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STREET SCENES

LATE MEDIEVAL ACTING
AND PERFORMANCE

Sharon Aronson-Lehavi

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This book is dedicated with love
to my parents
Shifra and Raymond Aronson
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My interest in medieval theories of performance has been the result of a long process of study and research. I would probably trace its genesis to the work I did on biblical theatre during my masters’ studies at Tel-Aviv University, when my first ideas about theorizing the theatricalities and preformativity of holy texts originated. The most crucial step into the world of medieval theatre took place during my doctoral studies at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. It was first and foremost my supervisor Pamela Sheingorn, who introduced me into the rich world of medieval theatre, religion, and their intersections. I am deeply grateful for her inspiration, guidance, and generosity. My ongoing work at the Department of Comparative Literature at Bar Ilan University has been drawing me more extensively into the field of performance studies and the reappearances of religious and medieval theatricalities in modern culture. This book is the culmination of this process, which has been continually illuminated and inspired by my exchanges with teachers, colleagues, friends, and students.

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"Street scenes" are theatre performances that take place in the street, as was typical of many of the religious vernacular performances in late medieval England. The concept, however, encompasses additional references and meanings, which help to articulate the performativity of late medieval religious theatre. "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre," is an essay by the twentieth-century experimental theatre creator and theorist Bertolt Brecht. In this essay, Brecht theorizes a postillusionist acting style in which the tension between actor and enacted character is highlighted and manifested rather than blurred and eliminated. In a "street scene," according to Brecht, an actor addresses the spectators directly, consciously engaging them in the performance, while playing and enacting the event. In other words, Brecht’s theatricality conceives of a theatrical event as being not only a framed, narrated enactment, but also an event that depends on live interaction between an actor and a character on the one hand and an actor and the spectators on the other. It is an aesthetic concept that highlights the process of enactment and its "liveness."

This idea refers, as we shall see, to the question that is the focus of this book: Was late medieval religious theatre created in relation to a theoretical discourse about performance, a discourse that might have led to a specific theatre language and acting style that best served the unique characteristics of performing holy subject matter? In essence, the book questions whether the enactment and embodiment of holy characters and events was an issue addressed by the creators of the mystery plays. And, if so, what theatrical methods were used in these performances to overcome the tension inherent in the art of theatre—the tension between the liveness and presence of an actor and the dramatic focus on an enacted character?

Although this tension is always part of the theatrical mechanism, there are moments in theatre history when an attempt to eliminate the difference between the two performing functions is an aesthetic ideal (as in late nineteenth-century realistic theatre, for example), whereas at other times, as in late medieval theatre, emphasizing the duality between an
actor and a character reflects an aesthetic concept of theatre. Moreover, the relationship between the two entities—the actor and the character—both embodied by the actor becomes a site of special inquiry in religious theatre. Here, many of the enacted events and characters are not only godly and therefore complicated or even impossible to (re)present, but, more importantly, their holy status demands a very careful treatment, especially when transmitted by human agency. The main argument offered here is that the question of enacting religious and holy figures was indeed a late medieval concern.

Evidence for this can be found in the late fourteenth-century Middle English *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (hereafter *ToMP*), a long tract that harshly criticizes the performance activity it calls “miraclis playing,” and which is dealt with in chapters 1 and 2 in order to reconstruct a late medieval performance theory. One of the main reasons for the tract’s objection to religious performance activity is that the plays do not have a purely devotional context, but rather involve mirth, play, game, and other forms of earthly enjoyment. The duality that the tract articulates and objects to relates to the dualistic nature of the theatrical medium in general: that is, the tension between the live event on the one hand and the enacted content on the other, a tension that is most concisely located in the very body of the actor. As discussed in the *ToMP*, however, this tension is problematic in religious theatre because of the *potentiality* that characterizes a live event, defined by the tract as the danger of “bourding” (joking, gaming) with holy and serious subject matter (“the werkis of God”). The *ToMP*’s critique of religious theatricalities because of this dual or dialogic appeal is a key to reconstructing a late medieval performance theory that was indeed based on acknowledging the tension between the liveness of the theatrical event and its enacted/fictional (and sacred) world.

