Get Outside and Have a (Mystery) Play: Crash Course Theater #10

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=5VI3qcSuUlk
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/5VI3qcSuUlk

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and today we're going to circle up our pageant wagons and talk about the theater of the late Middle Ages, mainly mystery plays and morality plays.

Judged by contemporary standards, these plays are awkward. They're episodic, kind of basic, and pretty chaotic in their mix of comedy, drama, and scripture. But some of the jokes are good, like the ones about baby-eating. But that's more Yorick's speed than mine. You really love a good morose groaner, don't you, bonehead? This guy.

Mystery plays and morality plays were the first European plays to unite religious life and secular life in more than a thousand years. Whole towns pitched in to create them, and whole towns arrived to see them. Those wagon wheels paved the way for the Renaissance's theatrical explosion.

Today we're going to look at *The Second Shepherds' Play*, written by the Wakefield Master. It may seem a little humdrum, but no Wakefield Master no Shakespeare, and no Shakespeare no Yorrick. Maybe that's okay, though.

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

A couple episodes ago, we looked at liturgical drama, those moments, first in the Easter mass and then all year, when priests and monks acted out some of the liturgy. This form took off and spread all throughout Europe, and by the 11th and 12th centuries got pretty elaborate. It expanded out from the altar and spread all over the church, occupying small spaces usually known as mansions, which were decorated to suggest different scenes. One personal favorite of mine, the hell mouth.

Liturgical drama works. You have the liturgy, you have the drama, you have the mansions – it's religious fun for the whole family. But eventually, it's just not enough.

Because here's the thing. Medieval Gothic churches are big. They're really big. They're trying to stretch all the way up to heaven to capture something of God's majesty in glass and stone. If you've ever stood in Notre Dame or York Minster, you're like, "Yep, this is some world-class majesty."

And yet, even these colossal churches become too small to contain the awesomeness that is theater. So liturgical drama moves to the only other place with enough square footage to accommodate all that dang majesty: outside.

So now you're thinking, "Yay, fun! Liturgical drama al fresco!" Not so fast, though. In 1210, Pope Innocent III issues an edict saying that the clergy can't perform plays in public. And the clergy are like, "Oh, well."

But the people are like, "No no no, you can't walk it back. We want hell mouths. Bigger, better, more." So in the early 13th century, a radical thing happens. Drama moves from being a clerical phenomenon to being a secular one. We back, baby.

Since Roman times, for more than a thousand years, Christians have *hated* theater. But obviously, Christians also loved theater, or the liturgical drama wouldn't have caught on the way that it did.

Performing plays inside the church, basing them exclusively on the Christian liturgy, and having members of the clergy act in them were the strategies Christians used to make it less sinful. But that's all gone now. Drama has left the building, and by building I mean basilica. Priests are no longer the actors; bring on the incest plots and the nude rope dancers!

Okay, it doesn't escalate that quickly. It's going to take theater a few decades to get truly decadent. Theater sticks pretty closely to the Bible and associated religious texts as the liturgical dramas transform into the cycle plays.

The cycle plays are an ambitious genre of medieval drama that depicts the whole history of the Christian universe, starting with the creation of the world and ending with the death and resurrection of Christ, skimming most of the Old and New Testaments in between. Some of them go all the way up to the Last Judgment.

In England, the performance of cycles began sometime in the last 1300s and continued until the late 1500s when they were banned because of the English Reformation. The Protestants weren't so keen on graven images, even fun theater ones, and cycle plays were also seen as just too Catholic.

The same thing happened throughout Europe. In the age of religious disputes and wars, religious drama was seen as just too controversial, even if it was very popular. In some cities, cycle plays were organized by religious guilds, but in many places, especially England, they were produced by trade and craft guilds.

This is why they're also sometimes known as mystery plays, because a "mystery" was another word for a trade. So, carpentry, that's a mystery. As are shipbuilding, blacksmithing, and baking.

The plays themselves aren't mysteries like *Murder, She Wrote* or *Serial*; they're more about mystery in the religious sense. So, who dunnit? God, pretty much always. Sometimes Judas.

Cycle plays are also known as Passion plays if the particular cycle focuses on the Passion of the Christ.

In most cases, each guild would be responsible for staging a biblical story, usually one overlapping with their work. So the shipwrights might take on Noah and the Ark, the bakers the Last Supper.

Each guild would supply the costumes, actors, and set, and they would pile it all into a big cart known as pageant wagons, basically a theatermobile. The carts were trundled through town, stopping often at fixed points to perform. Or maybe they stayed put and audiences moved to them, scholars aren't sure. And by the way, the move from cart to cart mirrors the way dramatic action would move from mansion to mansion in liturgical dramas.

Each play lasted for half an hour and there were upwards of forty plays. If you thought *Les Miz* was long, ugh, get ready. The cycle dramas were often performed over several days, though, so you weren't expected to sit for twenty straight hours. You could relieve yourself, grab a beer or a lard-based pie.

