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Dramatizing the Word

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In 1996 Peter Meredith invited me to co-direct a production of *Mankind*, with a cast made up of undergraduate students and staff of the Workshop Theatre, for the Aspects of European Medieval Drama conference in Camerino, Italy. The prospect was a daunting one as I have little to no knowledge of medieval drama and early planning sessions found me madly hedging my bets with assertions concerning the limited nature of my role which I cautiously – and somewhat vaguely – defined as something akin to an adviser on the stage action. I have rarely begun a rehearsal process with such trepidation founded upon an utter absence of imaginative impulses from which to urge the text into stage life. What Peter offered me throughout the three weeks' partnership which followed was an insight into the very particular seduction of the medieval drama. His tireless investigation of the language, both rhythmical and rhetorical, allied to his acute attention to detail concerning every aspect of the physical staging of the piece, made me begin to understand the nature of the fascination which drives the medieval scholar: evidence is sought, certainly, but beyond that there is an energy, born of desire, to touch the world differently, to seek those aspects fogged by the accretions of the humanist worldview. The opportunities for speculation offered by a text such as *Mankind* are endless, but only when one recognizes the clearly-defined boundaries of reason contained within its span, and those boundaries – as we discovered time and again – can only be fully discovered through the physical process of realizing the theatrical potential in the weave of the dramatic language.

Rehearsing *Mankind*, one ends up debating the world and one's place in it, which is what a rehearsal process should be. Rehearsing *Mankind* with Peter Meredith one is given access to a knowledge which begins to offer glimpses of dramatic vistas hitherto unsuspected and the concept of a 'theatre' which, beyond the boundaries of medieval scholarship, remains largely unexplored. Rehearsing *Mankind* became, for me, a love affair with a stranger; the affair ended, the stranger departed – no less alien and 'other' than when we had first met – but what remained was a whiff of an

extraordinary theatrical encounter which had, beyond any doubt, changed the way in which I viewed the theatrical process *per se*. The essay which follows is an attempt to document aspects of the Leeds production, and to highlight the specific challenges offered by the medieval text to a contemporary cast and audience.

* * *

Reason uses imagination as a vestment outside and around it; if reason becomes too pleased with its dress however, this imagination adheres to it like a skin; and separation is effected only with great pain [. . .] The mind delighted with body in this wise is deformed by the phantasies of corporeal imagination, and impressed deeply with these, it is not able to sever its union with the body.¹

Richard of St Victor

For the unknown author of *Mankind* the theatre is a bare stage whereupon the world is made anew via language. This is a 'fleshed' language however; a language prone to twists, distortions and eruptions in its dramatic travail through the exigencies of corporeal appearance. The paradox which both delights and dismays practitioners of the theatrical art has this very problem at its core: that without the actor communication will not occur, but the very presence of the actor denies transparent meaning to the spoken word. To make theatre is to pit language against the impulse to action; reflective thought may be earned as a result of mortal combat but it rarely feeds or motivates the major thrust of dramatic development, or plot.

The twelfth-century scholar, Richard of St Victor, confronts the same paradox in his – somewhat unwilling – admission of the need for the imaginative impulse in order that reason may communicate its sacred purpose via the flesh. His chosen 'root' metaphor of the 'vestment' reminds one of the dandified appearance of *Mankind's* vices – Newguise, Nowadays and Nought – and his description of the corporeal imagination as a slavish adherence to a world in which reason is doomed to negation helpfully illuminates one of Mischief's early encounters with the austere figure of Mercy:

I beseech you heartily, leave your [calcination],
Leave your chaff, leave your corn, leave your dalliation;
Your wit is little, your head is mickle; ye are full of predication.²

The spectator of *Mankind* is invited to share the space and time of the stage with an imaginative spectrum which finds its physical realization in a cast list which spans the profane world of those seduced by vestments which not only clothe, but finally prove the negation of reason, and the sacred realm wherein the imagination, and the images which flow from it, serve only to enhance the language of reason and illuminate the divinity of the Word. The problem for a contemporary cast is to find ways to allow the stage to articulate these concerns without veiling – or upstaging – the central role of its language; to offer, via reason, a glimpse into the heart of faith.

