

Corpus Christi Plays and the Stations of the Cross: Medieval York and Modern Sydney

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The metropolis of Sydney in 2008 may seem worlds away from the closely packed community of around 8,000 souls nestled within the walls of pre-Reformation York. This was a thriving medieval city, a town full of towers; after a building program that had extended over two hundred and fifty years, the Minster was completed in 1472 and its impressive gothic tower stood out against the skyline, proclaiming, along with the spires of the various religious houses and the numerous parish churches where the ordinary citizens worshipped, a society whose life was imbued with Christian spirituality.¹ Sydney's central business district in the 'noughties' has around 22,000 residents, a tally that increases to 4.4 million when you include the sprawling suburbs that surround it. And if you take a snapshot of the CBD using Google Earth's twenty-first-century satellite technology, you will find another, but rather different, set of towers: the iconic sails of the Opera House and the towers of commerce that cluster down to the shoreline of our famous harbour. This is not a city that speaks openly of religious affiliations, yet in 2008 it provided material for research into the devotional plays of medieval York—and indeed the religious drama of other cities in pre-Reformation England—when it hosted the Catholic World Youth Day Stations of the Cross on Friday 18 July.

Historian David Palliser has argued that 'it is almost impossible to measure spirituality from the records' of medieval York, a notable exception being the case of the 'text of the Corpus Christi cycle' of plays, whose 'undimmed popularity until the 1570s' implies that it 'struck a

¹ For an overview of York's religious culture in the late Middle Ages, see David Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 226-59.

responsive chord in many citizens'.² The people of York were religiously conservative and resisted Protestantism and the drive to suppress their traditional drama;³ the Corpus Christi Plays were performed in 1569, the year of the Northern Rebellion, although York was politically cautious as well as religiously conservative and hence resisted the Catholic rebels, who aspired at that time to capture the city.⁴ Still, the citizens clung tenaciously to their spiritual and cultural heritage and petitioned the council for clearance to revive the plays in 1580.⁵ As it happens this was to no avail; but it was certainly not for want of an audience or for want of a community of willing participants that the York Corpus Christi Plays ceased to be.

The dramatic events both in Sydney in 2008 and York in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggest a 'measure' of the spirituality in the very different contexts in which they were created. The York Corpus Christi Plays and the World Youth Day Stations of the Cross do, in fact, share a number of other features in common: both were devotional events involving 'theatre', both focused on the narrative of Christ's Passion, the central icon of the Catholic faith, and both operated in procession on the streets for an audience of local people and visitors gathered for the festival occasion. Furthermore, these two dramatic undertakings involved clerical input and were performed by amateur players. In York the authors of the plays, although anonymous, are widely assumed to have been clerical men;⁶ and again, although there is no concrete evidence as to who directed these plays, it is highly likely that this task fell to parish priests or to chaplains attached to the guilds that were responsible for the financing and administration of

² Palliser, *Tudor York*, p. 232. For an overview of the play cycle, see Richard Beadle, 'The York Corpus Christi Play', in Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre* (2nd ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 99-124.

³ For discussion of York's late medieval Catholicism in relation to the Corpus Christi Plays, see Claire Cross, 'Excising the Virgin Mary from the Civic Life of Tudor York', *Northern History* 39 (2002), 279-84.

⁴ Palliser, *Tudor York*, p. 55.

⁵ Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds, *Records of Early English Drama: York* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 390, 392-3.