My reading of the *ToMP* leads me to the two methodological directions that guide this work. First, an analysis of the *ToMP* demonstrates its applicability to religious theatrical forms such as the mystery plays and the Corpus Christi cycles, although it cannot be directly associated with a specific play or performance. Second, the tract analyzes the eventness of the performances it criticizes rather than the enacted and “fictional” realm of theatre. In other words, the emphasis of the text is the realm of performance and the performativity of the plays and not, for instance, aspects of dramatic literature or theatrical staging. This methodology of the *ToMP* itself reflects the somewhat oxymoronic nature of the religious vernacular theatre, whose sources and theatricality combine religious, devotional, and serious “scenes” on the one hand, with a performativity that originates in popular culture, folklore, urban civic life, and the “street,” on the other. In other words, the *ToMP* addresses these religious
INTRODUCTION

plays as “performance” because, according to the tract, the cultural function of the performances was related to their participants’ earthly concerns and enjoyment in the present via the enactment of religious subject matter.

Following Max Hermann, J. L. Austin, and Judith Butler, Erika Fischer-Lichte defines the concept of performance and the performative not as one with a primarily mimetic function but rather as one with the power to be effective as it happens, as a happening:

They all agree that performative acts/performances do not express something that pre-exists, something given, but that they bring forth something that does not yet exist elsewhere but comes into being only by way of the performative act/the performance that occurs. In this sense they are self-referential—i.e. they mean what they bring forth—and, in this way, constitute reality.

This focus on the eventness and efficacy of a theatre performance has greatly influenced theatre studies in the recent decades. It invites a reconceptualization of plays such as the mystery cycles as they functioned on both a mimetic, ideological, and devotional level and on a folkloristic and lively one. Therefore, based on defining the plays in terms of “performance,” which corresponds to the ToMP’s focus, the next step (to which chapter 3 is devoted) is an analysis of acting conventions in the Corpus Christi plays (specifically the York cycle). This analysis will demonstrate that the creators of this theatre, just like its critics, were aware of the tension between live event and scripted dramatic narrative and made use of this tension as a governing aesthetic.

I suggest that acknowledging this inherently theatrical tension between the performing and the performed in the unique case of religious theatre led to an acting style and theatre language that was meant to demonstrate this awareness, always emphasizing the signifying function of the theatrical event and never concealing its theatricality. By doing so, the performances created a deictic interruption in the process of enactment so that the performances would always claim a symbolic and theatricalized presence in relation to the enacted holy characters and events. Even in highly emotional and intensive scenes such as episodes of the Passion, the actor/character tension was maintained. By using methods of total theatre that included inflicting pain on the body of the actor and by self-referentially marking the act of performance, a difference was evoked between the performing actor and the real figure of Christ.

In addition to the ToMP, other primary sources that help establish this concept of acting and theatricality are the mystery plays themselves.
In this book, I focus primarily (although not solely) on the York cycle, which, like the tract, dates back to the late fourteenth century, and which was performed on moving pageants in the streets of York. Moreover, the records of early English drama (REED) help demonstrate the use of theatrical conventions that created a discernible tension between actors and characters. One example is a decision recorded in a York House Book dated 3 April, 1476, according to which players should not act in more than two plays of the Corpus Christi pageants:

And þat no plaier þat shall plaie in þe saide Corpus chri sta plaie be . con- ducte and Reteyned . to plaie . but twise [<.>] on þe day of þe saide playe And þat he or thay so plaing plaie . not . ouere twise þe saide day vpon payne of xl s. to forfet vnto þe Chaumbre asoften tymes as he or þay shall be founden defautie in þe same.

Much information about acting conventions can be gathered from this short rule although it was most probably designed to regulate financial relationships between different actors. First, it demonstrates that actors were interested in playing and apparently did play more than twice within the same cycle, that is, in more than one role. This makes sense given that the York cycle was composed of over forty pageants, each one of them performing its biblical episode repetitively in different stations in the city. However, the existence of this rule establishes another theatrical convention that is closely related to actor/character dialectics in the late medieval theatre. One of the consequences of such a rule is that different actors would play the same character throughout the performance of the cycle. Many characters appear in more than two plays, but outstanding is the figure of Christ, who appears consecutively as an adult in over twenty plays in the cycle. Following the rule cited above, a minimum of ten different actors would have to play this role, resulting in “Christ” having many different voices and intonations, heights and sizes, facial expressions, and so on.5

This is not an anecdotal convention. Whereas in nonreligious or noniconic theatre—in “conventional” drama—an individuated character is usually played by one actor from start to finish, the unique case of religious and iconic personae invite an acting style that emphasizes the disparity between signifier and signified. The rule that allows an actor to play in no more than two episodes demonstrates that in York there was no interest in having one