Our rehearsals for the performance of *Mankind* began with the relating of an anecdote. The three undergraduates who were to personify the plays vices were asked to relate a personal and incidental anecdote to a partner who must then repeat it to another, using only gobbledegook. Once again the transmuted anecdote is passed on but this time it must be repeated using only physical gestures. The final recipient is then asked to reconstitute the language content of the anecdote, taking as a guide nothing other than the promptings of the body which has been inherited. The results were absurd and often grotesque; the reconstituted language rarely adhered to the confines of logic, demonstrating rather the tics, stutters and eruptions of a body seeking expression at the very boundaries of linguistic possibility. This exercise, executed at tremendous speed, opened the sluice-gates to a flood of bodily impulses which rained chaos upon the carefully ordered structures of linguistic logic. Out of this corporeal chaos the three N's emerged.

Mercy, by contrast, was reasoned into existence. His emergence employed an absolute economy of physical effort; evidence of rehearsal was – in the early stages – very often provided by nothing more than a tight ring of coffee cups, cigarette butts and discarded pages of text suggestive of a morning spent in static debate during which the mind flew but the body remained obdurate in its refusal to follow suit. Mercy was reasoned into being because without the language of reason Mercy cannot exist. The energy which finally propelled this figure off the page and onto the stage of *Mankind* was born of the rarefied air of language in active engagement with its own generation of meaning. Mercy's body must be, for the spectator, the physical representation of the breath of divine grace by which Mankind may be saved from debasement; in dramatic terms this means that he must appear as the physical embodiment of a linguistic ideal. Mercy is not a character, he is rather the energy of reflective thought made flesh.

Every 'body' represented by the cast list of *Mankind* requires careful consideration concerning its translation from language to corporeal presence. This harnessing of theatrical power – the physical presence and potential for transformation

of the actor's body – to theological doctrine is exacting and integral to the successful playing of the piece before an audience. Indeed, for a contemporary audience, it is the innate theatricality of the form employed in *Mankind*, rather than the imparting of the Christian message, which proves the enduring strength of the text. This strength may be attributed to the author's unerring faith that language is being, and that to be able to speak the truth, the true history of man, is to be man in all his glory and divine potential. Benedict Anderson acknowledges the medieval worldview as one which creates bodies entirely unrecognizable to the contemporary eye, describing the nature of their alien quality thus:

There is no idea here of a world so separated from language that all languages are equidistant (and thus interchangeable) signs for it. In effect, ontological reality is apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of re-presentation: the truth language of Church Latin, Qur'anic Arabic, or Examination Chinese.³

The concept of a truth-language via which the body may be re-born into divine understanding is not so unfamiliar to contemporary eyes. After all, the dominant scientific discourses depend upon this claim for their continued existence. The theatrical enactment of a body born, or transformed by language, tends, however, to prove something more of a rarity. This was, for the directors and actors alike, the most challenging aspect of rehearsing *Mankind*; the theatrical creation of bodies, born of language, bearing a worldview utterly alien to our own.

The process by which this transmutation of the flesh was attempted was something akin to an act of faith; often Peter Meredith and I would stare – at the end of a three-hour rehearsal – in mute incomprehension – not to say blind panic – at the short passage of text we had managed, in that time, to traverse. We had decided, very early on in rehearsals, that without an absolute understanding of the language being spoken, on the part of the actors, not only would the play's content fail to communicate its meaning to the spectators but also, and probably more important, that without 'understanding' one risked sacrificing the energy required to generate the bodies implied by the text. It became evident, after the first week of rehearsals that 'understanding' in relation to the text of *Mankind* meant – for all involved in the production – the Herculean task of allowing oneself the liberty of seeing the world anew. The detailed exploration of the play's language, made possible by Peter's presence, loosed, for the actors, the shackles of subjective, contextual response and – simultaneously – hurled them into an unknown world bounded by a knowledge

absolute and incontrovertible both in its reasoning and its physical effects. This disorientation of the known produced, in the early stages of the work, an erosion of the combined energies of the cast as we collectively mourned the loss of a stage world founded upon psychological complexity and shot through with motivated action. Beyond this, however, lay the thrilling discovery of a potential, latent in the play's patterning of language, of a physical text dependent upon the articulation of the relationship between the body and its use of language, which was to prove the key to the staging of the piece. As a reader of *Mankind* one enjoys the narrative structuring which illuminates the battle for the soul of man; watching *Mankind* one is offered the opportunity to witness a 'theatre' of physical transformation in which a body is reborn into the 'truth'-bearing 'beauty' of divine language.

