however, soon discovered, and forced to accept his new honours ... The first task of the newly-elected King being to provide himself with money, an indiscriminate collection was made, one of the contributors being Mr Laud, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury. This was followed by the public installation of the Prince, which took place on the evening of St Andrew's Day. *Ara Fortunata*, or *Fortune's Altar* was the first play produced, but its success was not an unmixed one. The Hall, being crowded, there was very little room for the actual performance of the play; while at the second out-burst of admiration from the audience, the canopy of the Altar of Fortune suddenly collapsed. No damage was done, but the Prince's Fool sat down rather hurriedly at his monarch's feet, and broke his staff in two ...

At the second performance on Christmas Day, an 'ingenious interlude', consisting of *Saturnalia* finished off the evening. Then on 29 December the tragedy *Philomela* was performed. By now Tommy Tucker had a very bad cold, which was evident in his delivery of his lines as Tereus, and the carpenters had not finished the stage. But worse was to follow in the shape of a production of *Time's Complaint* on New Year's Day. Tucker and his train processed through the Quadrangle to the accompaniment of three volleys from fifty or sixty guns without mishap, but the Prologue, 'having only six lines to say, was totally unable to remember any of them: the "Good wife Spigott" , one of the comic characters, appeared before she should have done, and tried to fill in the interval with "patter" ... [and] the comedian acting the part of a drunken cobbler gave far too realistic a representation, and only succeeded in filling his hearers with disgust ...'

The later history of student drama at Oxford, particularly from the foundation of OUDS in the late nineteenth century, was, however, to become a distinctive tradition of very proficient performance. Nonetheless, even in the mid-twentieth century, it was regarded by many that the fitting place for drama in the universities, however well productions were researched and produced, was amateur, extra-curricular, and not to be taken too seriously. Yet ironically it is out of that tradition that many of

the luminaries of the early twentieth-century professional theatre emerged, as well as the intellectual genesis of systematically-researched and truly experimental theatre, theatre design, and intelligent revival. It was also to be a major force in articulating the opposition to the atrophied traditions of theatre censorship.

The greatest single influence on Glynne Wickham, by his own acknowledgement, was Nevill Coghill: 'Nevill Coghill was commonly regarded as one of the most stimulating teachers we had ever met'. He attributed to his experience not with OUDS itself, nor to College drama, but to his engagement with the wartime 'Friends of OUDS', under Coghill's direction, 'all my own thinking about plays and play-production, even to the creation of a drama department in another university'.<sup>14</sup> Coghill was born in 1899, younger son of Anglo-Irish baronet. He served in World War I before going up to Exeter College, where he was elected Fellow in 1924. Where he developed his distinctive interest in theatrical revival is unclear, but his first production seems to have arisen in response to a challenge when a student in an essay declared of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, that it 'would never play'.<sup>15</sup> Coghill was a don who involved himself in what was fundamentally a student-led activity, bringing to it a superior knowledge based on research as well as what we might now call 'modeling best practice', and that makes him the precursor of the development of university drama departments.

Part of Coghill's rôle was a product of the exigencies of war. OUDS was suddenly disbanded at the outbreak of hostilities, and found itself deeply in debt. It was an all-male society, and the life of the male student was of course disrupted by the exigencies of military service during the war. Coghill, a mature don of 40 when war broke out, put together what was effectively a rescue-package, entering negotiations with the University which led to the formation of the 'Friends of OUDS' with the specific purpose of putting on productions throughout the War to pay off that debt, using whatever students passed through on short courses on their way to call-up.<sup>16</sup> Glynne Wickham, as a new undergraduate at New College in 1940, was in precisely that situation himself. He wanted to produce *Much Ado About Nothing* in the College gardens, but found that his College's dramatic society had been officially 'dissolved for the duration of hostilities'. So he approached Coghill who was looking with increasing desperation for productions which would help to pay off the OUDS debt rather than increasing it. There being no financial help available from that direction, Wickham did a deal with Coghill whereby he produced his play



in the name of OUDS, but funded the production out of his own Post Office savings account. He made £100 profit which went straight into OUDS' coffers. But Coghill was sufficiently encouraged to venture a production of *Hamlet* for which Wickham auditioned and was cast as the Prince. This also made a profit. John Bryson's review praised the production while commenting on the extreme youth of the players, including an Ophelia more apt 'to retire to a nursery than to a nunnery'. Coghill himself, an inveterate smoker, played the ghost and, Wickham reminisced, was 'perhaps the only ghost who added a natural cough to its other ailments'. Glynne Wickham was later inspired to write a set of notes for an actor approaching the rôle of Hamlet which was included in a Festschrift for Coghill.<sup>17</sup> The students who played Laertes, Polonius, Horatio, and Osric were all killed in action.

