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Realizing Early English Drama

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 2010 a group of students from the Kent State University Honors College participated in a rare undertaking: presenting a medieval play as part of an international production of the whole play-cycle from which it originates. The students were five hundred years removed from the original context of that play and cycle. The earliest mention of *The Chester Cycle* comes from a 1422 legal dispute regarding the responsibilities of the guilds that were producing one of the plays in it, the language of which makes clear that the play-cycle was already well-established by that time. This historical remove was a significant challenge as students from 2010 prepared for this ambitious enterprise, one that required them to work with unfamiliar material and little hard evidence in the creation of the episode they were to produce.

The first challenge for student participants was to acquaint themselves with the unique subject matter they would tackle over the next nine months. Naturally, before getting to work, the students needed to learn what early English cycle plays were and when and why they were first performed. The three primary types of popular theatre in early and early modern England can be differentiated by performance venue: parish plays, which depicted the lives of saints and were produced by churches in rural communities; theatre performed by strolling players, whose repertoire would have consisted mainly of Robin Hood plays; and urban theatre, such as the cycle plays discussed here. The play-cycles are called by the name of the cities in which they were performed, and the full texts of only four of the English cycles survive: the *York Cycle*, the *Wakefield* or *Towneley Cycle*, the *N-Town Cycle*, and *The Chester Cycle* out of which came the play that Kent State University Honors College students would produce.

These play-cycles were sometimes called “mystery cycles” because the guilds (or “mysteries”) in the city were responsible for producing the individual episodes making up the entire cycle. They were likely derived from liturgical drama and were intended to teach the scriptures and reinforce faith in the sacraments. The earliest records we have of liturgical drama come from the late tenth century. This liturgical drama is the *Queum quaeritis* (Whom do you seek?), referred to by Alexandra Johnston as a “dialogue,” and although

it is not a theatrical performance as such, it is likely that it lead to what we might consider more “traditional” theatrical performances (CCMET, 3–4; Wasson, 28). By the mid-sixteenth century, the English Reformation was underway, and, as England separated from its Catholic roots, changes in religious and state law resulted in the cessation of such productions. The plays lay dormant and largely untouched for two hundred years. Then in the early nineteenth century, a scholar by the name of Thomas Sharp rediscovered episodes from what may have been a cycle performed at Coventry. His work, *A dissertation on the pageants or dramatic mysteries anciently performed at Coventry*, opened a rich and largely uncharted realm of scholarly research. As scholars engaged the subject of early English theatre and cycle plays in particular, the citizens of York and Chester began to mount performances of their eponymous cycles, which were no longer a thing of the past.

Interest in cycle plays was shared by those outside these specific communities. In 1966 a graduate seminar at the University of Toronto led to a production of the medieval play *Rafe Roister Doister* and eventually to the formation of the *Poculi Ludique Societas*, or the PLS, the oldest and most respected medieval drama society in North America. The PLS, which is dedicated to the realization of medieval and early English dramatic revivals, first revived *The Chester Cycle* in 1983. That tradition continued with the production of all twenty-four plays from the cycle that took place in 2010 as part of a lavish international theatre festival. I was lucky enough to become involved when a faculty member from the English department at Kent State University asked if I would direct the play we were to contribute. I eagerly jumped at the chance, and the documentation of that process eventually became my senior honors thesis and the basis of this paper.

FILL IN THE BLANKS

Information can be found about early English cycle plays, but it is not always as complete or as specific as one would like. As with most fields that explore and attempt to reconstruct pre-modern history, the study of early English drama is limited by incomplete historical records. However, early drama faces an additional evidentiary gap: many English medieval plays were systematically destroyed for religious and political purposes in the sixteenth century. Also, these plays were intended to be performed and not read; they would be spoken by actors (and performed for audience members) who were probably largely illiterate and who might not have been able to read the texts had the plays been written. Consequently, the act of creating scripts may have seemed a futile effort to their original authors, actors, and producers (Johnston, CCMET, 7–8). The texts that have survived are probably but a small fraction of the plays that were produced at the time. As a result of the

limited textual evidence, the information available about production comes partly from revivals within the academic community—revivals such as the one that the Kent State University Honors College participated in at the University of Toronto in May of 2010.