The unknown author of *Mankind* structures the text around the quest for a body in which the flesh has been subordinated to the soul; in theatrical terms, this involves the comprehension – via experience – and transmission – via the power of language – of the 'true', and therefore theatrically powerful, history of man. The play begins with a recounting of this history, offered authoritatively by the figure of Mercy who, in our production, began speaking from a position behind the audience – giving language precedence over the figure's physical presence – and only gradually moved to a command of the stage space. Mankind was given the same entrance but his arrival after the first disruptive sequence involving Mischief and the three N's required Mercy to pull the spectators' focus to this diminutive figure who hovered, amiably and yet with hesitation, at the edge of the stage. His introduction to the audience is conciliatory and lacking the resonance given to Mercy's opening address; it speaks of human frailty as yet unyoked to an entry into the language of divine grace. It is language which has not yet been tested by the bodily experience of dissolution and concomitant despair:

My name is Mankind. I have my composition
Of a body and of a soul, of condition contrary.
Betwix them twain is a great division;
He that should be subject, now he hath the victory.

This is to me a lamentable story,
To see my flesh of my soul to have governance.
Where the good-wife is master the good-man may be sorry.
I may both sigh and sob; this is a piteous remembrance!⁴

The wretched figure of Mankind knows that his body is a battlefield in which the fight of good and evil rages, and he is thus able to recognize and seek counsel from Mercy when he encounters him. Although he hears Mercy's words of warning, however, the distance between their speculative existence and the reality which they reflect creates the dramatic dynamic with which the spectator will follow Mankind's journey through the narrative of the play. The undergraduate playing Mankind had all her early rehearsals with Mercy and it is interesting to note her observation that it wasn't until she had spent time working with the N's that she felt she actually existed within the play. She spoke of 'embodying' the figure once she had begun to experience his downfall, and this – of course – is entirely apt, given the theatrical logic which we had discovered to be operating through the text: Mercy pities the fleshy state of Mankind but attempts to speak to his soul, whilst the N's are entirely concerned with the corporeal and exist in active combat with any notion of the spiritual.

We all found it extraordinarily difficult to position Mercy on the stage, in relation to the other figures in the play, but particularly in relation to Mankind. Too close and his words became a jabber, losing their meaning for even the most discerning ear; too distant and they failed to retain the necessary focus upon the physical presence and spiritual condition of Mankind. In the scene during which Mankind is first made aware of the presence of the offstage N's, whilst simultaneously attempting to attend to the onstage Mercy's admonitions concerning constant spiritual vigilance, we discovered a theatrical efficacy in playing a tight focus – as if in close-up – on the eyes of Mankind who was knelt centre-stage, with Mercy, distanced and upstage of him, offering his language as a 'voice-over' to the action. By setting the scene thus, the inference was that the spectator was being offered the privilege of seeing – with the eyes of Mercy, as it were – into the very soul of Mankind. One became aware of every distracted flicker, every downcast impulse of guilt, and through this moment of intimate detail one began to be able to articulate the nature of the relationship between the all-seeing and, thereby tortured figure of Mercy, and the frail and fractured flesh of Mankind.

