



CHAPTER TWO

Medieval Scenic Design

After the mid-sixth century CE, theatrical performances in western Europe lost their civic support as public order disintegrated and cities and towns imploded into early feudal societies. Theatre returned to a primitive state in which individuals or small bands of players sought audiences wherever they could be found. There are no records of dramatic performances in this period, although some of the itinerant groups may have presented crude sketches. For the most part, performers became storytellers, jesters, tumblers, jugglers, rope dancers, and exhibitors of trained animals. They were usually deemed to be outcasts: For more than four hundred years, performers were denounced in church decrees, and Christians were warned against contact with them.

But by the tenth century, the Catholic Church had begun to see the value of telling its stories visually through drama and art. Although its first short dramatic sketches were not much more elaborate than those being offered by itinerant performers, they were influential because they were performed by clergy and had the sanction of the most powerful institution in Western Europe. The Church, however, did not connect these dramatic presentations with theatre, which it continued to denounce as a remnant of pagan Rome.

From the tenth century into the twelfth century, liturgical dramas were performed indoors—in monasteries, cathedrals, and churches—usually in connection with the eight Services of the Hours scattered throughout the day. Plays were seldom linked with Mass, which had a fixed pattern and specific function that discouraged elaboration. Not all churches presented liturgical plays, and those that did generally presented them infrequently. When plays were presented, they reflected events of the church calendar, with the largest number centering around Christmas or Easter. Later, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when plays were added to the church's visual education, some moved outside the precinct of the church. Only clergy were allowed to perform in plays created within the church building, so moving the plays outdoors was an attempt to involve laypeople in production, but outdoor plays were also released from the confines of Latin language; the vernacular could reach a greater audience. The productions maintained the medieval convention of depicting time in a linear progression. Most plays remained very short in length until the fourteenth century, but they were presented in many countries throughout Europe.

Church Architecture as Scenic Partner

Because the early liturgical plays were presented in churches, they depended more on architecture than on temporary structures or painted scenery. The architecture was often used symbolically. An altar, for example, might represent Christ's sepulchre in the Easter dramas. [fig 2.1] Many churches had a choir raised several feet above the nave, which was used to represent Heaven. Stairs beneath the raised choir led down to a crypt, which was designated as Hell. [fig 2.2] The two fundamental elements of stage settings were mansions (or *sedes* or *domi*), which were small structures used to establish the place of the action, and a *platea* (or place or *playne*), which was the space adjacent to a mansion. A scene began at a mansion and then expanded to include as much of the adjacent space as was needed. When one scene ended and the action shifted to another locale, performers related themselves to a different mansion. The same *platea* space could be considered an extension of any mansion, its identity changing as the mansion changed. Originally, only one mansion was needed, but as the plays became more complex, additional mansions were required.

Mansions were often set up at intervals around the nave. [fig 2.3] During this period churches did not have fixed seating, so the

open floor could serve both as *platea* and as a neutral area that allowed spectators to follow the performers as they moved from one place to another. Sometimes the identity of the mansions changed during performances; the change was made clear to the audience through announcements or placards. Some mansions were elaborately decorated and had numerous hand properties; they usually represented the Last Supper, Daniel and the lion's den, and Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. Some mansions had curtains that could be drawn to reveal or conceal actors or properties.

Although by the fourteenth century most plays were being staged outdoors, others continued to be mounted inside churches. Staging became elaborate, especially in Florence. Of the detailed accounts that have survived, the most revealing is Bishop Abraham of Souzdal's firsthand account, written in 1439, of a festival to celebrate Christ's assumption into Heaven. This festival was held on the forty-fifth day after Easter in the Church of the Ascension, which had:

a rood screen 140 feet wide with stone columns 28 feet high. On the left of this screen, one saw a castle magnificently adorned with towers and bastions which represented the

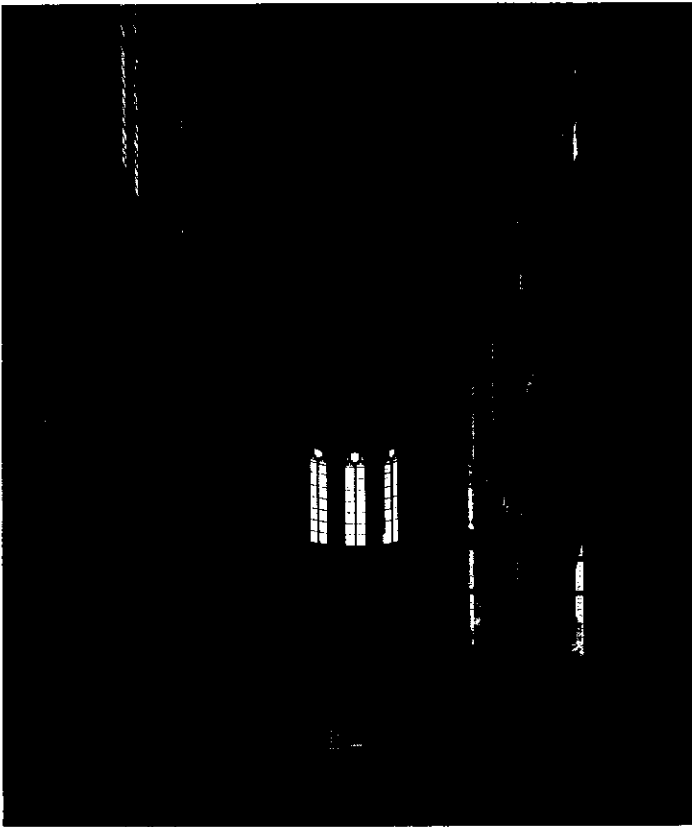


Fig. 2.1. Interior of the Saint Mauritius Cathedral in Magdeburg, Germany. Note the Easter Sepulcher in the bottom left corner.

Photograph © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

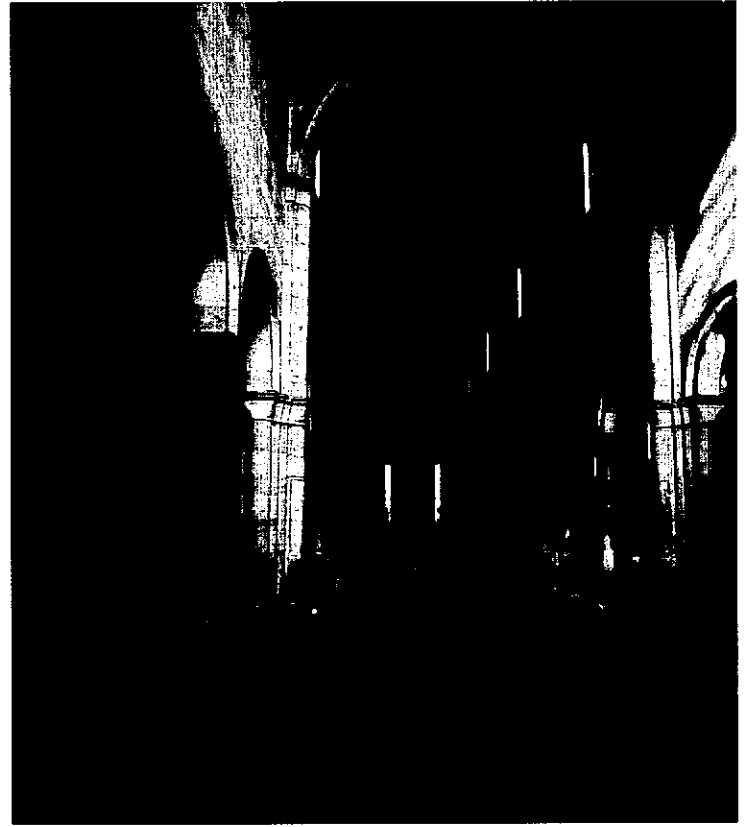


Fig. 2.2. Interior of St. Zenos, a Romanesque church built in Verona, Italy in the twelfth century. Note the arches below the choir, which mark the entrance to the crypt.

