



Bath time ... the RSC's eccentrically inventive production of *Everyman* PHOTOGRAPH: NEIL LIBBERT

The let-down

HOW do you present religious drama in a secular age? Bill Bryden's answer in both the *Mysteries* and Dennis Potter's *Son Of Man* was to rely on communal memory, folk rock and audience involvement. Kathryn Hunter and Marcello Magni take a different tack in their production of *Everyman* at Stratford's Other Place. They deploy many of the physical techniques of *Theatre de Complicité*, from which they both hail. But their production, though eccentrically inventive, seems at odds with the gravity and purity of this 16th-century Morality Play.

Everyman, as scholars point out, is not a bit like other medieval Moralities. There is no battle between good and evil, no interjection of AP Rossiter's "vices, devils, squibs and jocularities". It is a work of unrelieved earnestness in which God, despairing of human vanity, tells Death to go to *Everyman* and bid him prepare for a mortal pilgrimage. In his final journey of reckoning, *Everyman* is deserted by Fellowship, Kindred, Goods, Beauty, Strength and various allegorical companions. Only Good Deeds accompanies the repentant sinner to the grave and ensures his ascension to Heaven.

Clearly a work like this poses problems for a modern audience. We are not used to dramatised abstractions. We are even less used to the idea of a God who arraigns mankind for "living without dread in worldly prosperity", who talks menacingly of his "sharp rod" and who threatens unrepentant sinners with "everlasting fire". The play is a powerful product of Catholic Europe, and what it says, unequivocally, is that Man can be saved only by his actions — and even then, they'd better be pretty substantial. "And they be small," in the words of the concluding speech, "before God he hath no help at all."

Yet I believe the play can be made to work for a modern audience. It deals with the fear of dying, which is universal. It sees human life as something that has to be accounted for — an idea that haunts drama from *Hamlet* to *Peer Gynt*. It also taps into our residual belief that theatre should be morally improving — witness the modern popularity of *An Inspector Calls* or Hofmannstahl's *Jedermann*, which every summer confronts well-heeled Salzburg Festival-goers with the vanity of riches and the imperative of death. Propaganda has always been a vital part of theatre, and *Everyman*, at its most basic, tells us how to live.

What it needs, however, is moral conviction and imagery that

matches the text, both of which seem to be wanting in the Hunter-Magni production. In a strange preface, Joseph Myddel's naked *Everyman* is given a ritual rub-down in a tin bath before going as best man to Fellowship's wedding. God is a homely figure in white wig and gardening clothes. Death arrives in the tempting shape of Josette Bushell-Mingo in low-cut gown. And when the allegorical Five Wits appear, they turn out to be a ragged-arsed circus troupe doing funny business with ladders.

I have no objection to modern dress. It goes perfectly well with a work that harps on the emptiness of materialism. Bryden's *Mysteries* also showed that you can achieve the numinous in everyday working-clothes. But although they reject medieval iconography, Hunter and Magni never replace it with anything substantial of their own. The allegorical figures simply become clownish, sub-*Complicité* types, with Cousin played as a funny foreigner, Fellowship's bride as a man in drag, and Goods as a seedy Arthur Daley spiv. The pervading jokiness fatally reduces the paths of *Everyman's* desecration.

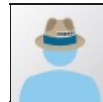
Only when the production resorts to basic religious imagery does it touch the heart. The sight of the penitent *Everyman* dragging a heavy stone or nestling in the arms of a beneficent angel is highly affecting; and when Myra McFadyen's prostrate, hempen-clothed Good Deeds is raised from the ground by *Everyman's* scourging, our spirits rise with her. At such moments something momentous — the salvation of the hero's soul — is at stake; at other times we seem to be watching a hectic attempt to lend tonal variety to a work whose very strength lies in its sombre unity.

I can see the problem. We have no recent tradition on which to draw in presenting medieval Morality Plays. We also lack a shared faith or fear of damnation. But theatre is a strange medium in which the conviction of the actors can lead to a willing suspension of disbelief; here, however, the pervasive irony left me only spasmodically carried away by the notion that we shall all confront a day of reckoning.

The RSC is right to revive this rarely seen play. But the challenge facing the company in its Other Place season, where Katie Mitchell goes on to direct the *Mysteries*, is not just to test the dramatic vitality of pre-Shakespearean drama. It is something even deeper: to recapture the spirit of a time when drama made the miraculous manifest and had a direct moral purpose. If theatre doesn't lead us to question the way we live, what is it for?

At The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon (01789 295623).

Billington Guardian Everyman



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