Although Mankind hears the words spoken to him by Mercy at the start of the play he is unable to position himself, as a subject, within the power-house of language which that figure represents. It is, therefore, only his relationship with Mercy that makes him theatrically compelling for the spectator. Before he is able not only to hear, but also to understand the language Mercy offers, he must, as part of his journey, first fall prey to the evil wiles of devilish Titivillus, the collector of idle speech and careless words, who weaves from the detritus of language the means by which Mankind will experience his descent into the foul abyss of the flesh. Titivillus'

assault upon the well-intentioned Mankind issues forth from a stage-world in which the chaos of the profane imagination has – temporarily – achieved dominance. The enveloping of the audience into this world marks a strict contrast with the relationship formed with Mercy throughout the piece where the truth is offered, via reason, and the responsibility for accepting that truth is laid at the feet of each individual witness to it. In the anarchic realm of the vices the distance between the spectator and the stage action is negated and the immediacy of the spectacle overtakes the possibility of reflection upon action. Having been inveigled into paying for the appearance of Titivillus the spectator finds himself witness to what amounts to little more than a tawdry side-show which nevertheless has catastrophic consequences for Mankind. At this climactic moment of the play the profane imagination utilises all the powers at its disposal; the downfall of Mankind is achieved via the use of illusion, the disruption of the most basic bodily functions and finally the eruption of dream as reality whereupon Mankind becomes convinced of Mercy's duplicity and resolves to cleave to vice rather than strive for divine truth.

Thus, at the climax of the play, Mankind becomes a figure lost in the tics and stutters of linguistic distraction; shorn of his quest for divine truth and therefore peripheral to the 'true' history of man. In this state Mankind is doomed to an endless limbo of infantile actions and meaningless babble, no longer able to maintain his role within the drama as anything more than an irritating distraction.

He is, of course, saved by Mercy, but the salvation is an interesting one; from the depths of his degradation – physically manifested by a radically pared version of his original costume, 'after the new guise' which now exhibits erstwhile covered flesh – he must find the will to emerge from his crouched, mute state and join Mercy at the centre of the stage where they will, the two of them, debate theology. The distance which must be traversed by Mankind is, of course, spiritual for the span of this journey marks the retrieval of his soul. It is also, however, a physical journey which signals the theatrical 'rebirth', or transformation of the wretched Mankind and the reconstitution of the stage-space from a 'playground', ever vulnerable to the distractions of the vices, to a space in which the beauty of divine language triumphs over the assertions of the flesh. Mercy makes his invitation thus:

God will not make you privy unto his Last judgment.

Justice and equity shall be fortified, I will not deny.

[But] Truth may not so cruelly proceed in his strait argument

But that Mercy shall rule the matter without controversy.

Arise now, and go with me in this deambulatory.
Incline your capacity; my doctrine is convenient.
Sin not in hope of mercy, that is crime notary;
To trust overmuch in a prince, it is not expedient.⁵

Previously the stage has been named as Mankind's 'plot' and – by the vices – as a cod 'parliament' but this is the first time that Mercy has offered a name to the space he now occupies. It is perhaps significant that this climactic transformation of the stage space occurs hard upon the heels of Mercy's despair when, having witnessed Mankind's refusal of his grace, he too, momentarily, falls prey to the corruption of the profane imagination; his faith in the redemption of man begins to fail him and only a heartfelt prayer to heaven is able to renew his will. Dramatically, Mercy's 'passion' is an extraordinarily powerful moment; it not only charges the actor with the challenging – and risk-laden – task of 'humanizing' this hitherto abstracted figure at his moment of isolated desolation, but also serves to complete the nightmarish descent of the spectator as witness. What begins as tawdry spectacle becomes spectacle of an altogether different order when, as in our production, Mercy turns the full force of his disdain and contempt upon those watching him:

Man, unkind wherever thou be, for all this world was not
apprehensible
To discharge thine original offence, thralldom, and captivity,
Till God's own well-beloved son was obedient and passible.
Every drop of his blood was shed to purge thine iniquity.
I discommend and disallow this often mutability.
To every creature thou art dispectuous and odible.
Why art thou so uncourteous, so inconsiderate? [. . .]⁶

The pact, made between the spectator and the vices – as precursor to Titivillus' entrance – removes the distance between the stage action and those who witness it; Mercy's passion occurs within, and is occasioned by, this same space. The contempt which he turns upon the spectator thus achieves a level of shock, immediacy and individual directness completely unassociated – formerly – with this figure of reason and debate. One might argue that it is this moment, provided by the manipulation of a complex theatrical dynamic, which proves the true climax of *Mankind*, for, once again, we find the stage space itself articulating beyond the written content of the play.