Photograph © Vanni/Art Resource, NY.

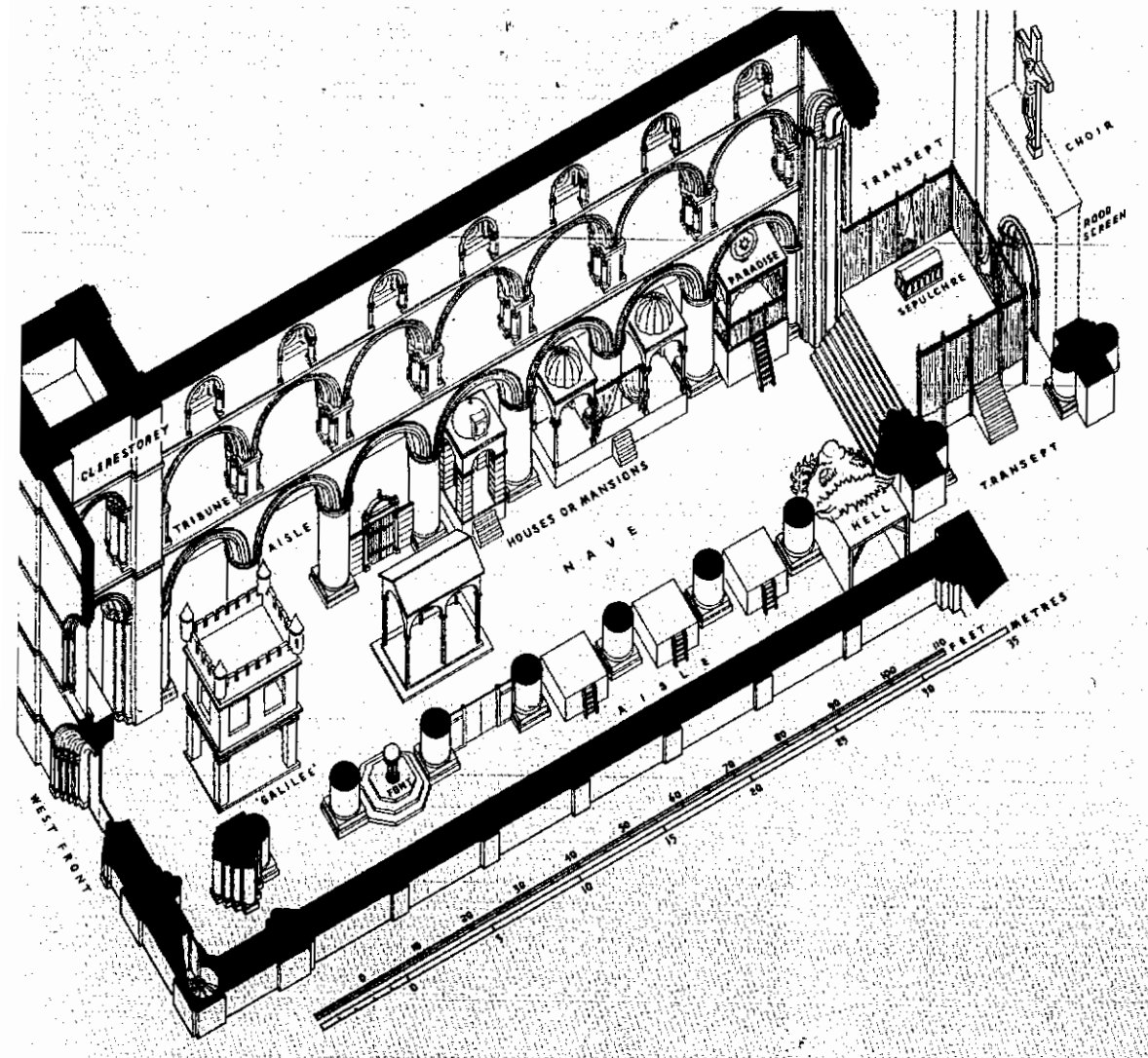


Fig. 2.3. Conjectural reconstruction of mansions arranged within the nave of a medieval church. In this reconstruction, the choir and apse are not used; all the mansions are set up in the nave or transept.

From Richard Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse* (London: Methuen Publishers, 1973). Courtesy of Methuen Publishers.

sacred city of Jerusalem. Facing this, toward the wall there was a mountain ten and one-half feet high reached by a stairway elevated slightly above the ground. This mountain was draped with rose silk. Above this, at the height of 56 feet, a wooden platform about 28 feet square was erected, the bottom of which was painted and decorated. In this platform there was a circular opening about 14 feet in diameter covered by a blue curtain decorated with a sun, the moon and stars to represent the first Celestial sphere. At the right moment, the curtain was raised. . . . Behind this curtain the Celestial Father was seen with a crown on his head. . . . God was surrounded by a group of young boys, playing flutes, lyres and small bells, who represented the Angels. God the Father and the Angels were bathed in a brilliant light created by many small lamps. The circular opening of Heaven was adorned with effigy images of angels painted on cardboard discs by skillful artists. These moved and turned separately. . . . From this opening in the sky, seven

thin, strong ropes were stretched down to Mount Olive. The young man who portrayed Jesus Christ used these ropes and some small iron wheels . . . in the action of the ascent. . . . From Heaven, where God the Father was seen, a beautiful cloud most ingeniously formed, descended on seven ropes carrying two young boys dressed as angels with wings of gold. As the cloud was descending, Jesus took two golden keys . . . and, [after] blessing the keys, he gave them to Peter. Then by means of the ropes, he ascended to the cloud. . . . These ropes were controlled by means of invisible machinery, so contrived that the person portraying Jesus seemed to ascend [without assistance]. . . . As Jesus approached the cloud it engulfed him from head to foot. . . . At that moment additional lamps were lighted to envelop Jesus and the two angels in a wondrous blinding light. Then Jesus continued to ascend to Heaven accompanied by the angels, who knelt by his side. . . . The curtains [then] closed on the Celestial Heavens (Larson, 211-12).

