

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Jane Oakshott, 'Experiment with a Long-Range Cue: York Mystery Plays 1994 ', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 29, (1998), 249-55

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=121539&silo_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English

School of English

University of Leeds

<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

Experiment with a Long-Range Cue: York Mystery Plays 1994

Jane Oakshott

Only thirty years ago processional staging was an alien concept to all but theatre historians, and the first reconstruction performance¹ was done simply to test theories about the very basic features of the genre. Did waggon staging work? Did it take too long to be practicable? Was it an unendurable strain for the audience? Did it provide adequate acting spaces? Could one move a waggon around safely and quickly?

The academic and popular success of this first production encouraged further full scale reconstructions,² with a change of emphasis in their purpose. Because the processional form obviously worked so very well, we were able to use its broad framework as a basis for testing details. Most important, of course, is the testing of information suggested by references in texts or account books and covering all aspects of staging. Who should wear masks? What musical resources should be used? How much action should happen at ground level? What do waggons look like?

It has, however, also been possible to work the other way round – to examine authentic productions for illumination of the records. That is, to see if certain details of staging (present for practical reasons and suggested by basic knowledge of drama) can explain otherwise puzzling references in the medieval sources; or might suggest elements for which evidence is not yet forthcoming. This article describes one such detail.

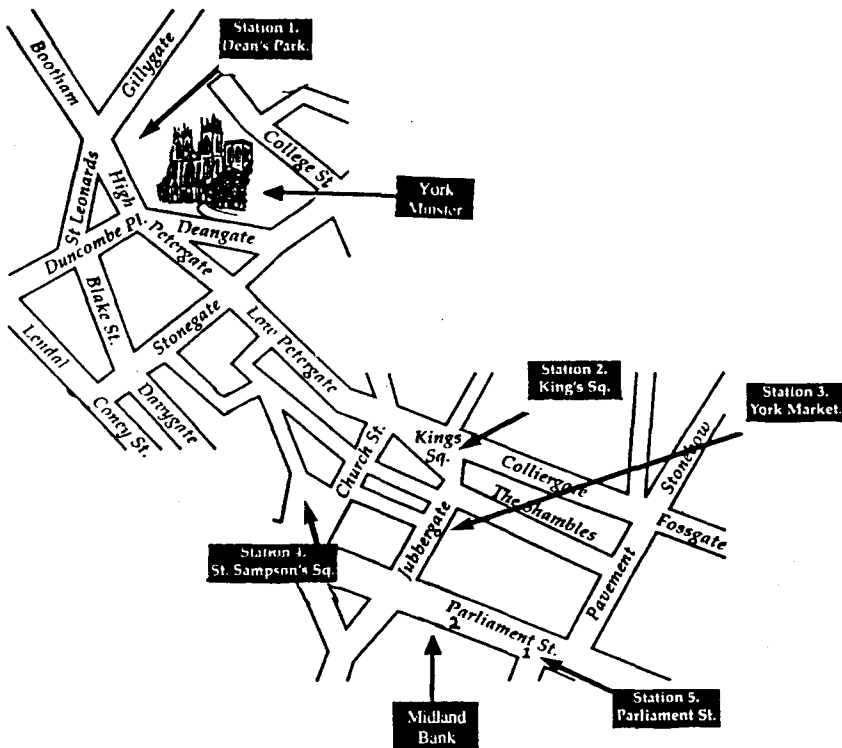
In *York Mystery Plays '94*³ the need arose to relay a cue over a considerable distance. The method used was chosen for its practicality and for the sheer fun of it. It is only in retrospect that we realised it might be significant for medieval stage management and even crowd control techniques.

The production consisted of nine pageants from the York Cycle performed processionally, on waggons, at five stations in York City Centre. As far as possible we were following authentic staging and production techniques – for example, only medieval materials and effects, and the correct weight of costumes, were used. The

production was experimental to the extent that so long a route and so many stations had not been tried before, and certainly not in York's congested town centre.

It was the first time for over 400 years that local York townspeople had been responsible for the production of multiple pageants from their Cycle: and the first time that pageants from every part of the Cycle had been presented in the York streets.⁴ In the number of pageants, of stations and of people, it was the largest processional performance in York since the sixteenth century.

York '94 was thus a decisive step forward in the history of reconstructive staging: an impressive one for its initiators, the Friends of York Festival; and a courageous one for the City authorities, still wary of processional staging after crowd control problems in 1988 and 1992.⁵



York Mystery Plays '94: Map of the Stations

(Adapted from map by Anderton Overton Design Partnership, with permission)

It was proper that a civic event of this nature be marked by some suitable civic celebration and for this reason, as well as for dramatic ones, I wanted the Minster bells to mark the end of the last pageant (*The Assumption*) at the last station. Now this raised an interesting problem. How were we to cue in the bells accurately at the required moment?

