

THE 1951 AND 1952 REVIVALS OF THE CHESTER PLAYS

David Mills

On 18 June 1951, the city of Chester ... presented an ... ambitious selection of plays from its cycle, though with less publicity and critical attention than York.

John Elliott has concisely described the textual adaptation and production of that 1951 Festival of Britain revival of Chester's Whitsun Plays.¹ The process by which the revival came about can be reconstructed from files DPU/7 and DPU/11 in the Chester City Record Office, which contain correspondence relating to the preparations for that 1951 production and to the decision to stage a further series of performances in the following year.² From them we may gain a better understanding of the difficulties facing authorities undertaking the unprecedented task of reviving such plays and of the factors which shaped the production at Chester in 1951. The correspondence also contains a highly original proposal for processional production advanced by the Curator of the Grosvenor Museum, Graham Webster, which deserves to be more widely known.³ Against this background some of the considerations underlying the second Chester revival, in 1952, become clearer.

The correspondence passed to and from the office of Chester's Town Clerk, Mr G. Burkinshaw. The files, though substantial, are not complete. Discussions were clearly under way before the first letter in the file, of 26 September 1949. The second letter, also relating to an otherwise unrecorded meeting, contains Webster's proposals and initiates the process that led to the production.

Graham Webster's Proposals

On 20 December 1949 the Curator of Chester's Grosvenor Museum, Graham Webster, a notable archaeologist and scholar, wrote to the city's Director for Education about a recent meeting with Burkinshaw about the Plays at which Burkinshaw had asked Webster to read through the plays and:

put forward some of my ideas concerning their possible performance in the streets of Chester.

The plan, which seems to have been discussed at the meeting, was evidently to produce a quasi-authentic revival in the streets of the town. Webster claimed to have read through 'several versions' of the Plays, and now put forward suggestions which he asked the Director to convey to Burkinshaw.

1) *Text*. Webster first addressed the problem of the acting text. He believed a modernised version was necessary because of the difficulties of the language and proposed using an adapted version of a text by I. and O. Bolton King which had been published in the 1930s, with the reservation that that version had been prepared for a stage production and had divided the Plays into a series of short episodes.⁴ He also felt that in the Bolton King text 'a number of good and interesting parts are omitted'. But since the original text took 'two whole days' to perform, some selection would be necessary. (Where Webster gained his impression of a two day performance is not clear; Chester's Whitsun Plays were performed over three days, except at their last performance in 1575 which occupied four days.)

Already, however, Webster foresaw another 'serious difficulty' — the possibility of censorship by the Lord Chamberlain. He understood 'that the persons of God and Christ are not allowed to be portrayed by actors and only their voices can be heard'. He felt that for the rôle of God the difficulties are 'not insuperable', and that in fact 'a slightly magnified voice off stage would probably give greater effect'. The same possibility was considered in Tudor Cheshire:⁵

For then shoulde all those persones that as godes doe playe
in clowdes come downe with voyce, and not be seene.

Post-Reformation Banns, lines 196—7

But he recognised that the person of Christ did pose an insuperable problem, since the prohibition would mean that no part of the Passion could be staged. In consequence, he proposed editing the Bolton King version into six independent plays, selecting from the Childhood of Man and the Nativity.

2) *Production*. Having considered the problem of the text, Webster turned to the implications for production.

They could only be staged satisfactorily in two storeys which would involve a carefully planned superstructure to give an additional

raised acting platform above the floor of the vehicle as well as curtained recesses behind the medial screen.

The vehicles were to be side-tipping lorries which would be driven to a number of playing places in the streets. At each playing place there would be 'a proscenium supported by a framed structure and a canvas roof' under which the lorries would park. The fixed structure would provide a frame for the action and a shelter for the actors from sun and rain. Webster included a number of sketches in his letter to illustrate how his proposals might work in practice. His plans go some way towards professional production, but are clearly influenced by contemporary theatre design. This is confirmed by his suggestion of 'rough seating accommodation' at each playing place to provide comfort for the audience and to ensure that sightlines were protected.