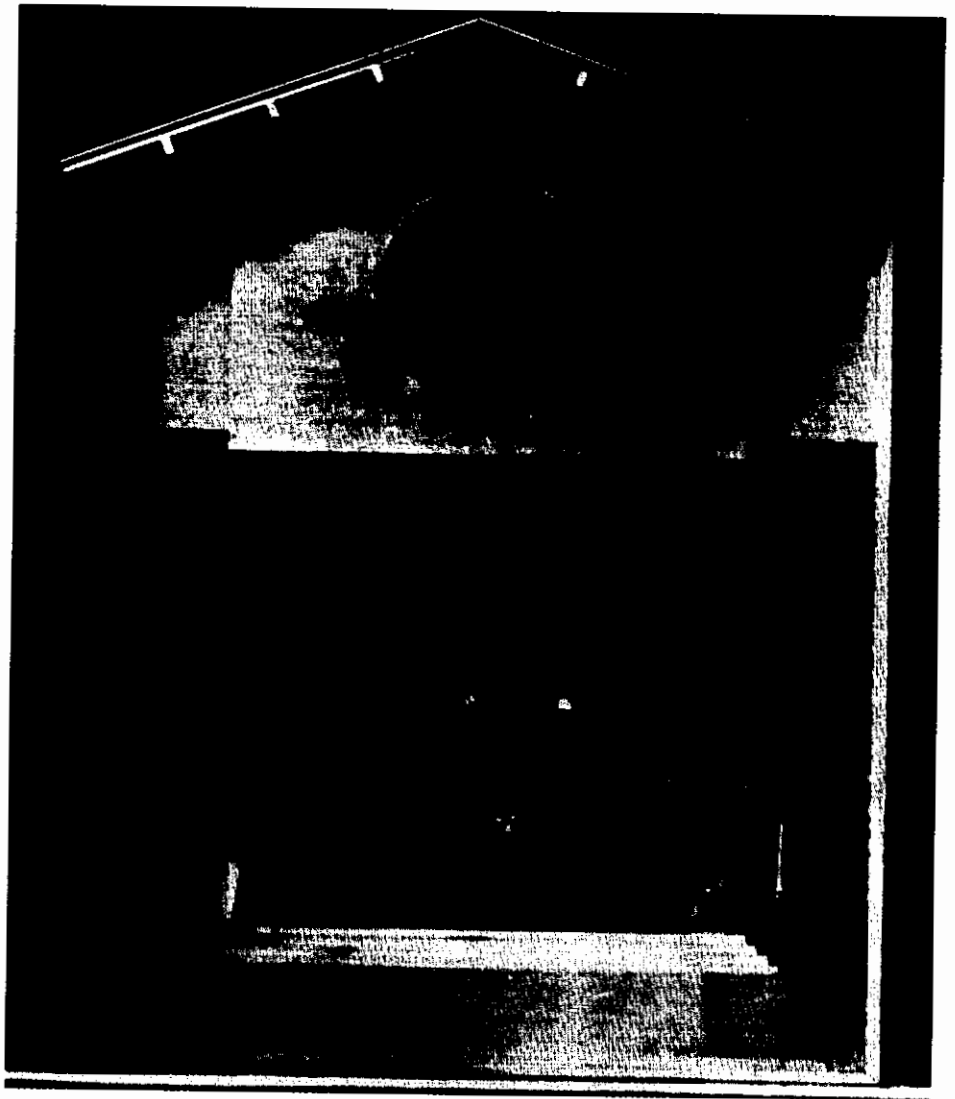


Fig. 2.4. Conjectural reconstruction of the complete mechanism for the representation of the Annunciazione of San Felice in Piazza. Wooden model by Ludovico Zorzi e Cesare Lisi, 1975.

© Provincial di Firenze—Archivio Fotografico.

Similar performances in Florence in the fifteenth century are described by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574)—one designed by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) for the church of San Felice in Piazza (Pallen, 51–53) and another by Cecca (1447–1488) at the Church of the Carmine (Pallen, 53–58). [fig 2.4]

The Outdoor Setting

Moving performances outside the church building into the streets and plazas permitted greater freedom in how the performance space could be arranged and, freed from liturgical restrictions, greater freedom in how plays could be developed, especially in length. Just as important were the replacement of Latin with the vernacular as the usual language for plays, the substitution of spoken for chanted dialogue, and the use of nonclerical performers.

The establishment of Corpus Christi, a church festival that was honored almost everywhere by 1350, also provided a rationale for plays of cosmic proportions (often dramatizing biblical

events from the Creation to the Last Judgment). Corpus Christi not only brought together biblical episodes that had previously been treated in short dramas distributed throughout the church calendar but also occurred in midsummer, when the weather was most conducive to large outdoor gatherings. Corpus Christi, which focused on the redemptive power of the Holy Sacrament, was intended to bring together all segments of society in a celebration of this central act of Christian worship. It encouraged and facilitated the cooperation of an entire community. For example, many towns and cities came to present elaborate plays to celebrate Corpus Christi (or, alternatively, to honor a city's saint's day or another all-inclusive holiday, such as Easter or Whitsunday, or to offer thanks for delivery from some disaster, such as a plague or drought). When plays were mounted, they were most usually community efforts for which no expense was spared. As was stated in 1583 about the Lucerne Passion Play then being presented, the purposes were to honor God, edify humanity, and glorify the city.¹ These festival dramas grew in number and in location.

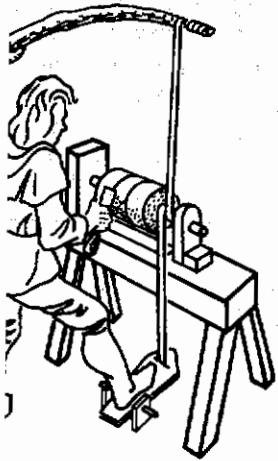
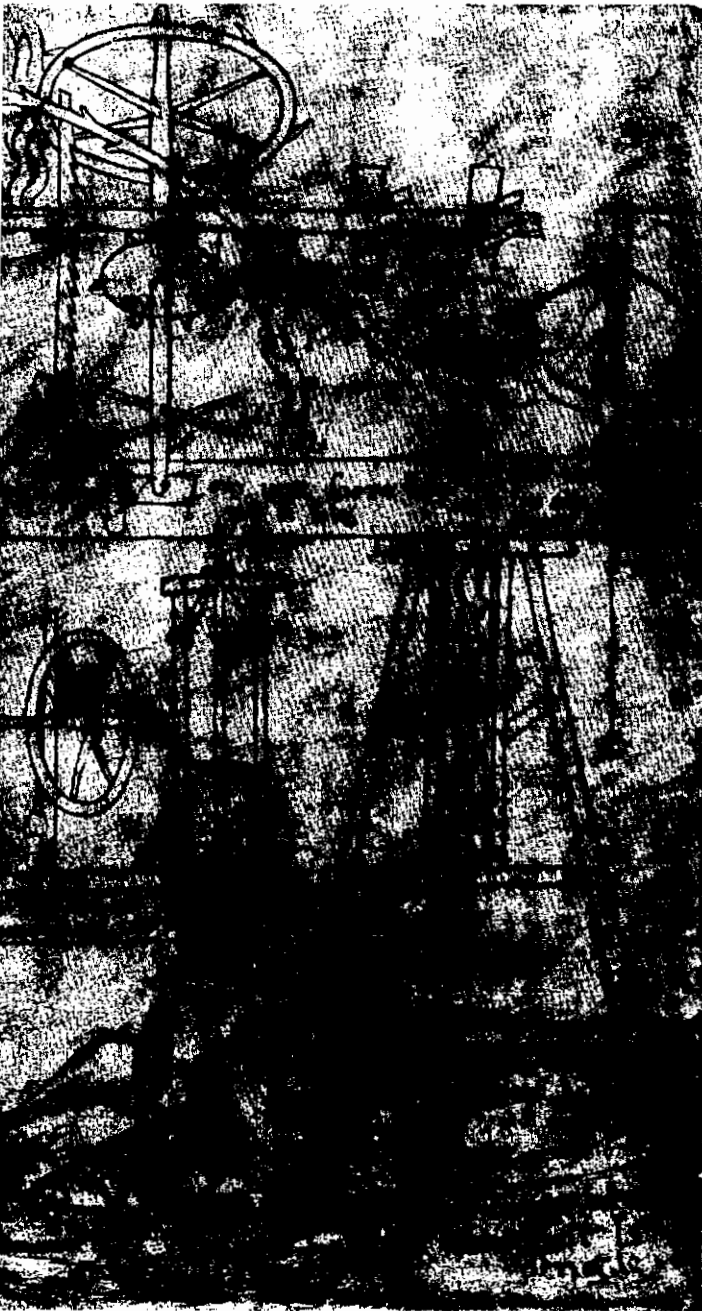