When the war ended after what had been a period of total Coghill monopoly over student drama under the interim arrangements of the Friends, OUDS did not immediately re-form. According to the Society's historian, a new spirit largely attributable to Coghill had entered university drama at Oxford:<sup>18</sup>

In a quiet way, Coghill had entirely changed the undergraduate attitude to acting. Those who took small parts in his productions were given the impression that they were just as important as the leading actors, and something like 'company work' began to be found in OUDS performances.

What Mackinnon does not observe is that this change looks remarkably like a move towards drama being treated as an academic subject, where the common enterprise is one in which each participant is accorded equal weight as a reflective learner. Later in its history, the re-formed OUDS was to continue to import guest producers and directors from the professional theatre which for a few students paved the way for direct entry into a career on the stage. For many more participating in student drama, at OUDS or College level, the activity was not undertaken as preparation for a career in the professional theatre, but was approached with the same research-based creativity that characterized their core studies. In the post-war period, therefore, these amateur student associations were not primarily a nursery for the professional stage, but were directly instrumental in giving weight to an evolving understanding of drama as a nascent 'professional' academic subject.

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PLATE 6: Glynne Wickham as Hamlet (November 1941)

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Wickham, having returned to Oxford from the RAF in 1947, immediately became involved again and, in the coldest winter since records began, directed the last project to be undertaken under the auspices of the Friends. The ill-fated, and inadvertently hilarious, production of Ibsen's *The Pretenders* was performed in front of the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish ambassadors, all issued with rugs and hot-water-bottles. The play had last been produced by OUDS in 1921, when it had starred Tyrone Guthrie, then at student at St John's, but later to be one of the participants in the 1951 symposium most vociferously opposed to the universities' interference in the theatre.<sup>19</sup> Though not a success, Wickham's production returned sufficient profit to lead directly to the reconstitution of OUDS, and Wickham concluded his time at Oxford as the Society's first post-war president.<sup>20</sup> The Society he presided over no longer dominated the Oxford dramatic scene, but acted as an advisory body for the proliferating dramatic activity of individual Colleges and also slowly gave way to the inexorable pressure to admit women.

Although he published little by modern standards, and certainly did not found a university drama department, Nevill Coghill's impact both on the integration of drama into the university syllabus, and the place within that of pre-Shakespearian drama, is key. Wickham noted that English and Modern Language departments everywhere had, by the end of the War, begun to relate the reading of dramatic text to its practical production in their teaching. Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds, Birmingham, and Edinburgh are singled out as having moved substantially in this direction, while at Oxford and Cambridge the gifts of theatrical benefactors — Judith E. Wilson at Cambridge and Alexander Korda at Oxford — made the question of what now to do with drama within the syllabus itself unavoidable. So it was that Nevill Coghill became a member of a Drama Commission who went to the USA in the spring of 1945, to see how drama was taught there.<sup>21</sup> The Commission met Allardyce Nicoll, Professor of Drama at Yale, where the department had been founded in 1918, and Harley Granville-Barker, who taught at Yale and Harvard. Both, however, paradoxically urged that undergraduate acting was a waste of time and distracted students from the study of plays. So there would be no department of Drama at Oxford. There was instead to be a new experimental University Theatre, constructed as a flexible space to accommodate all desirable set-ups from the Renaissance to the present day. This project was, however, also not to be fulfilled, because of the staggering expense involved, some £187,000, and the idea of integrating drama

teaching at Oxford seems to have petered out.<sup>22</sup> Coghill's enterprise and distinctive style continued unabated, however, and he notably went on to write *The Masque of Hope* which Glynne Wickham designed and directed for production in front of Princess Elizabeth in 1948,<sup>23</sup> and the memorable 1949 production of *The Tempest* in Worcester College Gardens.