Webster expected each of the six plays to be performed by a different acting company, imitating the procedures of the medieval production. But he felt that, since each play would occupy approximately 30 minutes, it would be unreasonable to expect players to perform at six sites in a afternoon, and he therefore proposed limiting performances to 'three or four sites'. Chester's Whitsun Plays were performed at four or possibly five sites in the city, perhaps reflecting the same practical concern; but, of course, each company performed only on one day, whereas the 1951 revival envisaged an almost daily series of performances.

3) *The Producer*. Webster stressed that these are preliminary ideas whose implications demand more detailed consideration. Amateur dramatic societies should be consulted 'at an early stage'. It would be necessary to have 'simple' lighting. Music might be provided, both to entertain the audiences between change-overs and also to provide accompaniments during the performance. The possibility of using microphones should be considered. But these details were secondary to a major requirement that was to prove decisive in shaping the form of Chester's revival:

Above all I feel that success will only be achieved in this venture if a first rate Drama Producer can be engaged to organise the whole affair. Faulty planning and execution could so easily wreck a show of this kind. The use of a well known name would ensure national publicity and make Chester a focus for visitors and if it is successful, once the initial organisation is set up, further repetition would become a much easier business with the experience gained, and one

never knows the Miracle Plays of Chester might well become a National festival reflecting great credit to our city.

The joint aims of commercial attraction and civic glory repeat those of earlier times — ‘for the common welth and prosperity of this city’ was how Burkinshaw’s predecessor, William Newhall, put it in his Proclamation of 1531/2.⁶ Webster’s vision has indeed proved prophetic. Nevertheless, his demand for a first-rate producer was to prove a major difficulty.

Webster’s letter is remarkable, the more so because in acknowledging it on 28 December 1949, the Director of Education says that he had attended the first meeting of the Liverpool Festival Committee only ‘a few days ago’ and had learned ‘for the first time’ that York planned to produce its plays, ‘almost certainly outside the west front of York Minster’. Chester had planned independently and probably in advance of York, and in a very different way. Despite the pervasive image of proscenium-arch theatre, Webster was proposing something original and revolutionary in 1951, a mode of production which no English city has yet implemented. We now need to explore why this vision was not carried out.

The Problems of Execution

The Director of Education’s attendance at the Festival Committee’s meeting seems to have prompted some re-thinking. Three of Webster’s plans were immediately called into question by the letter of 28 December. First, it was argued that if a first-rate producer was to be engaged, he (she?) would have to be paid and, as the Director baldly put it:

It would be necessary to have some means of taking money from the public so as to reduce the cost.

That in turn meant having an area to which access could be controlled, and the Director therefore suggested staging the plays in the cathedral, with admission by programme. The idea of processional performance was therefore quashed. I wonder if the Director’s decision could have been influenced by York’s plans for a fixed-set production. The Director, however, seemed to concede Webster’s demand for a first-rate producer; he says that Mr Willett, of the Arts Council, would enquire about suitable producers. Secondly, he questioned how much textual modernisation would be required:

We need not be too much afraid of the medieval language because it is surprising how much easier it is to understand when it is spoken than when it is read.

Again, I seem to hear a voice other than the Director's speaking here, and one perhaps that was inspired by a concern not to incur the additional expense of producing a new script. Finally, and most surprisingly, the Director challenged the assumption that the Plays should be performed by a series of local companies. He understood that the Midland Drama Company was to perform 'the Coventry cycle of plays at Coventry' and could come to Chester. That information could have come only from the Festival Committee meeting.

The immediate issues now came down to four — the city's contribution to the national Festival of Britain; the provision of a text of the Plays; the appointment of a producer; and the venue.