Fig. 2.5. Pole lathe.

From Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Cathedral, Forge, and Waterwheel: Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 199. © 1994 by Frances and Joseph Gies. Reprinted with permission from Harper-Collins Publishers.

Fig. 2.6. Drawing of machines by Villard de Honnecourt (1225?-1250?). Note, top left, the mechanical saw; middle left, a device that may have been a primitive escapement; and right, a screw jack.

In the collection of the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. Photograph © Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY.



Almost every part of Europe developed such dramas, which were most numerous and most elaborate in the first half of the sixteenth century.

Records of an outdoor drama from the twelfth century, the Anglo-Norman *Jeu d'Adam* (Adam's Play), provide the most detailed stage directions, as the following excerpts indicate: "Let Paradise be set up in a somewhat lofty place; let there be put about it curtains and silken hangings, at such an height that those persons who shall be in Paradise can be seen from the shoulders upward; let there be planted sweet-smelling flowers and foliage; let divers trees be therein, and fruit hanging upon them, so that it may seem a most delectable place." According to the text, after Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise, devils eventually "thrust them into Hell; and thereupon [the devils] shall cause a great smoke to arise, and they shall shout one to another in Hell, greatly rejoicing; and they shall dash together their pots and kettles, so that they may be heard without. And after some little interval, the devils shall go forth, and shall run to and fro in the [town] square [where the performance occurred] . . ." (Anonymous, 159). Although these directions are helpful, with the exception of Paradise, they tell little about the scenic design.

Flying Objects and Performers

The complexity of medieval liturgical plays mirrored technological and intellectual development in society at large. Many medieval inventions, such as the water-powered saw, the spring pole lathe, [fig 2.5] the screw jack, and the mechanical saw, [fig 2.6] improved and advanced wood and plaster construction. The machinists and engineers who created the great architecture of the period used the same technology to construct scenery and temporary stages and to create the miraculous flights and special effects that depicted the supernatural power of God. Advances in warfare and engineering from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, based on technology developed by the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and Persians, may have been employed in flights, floods, and pyrotechnics on medieval stages; the extant records of play productions and eyewitness accounts reveal complex theatrical tricks.

Props, scenery, and effigies were flown by means of wires, ropes, pulleys, and windlasses. [figs 2.7 and 2.8] Props, such as stars and suns, were strung on wires or cords and pulled across the nave using pulleys. A suspended star might be pulled ahead of the Three Kings to guide them to Bethlehem, for example, or a dove might descend to Mary during the Annunciation; clouds painted on card or canvas were raised and lowered from the clerestories or upper choirs (Tydeman, *Medieval*, 171) and effigies of Christ or Mary were flown into the playing space, sometimes with priests beneath the effigies holding a taut cloth to catch them if an

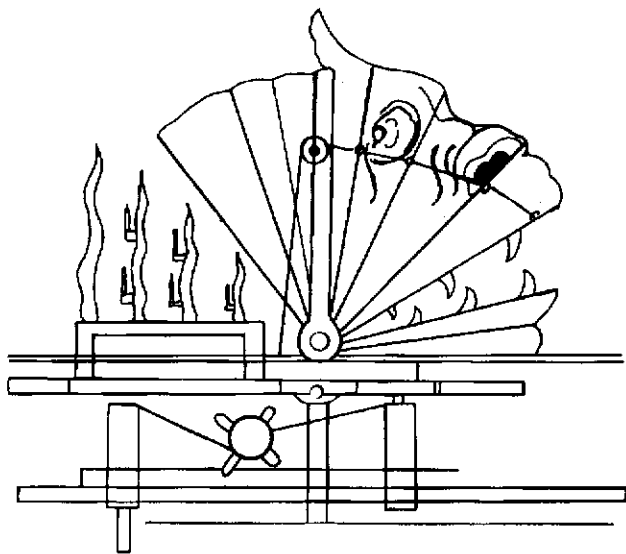


Fig. 2.7. Drawing showing how the Hell Mouth or Dragon (ca. 1700) operates. The mouth, which opens and closes, is operated by a windlass; flame effects (at rear) employ candles and reflectors. After a diagram in the Tessin Collection, Historical Museum, Stockholm.

From Clifford Davidson, *Technology, Guilds, and Early English Drama* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996). Reproduced by permission from Medieval Institute Publications.