The rebirth of these mystery cycles is due in large part to the scholarly attention they have received in the *Records of Early English Drama* (REED) and revivals by the PLS. REED was founded in 1975 and is closely associated with the PLS. The revival of medieval plays by the PLS in the 1960s led to an interest in re-creating original staging conditions, and the REED project was formed at the University of Toronto. Scholarly information was necessary in order to produce early English plays with accuracy, and as scholars were already seeking the kinds of data necessary to do so, the formation of a project that searched for records in unexpected places, such as in financial ledgers, was a logical next step.

We know much more about early English plays in 2010 than we did in 1960. Documents uncovered by the REED project as well as discoveries made during revivals by the PLS have produced a much richer understanding of early drama in spite of the centuries separating us from them. The last recorded early modern production of *The Chester Cycle* occurred in 1575. The entire cycle was not revived again until the city of Chester mounted it in 1951 as a part of the Festival of Britain (“Memories of past performances,” online). In 1983, the University of Leeds in association with the *Poculi Ludique Societas* mounted a full production of *The Chester Cycle*. The tradition that began with the 1983 mounting led to the 2010 production by the University of Toronto and the PLS discussed in this paper.

With nearly four hundred years separating the last pre-modern and first modern productions, many of the details we have about the performances and performance conditions in early modern England come from what Alexandra Johnston refers to as “external evidence,” i.e., from sources such as accounting and legal records or correspondence between civic officials (*Contexts*, 3; Wasson, 28). However, little hard evidence has survived to provide much detail. Despite some information regarding the specifics of production (e.g., conventions for the costuming of certain characters), most of what we know concerns the general atmosphere of the performance of cycle plays. Strong evidence indicates that the community within the guilds that produced these plays was like our modern-day bond of competition shared by teammates on a sports team. These productions were not only religious events or church festivals but also municipal productions that evinced the piety, civic pride, and community of the localities that labored to create them. In fact, both Lawrence Clopper and Anne Higgins have asserted that the clergy may not have been deeply involved in the productions, and that they were primarily

civic, as opposed to religious, in nature. Higgins even suggests that the processions through York were a means of demarcating territory for freemen, clergy, and civic officials. These productions were lavish, no-holds-barred events, complete with a carnival-like atmosphere and plentiful food and drink, so much so that accounting records show guilds spending more money on food and drink than on any other aspect of production (Meredith, 54–55). Such contextual information helped students from Kent State in their interpretation of their play. Regardless of how helpful knowledge about the atmosphere and intention of these plays might be, however, and in spite of our understanding of Elizabethan staging, we still had little knowledge about the staging of cycle plays.

THE BANNING OF *THE CHESTER CYCLE* AND OTHER MYSTERY PLAYS

Students working on Chester 2010 were curious to know why nearly four hundred years elapsed between productions. If these plays were highlights in the life of the communities where they were performed, why stop producing them? There is a school of thought that favors a Darwinian, “survival of the fittest” model regarding the reasons that religious dramas stopped being produced. This point of view was dominant from the 1860s well into the 20th century, and suggests that parish dramas and cycle plays were superseded by secular dramas that were somehow inherently superior. This point of view has been largely abandoned following since F.M. Salter’s *Religious Drama in Medieval Chester*, which began the trend of searching for information regarding these plays in external evidence. (For further information regarding these differing perspectives on medieval and early English drama, see Johnston, CCMET, 1–2). Today, the majority of scholars now agree that mystery plays and other kinds of religious drama were not collectively abandoned in favor of the secular drama that emerged in second half of the sixteenth century. Rather, religious plays were pried out of the hands of the citizens and civic representatives who had watched, created, or played in them year after year. In fact, the city of Chester mounted the cycle twice *after* the Archbishop of York issued a prohibition against their performance in 1572. City officials claimed that the Archbishop’s injunction arrived too late and that the year’s cycle had already been performed. But the 1572 production was not the last one. In 1575, Chester mounted its cycle again. This time, Parliament summoned the Lord Mayor to London to answer charges of the veneration of saints and depiction of Jesus and God (both of which were crimes in Elizabethan England). City officials accepted responsibility for the production, maintaining that they mounted it not only for the moral edification of the citizens of Chester but also for the economic well-being of the city (Mills, 2).

The last known performance of a cycle play (after the absolute prohibition by civil law) was in York in 1580. To situate this final recorded pre-modern performance in time, we should recall that William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and that his earliest plays were probably written in the early 1590s. We can safely conclude that the citizens of Chester were quite happy with their play-cycle and that Marlowe, Kyd, and Shakespeare, although masterful playwrights, did not actually put play-cycles out of business.