A direct aural or visual cue was out of the question since the bell-tower, a quarter of a mile away, was well out of sight and sound of Station 5 (see map) with several tall buildings intervening between the two. Various alternative methods of communication were dismissed as being unimaginatively modern (intercom) or unreliable (a runner). I decided to try a relayed visual signal as being historically acceptable and potentially fast.

The details of the system were the result of a happy collaboration of the three bodies involved – York Minster Society of Change Ringers, the Midland Bank, and York Settlement Players who performed our final pageant, the *Assumption of the Virgin*.⁶

In aiming for accuracy we had to take into account two factors: sight-lines and timing.

Sight-lines

Sight-line obstruction meant that the cue needed to be relayed twice.

- (1) Intervening buildings made direct cueing between waggon and bell-tower impossible, so we needed to set up an intermediate signal post. For this, the most suitable position was the roof of the Midland Bank, as it was near Station Five and high enough to give direct visual contact with the Minster.

In view of the ceremonial nature of the event we decided to use the Bank's flagpole for relaying the signal. Six feet long and projecting from the roof at an angle of 45 degrees over the street, this pole is easily visible from the Minster. The flag was to be worked, appropriately enough, by one of the Bank's messengers.

- (2) The Bank's roof was too high for an aural cue to reach it from the waggon, and the waggon's superstructure (Heaven) obstructed the messenger's view of the action. It was therefore important that the cue be initiated in the usual way, by the Stage Manager standing close to the action.

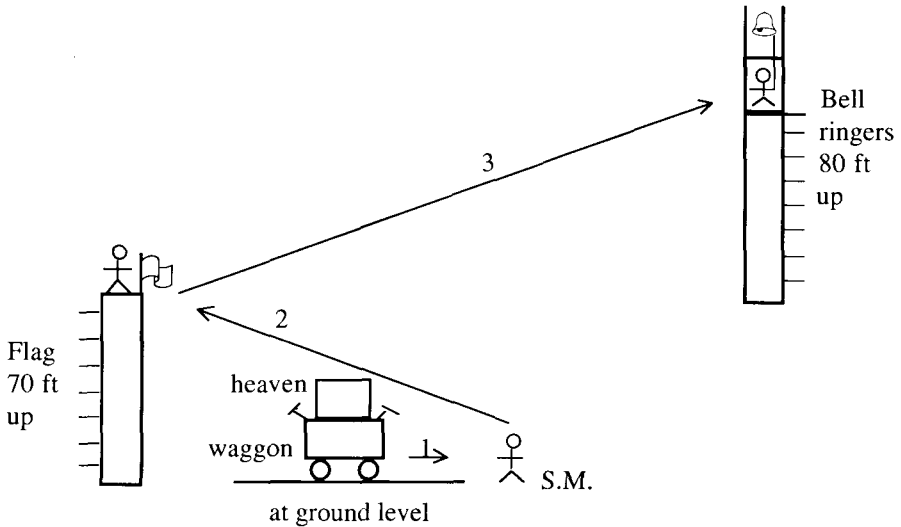


Diagram of the Cue Relays

Timing

The bells were needed as the last actor left the stage at the close of the 'Ave Regina' which ended the *Assumption* in this production. We chose to use the hymn itself for setting the cue points because it was a fixed length, and was not subject to inadvertent cuts since the singers were reading their music. This final hymn lasted 40 seconds.

There were three elements in the timing:

- (1) the point at which the bells were to be heard;
- (2) the delay between pulling on the ropes and the bells sounding. (It takes two seconds for York Minster bells to be heard in the bell-tower. From a quarter of a mile away and at ground level this can be extended to two and a half seconds);
- (3) the warning time needed for bells and ringers to be ready. This needed also to be only a few seconds as in normal circumstances York Minster bells are always left in the 'up' position ready for ringing. (Because of their weight it takes 20 minutes to ring them up from scratch.)

The performance was scheduled to end at Station Five at about 6 p.m. It was

therefore agreed that the messenger should go up to the roof when the *Assumption* waggon reached Station Five (c. 5.40 p.m.). He was to raise the flag immediately to signal his presence. The ringers were to be in the bell-tower from 5.40 p.m., and should be on the watch for the cue-sequence from 5.55 p.m.

The unknown factor was – how long would it take to relay the main cue? And from that, how accurately could the sound-effect be timed? For several reasons a full rehearsal of all the parties involved was not possible, so the answer came only as the performance finished, experimental to the last.

The sequence of events was as follows:⁷

Timings	Signals/cues
(1) Waggon to Station 5 Messenger to roof (5.40)	Messenger raises flag to top of flagpole Acknowledging wave from Stage Manager
(2) 'Ave Regina' begins: (6.04)	Stage Manager waves twice to Messenger Flag dips once briefly to warn Bells
(3) Mid-song (19 secs)	Holding gesture from Stage Manager to Messenger Flag dips twice quickly as 'stand by' to Bells
(4) Song ends (40 secs)	Stage Manager waves three times to Messenger Flag lowered fast.