1) *The City's Festival Programme.* The first may seem a strange consideration since the assumption from the outset was that Chester would produce a version of its play-cycle. But the correspondence suggests that the city was doubtful about the organisation and impact of the revival. The Director of Education had already informally raised the possibility of an outside company performing the Plays in their entirety, and in a letter of 13 January 1950 to Huw Weldon at the Arts Council, Burkinshaw formally raises that possibility.

By 10 March 1950 Burkinshaw was in correspondence with Norman Smith of the Glyndbourne Society and in a letter of 16 May he wrote again to Smith, rejecting a proposal that Tyrone Guthrie and Alfred Francis, the organiser of the Liverpool Festival, produce 'The Image of the Kingdom' in Chester as 'too big a risk for the city to undertake'. Instead, he suggested three possibilities for the Festival in Chester — to engage a producer for the Plays; to accept a Civic Arts Week toured and sponsored by Glyndbourne; to engage the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. A subsequent letter of 17 May makes it clear that these are seen as alternatives.

2) *The Text.* The question of the appointment of an adapter for the Bolton King text was also far from clear and was seen to be linked to the appointment of a producer. On 31 January 1951 at the request of the City Treasurer, who wanted to build the cost into his 1950–51 estimates, Burkinshaw wrote to J.L. Hodgkinson, the Arts Council's North-West Regional Director, for guidance on the appropriate fees for each and was

told £100—£150 for the adapter and a fee of c. £300 for the producer which could be built into the following year's budget. But by 1 March Burkinshaw again wrote to Hodgkinson asking if an adapter was necessary — could the producer work directly from the Bolton King text? This idea seems to have been dropped, but the search for adapter and producer proceeded together for some time. Thus Norman Smith proposed to Burkinshaw on 27 July that Peter Potter of the Salisbury Arts Theatre be appointed producer and James Gregson be appointed as adapter. On 15 June Smith suggested a Miss Jane Griffiths as adapter, saying that she had studied medieval drama in London, and on 9 October, Smith himself agreed to undertake the production and said that he had asked Jane Griffiths to produce specimen adaptations. For reasons unknown, neither of these arrangements was implemented. On 22 October, after an earlier correspondence that is not in the file, the Revd. Joseph McCulloch was invited to be the adapter and to begin work on the text.

3) *The Producer.* The quest for a producer proved even more complicated. On 9 June Burkinshaw reported to Major Reginald Jordan, the BBC's Regional Director of Publicity, that the following had been suggested: Dennis Carey, John Burrell, John Gibson, Peter Ashmore, Michael Langham, Douglas Clevedon [sic], and Martin Browne. Tyrone Guthrie must also have been suggested, since he was subsequently said to be too busy. Browne was clearly the preferred candidate. He seems to have been suggested to Burkinshaw by Francis, for Burkinshaw wrote on 22 May that 'the suggestion is an excellent one', and on 24 May he wrote to Browne inviting him to be producer. Browne replied that he was too busy, but he proposed Peter Potter, his assistant Dennis Carey, or Neville Coghill. Coghill replied that he 'would dearly have liked to have been able to produce the Chester Plays' but he was involved in Oxford's contribution to the Festival. Potter, as noted above, was interviewed by Smith, but when invited, declared himself too busy. A further candidate, James R. Gregson, was also proposed, and by 15 June Smith was also enthusiastically commending John Gibson, who had expressed willingness and was to meet Smith in London:

He is well able also to design sets and costumes. Such a happy combination of Producer and Designer is almost unique.

Smith met both Gregson and Gibson in London, but nothing seems to have come of his approaches.

By now the situation was looking desperate. In fact, Moran Caplan, of the Glyndbourne Society, informing Burkinshaw on 14 September of Potter's refusal, went so far as to urge him to abandon the idea of a professional producer altogether:

A lesser professional [than Potter, Browne or Guthrie] would do a first class job but would invite first class criticism. It therefore seems to us that the best advice we can give you would be that you should undertake it on a fully amateur basis.