Despite Clopper's argument to the contrary, most scholars agree that the termination of cycle plays and other kinds of religious drama was the result of Protestant suppression of a tradition regarded as fundamentally Catholic. Sectarianism within Protestant factions may have contributed to injunctions against this kind of playing, but—based on the fact that beginning in the 1530s English law forbade any representation of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit and also any portrayal and veneration of saints—it seems more likely that plays were forbidden by changes in English law (Clopper, 102–109; Johnston, CCMET, 20–22). If a two-dimensional depiction of Christ on the wall of a church had to be whitewashed, a three-dimensional, living, breathing characterization of Jesus would have seemed far more blasphemous. Such a portrayal, to an early modern Protestant, had “Antichrist” written all over it.

Fortunately for me and the other students from the Kent State University Honors College, the twentieth-century citizens of York and Chester were not unduly troubled by issues of blasphemy, and they began to re-mount their cycle plays. The progress was slow, happening over a period of approximately a hundred years. A small scale production was held in York in 1909. Both York and Chester mounted large-scale productions in 1951. A graduate seminar at the University of Toronto in the 1960s led to the formation of the PLS. After almost five hundred years of dormancy, revivals of medieval and early English theatrical productions made a full production of *The Chester Cycle* by the PLS, Kent State University Honors College, and dozens of other colleges and universities throughout North America possible.

THE SHOEMAKERS' GUILD

Kent State University became involved in its first PLS production in November of 2008, when the PLS invited a faculty member in Kent State University's English department to produce an episode out of *The Chester Cycle* for the PLS's 2010 production. I had taken several classes from this professor, and he asked whether I would direct the play. Naturally I jumped at the chance. After agreeing to produce *Play 13*, formally called *The Raising of Lazarus; At the House of Simon the Leper; The Triumphal Entry; and Judas's Plot*, the next step was to gather the resources necessary for such a massive undertaking. We were fortunate to enlist the support of the KSU

Honors College, and knew that through it we could assemble the person-power needed for *Play 13*. In early England, a craft guild of a city would be responsible for producing one episode of the cycle, so we set out to create our own guild by forming a year-long honors colloquium called Medieval Drama Boot Camp. *Play 13* was the responsibility of the Shoemakers' Guild in Chester. The formation of the course allowed our colloquium to become the Shoemakers' Guild, getting all the students in one location with a common goal, the means to pursue it, and consequences for not participating (i.e., grades). Had there been world enough and time while I was researching for the thesis that was the basis for this paper, I would have given greater attention to the similarities between the guilds that created cycle plays and modern-day community theatre. As it was, I contented myself with the knowledge that the community we built through the colloquium that had been created was comparable in some ways with early modern guilds. The course was team-taught by the faculty member from the English Department, Dr. Dugas, and a faculty member in the Theatre Department, Professor Richie. Dr. Dugas was the professor of record for the fall semester, and the focus was on laying the foundation for *Play 13*. Students read *The Empty Space* by Peter Brook, the first twelve plays of *The Chester Cycle*, and selected chapters from *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. These readings created a holistic understanding of the work being done; both the nuts-and-bolts historical information and the more ephemeral artistic background of the play. The other focus during the first semester was building the stamina and lung-capacity necessary for outdoor theatre. The course content in the second semester was to be the production work itself: rehearsal, building sets and costumes, coordinating fundraising events to partly finance our travels to Toronto, and a host of other duties and activities that were necessary to bring our play to life.

Producing *Play 13* was a colossal undertaking. The cast has a total of thirty-seven roles, twenty-nine of which are speaking roles. The class consisted of twenty-seven students, only twenty-five of whom would be onstage and several of whom shied away from speaking roles (many of our students were not studying theatre at all, and some did not feel comfortable in the spotlight). In addition, a full crew would be needed to handle the production elements for such a technically demanding show. To cast and staff the play fully, nearly all the students had to be cast in multiple roles, and nearly all of them fulfilled offstage or backstage responsibilities as well. Both casting and production assignments took into account the students' interests, in both cases asking them to provide information regarding the ways they wished to participate. For example, when it was time for auditions, I assigned students to read for specific roles I felt each of them was best suited for. However,

an actor who had his or her eye on a particular role was able to read for it as well.

