

*THE MYSTERIES*  
A Belgrade Theatre Production  
Coventry Cathedral, 1 August 2006

*Pamela M. King*

Thankfully it is now some time since Coventry's periodic revival of its mystery plays was based on the surviving texts topped up with extracts from N. Town. The Belgrade Theatre's now triennial production uses newly-commissioned scripts which take two ideas — biblical narrative, and celebrating the city of Coventry — to create new work for a present-day festive occasion. The play is set in the still-emotive ruins of Coventry's blitzed cathedral, with some debt to the post-1951 York Festivals, and is billed as a 'promenade' production, although in fact most of the audience on the mid-week evening when I attended was accommodated on the available seating, and no-one actually moved.

The city of Coventry is going through another renaissance at present, with the evidence of urban reconstruction, and of lottery and European funding, on all sides, giving a much-needed face-lift to the grim precincts of post-war reconstruction. The Belgrade Theatre and the City's Leisure Services department have collaborated to make the *Mysteries* a focal point both for the city communities they serve and for the tourist industry. This year the event had accreted not only platform lectures, but a series of 'wagon-plays', billed as *The Battle of the Guilds*, in which four young local experimental theatre and dance troupes staged small-scale productions loosely based on biblical stories, on a variety of wheeled vehicles at various times during the days on which the main show was taking place. I saw one of these, *Moses and the Ten Tabs*, an energetic twenty-minute production loosely based on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I also examined a splendid wheeled whale made of aluminium plates, which would not have looked out of place in a Continental Corpus Christi procession, but alas the *Jonah* play was not performed on the day I was in Coventry. There were also exhibitions, including one sponsored by the Cappers, showing hats specially commissioned for the occasion. The plan is, in 2009, to have many more street performances — up to forty, I was told. Perhaps then the city will really take notice of what is going on in its name; for, in spite of everything, there was the impression on this occasion that most of the city was going about its business oblivious to its Festival, audiences were

disappointingly thin, and restaurants nearest the Cathedral closed their kitchens at 10.30 as usual, just as the production disgorged its cold and hungry audience back on to the street.

This production deserved better, as one would expect with Barry Kyle directing and with some stunning designs from Phil Eddolls. The set ran east to west within the shell of the cathedral. The usual ecclesiastical orientation was, however, reversed in order to create a high, white stepped pyramid underneath, and reflecting the shape of, the original spire. God, and later Mrs God, came and went from a door halfway up the pyramid, where God also had a throne. The pinnacle and the spire were periodically and effectively invoked in the script as reminders of the connection between heaven and earth. Under the south and north walls there were raised walkways behind the audience and leading to a raised platform which ran the length of the west wall. Beneath this was a waterfall, spilling into a channel which ran the full length of the centre of the space. The channel served for the spectacular Flood, but also as a ditch through which characters enduring difficulties sloshed and in which Jesus was in the end very effectively beaten up and killed by a street gang of hoodies. For in this narrative set in contemporary Coventry there was no Crucifixion. Instead, as Jesus was kicked to death on the ground, a huge cross made of steel and a lattice of barbed wire, with a wire figure-sculpture on it, was slowly raised under strobe lighting from the pool at the base of the waterfall to the accompaniment of loud and very atmospheric electronic music. The effect was chilling, and side-stepped the pitfalls which always attend modern stage 'Crucifixions'. Less effective, perhaps, was the 'Resurrection' with which the play ended, in which a hologram of Jesus was projected on to one of the permanent statues in the cathedral, and instructed the assembled disciples and audience to go forth and love one another.

Ron Hutchinson's script is a mixed bag. The message is clear: it sets out to demonstrate the relevance and simplicity of the Christian message to the modern urban population. It does this by making biblical characters into modern 'types', very much in the way that Tony Harrison's *Mysteries* attempted, but also taking greater liberties with events and their modern, Coventry, analogies. As is so often the case with modern adaptations, the Old Testament made better theatre than the new. Possibly this is because it is difficult to be too earnest about the Creation and the Flood. The play got off to a lovely whimsical start with a moody God (Conrad Asquith) who was lonely, so he made a hedgehog. The animals he went on to

create, and those that did and did not get on to the Ark — for there are dinosaurs in this version — were all wonderful airy constructions on sticks, made of a kind of cling-film wound and stretched over wire or cane frameworks. The huge Ark was similarly constructed.

In the Old Testament story two themes were set up which were continued throughout the play, after Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden and sent to Coventry. Firstly Cain's murder of Abel set in motion a pattern of urban violence, based variously on internecine difference, racism, bigotry, ignorance, envy, and boredom, which simmered threateningly and convincingly under the surface. It was of course later groomed by a smooth-talking Satan into a procession of sins, with their names on their tee-shirts, far greater than seven. Secondly the pattern of Mrs Noah was reversed, as this Noah had a wife without whom the Ark would never have been built, the first in a number of stoical women who suffered, kept the peace, and generally got things done. Somewhere in among all this, Mrs God (Claire Cogan) appeared as a counter to God's recurrent grumpy resolution to put an end to it all, suggesting instead that they should have a son who would go and put things right. This led to the appearance of a pregnant Virgin Mary whose long-suffering husband stands by her despite taking a lot of stick from his work-mates about the paternity of the child. Joseph later regrets that his son has to go off on his ministry, as he had hoped he would grow up 'to do something with wood'. I *think* this was a bad joke, but one which mercifully the audience did not get.

The trouble with the production was the New Testament. Strong direction and a powerful performance from Aaron Cassidy as the adult Christ nearly rescued it but, for me, not quite. For this is a frankly evangelical production which, quite unlike the originals, places the balance of its narrative focus on Christ's Ministry. The first inkling the audience has of this is when the young Christ assembles his disciples, a very long scene in which an array of social misfits are persuaded to give up everything they hold dear in order to follow Christ. This was uncomfortably reminiscent of how extreme Christian sects have broken up families and assembled their followers by a combination of personality cult and the brain-washing of the suggestible. The analogy was not helpful. There followed a series of scenes based on the parables and miracles, including a searing and memorable one in which a distraught woman carrying the corpse of a little girl walks through the water berating God while the assembled helpless emergency services look on. Jesus then appears and resurrects the child. Direction and design make this suitably

PAMELA M. KING

erie, but the underlying plotting borders on the mawkish. As the evening drew on and got chillier and one frankly didactic episode about how if everyone loved everyone else the world would be a better place followed another, I'm afraid I began to long for the closure of the Passion.

But there was much to commend the production overall. Much of it might have been the kind of sentimental evangelism that reduces Christian theology to sound-bites about good and bad social behaviour, but the whole audience was visibly moved. The production assailed us aurally and visually in a way that was constantly moving, changing and expansive in its scale. It had pace, confidence and conviction, and that extended to the crowd of local extras, both adults and children who performed better, under better direction, than I have ever seen in comparable productions. The play was also an affectionate and knowing celebration of the city of Coventry, still using its one shattering night of blitz as a touchstone, and squaring up to the tensions and social challenges faced by the communities within the present day multi-cultural city. I am glad I saw it.

*University of Bristol*