⁶ See Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King, eds, *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. xii. Some scholars have suggested the possibility of lay authorship, see, for example, Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 207-14.

the York Plays and were obliged to present them whenever they were so instructed by the city council.⁷ The texts of the prayers and reflections for the Sydney Stations of the Cross were written by Rev Prof Peter Steele SJ, Professor Emeritus in English at the University of Melbourne and an esteemed Australian poet, while the direction fell to the capable hands of Father Franco Cavarra, who trained as a TV and stage director and worked for many years for Opera Australia before entering the priesthood. The actors in medieval York were at least partly drawn from the membership of the guilds that sponsored the plays, and in the case of Sydney, the actors were young people from the local parishes, eager to serve God through their performance of the Stations. One major difference between the two productions is that the York Plays were spoken drama, whereas the Sydney Stations were presented as tableaux, a distinction that both Gail McMurray Gibson and Theodore Lerud have commented on. Gibson claims that medieval audiences would not have drawn this distinction between spoken play and ‘visual spectacles’ at all,⁸ while Lerud uses the blurring of the two categories to argue his thesis that medieval plays were moving images that were viewed, like static images, as ‘devotional aids’ that were ‘uniquely able to jog the mind toward spiritual understanding’.⁹ That plays of this kind did remain indeed in the memory of late medieval beholders is supported by the testimony of a man of around sixty years old, who in 1644 was able to recall a play that he had seen some forty years previously in

⁷ In the case of the royal entries of 1483 and 1486, Henry Hudson, parish priest of All Saints’, North Street (and in 1486, parish priest at the church in Spofforth), was retained by the council to arrange for the plays/shows that entertained Henry VII; he was assisted by a team of parish clerks, see Lorraine C. Attreed, ed., *The York House Books 1461-1490* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1991), pp. 288, 298, 304, 479, and *REED: York*, pp. 130, 138, 145. It is clear that clerical men were regarded as experts in matters that we would now see as the work of directors and producers.

⁸ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 114. Meg Twycross suggests that in the early fifteenth century the York Plays may have been tableaux rather than spoken drama, ‘The *Ordo paginarum* Revisited, with a Digital Camera’, in David N. Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marsalek, eds, ‘Bring forth the pagants’: *Studies in Early English Drama presented to Alexandra F. Johnston* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 105-31 (p. 111).

⁹ Theodore Lerud, *Memory, Images, and the English Corpus Christi Drama* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 57, 62.

Kendal, where there was ‘a man on a tree, & blood ran downe’, a memory of the ‘Iesus Christ God-man’, who was the ‘way to Salvation’.¹⁰

Following Lerud, this essay stresses the parallels between the tableaux of the Sydney Stations of 2008 and the scripted drama of the York Plays as ‘devotional aids’ in its examination of questions associated with the original participants in the York Plays, the medieval actors and their audiences. Part 1, below, explains the nature of the Corpus Christi festival and World Youth Day celebrations; Part 2 extends these findings to define medieval performers and ‘theatre-goers’ in relation to a form of lay piety known in the Middle Ages ‘affective piety’, which concentrated the thoughts of its practitioners on the humanity of Christ and the details of his earthly life.¹¹

1

A Tale of Two Festivals

Corpus Christi Day and the York Corpus Christi Plays

Pope Clement V formally established the Corpus Christi festival in 1311 to celebrate the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, which had been validated by Christ himself at the Last Supper when he presented the bread and wine to the disciples as his body and blood (Mathew 26: 26-27). The date chosen for the feast was the Thursday after Trinity Sunday; it varied from 21 May to 24 June in accordance with the date of Easter, and thus it fell during the European late spring or early summer, making it ideal for outdoor activities. At the original foundation, the papal bull ‘provided only for a mass and an office’, but, as Miri Rubin states in her magisterial book on the topic, ‘by the early fourteenth century’ an outdoor procession ‘was deemed the most appropriate mode’ of celebration and ‘in most towns and parishes a

¹⁰ Audrey Douglas and Peter Greenfield, eds, *Records of Early English Drama: Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 219.

¹¹ For an account of ‘affective piety’, beginning with St Anselm of Canterbury in the late eleventh century to its great flowering in the fifteenth century, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 129-56.

processional enterprise dominated the day',¹² while other 'creative activities' were also associated with it:

the writing of sermons, ... formation of fraternities, interpretation of eucharistic themes in the silver and gold monstrances and in the fine cloth of canopies, in the composition of hymns, and in the orchestration of town-wide ventures.¹³

The initial foundation also provided for rewards in the form of indulgences of forty days for attendance at the office, while later grants were offered for participation in the Corpus Christi procession.¹⁴ The cult of Corpus Christi was, as David Crouch puts it, 'the apex of the worship of Christ as God in man, and of the late medieval obsession with the physical nature of Christ's redemptive sacrifice';¹⁵ in other words it was closely connected with the phenomenon of affective piety.