Giving actors the opportunity to choose the roles they most wanted to read for allowed for some casting decisions that might not otherwise have been made. Actors may have unrealistic perceptions of their abilities, but they also know which parts they connect to most strongly. The actor who was cast as Judas, for instance, was not asked to read for that role initially. I asked him to read for Thomas, Simon, and the Janitor, but after he read for Judas, the faculty members facilitating the course, my stage managers, and I unanimously agreed that he should play the role. Had he not been given the opportunity to read for the character he wanted, we would have ended up with a very different production of *Play 13*, his performance being one of the highlights of the cycle. Similar care was taken in making production assignments so that students would be creating elements about which they felt enthusiastic.

The exact method of making production assignments and casting decisions is less significant than the necessity of making a medieval or early English play a collaborative effort. *Play 13* was entirely student-created, from costumes to scenery, from research to public relations, from concept to implementation. Faculty took a hand only when it was clear that a student was unable to complete an assignment without help or when we were liaising with senior Kent State University officials, as when we needed permission from the university architect to construct a six-by-twelve-foot scaffold stage outside the honors college. Any artist will tell you that the energy invested in a piece is directly proportional to the outcome. Blending the lines dividing actors, designers, and technical crew created a strong sense of ownership and translated into high-quality production elements and passionate performances.

STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY: THE PROS AND CONS OF MEDIEVAL DRAMA BOOT CAMP

As one might expect, the structure of our Medieval Drama Boot Camp differed significantly from either a traditional rehearsal process or a traditional university course, especially in the length of time spent studying or rehearsing. Whereas a standard course lasts sixteen weeks and a standard rehearsal process lasts from four to eight weeks, students spent nearly nine months on *Play 13* from the time they began their study of *The Chester Cycle* to the time they performed in Toronto. This extended time had definite benefits. For example, we had the good fortune of seeing our students read *Plays 1* through *12* and working with them for nearly an entire semester before auditions, which made our casting choices exceptionally well-informed.

Student designers also had ample time to meet with other designers and dramaturges and to sit in on the staged readings of earlier pieces, thus gaining a clear sense of the world of these plays and producing a remarkably varied yet cohesive design.

One of the most advantageous facets of the two-semester-long period of preparation was the reading of Plays 1 through 12 in *The Chester Cycle*, which allowed students to orient themselves to working within the very small boundaries of the wagon we would be performing on and also to become familiar with the plays' unique language. Students immersed themselves in Middle English, Chester's unique verse structure, and the rich characterization this highly poetic language brings to the plays. A strong understanding of the text meant students could develop deep connections to the characters and events in *Play 13*. Reciting the words of *The Chester Cycle* oneself and hearing one's fellow actors speak the words in our staged readings of them necessarily enhanced understanding in a way that was unlikely to have been achieved otherwise.

The structure of the Medieval Drama Boot Camp nevertheless has shortcomings. The course was an experiment: neither professor had worked on an interdisciplinary venture of this scope before, so neither could be sure what the best structure might be. If the Boot Camp were likened to a traditional rehearsal process, the first semester consisted of the table work, research, and physical warm-ups, and the second semester was active scene work and production work. Only in the second semester did we begin approaching *Play 13* from a production (rather than a research) perspective in earnest. Spending half the rehearsal process doing table work is useful, and I strongly recommend it to directors; sometimes in theatre, research done by performers is rushed, and then not enough time is devoted to it during a rehearsal process. However, our production work should have been integrated more quickly than it was. By dividing the course the way we did, we drew a line in the sand that created separation between thinking about our play and actively creating it. A better approach would have been to blur that line and begin work on *Play 13* much sooner since research and action are in no way mutually exclusive. The students in the course were vocal in their agreement that production work should have been better integrated; by the end of the first semester, they felt burned out by too much theory and not enough application. They wanted to work on our play. Staged readings of Chester Plays 1 through 12 were useful and necessary, but the students felt ownership for and a special attachment to *Play 13*. Students asked for a staged reading of *Play 13*, but we put it off in favor of approaching the plays chronologically. Robert H. Leonard wrote of community-based theatre that "the creative process must feed everyone, artist, community member, and audience alike"

(71). We did not “feed” our students in the way we should have in the first semester.