But the search continued, ranging over Terrance Tiller, Emyln Williams and John Allen, until a successful agreement seemed to have been reached with John Fernald. Fernald had expressed willingness for a fee which was agreed, and the right to approve the text and the venue. Negotiations reached the stage of offering Fernald the position on 5 January 1951. But letters of 5 February state that Fernald could not undertake the work and refer to a forthcoming meeting on 9 February between representatives of the Council, the County Drama Committee and the Cheshire Rural Community Council with Christopher Ede, the man who finally undertook the production.

5) *Venue*. The venue remained the final problem. The Director of Education had already suggested that the production be in the cathedral. In his letter of 13 January 1950 Burkinshaw also sought Wheldon's advice on production — should it be 'as nearly as possible in the mediaeval manner by using lorries for the various scenes and producing at a number of selected points in the open air'? We have no copy of Wheldon's reply but on 17 May Burkinshaw wrote that the Plays 'might be produced in the open air on the Abbey Green' and on 28 June 1950 he wrote to Bishop Norman Tubbs to ask if the Dean and Chapter would agree to a performance there. 'It would mean making an enclosure and placing seating on the Green and charging for admission.' The Dean and Chapter agreed, asking for a copy of the text to be placed in the cathedral library. It is not clear at what point in the planning the cathedral refectory, the final venue of the production, was proposed, but it is clear that the Revd McCulloch played an important part in the decision. Cottam apparently sought his opinion on a number of possibilities and on 22 November noted McCulloch's preference for the refectory.

The Text

The Revd Joseph McCulloch was, on the face of it, not the obvious adapter of the Bolton King text. Born on Merseyside, he had gained a reputation as a broadcaster on religious affairs.⁷ No reason for his selection is given, though perhaps a combination of his fame, his clerical vocation, and his skill as a popular communicator influenced the decision. But it is evident from the correspondence that the bulk of the work on the text was done by his wife Betty. That, and her policy, are stated in McCulloch's letter to Cottam of 27 December 1950:

My wife, who has done most of the work on the actual language, has thought it right to translate the words which are completely unintelligible to modern audiences but for the most part, to leave naive grammatical constructions and oddities of phrase, which constitute one of the chief charms of these delightful plays.

The typescript of the text was sent to Cottam on 7 February 1951. The Revd McCulloch's accompanying letter reiterates the points made in his previous letter above, and draws attention to two problems. The first concerns the Fall of Lucifer, which he had originally included as a Prologue to the first play but then decided to omit, partly to reduce the length of the play (which he now felt might be too short) and partly because it required the appearance of God on stage:

putting God the Father visibly on the stage, supported by massed ranks of angels and archangels etc — which I thought you might wish to avoid.

He then continues to explore what might happen if this episode were to be included, as he seems to wish:

God the Father could then continue to be visible during the First Scene with Adam in the Garden, up to the time of the Fall — the symbolism presumably [sic] being that *after* the Fall, God could not reveal Himself because of man's sin. How interesting the medieval mind is!

Elliott notes the omission of the Fall of Lucifer from the acting text, but it was in fact part of the original text and scheme.

The second change is an addition to the last scene of the Third Play, the address of Jesus to Peter after the Resurrection of the forgiveness of sins. McCulloch here shows an alertness to the dramatic potential of the plays:

This seems to be a more fitting ending to the whole play, as it suggests, through Peter, the beginnings of the Christian Church, and is the point, so to speak, at which the audience takes over from the players!

It is never clear whether the McCullochs looked beyond the Bolton King text to the text in the cyclic manuscripts, but the effect of handing the responsibility to the audience is wholly in keeping with the ending of the Doomsday play.

Ede was pleased with the text, which he approved in accepting his commission on 13 February. Rather surprisingly, he says:

Incidentally, I think that the Chester Cycle seems to have, as I thought, a much greater humanity, drama and poetry than the others.