The earliest surviving reference to the Corpus Christi festival in York is dated 1322, when Archbishop William Melton commended it as 'the glorious feast of the most precious sacrament of the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ'.¹⁶ In 1408 the York Guild of Corpus Christi was established 'as a confraternity of chaplains and lay persons, with the encouragement of the city government, probably to form the focus of the civic Corpus Christi Day procession'.¹⁷ York in fact had three separate liturgical processions on the festival day, each presented within the jurisdiction of the groups responsible for them: one in the jurisdiction of St Mary's Abbey, one in the jurisdiction of the Minster, and the third, the one with which the Corpus Christi guild was associated, within the civic

¹² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 243.

¹³ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 271.

¹⁴ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 211.

¹⁵ David J. F. Crouch, *Piety Fraternity and Power: Religious Guilds in Late Medieval Yorkshire 1389-1547* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2000), p. 99.

¹⁶ Quoted in Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 200.

¹⁷ Crouch, *Piety Fraternity and Power*, p. 161. Another function of the guild was the performance of the now lost Creed Play, which was presented once every ten years in place of the Corpus Christi Plays, see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York: The Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play', *Speculum* 50 (1975), 55-90 (pp. 57-70).

franchise under the general regulation of the council.¹⁸ The festival and the way in which the city of York chose to celebrate it was also the subject of an impassioned Corpus Christi sermon delivered in 1426 by another William Melton, a Franciscan friar, who spoke of the relative value to the citizens and their visitors of the mass and office on the one hand and, on the other, the York Plays.¹⁹ These plays, a connected series of short episodes, or ‘pageants’ as they were often called, were a creative civic-orchestrated ‘town-wide venture’. They were presented on waggon stages that were drawn through the streets by their guild sponsors, and by the time of Melton’s visit, had achieved status as the major attraction of the local Corpus Christi celebrations. Melton reminded his listeners that the indulgences now associated with church attendance had in some cases risen to one hundred days, but even this seems to have offered no real competition to the allurements of the plays, which while essentially good, he said, encouraged people to indulge themselves in less laudable social activities: ‘feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gossipings, and other wantonness’.²⁰

Northrop Frye provides a much more positive statement on the essential nature of the Corpus Christi drama that was presented in medieval York than Friar Melton; he describes it as a ‘myth-play’ that offered ‘to the audience a myth already familiar to and significant for that audience ... designed to remind the audience of their communal possession of this myth’.²¹ As Frye goes on to point out, the ‘characteristic mood and resolution of the myth-play are pensive, and pensiveness, in this context, implies a continuing imaginative subjection to the story’. Residents of medieval York and their visitors could witness representations of biblical narrative paraded through the city streets on the festival day: a moving panorama of the history of God’s relationship with humanity from the early days of Creation to the Last Judgment at the end of time. There was a

¹⁸ For discussion of these processions see Douglas Cowling, ‘The Liturgical Celebration of Corpus Christi in Medieval York’, *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter* 1.2 (1976), 5-9; Crouch, Piety, *Fraternity and Power*, pp. 160-95; and Erik Paul Weisengruber, ‘The Corpus Christi Procession in Medieval York: A Symbolic Struggle in Public Space’, *Theatre Survey* 38.1 (1997), 117-38.

¹⁹ The text of this sermon is lost, but for a contemporary report on its contents see *REED: York*, pp. 42-4, 728-30.

²⁰ *REED York*, p. 728.

²¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 282.

particular concentration on the Passion sequence, with sixteen of the forty-seven plays in the surviving manuscript of the York plays devoted to events between ‘The Entry into Jerusalem’ and ‘The Ascension’.²² Christ came as a visitor to the city, entering York as he entered Jerusalem;²³ and when Pilate speaks of his domain at the beginning of the Cutlers’ play of the ‘Conspiracy to capture Christ’, he gestures towards the towers of the surrounding cityscape: ‘To me betaught is þe tent þis towre-begon towne’ (the care of this turreted town is entrusted to me).²⁴

This was a ‘myth’ that the medieval audience understood as informing the context in which they lived, and in the process of playing, the landscape of medieval York was superimposed onto the landscape of the Holy Land. For the medieval audience Christ’s sacrifice was their spiritual centre, and the play was another means through which they could contemplate and dwell on the human aspect of the agony he suffered. This was a public expression of affective piety in the very public domain of the city streets, where people, at other times, lived out their ordinary secular lives. When the play was done and the waggons safely stored in the city’s ‘pageant houses’ to await their next outing, the medieval audience, walking through those same streets or in moments of quiet, in their workplace, homes, or parish church, could experience the ‘continuing imaginative subjection to the story’ of which Frye speaks.

World Youth Day and the Sydney Stations of the Cross

World Youth Day was established as an international pilgrimage by Pope John Paul II and was first celebrated in Rome on Palm Sunday 1986. It targets Catholic youth ‘aged between 16 and 30, the generation ... most disaffiliated from the church’, its ‘purpose ... is to educate and energise

²² For the most recent edition of the manuscript see Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290*, Vol. I, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Beadle divides the text into forty-seven plays, whereas the first scholarly edition by Lucy Toulmin Smith presents forty-eight, *York Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1885).

²³ Martin Stevens advocates the notion of ‘city as stage’ and York as Jerusalem in *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), especially pp. 52-62.

²⁴ Beadle, *The York Plays*, p. 213, l. 5.

young people to go out into the world to witness the Christian gospel'.²⁵ This purpose could be described using the terminology that Frye applies to the medieval Corpus Christi plays—a reminder of the 'communal possession' of the Christian 'myth' that will result, hopefully, in 'a continuing imaginative subjection to the story'.

The World Youth Day pilgrimage comes around every two or three years and brings people not to the shrine of a saint, the objective we would usually associate with pilgrimage, but to a host city charged in that year with the responsibility of putting together a program of devotional activities designed to reinforce and celebrate a shared faith. It resembles the Corpus Christi festival of the Middle Ages in the way that it generates a number of 'creative activities'—including the regular feature of a dramatised Stations of the Cross—alongside the masses that are, in this case, presided over by the Pope. Hundreds of thousands of people from around the globe attend, and despite the name 'World Youth Day', the event lasts not just for a day but a whole week; moreover, not all the pilgrims in Sydney for the 23rd World Youth Day in 2008 (14-20 July) were young, there were young and old from far and wide, some older Australians attending the historic occasion with their children and grandchildren.

This event is Olympian in its proportions. Indeed, the number of registered pilgrims in the year 2008—223,000, with 110,000 coming from 170 nations overseas—outstripped the Sydney Olympics of 2000 to make it the 'largest event ever hosted in Australia'.²⁶ It was also an expensive enterprise; the Federal Government contributed \$35m as well as the cost of security, with the anticipated payback being that it would 'generate between \$100 and \$125 million for the state of New South Wales'.²⁷ The Olympic Games has its eternal flame and Catholic World Youth Day has its cross. The 3.8 metre high wooden cross goes back to the Holy Year of 1983, when Pope John Paul presented it to Catholic youth with the intention that it be

²⁵ Paul Collins, *Believers: Does Australian Catholicism Have a Future?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), p. 1. The same sentiments were expressed by Pope Benedict XVI at the welcoming ceremony, 17 July, 2008, *Dear Young People: Homilies and Addresses of Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Journey to Sydney, Australia on the occasion of the 23rd World Youth Day, 12-21 July 2008* (Strathfield, N.S.W: St Paul's, 2008), pp. 9-10.