The desire to engage directly with our play was one we had anticipated, so we asked students to propose a portfolio or paper that answered a question or solved a problem raised by *Play 13*. The goal was to provide them with the opportunity for creative input as well as to gain an understanding of the production assignments that would inspire our students. The assignment did not fulfill our students’ artistic needs, however, because the portfolios were primarily theoretical. Students knew that their ideas were likely to end up in the final production, but ultimately what they turned in as their portfolios were sketches and ideas, not products. A better means of providing a creative outlet for students would have been to make the production assignments before midterms in the first semester rather than waiting until finals to do so; this would have allowed students to create elements of the show rather than merely make suggestions. However, once rehearsals began, students were re-energized by their involvement in creating the characters and the world of the play.

MODERN TECHNIQUES AND THEORIES

Because there are a number of resources that deal with running rehearsals, I have chosen to forego a detailed discussion on our rehearsal processes, and to focus instead on the specific techniques we employed. However, before I discuss those techniques, I should mention that there are three practices that will make rehearsals particularly effective. The first is to record run-through rehearsals at regular intervals, and record parts of rehearsals in between. This allows for more careful watching, and for those involved to see their progress. The second practice is to watch others who are performing early drama, whether they are producing a cycle play, saint play, or morality play, and whether you watch live or not, as you are sure to learn from watching others. The third practice is to have individual rehearsals with principal actors, giving them the chance to make discoveries in an environment where there is less pressure from onlookers.

Logically, the rehearsal process will be determined in part by the methods used in preparation. More than six hundred years have elapsed since *The Chester Cycle* was written, and in that time myriad acting, movement, vocal, and performance techniques have been developed to help actors tell stories. Choosing which methods to employ can be bewildering when so many are useful. Naturally, every director should choose for herself which methodologies are right for a production. The ones I chose to prepare for *Play 13* have, I believe, particular applicability for approaching early drama.

The technique we used the most during the rehearsal process for *Play 13* was the Michael Chekhov acting technique, partly because that was one kind of training provided at Kent State University but primarily because of its use of archetypes and archetypal gestures. I am not certified to teach the Chekhov technique, and as such utilized only the gestural aspects of it, with a particular focus on the archetypal gestures. These aspects of the technique are useful because archetypes are a central theme in these early plays; the characters depicted are not three-dimensional, are not necessarily humanized, and are meant to be clearly good or evil. This is not to say that the characters are undeveloped or caricatures but simply that, stylistically, one should approach these archetypal characters differently than one would approach realistic characters in a realistic play. Archetypes are highly recognizable, and the gestures that Chekhov has categorized as archetypal (*I give, I take, I want, I reject, I yield, and I stand my ground*) will be readily understood by most audiences. As a way of demonstrating to colloquium students how recognizable these gestures are, I asked them to close their eyes and strike a pose that suggested praise, grief, and fear. In all three cases, there were one or two poses that each and every student adopted because each of these concepts is embedded in their consciousness.

This demonstration also helped the students gain a better understanding of how they might use these movements to approach playing archetypal characters, and also helped bring some of the students out of their shells by providing them with a go-to set of gestures they could draw on if they were feeling insecure. In addition to archetypal gestures, others found in the Chekhov method include the psychological gestures: *I wring, I fling, I tear, I open, I close, I lift, I push, I pull, and I strike*. The final set of gestures found in the Chekhov technique, called the Steiner gestures and based on the work of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, are also a useful part of Chekhov's method.

Movement is an effective way for actors to build a connection to their characters, and Chekhovian gestures are only one of many springboards for creating movement. Another example of movement as a tool to underscore specific minutiae within an iconic moment is our use of warm-up games outlined in Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* to create the Raising of Lazarus. The magic of the Raising is so overwhelming that determining how to streamline it without losing the power of that moment initially seemed an insurmountable task. Using Boal's "Colombian hypnosis" game as a starting point, we chose the struggle between good and evil (essentially between Life and Death) as the focus of the Raising. Boal spoke of "dynamizing" an image, that is, of imbuing it with added intensity through viewing it from new and different perspectives. Using a tangible concept, a fight, to

dynamize a simple movement exercise, the actors playing Jesus and Lazarus were able to narrow the scope of this incredibly difficult scene into a compelling event.

Aside from these exercises and some training in Chekhov, I have had some limited training in the Meisner technique, which focuses on reacting spontaneously and which we briefly touched on to help build concentration and listening skills. In addition, the faculty member who acted as vocal coach brought the Linklater and some Rodenburg vocal techniques to our rehearsal process, both of which assign importance to founding vocal work on emotion and instinct to create honest performances.