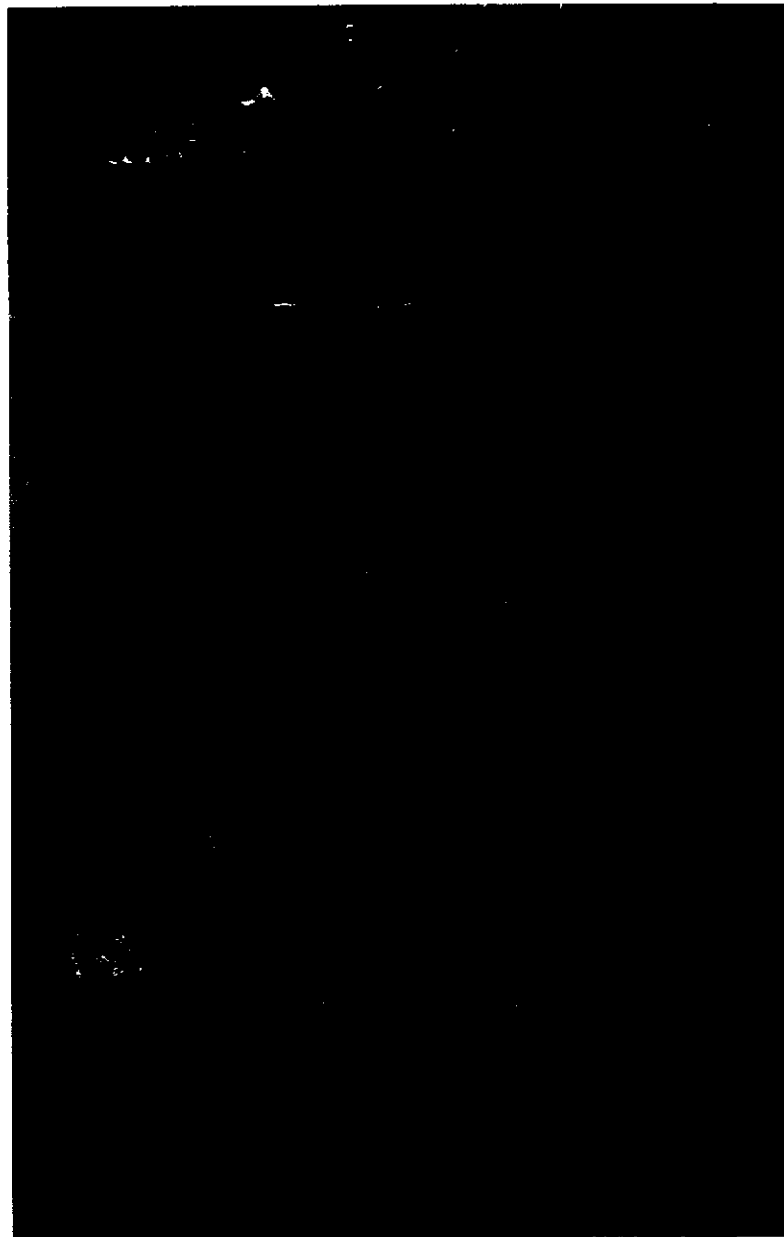


Fig. 2.8. Construction of the Tower of Babel. This image shows typical construction equipment for raising and lowering objects and people while building high structures.

Illuminated manuscript page from the Wenceslas Bible, made ca. 1390–1395 for Wenceslas IV, King of Bohemia. Cod. 2759 fol. 10v. Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Austria. Photograph © Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.

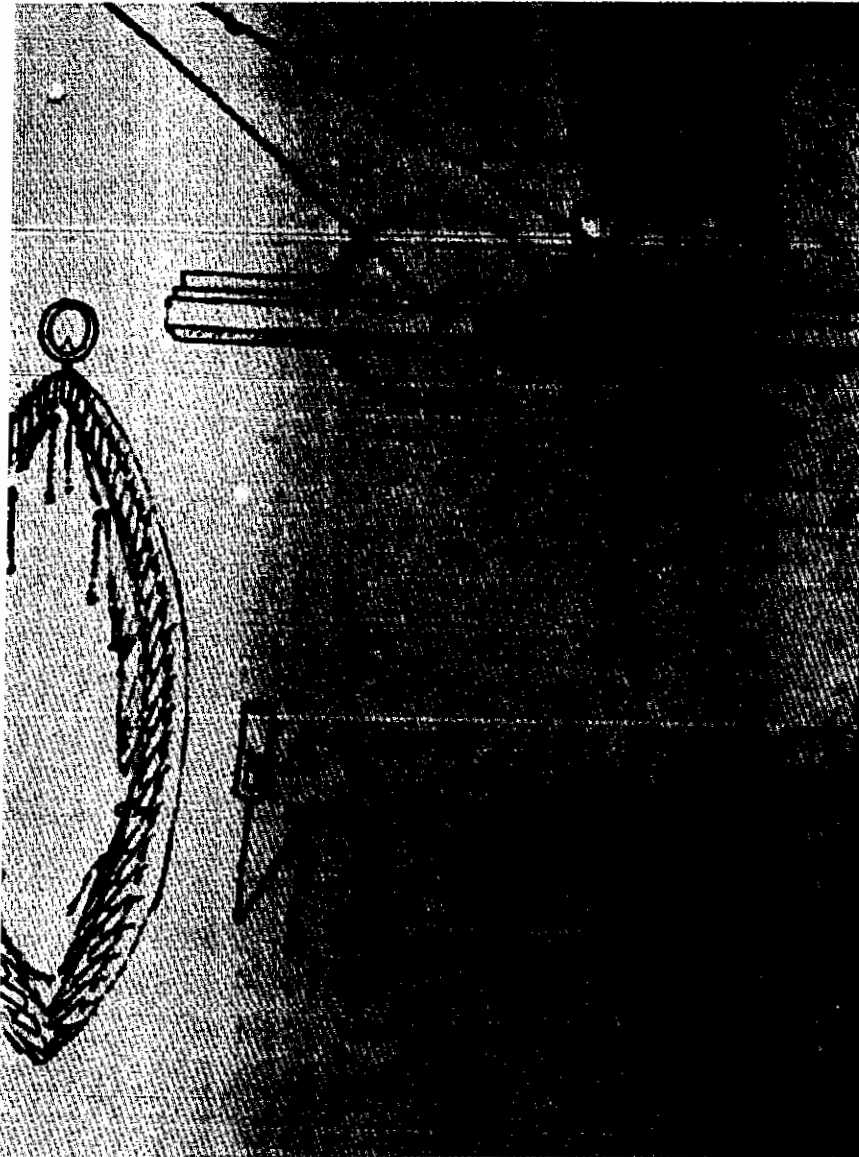


Fig. 2.9. Buonaccorso Ghiberti's drawing of Brunelleschi's mandorla around the Angel of the Annunciation, showing metal tubes containing candles and cords to control the levers that would raise and lower the tubes, thus revealing the candles.

In the collection of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence. From the *Zibaldone* of Buonaccorso Ghiberti, MS. BR 228, f. 115r.