Nevill Coghill's engagement with university drama and, in particular, his interest in medieval drama considerably predates Glynne Wickham's arrival at Oxford in 1940, however, and, cannot be attributed only to the special circumstances of wartime. His first production for OUDS was its 1935 jubilee production of *Hamlet*, the Society's first in the newly renovated New Theatre, for which Edmund Blunden wrote a special prologue, and in which Peter Glenville starred to general critical approval. But all his other pre-war activity involved College productions rather than OUDS, and arguably illustrate his fundamental impulse to educate through creative practice. In these pre-war productions, he developed a reputation as an unconventional director who did not attend to verse-speaking or details of blocking, but who was already adept at making the most of his performers, and who was particularly inspired in the use of unconventional locations, in the devising of visual effects, and, of course, in seeing the potential in old and, at the time, relatively obscure scripts.<sup>24</sup>

Never really at home on an indoor stage, he would create some stunning outdoor *coup de théâtre* in a college garden or quadrangle simply by considering the possibilities of the setting — trees, water, a tower, or some other feature ... Dacre Balsdon, a fellow don at Exeter, recalled an early example of this when Coghill produced the medieval *Noah's Flood* with a group of young unemployed Welshmen at a camp organized by the university, alongside the Thames at Pinkhill Lock. 'What wiles did you employ on the lock-keeper', Balsdon asks, 'to produce ... the flood itself, when he opened the lock gates?'

Amongst Glynne Wickham's papers in the Theatre Collection are mementos which tell us more about this particular 1934 production.<sup>25</sup> A review in *The Times* also vicariously reveals the painfully slow awakening of what one might call 'modern received opinion' to the acceptance that medieval scriptural plays, even when performed by amateurs, need not be the quaint and rustic theatrical disaster that one might anticipate. It may be assumed that the reviewer, though two hundred years out with his dating of the Chester plays, may be trusted on other matters relating to what he saw.

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PLATE 7: Programme for Coghill's production of the Chester *Noah's Flood*

See over for cast-lists and credits

Bristol University Theatre Collection GW/AC/476/1

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PLATE 8: Programme for Coghill's production of the Chester *Noah's Flood*: cast lists and credits

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The play was performed at Eynsham, near Oxford, and the unemployed were drawn mostly from the Risca district of South Wales and from Bethnal Green in London. The men lived under canvas and worked in the mornings, so far as Trades Unions would permit them to be productively employed. The afternoons were given over to games and hobbies. They were also taught German by two German students who were part of the project. The camp was not a charity, but the men had to pay from their dole. They were, however, also subsidised by public donation, and this was attracted by what they did in the evenings. Large numbers turned out from Oxford and the surrounding area to participate first in community singing *al fresco*, then to watch the play. It was set against the keeper's lodge at Pinkhill Lock, between two willow trees, where God's throne was erected. Noah and his family occupied a lawn on the near side of the lock. The lock, therefore, lay between heaven and earth. Lighting was provided by what *The Times* report calls 'an ingenious system of footlights, composed of motor-car headlights'. The cast had had a week to rehearse, and most of the actors had never performed before, but the angels sang hymns in harmony, 'as only Welshmen can'. God and Noah were also Welsh, and spoke 'their quaint but engaging lines without mouthing or mumbling, and their gestures were dignified, easy and appropriate'. The animals were played by less talented performers, and by pastel drawings, but there was also, off-stage, 'a fine animal mimic'. And the Flood was indeed provided by the opening of the lock gates:

In this rustic environment one might have expected so curious and old-fangled a piece to degenerate into burlesque; yet nothing of the sort happened. The performance was not merely serious, it was even devout, and though the humorous situations — and there were plenty of them — were made the most of, the tone was set by the beautiful unaccompanied singing of the Welsh 'chorales' Indeed, the camp performers succeeded far better than more sophisticated players, amateur or professional, have done in recapturing the real spirit of the medieval mystery.

The programme shows that Coghill himself played 'a bad man'.