STEREOTYPES AND ICONS

When we began work on *Play 13*, the familiarity of the characters and stories—all based on the Christian Bible—became a kind of double-edged sword. The virtue of familiarity was that we had a foundation on which to build the characters in our show. Familiarity's limitation was that it tempted us to do only what was "expected" without exploring other possibilities. Although not everyone would recognize all the Biblical episodes in our play, the consensus among those working on it (including the student performers) was that we had to tread lightly to avoid falling into what Peter Brook calls "deadly theatre" (9–41). Although deadly theatre is a complex concept that is difficult to describe, it can be loosely defined as the attempt to re-create a performance for the sake of the superficial effect and/or commercial gain. The facets of our play that could produce deadly theater had to be identified so that they could be prevented. Through in-class conversations with students and out-of-class conversations with my thesis advisor, I determined that two primary forms of "the expected" in *Play 13* could result in deadly theatre: stereotypes and icons.

Stereotypes and icons, it turned out, were a concern for the student performers as well as for their director. The first in-class discussion we had in which the students overcame their timidity and became fully engaged was about Jesus's character and how to prevent him from being deadly. The students unanimously expressed a fear that Jesus's humanity would be erased and that his character would become shorthand for something generically "good" and "divine." Stereotypes can be archetypes (a kind of shorthand), and archetypes can be extremely useful when communicating to a broad audience; however, the risk of using them is that performers can become lazy or imprecise as a result of an assumed mutual understanding. We had to attempt to portray the truth within stereotypes in order to prevent carelessness and generalization. Of course, this approach had the potential to be problematic because there is no universal definition of "truth." Since truth is not a

concrete or objective concept, the best any production can do is to make a decision about which truth (or aspects of it) they wish to portray. For *Play 13*, we chose to focus on the transformations made by each of the characters during their journey from the Raising through the Plot; the truth we searched for, then, was the one that would delineate what changes each character experienced. By choosing to concentrate on the truth found in each character's journey, we also provided specific details that students could work into their characterizations, helping to prevent generalization.

Although stereotypes are often oversimplified and lose truth as they lose detail, iconic characters can easily be overcomplicated, obscuring the truth with an overabundance of information. Icons are magic and mythic; they are familiar yet strange and remote; they are depictions of things and people we have heard about and know well but may have never experienced ourselves. The issue of stereotypes being oversimplified can be addressed by adding detail in order to preserve and respect their origins, but the removal of detail does not serve to clarify the iconic figures. Rather, honoring the wealth of detail while focusing on particular elements creates a balance between the complexity of the myths and the simplicity of the stock characters. Once I had reduced the concepts of stereotypes and icons to a matter of the amount of detail, the task of addressing the issues raised by each became much more manageable.

Director Anne Bogart has many valuable insights regarding stereotypes, and devotes a chapter of her book *A Director Prepares* to it. Specifically, she suggests filling them with memory in order to bring honesty and dimension to otherwise flat concepts. The idea of filling a container with memory is not intended to be a "sense memory" exercise of any kind. Actors will naturally bring their own personal experience to a role, and this will add its own brand of honesty to a performance. However, in the case of *Play 13*, the association of a specific personal memory with an exercise is not necessary. I realize this sounds contrary to the concept under discussion, but "memory" should be thought of as an instinctual or visceral response for the purposes of this discussion. In general, our most complex emotions stem from our very basic—even animalistic—feelings. For example, the basic emotion fear can lead to worry, desperation, helplessness, anxiety, inferiority, and defensiveness (among others). In this case, "memory" means the filling the container of our stereotypes with the verbalization or manifestation of those animal responses and the more complex emotions triggered by them. Experienced performers often find these primordial memories through any number of processes, but in the case of *Play 13*, some students needed more direction. In an effort to prevent the generalization of stereotypes and to clarify icons, students did homework after each rehearsal. Sometimes the homework was as mundane

as picking out their favorite quatrains from a particular scene, other times it involved creating a world in which the characters live by inventing memories their characters might have (the most unforgettable of which was 1 Jew and 2 Jew sneaking a taste of bacon late at night while digging a grave) or deciding on a transformation made during a course of events.

