

Chester Miracle Plays

By MARGARET M. PRITCHARD, B.A. (Admin.),

ASSIST. SECRETARY, CHESHIRE RURAL COMMUNITY COUNCIL

IT was with great trepidation and cautiousness that the County Drama Committee of the Cheshire Rural Community Council first received the approach from the Chester City Council that it should undertake the production of the proposed revival of the Chester Miracle Plays for the City's part in the Festival of Britain. These plays which, until 1951, were last performed in 1600, form the earliest of the four surviving cycles of Miracle Plays which have come down from mediaeval times. The theme of these cycles was vast, ranging from the Creation of the World to the Last Judgment. When, during the 14th century, the responsibility for the presentation of the plays was taken from the clergy by the Guilds, each one took on, as far as possible, the play most suited to its own particular craft. The water-carriers of the Dee were responsible for the Deluge, and it became a deluge in which players, and some of the audience, were drenched, for these plays were always presented with the utmost naturalism.

It is interesting to note that the first approach to the County Drama Committee was only made at the end of September, 1950, and in less than nine months from that first tentative proposal the plays had been adapted so as to be in a suitable form for modern production, a producer engaged, over a hundred amateur players brought together from all over the county and the plays rehearsed and finally staged in a delightful mediaeval set with costumes specially designed and made for this production. Naturally, there were many obstacles to be surmounted ranging from such impressive matters as obtaining the Lord Chamberlain's permission to perform the plays, down to the none-the-less important details of arranging car park facilities for the actors. But, from the first, members of the Committee felt that if at all possible, the full performance of the Chester Miracle Plays should be given during the Festival year, although it was realised that it was quite a formidable task.

The first step, after the preliminary negotiations with the City Council, was to get the Plays adapted from the material available so that they could be easily performed and presented to a modern audience. This work was eventually accepted by the Rev. Joseph and Mrs. McCulloch of Warwick, and after carefully considering the material they reported that they anticipated telescoping the original twenty-four plays into six parts dealing with the Creation, Nativity and Resurrection equally. They felt that these six parts would perhaps take three nights to perform. Early in February the completed adaptation was received, and it was soon clear that

the aim of making the script easily intelligible without destroying the essential character of the work had been well achieved.

The whole cycle of the plays was now seen to have fallen neatly into three parts of more or less equal length — “In the Beginning,” “The Nativity” and “The Passion.” It was decided that the Plays should be performed on three successive evenings and it was on this basis that the selection of the groups to act in the Plays was eventually made.

About this time serious consideration was given as to where the Plays should be performed. Inevitably there were people who pressed for the full re-creation of the old method of presentation — on “pageants” or wagons, but for obvious reasons this was not practicable. The question then resolved itself into the straightforward one of either an indoor or an outdoor production. An approach had already been made to the Dean and Chapter, who had agreed to put the Abbey Green at the disposal of the City Council for this purpose. For an outdoor performance this was an ideal setting, but the usual pleas of inaudibility and the uncertainty of the weather were strongly pressed. The alternative was the Cathedral Refectory. Naturally, it was agreed that the final decision must rest with the Producer/Director when engaged, but it was decided to make further enquiries on both lines.

Events began to move so rapidly and so many things happened in so short a time that the work resolved itself, from necessity, into being done directly from the office with periodic meetings at odd hours during the day with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee.

On a recommendation of the Arts Council, an approach was made to Christopher Ede of London to undertake the direction of the Plays. After a preliminary visit to Chester and discussion with representatives of the City Council’s Development Committee and the County Drama Committee, Mr. Ede agreed in February, 1951, to undertake the production and general direction of the plays.

By now it was generally agreed that, although this production was primarily for part of Chester’s activities during the Festival of Britain year, it was hoped that, at the conclusion of the performance of the Plays, the City Council would have in its possession sufficient equipment in costumes and sets, to make the Plays’ further performance in future years a more practicable possibility.

It was, therefore, a complete picture of the preliminary work that was presented to the County Drama Committee at its meeting on the 24th February — the scripts were in the office. Christopher Ede had been engaged as Producer/Director and the Cathedral Refectory had been booked for the performance of the Plays to take place from the 8th—30th June, 1951 — the committee

was ready for the more detailed work. Although so much work had already gone into the project, time was moving swiftly and the actual production had hardly been put into operation. The Committee set out to consider the cast required, and as to how best the county might be divided into workable groups. From careful study it became obvious that each of the three Plays would have to be produced in three separate groups, though still maintaining the whole. The first approach was made to all known societies and groups by circular letter, giving particulars of the proposed production, and secretaries were asked to inform the office of the probable number of their members who would be likely to take part. By the end of March, 1951, the position was fairly clear and preliminary casting auditions were held in three centres: Frodsham, Acton and Chester. These meetings were only of an explanatory nature designed to ascertain what talent was available. Mr. Ede finally approved the casts on his visit to the County during the second week in April, when each play was read through and set. In his introductory talk to the cast, he made reference to the rules governing the performance in the Middle Ages when players were liable to be fined for late attendance at rehearsals or bad performance on the night.

The three sub-producers were then left with his instructions for carrying on until his next visit, with an assistant producer to oversee the whole in Mr. Ede's absence.