Betty McCulloch reported Ede as seemingly 'much moved by the Passion play particularly', a view with which she concurs, claiming it to be:

extraordinary [sic] dramatic in its mounting scene of tension, from the quick opening and the Last Supper. In the moment of the crucifixion and then on to the quiet beauty of the Sepulchre scene. This last play has some of the loveliest poetry in the whole cycle.

Censorship

A factor in McCulloch's unease about the Fall of Lucifer was the fear of censorship by the Lord Chamberlain's Office, a matter that had concerned Webster. Burkinshaw raised the matter with Ede on 10 February 1951, saying that he understood the usual rule to be that God the Father and Christ could not be personified on stage, but that he understood also that a dispensation had been given 'to enable certain scenes in the York cycle to be played'. He also says that he will write to the Dean and Chapter 'since it is possible that there may be some difficulty there, though I hope not'.

Ede's reply of 13 February related to a discussion he had had with Martin Browne on the subject, to the effect that the Lord Chamberlain had no jurisdiction over plays written before 1700 and, since he supported the venture, would withdraw once given assurances that this was not a new play. Browne had also mentioned to Ede the possibility of performances being disrupted by 'fanatics' such as the Lord's Day Observance Society, which seems not to have been considered at Chester. Ede also comments on the omission of the Crucifixion at York:

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on the grounds that it is a Festival performance and not Passiontide and also I expect question of taste.

This explanation must have come from Browne and ignores the objections of the Archbishop of York. It had not been intended that Chester's script should include the Crucifixion, so the problem did not arise.

On 28 February Betty McCulloch responded to a request from Burkinshaw by stating that 'there is no new act, scene or other part whatsoever' in her script, and the next day, armed with this assurance, Burkinshaw wrote to the Lord Chamberlain's Office arguing that, as an old play, the script did not fall under section 12 of the Theatres Act 1843 and that, although Christ would appear as a character on stage, he understood that York had received a dispensation. The Assistant Comptroller in the Lord Chamberlain's Office was encouraging in his reply of 14 March. The legal question was whether a modernised version constituted a translation, which would bring it within the terms of the Act. He agreed that there had been difficulty in licensing a play involving the physical appearance of the Deity:

especially when a modern conception is in question compared with the naive and unquestionably devout mediaeval interpretation.

His conclusion is that if the Diocesan authorities are happy, the Lord Chamberlain will 'feel that all necessity for intervention was removed'. The Bishop provided this assurance, with the proviso that Ede meet the Chapter to discuss 'certain features of its production', and on 28 March the Assistant Comptroller confirmed the Lord Chamberlain's satisfaction.

One further major problem had been overlooked. Elliott comments on limited publicity for the production. In fact, publicity had been almost entirely neglected. As late as 8 April 1951, with the performance opening on 18 June, Ede wrote to Burkinshaw that no form of publicity 'is even in preparation', adding that, while York had already taken £1000 in advance bookings:

at the moment the Chester plays are the best kept secret of the Festival.

Belatedly, publicity was put in hand. No doubt the uncertainties of planning and appointment had led to its neglect. But the production seems to have been well supported and received.

Postscript: The 1952 Production

Writing to Frederick Campbell of the BBC's North Regional Drama Department of 11 June 1951, Burkinshaw said that the Corporation 'will necessarily incur a substantial deficit'. This estimate seems to have been correct, and to have had some bearing on the decision to repeat the production in 1952. The proposal to repeat the production was relayed to the Cheshire Community Council before 8 October, when Cottam informed Burkinshaw in confidence of their willingness, though the following month the Chairman of the Community Council responded officially to Burkinshaw indicating that they would expect a grant for their services. Cottam then wrote to Ede, and Ede responded with considerable suspicion:

Your letter suggests that the Town Hall think that for £200 or so they can put on the plays and get back their £1000.