Most actors weren't professionals, either. They were men and boys drawn from the working class. And in some towns, women participated. Amateur actors were expected to take their work very seriously, though. You got fined if you didn't know your lines.

The cycle plays were a big draw for tourists and a chance for towns to show off their civic pride and their skills as craftspeople. Ooh, mysterious!

Most plays restated the basic action of a Bible story, though guilds would dress stories up with anachronistic jokes and the occasional bit of troubling antisemitism. Plays were typically a mix of highly stylized action and contemporary realism. And authors were mostly anonymous, though a couple of Frenchmen signed their plays about the lives of the saints, also known as miracle plays.

Medieval stagecraft wasn't the most sophisticated. I mean, when

your stage is a wagon, there are limits. But guilds wanted to put on a good show, so there were plenty of special effects like trapdoors, fake corpses, fake blood, and some fire effects. I know, right? Don't tell the fire marshal guild.

One of the best preserved and best loved of the cycle plays is *The Second Shepherds' Play*. This English work is part of the Wakefield Cycle. It was composed by an anonymous writer sometime in the 15th century known only as the Wakefield Master. It's called the "second" shepherds' play because there's an earlier shepherds' play in the same manuscript trove.

Let's take it to the Thought Bubble.

It's freezing cold in a meadow somewhere in the Middle East (that looks a lot like the North of England). Coll, the first shepherd, enters and complains about the weather. The second shepherd, Gyb, arrives. He complains about the weather, too, and also about his wife, who he says is fat.

A third shepherd, Daw, shows up, saying, "Christ's cross me speed," which is odd because Christ hasn't been born yet. Oh, and he also complains about the weather. Hashtag relatable Northern England content right here, hmm?

Then Mak enters. Mak is a sheep-stealer. Conflict! He tries to trick the shepherds, but they're onto him. Eventually they bond about how terrible Mak's drunk baby-having wife is, and everyone goes to sleep except Mak.

He puts a spell on the rest and runs off with a sheep, bringing it home to his wife Gill, who's like, "Way to go, now you're going to be hanged!" But Mak is like, "Come on. It's meat!" So Gill comes up with a plan to put the sheep in the cradle and say it's a baby. Good thinking, Gill!

Back in the meadow, Mak pretends to wake up alongside the shepherds, but they realize a sheep is missing and they go search his house. Gill fends them off, joking about eating the baby, which is maybe about the Eucharist? But also maybe about cannibalism?

The shepherds take off, but then they're like, "Oh wait, we forgot to bring gifts for the baby!" So they come back and they find the sheep. Instead of hanging Mak, they decide to roll him up in a cloth and beat him black and blue. Hooray, another one of those famous happy Christian endings!

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Okay, wait. Wasn't that supposed to be a Bible story? Well, after the shepherds leave, an angel comes down and tells them to go to Bethlehem and see the Christ child. Bethlehem is, conveniently, very nearby.

They go visit Mary and the little baby Jesus, bringing him cherries, a bird, and a tennis ball. That's not a joke, they actually bring him a tennis ball.

In this play, we can see the Bible story, mostly borrowed from the Gospel of Luke, intersect pretty comfortably with the English vernacular, entertaining an audience while also celebrated Jesus. It's comic and dramatic, serious and silly, high and low, religious and folkloric. It reminds the audience that Christ was born to save Northern English shepherds as well as biblical types. And there's just a *little* cannibalism. You know, for fun.

Cycle plays weren't the only fun in town, though. Pretty soon, another form of medieval drama made its debut: the secular play, which first appeared in France in the late 13th century.

These plays were often based on folklore, hence the *Play of the Greenwood*, which includes both fairies and townspeople, and the *Play of Robin and Marion*, which is the first dramatization of the Robin Hood stories. We're still dramatizing this one 700 years later, though now with Kevin Costner and the soothing pipes of Bryan Adams.

The other important medieval genre is the morality play, which Hildegard of Bingen started. The most famous morality play is *Everyman*, which is still performed annually and often updated.

Morality plays have one simple message: you gonna die, so you'd better get your act together because all that love and wealth and fun aren't going to follow you six feet under. Right, Yorrick? But you know what will follow you? Good deeds. So go help some old ladies cross a cow path. Morality plays have a huge influence on the plays of the English Renaissance.

Mystery, folk, and morality plays have a good run. They remain the dominant forms of theater for more than 300 years. And as I mentioned, *Everyman* is still being performed today. Take that, *Cats*!

But things get tricky at the beginning of the Renaissance, when Protestant reformers look around and decide that drama and religion shouldn't mix, and then they ban cycle dramas. Happy trails, pageant wagons. Anduntil next time, curtain.

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBD Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows, like *The Art Assignment*, *Eons*, and *It's Okay to Be Smart*.

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