All of the assignments were designed to help students find the memory that would most effectively “fill the container” that their character presented to them. Some of the homework resulted in very detailed responses, creating levels and dimension for the characters. But the goal was not realism. Monet’s *Haystacks* were detailed but impressionistic. Breton’s paintings can hardly be called realistic, and yet they are incredibly intricate. Similarly, the actors in *Play 13* built detail into a world of types and stock characters by bringing specific choices to their work. The homework, written or otherwise, encouraged them to think of their characters in new ways while always emphasizing the function of their role in the play.

Homework has its place but is never enough on its own. Research and bookwork bring answers that are careful, rational, and even meditative, but work in the rehearsal room informs the life of the characters; rehearsal work brings answers that are intuitive, emotional, and spontaneous. We needed to “light a fire under” our stereotypes and icons, to use terminology coined by theatre artist Tadashi Suzuki, and often the way to do this was through movement (quoted in Bogart, 96). I have found that when a performer is asked to move in a certain way, she will relate to the character, to the moment, and to the emotion in a different and often profoundly truthful way. For example, I asked actors to choose lines that struck them, that were long enough to work with but short enough to memorize between rehearsals and to be repeated often. Coupling that line with a type of movement unrelated to the action of the scene (e.g., pushing against a person or a wall for anger, reaching out in desperation) almost always produced a response in both the actor and others in the rehearsal room; it stimulated a memory that could be used to fill the containers provided by stereotypes and icons.

Movement is often the most effective way “in” to a scene, but it is not the only way. The manner of delivering lines also adds clarity and often proves more comfortable for untrained actors. Our prompter and dramaturge discovered that determining where the emphasis falls in a line provides indications about the characters’ personalities and what drives them, which scenes are comedic or dramatic, and what relationships exist between characters. Some of the more cerebral students preferred to approach the text in this way, utilizing the words and the rhythms of *Play 13*. The approach taken to Mary, the sister of Lazarus, is one example of the way hints supplied in the poetry were used to highlight certain qualities of her icon. There are not many mentions

of Mary in the gospels, and the most prominent depicts Martha scolding her for listening to Jesus preach instead of serving him. Jesus responds by telling Martha that Mary has made the better choice, leaving the impression that Mary is more perceptive than her sister. The anecdote reveals several facets of Mary's character that needed to be reconciled for the purposes of *Play 13*. Initially, she is child-like, and then she is wise beyond her years. She is revealed as complex and contradictory. In other words, Mary is made human. This event is not portrayed in *Play 13*, but audience members were likely to be familiar with it, and therefore I felt a responsibility to address the apparent inconsistencies that arise as a result. The complexity of Mary's icon may be truthful, but it does not fit into the world of *Play 13* very well. In order to synthesize the multifarious nature of her character, we paid special attention to Mary's mourning passages. By putting the emphases on specific syllables, the dramaturges (and later the actor playing Mary) were able to pinpoint her personality as the self-absorbed younger sister who makes a transformation into a follower of Jesus. By focusing on certain aspects of the poetry, the actor was able to bring out these qualities of Mary the icon.

A NOTE ON AUDIENCE RECEPTION

Two of the most difficult issues in mounting a production are determining the message one wishes to convey to the audience and the most effective means of doing so. In order to make *Play 13* more accessible to our audience members, I chose to stage this early English play with modern production elements. Middle English text was combined with twenty-first-century trappings to create a world where the boundaries of time disappeared amid the characters and events of the play. Such words as "yode," "dearworth," and "gritch" were spoken by actors wearing Chuck Taylor sneakers sitting on folding plastic benches. The modernity of the design created a sense of immediacy and even intimacy (in spite of the size of the playing-space) by breaking down many of the barriers that could have separated our audience from the meaning of *Play 13* and thus providing the opportunity for our twenty-first-century spectators to invest and engage more fully in the action onstage.

That said, some members of a modern audience will always find pre-modern theatre inaccessible; the historical, linguistic, and cultural remove is too great for them. Try as we might, not every person understood every aspect of *Play 13*, a fact that was as frustrating as it was unavoidable and that was driven home by something that happened during our first local performance outside the honors college. Just before the "Hosanna," a passerby stopped and remarked to me how "unnatural" and "over the top" the performances were. He watched for a time, then left after deciding such artificiality wasn't for him. I later learned that he was a friend of the actor who played Caiaphas and