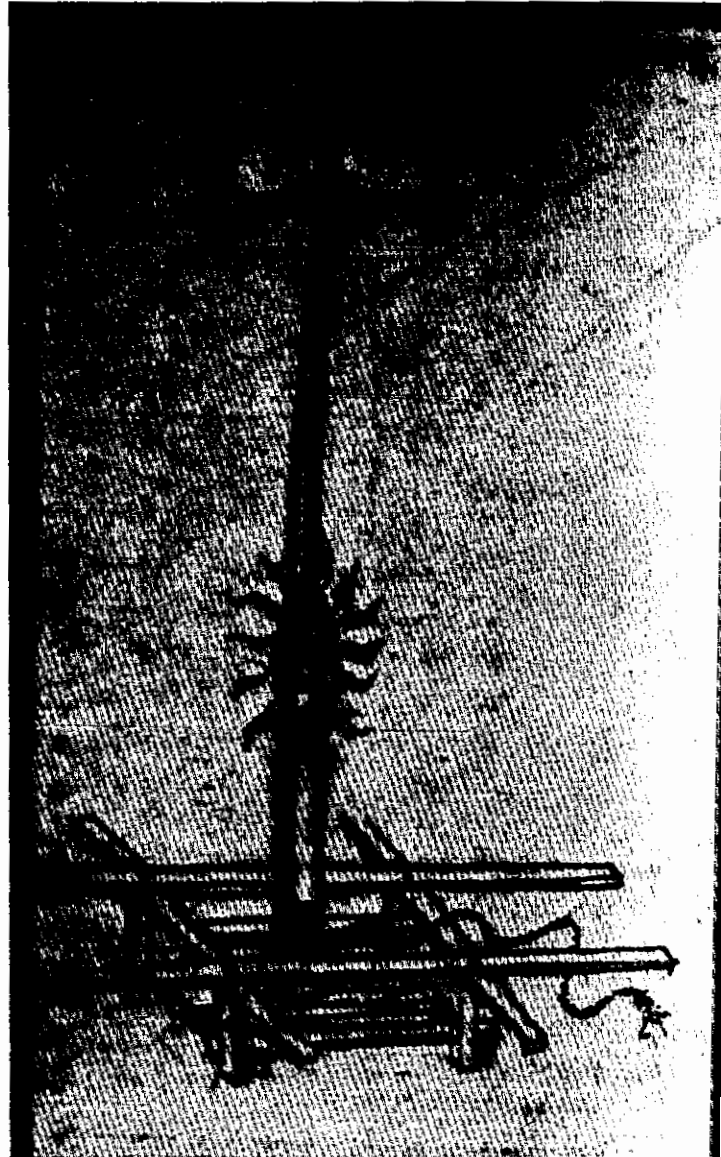


Fig. 2.10. Buonaccorso Ghiberti's drawing of Brunelleschi's mechanism for the Angel of the Annunciation.

In the collection of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence. From the *Zibaldone* of Buonaccorso Ghiberti, MS. BR 228, f. 115v.

accident occurred. A “glory” or “paradise” was a special machine on which heavenly characters or objects descended into the playing space. It took two basic forms: concentric circles mounted on lit moving frames, or a decorated box lit from behind or within. In both forms, it carried performers or props. [figs 2.9 and 2.10] Individual flights or suspended group flights without visible supports or cloud decor were also accomplished with ropes and windlasses. Clifford Davidson’s *Technology, Guilds and Early English Drama* states that flights were controlled with a ratchet system, [fig 2.11] which was a common way to stop and control the suspension of heavy objects in building construction (85). Flights controlled by ratchets relied on the strength of the windlass operators to make the flight smooth and the skill of at least one more operator to stop or start the flight, especially when flying adult performers or multiple people and objects.

Lifting by counterweights, a safer and smoother method, was probably in use by the high Middle Ages, around 1300–1500. The trebuchet, a counterweighted catapult developed for warfare in China around the first century CE (Gies and Gies, 145), was depicted in art in western Europe in the thirteenth century. [fig 2.12] In 1421 Brunelleschi designed a counterweighted hoisting machine, which had a drum that reversed and allowed a load to be set down without any disturbance to the winches, and other fifteenth-century engineers and architects followed suit (Long, 96; Gies and Gies, 271). Counterweights would have provided a smooth flight and easy operation, requiring fewer operators and possibly less machinery, because a windlass may not have been required. These methods were used for ascents and descents on a single vertical plane. Multiple lines for horizontal and vertical flights were used in Italian religious dramas of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and it seems that counterweights were in use. According to John Wesley Harris, “At Mons in 1501, Christ mounted himself on the devil’s shoulders and they were both hoisted to the pinnacle of the Temple ‘in a trice . . . by means of a sudden counterweight’” (141). Machinery may have been hidden by mansions, or curtains may have been used to hide the ropes and operators (Harris, 129–30).

Flights sometimes involved simultaneous ascents and descents of performers or effigies in concert with flying scenery and other effects. Dunbar H. Ogden, in *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church*, recounts how a flight was described in a fourteenth century manuscript from Moosburg:

Within the tentorium representing Mount Sinai . . . was an effigy of Christ, suspended from the roof by a rope, and a person to speak Christ’s role was also present. Three rings were hung from the upper area. The effigy was to be drawn up through a ring of silk cloths, while the other two rings would be raised and lowered: the first of flowers with the likeness

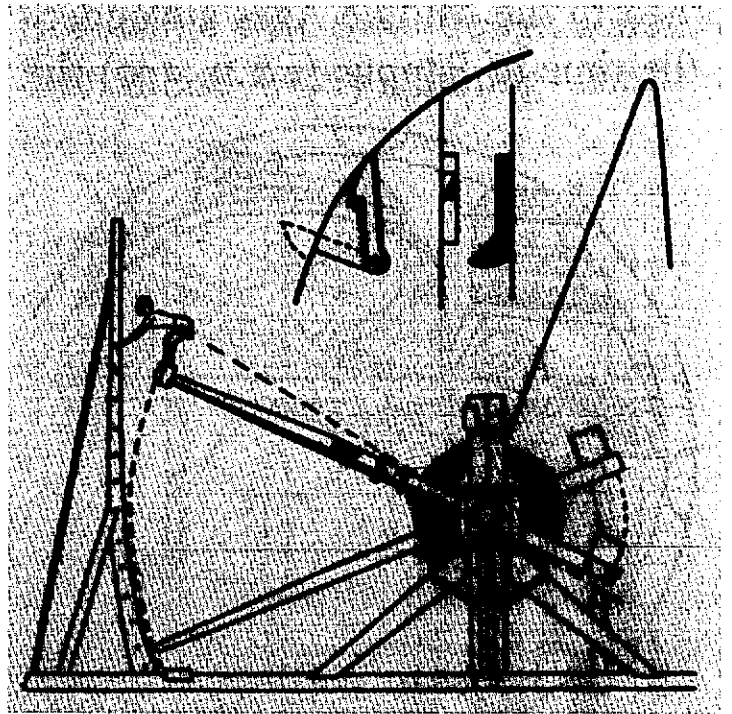


Fig. 2.11. Reconstruction of a medieval winch for raising heavy burdens by means of an oscillating lever and ratchets.

From Charles Singer et al., eds. *A History of Technology*, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). Reprinted by permission from Oxford University Press.



Fig. 2.12. Image of a trebuchet from an Old Testament miniature.

In the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Purchased by John Pierpont Morgan (1865–1943) in 1916. MS m.638 fol. 23v.

of a dove and the second encircling the likeness of an angel. . . . The note goes on to recommend a final shower of wafers, roses, lilies and sundry flowers, to be gathered by poorly dressed children . . . who are to clap their hands and sing (103).

Inventories indicate that, if performers were flown on scenery such as platforms or furniture, they were attached to the scenery with belts or harnesses. Scaffold stages, outdoor mansions, and pageant wagons also included flying devices; flights of any major weight were probably more easily achieved on stationary stages. There are accounts of outdoor ascensions at Chester and Wakefield (Tydeman, *Medieval*, 171). An inventory from York documents pageant wagons with hoisting machinery and iron bracing to "bear up Heaven," which may have been used as a platform for angels to stand on or for the flight of God.

Medieval Production Organization

In the early part of the medieval era, special collections, fundraisers, and donations from individuals supplemented church budgets, and the local townspeople donated hours of labor to create scenery, costumes, and props. As plays and pageants moved outdoors and were no longer dependent on the architecture of churches, production often became more visually elaborate and technically complex, so other means of funding were necessary. Although many plays used church budgets, the church and municipal entities levied additional taxes specifically for the festivals. In Britain, taxes collected from trade guilds were called "pageant-pence" or "pageant-silver" (Tydeman, *Medieval*, 226). As time went by, special tithes were also collected for religious plays and pageants. Individuals granted loans or donated funds, and if the play was produced by a civic entity, municipal funds helped support production, and profits went back into the treasury or paid back loans. In some cases, groups of performers organized themselves, financed the production, and split the profits (Tydeman, *Medieval*, 225-26). When a production's costs exceeded its admission sales, costumes and props were sold to the public to help pay off debt. As the trade guilds became more involved, they often absorbed costs by supporting and maintaining mansions or wagons that not only displayed their civic pride but also showed off their particular crafts.

