

# DRAMA



# PREVIEW

by Dr. Ann L. Greer

## MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS DRAMA PART II CORPUS CHRISTI GUILD CYCLE PLAYS

The plays to be presented by the Ottawa University Players at the Commons Theater on March 20 and 21 at 8:15 p.m., for the University community, are taken from English cycle plays, and represent a dramatic development particularly, and almost exclusively, English in some characteristics.

In 1264 Pope Urban IV instituted the festival of Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ, or the Blessed Sacrament). No special kind of observance was practiced, however, until in 1311 Pope Clement V issued a decree making the festival operative in processions to be undertaken on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. This placed them in a most favorable time for outdoor celebration, as the festival falls in June, in early summer.

The processions became elaborate. Some participants wore symbolical costumes, and some groups performed "mummings" (simple acted-out roles) as they

moved along. It became customary after a time for Corpus Christi processions to be composed of groups from the trade or craft guilds, each typifying an event in the ecclesiastical concept of universal history, from the Creation to the Day of Judgment, all arranged in Biblical order, and somewhat similar to the longest of the tropes, the **Procession of the Prophets**. Each of the guilds tried to make its own part as fine as it could.

The next step (and we have no documentation for just how and when, or how gradually this happened) was the performance of plays by the groups instead of just a procession, with some effort toward

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excelling each other evident in guild records. Such records, dating from about 1375, show that this kind of festival observance was catching on in different towns, from the very small to large cathedral towns. Before the end of the Fourteenth Century, more than a hundred English towns were provided with such entertainment. The plays were performed annually in some, although less frequently in most. Throughout the Fifteenth Century these religious plays continued, gradually losing place to single longer plays like the **Everyman** morality play and to more sophisticated drama in the Renaissance.

The guild plays, like the representations in the processions before them, attempted to cover the more dramatic stories from the Bible that related to man's creation, fall, and need for redemption; the promise and coming of the Redeemer; His life, trial, death, burial, and resurrection; some events in some cycles following His ascension, culminating in the Judgment Day. Each of these was presented in a separate play, all being performed in sequence. In some cycles, the plays differed enough to indicate that they were composed by different authors working for or in each guild; in some, there is evidence of a single author coordinating, and per-

haps writing or at least editing all or some of the plays. The **Chester Cycle** (for Whitsuntide, not Corpus Christi) is obviously the work of one person.

We have extant fragments from several cycles, whole plays from some, and some entire cycles. The most important were identified with the towns of Chester, York, Wakefield, and Coventry, though the group called **Ludus Coventriae** were probably wrongly named this in a late attempt at identification. Also, the N-Towne cycle has caused controversy, some scholars leaning toward a theory that N- stands for **Nomen** (Latin for name), indicating that an early traveling troupe owned this cycle, and that the name of the next town where they were to perform would be inserted at this place in the banns, the announcement advertising the plays.

While on the continent the trend was to perform on fixed stages, the more typical stage in England was on wheels. The pageant, or pageant wagon, rolled usually on three sets of huge wheels that lifted the acting level rather high, leaving room below concealed by a curtain so that it could be used as a "tiring room" if needed, and could serve as the "lower world" if the play required this Entrance from the stage was through a trap door. A roof could serve as the heavens, with a ladder leading to the



John Hoppe, portraying Christ, is set upon by other members of the cast of "The Trial," one of the five Cycle Plays to be presented in the Commons Theatre.

COMMONS

MARCH

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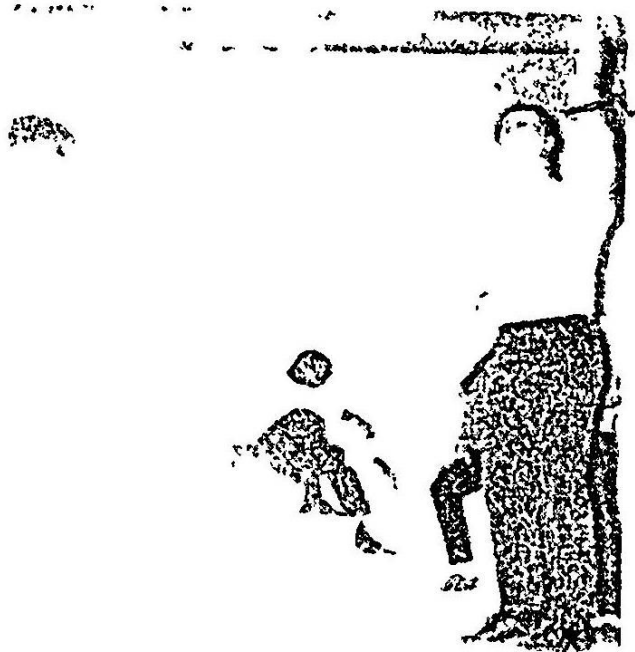
main stage level if the play required. The plays themselves came to be called pageants after the wagon stages on which they were performed.