that he did not understand why the actors were speaking in rhyme; he commented that they “all sounded like Dr. Seuss.” The young man in question was unaware that I was the director when he spoke to me, but that was of no consequence in any event. I was not discouraged by the young man’s words. On the contrary, I took them as a compliment—after all, this isn’t *The Glass Menagerie*. *Play 13* is larger than life, and my actors honored that fact in each “over the top” performance that they gave. Of course there were other instances of disconnect among audience members. For example, one of the actors’ roommates asked why *Play 13* was not written in English. Audience members at our local performances caught some of the jokes, but others seemed to come and go unnoticed. To be sure, the language is unfamiliar and specialized. The culture in these plays is different from modern North American norms, so the confusion was unsurprising in some cases. However, we chose not to “dumb down” *Play 13*, especially since we knew our audience at the University of Toronto would be well-versed in early drama. Indeed, that crowd seemed to appreciate the nuances we included.

Our strong suspicion that much more of our Canadian audience would “get it” comforted us as we headed north. More importantly, the nuances are not central to the themes and story of *Play 13*. My goal was to create a production that would communicate to many people the power of the transformative and the power each of us has to effect change. The rest is icing on the cake. Whether people noticed the use of stuffed pelicans in our temple scene or caught references to the sin of Onan in Judas’s monologue was secondary to whether they witnessed the major moments, like the miracle of Lazarus rising to life again or Mary Magdalene’s acknowledging her wrongdoing and seeking to right her life. I have faith that *Play 13* spoke to our audience members in such a way that they listened.

SOME LESSONS LEARNED

Much of what we accomplished with *Play 13* was achieved through the dedication and commitment of the students who participated in it. They were asked to work outside of class time, to return to campus and continue working after the semester had ended. They worked outside their disciplines and their comfort zones to create a product they had to deliver *very* publicly. Despite some structural shortcomings (the professors were also working outside their comfort zones!), Medieval Drama Boot Camp was about as interdisciplinary a course as I can imagine and certainly more than any I have ever experienced. We had strong representation from the expected disciplines like theatre and English, but making this an honors experience enabled us to attract students from music, psychology, fine arts, photography, fashion, chemistry, physics, and American Sign Language. Every student had distinct,

useful contributions to offer. Among other advantages, having such diverse representation gave the students a chance to view the material and the problems it presented from multiple perspectives. Collaboration, cooperation, imagination, communication, compromise, and thinking and solving problems creatively are all twenty-first-century skills imperative to success in an increasingly complex and competitive world. Many of these skills are fostered in the educational environments of honors colleges across the country, and *Play 13* provided a veritable Petri dish for their growth.

Because the performance of early English theatre necessitates a holistic understanding of not only the language but also the context, culture, and other facets of the material, students had to use cognitive skills that might not be required in other educational settings. Students did not have the option of memorizing the material long enough to take an exam and then relegating it to the part of the brain reserved for information they deem “unnecessary.” All the material was as necessary as it was cumulative and interconnected. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, if one piece of information was missing, other pieces could not fall into place. If a student missed the piece of the puzzle for which she was responsible, she would be left behind and in turn leave her colleagues hanging; when pieces of a jigsaw puzzle are missing, the big picture does not make sense. In order to comprehend the plays and to make sense of their lines while delivering them, students needed to acquire a basic knowledge of Middle English language and poetry; in order to comprehend the stories and build characters around them, they needed some knowledge of Catholic beliefs and pre- and post-Reformation mindsets; in order to comprehend the physical demands of the plays, they needed some knowledge of the atmosphere surrounding this type of theatre; and in order to meet those demands, they needed a physical commitment in the form of moderate aerobic and vocal workouts. The performance of *Play 13* in Toronto was the tangible demonstration of students’ scholarly and performative mastery of this rich and complex subject, giving them more fulfillment than an “A” on an exam could have provided.

The results of the work done on *Play 13* were extremely diverse, with each participant taking away something unique. Involvement in such an intensely collaborative project was an invaluable experience that every member of the Shoemakers’ Guild shared, from student leaders to faculty to those outside the course who somehow contributed. In the time since our performance in Toronto, I have heard from students who have put their participation in *The Chester Cycle* and *Play 13* to good use, including a student who has gone on to pursue a master’s degree in theatrical costuming. Shortly after beginning her studies she contacted me to say that her deep understanding of early English cycle plays has helped her excel in her theatre history course,

and that she was able share her knowledge with other students in her class. She is one of the many students who have carried their learning with them beyond the classroom and beyond the performance to continue using it in other pursuits.

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