The first medieval writers and stage directors were clergy, and the choirmaster of the cathedral or monastic school was often the composer and director (Tydeman, *Medieval*, 51). Records were kept of the plays and their production needs and staging, including the stage directions for props, scenery, and costumes, so that performances could be re-created. If a new work was commissioned, the author typically specified how it should be staged, and

the performers were the local townspeople and clergy. Producers, who were called "pageant masters" or "keepers," organized the mystery plays, which were often performed in festival cycles. Wardens of the trade guilds appointed these individuals, who held office for several years to troubleshoot production problems. The pageant masters were responsible for storing and maintaining the wagons and scaffolds and hiring the craftsmen to build new scenic decor and props. They hired the dramatists, actors, engineers, musicians, stage managers, stagehands, and workmen. They also catered the rehearsals and performances (Harris, 134). By the fourteenth century, drivers and couriers gathered and transported scenic and prop materials; if certain pigments, metals, or other materials were not locally available, they procured those items in other towns. Guards were engaged to protect scenic construction and the performance site. Notaries and secretaries were hired to revise scripts and carry out daily correspondence. According to extant records, dramatists, actors, engineers, the workmen who created the scenery, and the musicians were paid more than stagehands and laborers. Dressers were the poorest-paid members of the production team. Many people were paid very little to perform small tasks, such as carrying a costume or creating a sound effect, which indicates that play production may have been a desired source of extra income for many local townspeople. In Coventry, the "dresser of the pageant" tended the flying machinery and dyed costumes and fabrics (Harris, 139); the "ordinary" served as a prompter, following the actors about on the stage and feeding them their lines (Nagler, 53). Although job descriptions and responsibilities most likely varied throughout Europe, the following timeline for *Mystère des Trois Doms* (The Mystery of Three Masters) at Romans, France, gives us an idea of a production process:

July 1508

Representatives of St. Bernard's Monastery and the town council meet to discuss the ideas of the performance. Money is pledged from various sources and churches. A body of commissioners is appointed to oversee the production. Authors and secretaries are engaged.

December 1508

Monsieur Sanche of Dijon is appointed as producer. Monsieur François Trévenot is hired as the designer.

January 1508

Building begins on the stage and auditorium at St. Bernard's. Carpenters, a blacksmith, and a clocksmith are engaged.

February 1509

Canon Pra of Grenoble has a reading for the commission, and three notaries are engaged to make copies.

The Audience of Faith

Medieval life was disordered, insecure and violent. Christianity sought to allay citizens' fears, to give hope, and to reward work and convince its parishioners of life everlasting. Its tool was the story of contrasts: of creation and human sin, of the Virgin and Christ's suffering, of the human's sole potential to be damned to everlasting hell or saved for eternal bliss.

William Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, 55

As the Church became the central authority on matters spiritual, moral, and intellectual, Christianity brought a shift in focus. "Art and architecture now had new priorities: to create architectural spaces for worship, to enrich those spaces visually and to teach the ideas and values of the new religion" (Benton, 7). By 500 CE, the hostile forces that had laid waste to most of Europe had been defeated, and small, defended communities were being settled, creating a safer environment in which to build a society. In this more structured universe, everything—stone, plant, animal, and man—had its appointed place. Man learned about his own place in this universe through biblical stories told in church and from the paintings on its walls. Dominating that structure was God. It was the age of faith, and in Europe that meant the Christian Church, animated with a missionary zeal that re-energized the world as it emerged from the cultural and economic stagnation that followed the fall of Rome.

The Middle Ages were shaped by two predominant social structures: the Church and feudalism. The influence of one over the other changed as the social structure evolved. Eventually the Church's power and sponsorship weakened as urban centers grew and a new European aristocracy developed beginning around 1000 CE. At first, however, religion, not politics, assumed priority over issues and offered the medieval citizen moral direction while satisfying his craving for certainty and stability.

In the early years, the Church held the world together as bishops took on the civic functions previously carried out by the Roman Empire: They administered justice; fostered public works projects, such as building bridges and maintaining roads; and provided social services in their almshouses and hospitals. Their

monasteries became the sole source of education. According to Robert Delort:

The church and its priest rather than the castle and its lord were the major factors in the peasants' life and forged the times that made them a community. It was to the church that they went to attend Mass, listen to a sermon, hear the news, and even meet to organize the struggle against the lord. There they joined to worship their patron saint, receive the sacraments, have their children christened, and bury their parents. They kept the building in repair and sometimes even fortified it as refuge in case of need; they paid tithes at the church door, held fairs and markets on the square before it, and welcomed pilgrims and strangers there. It was in the church that the poor were given food. The church bell marked the hours of the day and rang the Angelus to call home belated workers in the field (179).

Beginning in the tenth century, the church also became the nurturer of theatrical production throughout Europe, inserting dramatic elements into holiday services such as those for Christmas and Easter, largely because it wanted to grow in membership and influence. Ironically, after it had for so many years deemed classical drama unsuitable for Christians, some individual churches began to see the value of theatrical performance. They began to add vivid theatrical presentations to parts of the church service in the hopes that their message would have more meaning, even if it was being said in Latin. This liturgical drama, as it became known, developed into the first theatrical product of medieval culture. These early "plays" were actually texts sung in Latin by members of the clergy and contrasted with a later form of Christian theatre: the mystery or miracle cycles.

For more than three centuries, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, while productions remained within the confines of the church, the clergy retained complete textual control. Eventually it became obvious that the confined space of the church building, the Latin Mass, and the restrictions on who could participate in the mass continued to act as barriers to a relevant or easily understood ritual. Religious drama, as presented, was no

longer fulfilling the purpose of augmenting the church's ranks, so adjustments were made. Productions were moved outside the church building, and the local vernacular was used in the new dramatic format of the mystery or miracle cycle. Although textual emphasis on biblical figures continued, changes were soon evident in the dramatization of numerous biblical events beginning with the creation and ending with the last judgment:

Because the object of the vernacular drama was to teach by entertaining, it had to entertain in order to teach. . . . It could no longer present events in Scripture simply "because they were so"; it needed to explain them in human terms. Above all, the characters must be believable—which means that however remarkable the circumstances in which they find themselves, their behaviour must feel right to the audience (Harris, 51).

Along with changes in textual control came changes in the producers of the plays. Lay citizens began to participate in producing the religious dramas once they were moved outside the confines of the church walls. In addition, the clergy allowed producers to dress the characters in contemporary dress, which made the biblical characters more identifiable to audiences. "Abraham and Isaac, Noah, Joseph and the Virgin Mary were depicted as ordinary men and women just like the friends and neighbors of medieval audiences" (Wilson and Goldfarb, 131). To the Church the modern concept of historical accuracy was of no importance. The clergy were more focused on the effect of the production on the audience. Their hope was that the audience would relate personally to the church's dramatic spectacle as they heard the stories being told in their language and therefore be more likely to accept the church's redemptive power. As the productions took on a more localized flavor, viewers could more easily identify with the stories and incorporate the lessons into their daily lives.