Nor was this Coghill's only excursion into medieval drama. The same report in *The Times* records that the costumes used at Pinkhill Lock had been adapted from the Exeter College Drama Society's production of *Everyman* earlier in the summer of 1934, and were judged 'highly appropriate'. The production of *Everyman* was also a Coghill project, and

again Glynne Wickham acquired, and kept, a copy of the programme.<sup>26</sup> The programme notes indicate that the spirit in which the play had been produced was broadly Fabian. It was dedicated to William Morris, enjoyed the patronage of John Masefield, then Poet Laureate, and is commended for the clarity of its reflection of a particular view of the nature of human life, and for the decorous simplicity with which this is translated into performable drama. In the following year, 1935, Coghill took *Noah's Flood*, *Everyman*, and the 'unplayable' *Samson Agonistes* to the Tewkesbury Festival.<sup>27</sup>

Nevill Coghill, with George Rylands from Cambridge, was to be briefly engaged by the professional theatre to direct for John Gielgud at the Haymarket in the 1940s, but this did not play to his forte. He apparently lacked the craft to direct professionals with precision, which again reinforces the impression that his true talents lay in the yet-to-be developed field of drama education.<sup>28</sup> He achieved a more durable legacy in his creation of the Experimental Theatre Company (ETC), again at Oxford, in 1936. ETC opened up opportunities for university performers and directors to move away from the Shakespeare-dominated repertoire of OUDS to experiment with new plays and with lesser-known plays from the past. It also provided more opportunities for women in an era when OUDS was a strictly all-male preserve. It was, indeed, ETC which staged *The Castle of Perseverance* in 1938 with a cast which included a number of female students.<sup>29</sup> The play was later to be produced in 1950, now under the auspices of a mixed-gender OUDS, by a Somerville student, Shirley Catlin, later Dame Shirley Williams.<sup>30</sup>

It was clearly his contact with Nevill Coghill, and his privileged knowledge of the latter's experiments in the 1930s, that led Glynne Wickham into an early interest not only in the archival survival of medieval plays, but into the thick of the controversy over their performability. The year before the 1951 symposium he directed an experimental production of Sir David Lindsay of the Mount's *The Thrie Estatis* in Bristol's Victoria Rooms, which was received enthusiastically by the *Western Press* (21 February 1950) as an example of how 'research, pronunciation, medieval idiom, mime, movement, and stage technique can be achieved simply', and this despite an amateur cast of 45 people. It did not go unnoticed by the national press either, as *The Observer* also commended it (25 February) as the first performance of the play since the sixteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Later in the 1950s, he went on, like his mentor, to produce scriptural pageants as part of the Tewkesbury Music Festival, in



1957 a Passion Play, and in 1958, the York Epiphany pageant. The latter was believed by the anonymous reporter from the equally anonymous, but evidently local, newspaper from which Wickham kept the report, to have been from the 'thirteenth century'. The production's 'artistic balance' — whatever that is — was, however, commended, particularly when:

... the Holy Family appeared with their lowlier brethren in the scheme of Creation — the ox and the ass. The players had by no means an easy task because the language of their script was as antique as that of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'. Mainly because of their sincerity and deep feeling for their theme they were able to overcome this handicap and make a strong emotional appeal.<sup>32</sup>

The performance appears to have made full use of the existing layout of the Abbey and its fixed furnishings — pulpit, lectern, choir-stalls and altar. Glynne Wickham went on to produce his own version of *Everyman* too as part of the Bristol Shakespeare Festival in 1963/1964.<sup>33</sup>

Hereafter, Wickham appears to have moved away from producing pre-Shakespearean plays to concentrate on writing about them. When his department undertook the most ambitious reconstruction of a medieval play of its era, the production of Cornish *Ordinalia* in the summer of 1969 in the round at Perranporth, it was directed by Wickham's colleague, Neville Denny.<sup>34</sup> But Glynne Wickham's writing was not, in the late 1950s and 60s, confined solely to scholarly books and articles about the medieval theatre; he engaged actively in the campaign to have medieval plays publicly understood, and, in particular to bringing to an end the outdated scruples about impersonating the Deity in the theatre which had for so long impeded the production of all religious drama including the revival of medieval scriptural plays.