The bells were heard in Parliament Street exactly as the last angel left the stage, four seconds after the Stage Manager's final cue. Given the known two-and-a-half seconds taken for the sound to travel, we found that the double relay of the cue took just one and a half seconds.

Honesty compels me to note here, that by the time our experiment took place, Station Five had been moved⁸ to avoid the revving motorbikes which infiltrated the precinct after 5.00 p.m. So, as it turned out, the bells were not audible to people close to the waggon, though they could be heard clearly by those standing at the back and by those watching from the original Station position some 30 yards down the road. We hope to use the same method again for the *York Guilds' Mystery Plays* in 1998 (with authority this time for stricter traffic measures) and it will be interesting to

assess any variations which occur on that occasion.

In spite of this unexpected development the experiment showed that, even over a distance, a cue relayed by visual means can be extremely fast – very little slower, in fact, than a cue delivered in the close and possibly cluttered confines of a backstage area. It can also be very accurately timed. A visual signalling method could clearly be effective anywhere that direct cueing was impossible, or where large areas were involved, for example, in Royal Entries or any kind of procession.

I am not of course claiming that this method was ever needed or used for the individual pageants in the York Cycle. But it is perhaps worth speculating on the use of some visual signalling system across the whole York procession route. Such a system could have been used for controlling the flow of the procession itself, from first to last stations, for example, or from last station to Lendal Bridge.

Perhaps even more important, a system of coded signals could have been used to relay more complicated messages or instructions for the purposes of crowd control. In a city where fire was an ever present risk, and violence not unknown, a quick, discreet and unencumbered way of passing information to and fro would allow a welcome measure of control over the entire procession, and over the crowds who flocked to watch it.

* * *

Our long distance cue worked excellently in its dramatic context. It will be even more satisfactory if it can be found to explain some obscure reference. Even if it doesn't, it was an entertaining way to involve two important local organizations; a valid operation in its own right; and the sort of experiment that is vital to the life, as opposed to the existence, of historical reconstructions.

NOTES

¹ **Leeds/York (1975)** Director: Jane Oakshott; Chairman of the Steering Committee: Lynette Muir. Produced by the University of Leeds Centre for Medieval Studies as part of the University's Centenary Celebrations.

² **Toronto/York (1977)** Joint production by David Parry, Artistic Director of Poculi Ludique Societas, and Alexandra Johnston, Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the University of Toronto.

Wakefield/Towneley (1980) Director: Jane Oakshott; Chairman of the Mystery Plays Steering Committee for Wakefield Festival: Councillor Norman Hazell.

Leeds/Chester (1983) Part of the University of Leeds Renaissance Festival. Director of the Festival and the Plays: Jane Oakshott; Artistic Director: Peter Meredith.

Toronto/Chester (1983) A joint production by David Parry, Artistic Director of Poculi Ludique Societas, and Professor Johnston, Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the University of Toronto.

³ Presented by the Friends of York Festival as part of York Early Music Festival. Artistic and Executive Director: Jane Oakshott; Associate Director: Rachel Semlyen; Musical Director: Richard Rastall.

⁴ Important precedents for waggon staging in York existed: a single waggon play had been performed every Festival year since 1951 by Archbishop Holgate's School; and the joint Universities' productions organized by Professor Twycross brought processional staging of the *York Cycle 'Mary' Plays* (1988) and the *'Passion'* sequence (1992) to the best preserved part of the original route – Stonegate and Petergate.

⁵ Two articles in *Medieval English Theatre* refer to the situation. Philip Butterworth, 'The York *Crucifixion*: Actor/Audience Relationship'. *METH*, 14 (1992), 67-76 (p. 75, n. 1). John McKinnell discusses the artistic implications in 'Producing the York *Mary Plays*', *METH*, 12:2 (1990), 101-23 (pp. 117-20). The problem facing the Police and the City Centre Authority was not one of artistic effect, but the threat of legal action by the Stonegate Traders' Association in the event of any such performance in the future.

⁶ Particular thanks are due to Paul White of the Midland Bank; David Potter, Ringing Master of the York Minster Society of Change Ringers; and Ray Alexander, Director, and Carol Dutton, Stage Manager, for York Settlement Players; for entering into this exercise with spirit, and doing so much to ensure its success.

⁷ In performance the cue relay team took their timings from the action of the play. The exact timings were noted in performance and verified from the unedited version of the videofilm: *York Mystery Plays 1994*, ed. by Karen Hodder (York University Audio-Visual Centre, 1994).

⁸ See map, Station Five 1 and 2.