By the thirteenth century, even the church's front steps did not seem to be large enough to contain the audience, so the city itself became the new stage as saints began to be processed through the streets on their saints' days, penitents and civic organizations joined in the festivities, and what began as simple processions had, by the end of the fourteenth century, evolved into elaborate productions: pageants depicting stories from the Old and New Testaments and the legendary lives of saints and martyrs were added to the processions. In Britain, as in most of Europe, the subject matter depicted in the processions and miracle plays encompassed the story of humankind from creation to the last judgment with local actors playing the parts.

The actor/audience boundary was fluid because all humans were conceived as ultimately players. To portray reality was to portray the divine scheme, and one's own place within that

scheme. By turning a marketplace, the focus of communal everyday life, into a theatre, medieval makers of plays showed how everyday life concealed a deeper meaning (Wiles, 82).

For example, in Mons, a town in what is now northern France, a carpenter who built the stage was also cast in the role of Noah. It was not difficult for the spectators to identify him with the character of Noah, the ark builder, because they already knew him as a carpenter (Brown, 83). This easy merging of daily life with the divine helped to allay the fears of people who lived in a violent and insecure age; it gave them hope, demonstrated that work was rewarded, and convinced them of life everlasting.

When medieval man viewed a miracle play or biblical cycle of plays, he called upon a visual vocabulary that he developed through various means; two primary ones being the art and architecture of his times. Medieval artists produced works of deep aesthetic and spiritual importance characterized by a consistency of subject matter—that is, religion—executed in a variety of styles. The medieval viewer was exposed to paintings whose subject matter, in almost every case, was religious. The works also aided the viewer in gaining access to, and an understanding of, God's invisible realm. In a society with an extremely high illiteracy rate, visible images were considered more powerful than the written word. "By engaging the passions and evoking fascination and fear, pictures were considered particularly powerful in rendering the words of Scripture memorable" (Kessler, 177). In some cases, however, an epigraph was added to the image to serve as a memory aid to the viewer who had listened to the sermon, "and everyone could carry the message of that extraordinary and imposing painted homily back home with them, and indeed would remember it for the rest of their lives. From the pulpits, the Dominicans and Franciscans thundered in their fiery language, their words often inspired by the very same frescoes: Thus the fears of viewers were fused into a tight circle" (Frugoni, 82).

If art was meant to teach, the church building that housed that art was created to astound. At a time when medieval men and women spent their entire lives in the same village, town, or city; when wars were frequent and famines were common; when life was uncertain and short, the emotional impact peasants must have felt as they first entered the great cathedrals is hard to imagine. They undoubtedly initially marveled at the splendor, but once they overcame their awe, they began to treat the church with familiarity as they wandered in and out, talking and joking as if they were at market. The church building was seen as the civic center: a place where people gathered for town meetings, held festivals and bazaars, and even stored hay.

The second dominant force in shaping medieval life was feudalism, a political structure based on tenant farming with specific rights and duties. Feudalism had its beginnings in the late ninth

and early tenth centuries, flourished as a fully established political structure by the eleventh century, began losing influence as an institution by the thirteenth century, and came to an end by the fourteenth century. In most countries, the ruling monarch gave estates of varying size to lords in return for their agreement to provide the monarch with troops and military service. The lord rented out his parcels of property to vassals or serfs, who owed the lord their loyalty and a share of their harvest. In return, the lord agreed to protect his vassals and dispense justice. Although this form of governance was primarily civil, the church was also a landlord, and the very same feudal system applied to those serfs who rented its lands.

By 1000, a map of Europe began to delineate the major European nations as we know them today. Towns and cities grew as the population exploded due to several factors: the growth of markets for farm products, increased yields because of improved farm implements, the harnessing of water and wind for power, and new agricultural techniques. As the European political climate stabilized and economies expanded, the urban centers added civic events along with religious holidays as cause for celebration and transformed many aspects of medieval theatre into community. European monarchies and biblical episodes were expanded to include stories of historical chivalry and even classical mythology, and as such, these morality plays became the secular equivalent of the cycle plays that preceded them. "Morality plays," writes Ronald Vince, "portrayed a world in which there was a higher power to reward good and punish evil. The morality hero, often an Everyman character, must use his reason to distinguish between the two. Spectators were thus taught direct lessons in moral behavior" (Companion, 138). The result of the morality play has some common threads with Aristotle's assertion that tragedy's cathartic effect was to purge the audience of the emotions of pity and fear and leave them better people for having experienced the play.

As civic groups developed their own forms of quasi-theatrical extravaganzas, the architecture of the cities served as the scenery and its streets the stage. The "decorated streets and architectural features provided the 'playing area' and backdrop to the procession that was normally at the center of the celebration, and whose citizens constituted the audience" (Vince, Companion, 57). These spectacles generally celebrated the visit of a sovereign or important foreigner, a royal wedding or birth, a coronation, or a military victory. Although they were composed of many events and lasted a number of days or even weeks, the celebrations most often included a procession through the city streets and pantomimed *tableaux vivants*, which took the form of allegorical pictures occasionally accompanied by narration. "Those watching the procession saw costumed riders and players pass before them, while those in the procession saw mimed plays" (Vince, Companion, 135).

Coming full circle, civic celebrations moved back inside, this time to the banquet halls, castle chambers, and private theatres of emperors, kings, and noblemen, and the productions lost much of their moral emphasis in favor of elaborate dress-up games. However, the concept of theatre was well established by the end of the fourteenth century and

any audience, granted a public holiday, could expect to be entertained either indoors or out of doors with dramatic spectacles ranging from circus acts to stately tournaments, from simple representations of particular stories from the Old and New Testament to much more complicated disputations on the finer points of theology, from re-enactment of the miracles of revered saints to the heroic and romantic exploits of Christian kings and conquerors, and from homely folk-dance to sophisticated farce and satire, all presented in local dialects which everyone assembled could understand (Wickham, 90).

In the beginning, medieval theatre evolved in response to community-wide ceremonial occasions and could truly be viewed as a community project in which citizens from all walks of life worked together to create a ritual theatre that became the expression of the whole.

By the end of the medieval era, theatrical performance had changed from a collective effort to productions that carried a distinctive individual stamp. The nobles recognized the church's success in telling its story through drama, and they readily adopted street pageants and courtly entertainments to serve their own political aims. Eventually, however, outdoor processions and pageants gave way to elaborate indoor entertainments put on by the aristocracy for an audience who filled the hall by invitation only, inaugurating the institutionalized theatre that would become common in the Renaissance.

NOTES

1. See Evans.
2. See Cohen, *Livre*, lxxxii-lxxxvi.
3. And the illustrator of two manuscripts about the play (both now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris).
4. See Cohen, *Études d'Histoire du Théâtre*, 235.
5. Ms de Cangé no. 819, Bibliothèque Nationale.
6. *Le Mystère de la Passion*, Arras, 1891.
7. See Lawrenson, 114-15.