Around the same time that E. Martin Browne began to engage in delicate negotiations to be able to cast Christ in his Festival of Britain production in York,<sup>35</sup> Glynne Wickham as Head of Drama at Bristol University, was writing to the press in angry response to the Archbishop of Canterbury's request that all texts of Nativity plays be submitted to the Bishop of Dover for examination before rehearsals begin.<sup>36</sup> Wickham saw this as the 'virtual censorship' upon what he called the 'recent revival of interest in religious drama'. He pointed to the absurdity of the Church on the one hand declaring its intention to use modern methods, like film, to bring its message to a wider audience, while strictly controlling the revival of medieval plays on the other:

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PLATE 9: Noah's Ark: production of the Cornish *Ordinalia* by Neville Denny and the Bristol University  
Drama Department at the Piran Round, Perranporth, Cornwall, July 1969.  
Photo © RichardAxton

One assumes that it is the performance in recent years of the sheep-stealing scene in the *Wakefield Shepherds Play* and representing St Joseph's bewilderment at the Incarnation in the *Coventry Nativity Play* which have caused objection to be raised and a censorship imposed. Yet emasculated texts, divorced from the realities of human life and the mediocrity in performance which such texts receive in consequence, will not inspire that wide audience, accustomed to the vitality of the cinema, which the Church aims to attract. The secret of success in the medieval mysteries (sic) cycles lay in the fact that they portrayed the Bible stories in such a way that the whole audience could appreciate their significance in terms of their own experience ...

He goes on to say that the York *Building of the Ark* is attractive because the shipwrights knew how to build ships, and that the Wakefield Pilate was a local JP:

... Any hope that a new religious drama may arise and flourish is already vain unless our plays have an equally direct bearing on contemporary life. A censorship may well eliminate occasional errors in taste and judgment, but by strangling originality of treatment and stifling enthusiasm it may well destroy the vitality essential to success.

In tracing this path to 1951, and inserting the Academy into the early history of the revival of medieval English drama, I have painted a picture which is very focused on the contribution of amateur university drama at Oxford. The networks which radiate from that which were to bring Tyrone Guthrie, E. Martin Browne, and Nevill Coghill back together in Bristol in 1951 present a coherent narrative, but, I am aware, a partial one. A number of other interventions contribute to the whole picture to which I cannot do justice here. One in particular deserves mention, however briefly, if the picture is not to be skewed too much in favour of the élite, and it is the parallel rôle of the teacher training colleges and, in particular, the part played by Martial Rose.

Martial Rose began his career as a teacher at Leyton County High School, having graduated from King's College Cambridge (where he held a scholarship) in 1946, and was in his penultimate year there when the symposium, at which he was not present, took place in Bristol. His successor at the school, Bobby Brown, pays tribute to his early legacy:<sup>37</sup>

I was very lucky to inherit, when appointed to LCHS in 1952, in my function of 'looking after the Drama', a veritable posse of thrusting,

questing young thespians previously guided, and thrashed on and reined in, by Martial Rose. I had glimpses of him and them rehearsing *Macbeth* and recalled later that I'd seen a very young Derek Jacobi sitting on a bench near the gym waiting to tear on with a lantern as a storm-tossed Fleance. We all have to start somewhere! Martial was almost on his way to lecture at Bretton Hall in Yorkshire ... LCHS, like many other hard-working schools, had no Drama Department as such. For English staff it obviously 'got into' classroom teaching but it was otherwise an after-hours activity. I came flushed with a heady spate of acting and directing at University — and then got down to preparing the annual play.

LCHS was not in any sense unique in having a strong tradition of the school play in this era, but it is clear that this was an area in which Martial Rose made a more than usual impact. Bretton Hall College of Education opened in 1949, as the product of negotiations between the Department for Education and Science and the West Riding County Council, following the purchase of the buildings by the latter, in the same year as Bristol University opened its Drama Department. Under the guidance of the Chief Education Officer for the WCC, Alex Clegg, the plan hatched by the government's Department of Education and Science to open a college for music teachers was expanded into a project which created a highly specialised college, which had as its basis the studies of music art and drama.<sup>38</sup> It was to this environment that Rose progressed in 1952.