This was then apparently the magnitude of the Council's loss, and Ede was not willing to co-operate. His advice to the Community Council was to put it on themselves — he had no financial or artistic interest in the idea. For the small fee offered he would, if free, visit Chester for a couple of weeks to polish the production 'but would not have my name associated with revival'. Ede was eventually engaged for the revival, but at a fee only a little short of that of the previous year. Ede also noted that the bulk of the loss in 1951 had been on costumes and settings and was of the opinion that the 1952 production presented little financial risk.

Artistically, Ede was willing to consider a repeat only with modifications. In a letter of 10 January 1952 to Burkinshaw, he set out the lessons he had learned from the previous year and the areas for reconsideration. They were:

1. The possible telescoping of Plays I and II;
2. Improving the music;
3. Touching up the costumes and scenery;
4. Reorganising the lighting control;
5. Intensive education on make-up for the players;
6. Recasting of certain parts (unspecified);
7. Planning a new publicity campaign;
8. Detailed alteration of the production 'now that I know most of the players'. Redesigning crowd scenes and ensuring a fresh approach.

The first was, however, not supported. It was, perhaps, with some relish that Ede reported on 10 March 1952:

As there is likely to be a good deal of new blood in the casts, there will be quite a bit of alteration to be done to costumes.

Approaches were also made to Betty McCulloch to review her text. Her changes are described in another letter from Ede to Burkinshaw of 17 April 1952. In Play 1 she added, as she had previously wished, the Fall of Lucifer, and also the scene of Moses receiving the Law and of the prophets entering to foretell the birth of Christ. In Play 2 she introduced the order for the slaughter of the Innocents, and also the death of Herod. The latter necessitated the entry of the Devil to carry off Herod's soul and of an angel to tell Joseph that it was safe to return to Nazareth. Ede noted approvingly that this extended the role of the Devil. He made no mention, however, of the addition in Play 3 of the episode of Doubting Thomas.

It is difficult, at this remove, to appreciate the problems facing the Chester authorities. Since the city was not one of the major national festival sites, it received no outside assistance in its planning and all expenses had to be met from its own revenues. The venture was experimental — no-one could be sure of its success. To import a professional organisation such as the D'Oyly Carte or the Glyndbourne Company was to off-load administrative problems and financial risks and ensure that responsibility for success passed elsewhere. 1951 was still a time of shortages and rationing. Moreover, there was evidently no-one in the city with the necessary theatrical contacts to find a producer quickly, and artistic energies and attention of potential producers were already engaged, often in more high-profile events across the country. The lateness of Ede's appointment and the failure to ensure adequate advance publicity — apparently through administrative oversight — are more obvious reasons for Chester's critical neglect than the attention focused on York. And what Elliott terms 'the deliberate amateur quality of its acting' exemplifies a necessity masquerading as a virtue.

Nevertheless, the plays did prove popular. Ede himself was pleased with their reception, and part of his concern about a 1952 revival was that, with the novelty lost, a simple repetition would be less enthusiastically received and the audience more critically unforgiving. Both economic and artistic considerations seem to have determined the 1952 revival.

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NOTES

REVIVALS OF THE CHESTER PLAYS

1. John R. Elliott Jr *Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Stage* (Studies in Early English Drama 2: Toronto UP, 1989) 102.
2. I am grateful to Ms M. Lewis, City Archivist of Chester, for permission to quote from these files.
3. I am grateful to Mr Webster for allowing me to quote from his correspondence.
4. I have not been able to obtain a copy of the Bolton King text. It is mentioned by Maurice Hussey *The Chester Mystery Plays: Sixteen Pageant Plays from the Chester Craft Cycle, Adapted into Modern English* (The Drama Library: Heinemann, London, 1957) 6. 'I have read in addition an older and freer version in modern language by I. and O. Bolton King, but except on a few occasions, where defeated by archaisms or perverse rhyming in the original, I have attempted to keep closer to the original.'
5. Quoted from R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents*, With an essay, 'Music in the Cycle' by Richard Rastall (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1983) 294.
6. Quoted from *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* 294.
7. I am grateful to the BBC Archive for information about McCulloch.