In some towns, where a good open place such as the commons or town square permitted the cycle was performed but once during the festival, only at this one location. Stands were erected, the seats thus constructed selling for a good price as "reserved seats" in our parlance. In towns not offering such a location, as many positions as practicable were selected, with performances in proper sequence at each such station. In either case, the pageant wagons would all be drawn up in good time at a convenient place, each ready to move up to the playing position as time required. This would vary according to the number and length of the plays preceding it in the cycle, and the number of performances in the town for that day. We know that for the York cycle, which had forty-eight plays (the longest, perhaps), an order was given for the first wagon to be ready to start between four and five in the morning. Wagon one would move into position, the players perform, and roll on to the next station as wagon two pulled up to station one, and so on until the cycle was completed at all stations.

From records of the time, mostly guild and town records, we know that usually the guild owned its own play, its own pageant wagon, props, costumes, and kept these in repair; the guild provided its own actors, managed its own play, and financed its whole production except what some nobleman or other benefactor might contribute. The guild members were taxed from one to four pence, and a collection was taken from the audience, to meet expenses, which included pay to the play personnel and to a general pageant master elected for each season's performance to perform as business manager for the entire cycle. The guilds tried to out-do each other in, apparently, a good-natured rivalry. To help insure good per-

formance, players were fined if they forgot lines or failed to perform well. The entire guild was fined if it was late in paying its "pageant silver" toward the pageant master's salary.

We observe some characteristics that were evidently traditionally expected in these guild plays. For example, the costumes colorfully furnished the stage, as very little setting was used. God wore a white coat, and his face was gilded. Herod was dressed as a Saracen, as were all the "villains," probably an influence from the crusades which assumed that anyone who was not a Christian or a good pre-Christian was a Saracen. This was not in defiance of, but in ignorance



**Spinelli and Darby practice for their parts in "The Resurrection of Christ."**

of the historical time and place of the Saracens. This will be noted in the Ottawa University Players' performance of **The Trial** and **The Res-**

**urrection.** Also, the dress, and the social, political and some religious titles and patterns of conduct were contemporary with the original actors, as antiquary research was non-existent. The O.U. Players will be garbed, consequently, in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century English fashions; the Centurion, for example, is a knight, and the language implies contemporary manners. Certain parts were portrayed in a customary way: Noah's wife was traditionally a termagant; Herod ranted and raved like a madman in his violent temper; and the shepherds were humorous country folk.

In the O.U. production, the banns are adapted from two originals in order to suit the particular plays used, as these must specifically announce what is to come: in this case, four selected plays.

The first is **The Salutation and Conception** from the **N-Town Cycle**, a very short play,

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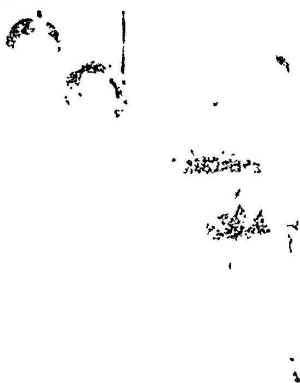
We are more than a drug store that offers professional pharmacy. We are a gathering place for you and your friends, a luncheonette, gift shop and newsstand all in one.

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done for its poetry and lovely effects in Middle English. The story is so well known and is so little expanded that the audience should be able to follow the language from the action and the predominance of words still in use. The other three plays have been modernized sufficiently for ease in understanding, though retaining the flavor of the Middle English originals sufficiently, in sentence structure and diction as well as verse structure, so that the suitability of the whole is felt in the plays.

Second is the most famous of all the cycle plays — **The Second Shepherds' Play** from the Wakefield cycle, modernized by John Gassner, who graciously granted permission by personal letter for use without payment of royalty fees. In this play the traditionally comic shepherds are north country Englishmen, very realistically complaining about the weather, their poverty, the government, and so on and on. A petty thief dupes them, to be paid in full for doing so when they catch him. As the weary shepherds lie down to rest, suddenly to these very real, poor, and ordinary people the angel appears with news of the Savior's birth. They hasten to the stable, reverent, changed, with every contrast between the "false birth" of a baby pretended by Mak, the thief, and the true and blessed birth of incarnate God.



**Bill Douglas, shepherd; Pat Stevenson, Mary, are joined by other members of the cast of "The Second Shepherd's Play."**

Dr. Greer, of Ottawa University's English Department, has modernized and somewhat abridged the two remaining plays. **The Trial of Christ** is from the N-Town cycle. The trial is not concluded, as the return to Pilate for sentencing is in the following part of the cycle. The plays of the Wakefield crafts is again drawn on for the concluding play, **The Resurrection of Christ**. The



roles of the soldiers are particularly interesting, showing comparable realistic treatment to that of the shepherds. The play (and the performance of the evening) ends with a beautifully reverent and moving scene of Mary Magdalene's recognition of her risen Lord in the garden near the open tomb.

These old plays have a directness and simple beauty not common in a later time. They are offered in the hope that the timeless devotion they portray will find its echo in the hearts of the audience

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