In 1958 he produced the Towneley Plays there, the same year as Glynne Wickham was producing the York *Epiphany* pageant at the Tewkesbury Festival. Bretton Hall lies just outside Wakefield, the then undisputed home of the Towneley Plays. But Martial Rose then went on to achieve something that neither Coghill nor Wickham managed successfully, and that was to make the cross-over as educationalist into the professional theatre. He was commissioned to prepare an adaptation of eighteen of the plays from the Towneley manuscript in modern spelling to fit a run-time of three-and-a-half hours for a production on the London stage.<sup>39</sup> The producer was Bernard Miles, and the play went on in April 1961, at Miles's then fairly new Mermaid Theatre in Puddle Dock. Martial Rose, like Bernard Miles, was a member of the British Drama League along with Dorothy L. Sayers, Norah Lambourne, and, of course, E. Martin Browne. The production at the Mermaid was the first time that God had appeared on stage in an English playhouse since the late sixteenth century, and Bernard Miles remarked, 'life was a unity — swear words, sexual references,

prayer and devotion unashamedly mixed'.<sup>40</sup> Later Rose became Principal of King Alfred's College, Winchester, another Higher Education College with a fine tradition in drama education.

An investigation of the renaissance of medieval theatre and its relationship to the growth of university drama in England draws attention to the intimate connection between theatrical experiment and scholarly advance in our field. It does this by highlighting the negative: while conventions of state censorship kept most of the plays from the period before the playhouses off the stage, because most of the texts involve the problem of 'playing God', drama scholarship too focused elsewhere. This becomes particularly apparent when we look into the resources available to those pioneers working in the period up to 1951. E. Martin Browne and Norah Lambourne relied heavily, in designing the Festival of Britain production in York, on the work of Allardyce Nicoll, whose magisterially wide-ranging *Masks, Mimes and Miracles* contains fundamental and major misunderstandings about such things as the date of the York Play. Because the performance of the plays had been so long neglected, there was a commensurate lack of hands-on familiarity with the original documents relating to the York in which they were first produced. Nor was there the experience of frequent attempts to produce them, however badly, as pieces of theatre, which has developed since the 1960s and 70s. Theatre practitioners had to rely on their professional intuitions, supplemented by what accessible published guidance there was, and that was not much.<sup>41</sup>

In this context Richard Southern's plea at the Bristol symposium, for the universities to involve themselves in theatre research takes on real significance. Southern's own varied career had led him to compile an unrivalled collection of pictorial resources relating to early theatre which he amassed on his travels all over the world. He and Wickham frequently sent each other postcards of theatrical sites and informative examples of medieval iconography which were filed in their respective collections. Southern's not only provided the research material for his own publications, but was made available, at a charge, in his studio off St Martin's Lane in London, and as a travelling exhibition. The published material he had to draw on for the type of visual information he needed was scant: the best being the twelve-volume *Monumenta Scenica*,<sup>42</sup> although he also used Victor E. Albright's *The Shakespeare Stage* (1909), and later on A.M. Nagler's *Sources in Theatrical History* (1952).<sup>43</sup> He and Glynne Wickham, though much of their work is in turn now showing its age, were among the first truly modern scholars who began to offer the theatre

practitioners more informed and detailed material, and in particular visual material, to work with.

The acknowledgements in Glynne Wickham's D.Phil. thesis also reveal a world in which although some aspects of medieval-theatre research were much more difficult, some were easier. For example he thanks the Director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence for opening the print room specially for him, although it had been closed since the outbreak of war, and he thanks Richmond Herald of the College of Arms for lending him a medieval manuscript for three months.<sup>44</sup> The introduction shows particularly how, under Coghill's guidance, he was trail-blazing as he aims to survey entertainments from the Middle Ages which,<sup>45</sup>

Because they lack literary merit, have received only scant attention from theatre historians, but which nevertheless warrant closer study if considered as dramatic spectacle.