Mercy leaves the stage renewed in his quest to save Mankind and reappears bearing – in our production – a cross-staff. Following the logic of the space argued thus far, the need now to claim and cleanse it becomes an imperative if Mankind's soul is to be redeemed. Mercy's naming of the space as a 'deambulatory' or 'walk-way' suggests a change of rhythm after the frenetic quality of the preceeding scenes, and his injunction to Mankind to match his pace and attend to his doctrine restores a framework of reason to the site of erstwhile chaos; it also provides Mankind with a theatrical structure within which to build a bridge back to faith. Mercy's invitation to Mankind, who was at this point in our production crouched and trembling beside the pulpit, was – in early rehearsals – attempted with Mercy physically helping Mankind to his feet. Given that the invitation is proffered midway through Mercy's address, however, a problem arose concerning the speed with which Mankind was required to transform his state. A 'helpful' Mercy was certainly not a theatrical Mercy, nor did his action aid Mankind in a theatrical exposure of spiritual travail. Working against the assumed inference of physical aid, therefore, we placed Mercy at a distance from Mankind and required of his journey the spectacle of transition. This transformation was hardly acknowledged by Mercy, rather he became an agent to its process by falling into step with the, still hesitant, Mankind and offering him a contemplative pace and air of reflection, entirely in keeping with the stage-space as 'deambulatory', which lent a new maturity to this theatrical figure. By naming, and thereby re-making the stage-space, and the purposes it should serve, Mercy thus enabled Mankind to emerge from distraction and enter the divine truth via language.

Whilst rehearsing this scene, Richard Boon, who played Mercy, constantly articulated an impulse – referenced to the language of the text – to embrace the newly fledged Mankind, but efforts in this direction proved a hindrance to the figure's theatrical growth. Finally, we determined to play against this impulse and allow Mankind an ever greater distance from his agent of salvation. The two actors, having traversed the stage side by side, gradually moved apart as Mankind found the language to describe his fall, and ended by tracing a diagonal across the stage space, in a configuration which appeared, to the actors, to be working in diametrical opposition to the inferences of the text, and yet provided the audience with an aesthetic which was able to articulate the theatricality of this final moment of encounter. By placing the greatest distance allowed by the stage-space between the two figures, one made of the central playing area a void which began, therefore, to resound – in the manner of an echo-chamber – to the newly wrought language of reconciliation, rippling with the anguish experienced in its making. For both Peter and myself, as spectators to this moment, there was no doubt as to the power lent this moment by the 'de-fleshing' of

the central stage-space. The stage now belonged to Mercy, the battle had been won. Mercy's final utterances were addressed, from centre-stage and thence from the pulpit, to a Mankind who had returned to the mass represented by the audience; a figure now indistinguishable from his fellow spectators.

After an immense struggle with despair – on the part of both Mercy and Mankind – Mankind is welcomed back into the protective embrace, not of the physical presence of Mercy, but rather of his language charged with historical power. He is thus granted a body charged with theatrical power and becomes, at last, as theatrically compelling a figure as the austere Mercy who has guided, and guarded, the play's narrative from beginning to end. By comparison, the vices of the play have provided little more than empty, though eye-catching, spectacle. It is Mercy and Mankind, the carriers of reason, who will etch themselves as after-images with which the spectator will depart the play.

NOTES

¹ Richard of St Victor, *De Unione Corporis et Spiritus* in *Patrologia Latina*, 177.285, cited in Richard Kearney, *The Wake of the Imagination: Ideas of Creativity in Western Culture* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1988), p. 121.

² *Mankind: An Acting Edition*, ed. by Peter Meredith (Leeds: Alumnus, 1997), p. 42, ll. 45-47.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso & Left Books, 1983), p. 14.

⁴ Meredith, *ibid.*, pp. 50-52, ll. 194-201.

⁵ Meredith, *ibid.*, p. 92, ll. 839-46.

⁶ Meredith, *ibid.*, p. 84, ll. 742-48.