The costume designer, Miss Sheila Jackson, also travelled up from London that weekend and as far as possible took measurements of the cast. She brought with her the designs which she had made for the various characters. Miss Jackson and Michael Trangmar, who designed the set, bought many of the bits and pieces required for the costumes and props in London, and mention should be made of some of the receipts received for these articles — "leather for Devil's tail" and "pencil tops for the Devil's pitchfork."

From this point onwards the difficulties grew daily. The cast had a habit of changing rapidly, and this involved considerable difficulty with regard to costumes. The third play suffered particularly in this respect as finding twelve disciples as well as many other male characters was no easy task. Letters had to be written asking for some of the cast to be allowed to play in matinees; the programme had to be prepared with suitable programme notes; irons and a sewing machine had to be made available in the Refectory. Then, from the end of May onwards, hampers of unfinished costumes arrived from London, and unwilling casts had to grapple with the hemming of them. Somehow out of all this chaos, together with the other 101 tasks which are involved in any performance, and especially one of this size, order began to emerge. The Plays began to look like plays, and one could reasonably expect to see the same face in the same part

for two consecutive rehearsals. Memories of those last few weeks are more than hectic — the office began to look rather like a second-hand clothes dealer's — and the problems that confronted us became too numerous to record. Many of these concerned only small matters, but all needed time and patience to solve.

Apart from the principal characters, in each of the three plays there was also a crowd which played a part in each — pleading to be taken into the Ark, at Bethlehem and before Pilate. For the sake of economy, the same costumes for the crowd were common to all three plays, which may have saved the expense of having to make forty more costumes, but caused many a headache. To begin with, and not unnaturally, everyone would have liked to have had his or her own costume. It meant that the costumes could not be taken away from the Refectory, and after each performance I had to make myself thoroughly unpopular until I had successfully managed to get twelve women's crowd costumes folded neatly on one table and eight men's crowd costumes on another. Difficulty also arose from the wimples for the women — these, too, were common to all three crowds, and as they came into close contact with the grease paint, needed frequent laundering. But, with three matinees and six evening performances a week, they had to be done on the spot. Accordingly we had to organise "wimple-washing parties" of ladies in the cast who were able to spare an hour or two each day and who kindly came down to the Refectory to wash and iron the wimples. One day we ran into difficulties — I had gone up to the Refectory to see about some seating arrangements, and met the wimple-washing party with a pile of wet wimples ready to be ironed. In the whole of the Cathedral there appeared to be only one three-point plug. This was actually in the Refectory and the ironing was generally done there, but this particular afternoon there was a Bring and Buy Sale in progress and we were left with no ironing facilities and a performance in three hours! After searching around we did eventually find another plug for the iron in the workroom, and cleared out a carpenter's bench and sundry tools and set to work there.

Of the set and the props there is really little that I can say — its delightful mediaeval perspective has really to be seen to be appreciated and it is hard to describe its attractiveness. The actual plan of the set was discussed with Mr. Ede during March, it was designed by Michael Trangmer and built by Stage Decor, a firm in London. It arrived in Chester on Monday, 11th June, a week before the production opened. We arranged for a removal van to collect the set from the station and deliver it to the Refectory. The framework — tubular scaffolding — was erected and then little more could be done until Strand Electric had finished their work of fixing the lighting. Then the permanent part of the set — the archways each side and false proscenium which were common

to all three plays — were fixed, and the parts for the individual scenes stored in the Cloisters and the Undercroft. All this work took several men a good week to complete — yet it came down, with far less help, in a day and a half.

The plan of the set, allowed for a small raised platform which would be the musicians' gallery. Mr. Ede's original idea was that a group of eight or ten male singers, together with a group of oboe players, should take their place on this platform. Later, owing to the fact that the singers were required every night it was found more practicable to form a rota and this gave rise to even worse costume difficulties. In the end, the singers were heard from off-stage and the recorder players, with the Prompter, all three in costume, crossed the stage and took their place on the platform as the trumpet fanfare was sounding. Only a few days before the dress rehearsal was a trumpeter found to play the fanfare that began each play. This fanfare was played three times; once away in the Cloisters near to the Cathedral, and again nearer to the Refectory and the third time on the small flight of steps leading from the Cloisters to the stage in the Refectory. The house lights were dimmed between the second and the third fanfares and the musicians and the prompter took their places.

Dress rehearsals took place the weekend immediately prior to the opening night and, in retrospect, appear to be a confused jumble of a flurry of trying to wear wimples the right way, frantic exchanges of wigs, a confused mass of grease-paint, photographs, and trying to hear the players through a background of a visiting team of bell-ringers.

Of the actual fortnight of the production little can be said here — the Cathedral Refectory became a second home and one tended to forget that there was a life outside it. The milling crowds and the queues waiting in the hope of returned tickets faded once again when the lights went down and, with the sound of the first fanfare on the trumpet heard in the Cloisters and gradually coming nearer, we were taken back into the Middle Ages — the costumes and set designed so cleverly, with colours intermingling and their shades altering to the mood of the play — gay for Noah and his Ark and gradually merging into the sombre colours of the Passion. The music of the two recorders and the sound of the male voices from the background all became one with the splendour of the Story.

One could go on with the details of the mass of clearing up that had to be faced, the storing of the costumes, props and set and many other problems, but it is perhaps better to finish here at the culmination of the hard work and fun that went into this revival of the Chester Miracle Plays. We had barely finished the final packing of the costumes on their return from the cleaners when, in view of the outstanding success, the City Council decided to repeat the performance of the cycle in 1952.