He was already developing what became a characteristic impatience with the work that others in the field had achieved, and goes on to complain that G.R. Kernodle's *From Art to Theatre* (Chicago, 1944), lacks detail and is, therefore, 'hypothetical and inadequate'.<sup>46</sup> He was later to write a tepid review for *The Times Literary Supplement* of Hardin Craig's then ground-breaking *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (1956) as 'less erudite and less graceful' than the works of Chambers and Young, and to use the review to lament the loss of the Devonshire manuscript of the Chester Plays, as well as the Towneley manuscript and the Macro Plays to collections in the USA.<sup>47</sup> The problem in England he had already diagnosed in his thesis:<sup>48</sup>

This bias towards a purely literary approach is however quite understandable considering how recent is the serious study of theatre history and how little of the burden had been undertaken by practising men of the theatre. And here, most unfortunately, the mutual suspicion with which theatre artists and theatre historians regard one another's interest has blighted the healthy development of both.

The search for a solution to this problem from his position within a university department of drama, was, surely, the goal of the 1951 symposium.

1951 came and went. All the medieval plays planned for revival at the Festival of Britain went ahead without, as some Church authorities feared,

provoking riot,<sup>49</sup> and specialist scholar-practitioners continued the project of producing plays of medieval origin. Finally, in 1968, theatrical censorship was laid aside in Britain, so there was no further obstacle to 'playing God'. Glynne Wickham's interest in reconstructions of medieval theatre continued unabated as interest grew in the post-censorship decades. I shall close, therefore, with his preface to the programme for some pageants directed by Bill Tydeman, Head of Drama at Bangor, another specialist in the growing field:<sup>50</sup>

'Quaint', 'crude', 'childish', 'naïve': such are typical adjectives that were used by critics in the nineteenth century and the first half of the present century to describe their reactions to the surviving texts of mediaeval religious plays and to descriptions surviving from the seventeenth century of the manner in which they were performed. Generations of students in schools and universities have thus grown accustomed to formulating mental images of illiterate peasants — Pennine shepherds, East Anglian fishermen or Midland grocers and drapers as the case may be — disporting themselves on clumsy carts in market towns disguised as Biblical characters and reciting verses scarcely worthy of an average Sunday-school today. Quaint, crude, childish, naïve: the cap fits.

Only in quite recent years have scholars begun to notice, and to proclaim, that such epithets were themselves of relatively modern coining, being substitutes for 'superstitious', 'idolatrous', 'papistical', and other adjectives of a familiar tone and colour which had characterized critical comment on the plays in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This of course is the language of Protestant Reform; and once this has been recognised it becomes possible to measure the degree of simple prejudice and positive polemic informing the choice of such descriptive adjectives.

Here he can be seen still inveighing, as sadly some of us still have to, against the patronising assumptions about what early theatre was like, and arguing for its continuing value not only in the classroom, but also in modern performance.

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## NOTES

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- 1 Bristol: Bristol University Theatre Collection GW/AC/441/8.
- 2 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/441/2, 3.
- 3 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/441/1.
- 4 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/441/1/4.
- 5 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/441/6.
- 6 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/24/2.
- 7 The history of the Bristol University Theatre Collection, as well as a catalogue of those holdings which have been digitally catalogued to date, may be found at <http://www.bris.ac.uk/theatrecollection/> > .
- 8 The section of Richard Southern's collection concerned with the Medieval Theatre can be found at Bristol: Bristol University Theatre Collection RS/008 and 011. Richard Southern's collection of glass lantern slides is being digitised and catalogued at time of writing.
- 9 Glynne Wickham *Early English Stages* 5 vols (London: Routledge, 1959) 810.
- 10 Humphrey Carpenter *O.U.D.S.: A Centenary History of the Oxford University Dramatic Society* (Oxford UP, 1985) 73.
- 11 *REED: Oxford: the University and the City* edited John R. Elliott Jr, Alexandra F. Johnston, Alan H. Nelson, and Diana Wyatt, 2 vols (University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- 12 Alan Mackinnon in *The Oxford Amateurs: A Short History of Theatricals at the University* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1910) 3–9.
- 13 Mackinnon *Oxford Amateurs* 6–9, quoting 'Mr Courtney'.
- 14 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 145.
- 15 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 135.
- 16 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 143.
- 17 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 144–5. The Festschrift is *To Nevill Coghill from Friends* edited W.H. Auden and John Lawlor (London: Faber and Faber, 1966). Both editors were also students of Coghill, and their later careers show evidence of his personal influence.
- 18 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 149.
- 19 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 76.
- 20 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 154.
- 21 The established nature of North American university drama within the curriculum is another story, but is summarized effectively in a brief article by Janet Hills for a publication entitled *The Schoolmaster*, which she sent in manuscript draft to Glynne Wickham following the 1951 symposium: Bristol University Theatre Collection GW/AC/441/9.



MEDIEVAL-DRAMA REVIVALS AND THE UNIVERSITIES

- 22 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 158–63.
- 23 For papers relating to *The Masque of Hope*, including production photographs, Glynne Wickham’s hand-drawn designs, and his letter of congratulation from the Princess, see Bristol Theatre Collection, GW/AC/343.
- 24 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 136–7.
- 25 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/476/1.
- 26 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/476/2/1.
- 27 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/476/3/1.
- 28 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 137.
- 29 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 145–6.
- 30 Carpenter *O.U.D.S.* 165.
- 31 Bristol Theatre Collection BDD/000415.
- 32 Bristol Theatre Collection BDD/000416.
- 33 Bristol Theatre Collection BDD/000038.
- 34 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/419. The film of the production designed as a teaching aid in collaboration with the University of California but never released because of problems with the sound-track, is also preserved in the Theatre Collection and shortly to be re-mastered on DVD.
- 35 Primary source material relating to the production of the York play for the Festival of Britain in 1951, produced by Keith Thomson and directed by E. Martin Browne, and to subsequent York Festival productions, is preserved in the E. Martin Browne Archive which belongs to the journal *Medieval English Theatre* and is lodged at the University of Lancaster, along with Norah Lambourne’s designs for the production. See also the web pages of the York *Doomsday* Project at <<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/yorkdoom/emb.htm>> and <<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/yorkdoom/norah.htm>>, and Olga Horner ‘The Law that Never Was: a Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain’ *Medieval English Theatre* 23 (2001) 34–96.
- 36 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/438/3
- 37 Paul Estcourt ‘Leyton County High School for Boys at Its Peak’, <[http://www.sparrowsp.addr.com/articles/excerpt\\_from\\_leyton\\_county\\_high\\_htm](http://www.sparrowsp.addr.com/articles/excerpt_from_leyton_county_high_htm)>.
- 38 Bretton Hall, 1947–2007: <<http://www.bretton-hall.co.uk/history.html>>.
- 39 The text was published: Martial Rose *The Wakefield Mystery Plays* (London: Evans Bros, 1961).
- 40 *Time Magazine* archive, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,872276,00.html>>.

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- 41 Allardyce Nicoll *Masks, Mimes and Miracles* (London: Harrap, 1931). Norah Lambourne references Nicoll in her recollections of the 1951 production, 'Designing for the York Cycle of Mystery Plays in 1951, 1954 and 1957' *Costume* 30 (1996) 16–36.
- 42 *Monumenta scenica [Denkmäler des Theaters]: monuments of the theatre, scenery, decorations and costumes for the theatre and the great festivals of all times* edited Josef Gregor, 12 portfolios or *Mappe* (Vienna: National Library, 1925–1930).
- 43 See, for example, Bristol Theatre Collection RS/008 and 011. I am also grateful to Norah Lambourne for sharing her personal reminiscences of Richard Southern.
- 44 Glynne Wickham 'Medieval Pageantry and the Court and Public Stages of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis; Oxford, 17 March 1951): Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/24/2, front papers.
- 45 GW/AC/24/2, xiii.
- 46 GW/AC/24/2, viii.
- 47 Bristol Theatre Collection, GW/AC/108. The works he approves of are E.K. Chambers *The Medieval Stage* 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), and Karl Young *The Drama of the Medieval Church* 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).
- 48 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/24/2, iii.
- 49 See letter to E. Martin Browne from Keith Thomson (9 November 1949), E. Martin Browne Collection, Medieval English Theatre, University of Lancaster. See also Horner 'The Law that Never Was'.
- 50 Bristol Theatre Collection GW/AC/40/2.