²⁶ World Youth Day, Sydney 2008 website, <http://www.wyd2008.org>, accessed 30/5/09.

²⁷ Collins, *Believers*, p. 2.

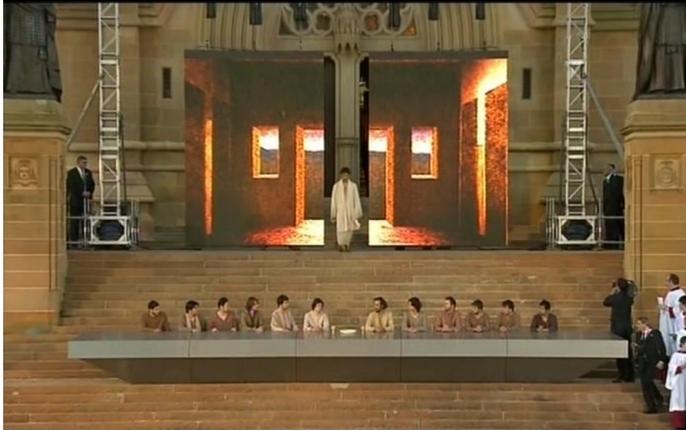
taken around the world as a symbol of Christ's continuously present sacrifice and love for humankind. The World Youth Day cross, like the Olympic flame, travelled through many countries and then around Australia to Sydney, where it featured in the Stations of the Cross, which came to life as a series of moving tableaux combined with Gospel readings, prayers, and reflections.²⁸ As the actors progressed from place to place, the cross directed them along the path that they were to follow.

The Stations of the Cross is a devotional practice that can be celebrated in various forms. Individuals can practice the Stations as a private meditation focused on pictorial imagery, or they can share such meditations with their priest and fellow parishioners. In another variation, many parishes celebrate a Stations of the Cross procession on Good Friday, which, like the World Youth Day Stations, presents costumed actors in tableaux, accompanied by traditional prayers and a text that narrates and explicates the events being depicted.²⁹ Sometimes the Stations become a scripted passion play as was represented in the acclaimed French-Canadian film, *Jesus of Montreal* (dir. Arcand, 1989).³⁰ The World Youth Day Stations, using the same technique as this film and the York Corpus Christi Plays, showed Jesus in Sydney-as-Jerusalem. His journey to the cross began with the Last Supper, appropriately presented on the steps of St Mary's Cathedral.

²⁸ See Appendix for a list of the titles and performance sites of the Sydney Stations and a brief description of the prayers and reflections that accompanied them. The Gospel texts were from the Jerusalem Bible authorised for use in the Australian Catholic Lectionary.

²⁹ For an account of one such dramatization, see Wayne Ashley, 'The Stations of the Cross: Christ, Politics, and Processions on New York City's Lower East Side', in Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 541-66.

³⁰ For discussion of *Jesus of Montreal* see Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 174-80. Numerous other biblical films could be classed as versions of the 'Stations', such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 *The Gospel According to St Matthew* and Mel Gibson's controversial *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).



Jesus enters from St Mary's Cathedral for the Last Supper

Jesus of Sydney establishes the sacrament of the Eucharist at a site that has spiritual significance for Australian Catholics, and as he progresses, the scriptural narrative is not simply an historical re-enactment displaced to a pretend-Holy-Land location, it is also placed within local, national and global concerns of our present time. At the Opera House, for example, after the Trial before Pilate, Jesus is tortured and scourged off-stage in a scene that recalls images of the notorious Abu Ghrahib prison in Iraq.



Jesus is raised aloft and lowered via a trapdoor for the Scourging that occurs offstage

The reflection on the scourging and crowning with thorns, although it does not mention the particular horror of Abu Ghraib, certainly has the power to remind us of it:

A cohort of soldiers—hundreds of them—mobbed and mocked Jesus in the same way that so many Jews and other ethnic minorities have been before and since his death. Scourging and crowning with thorns were forms of torture. To torture someone is to treat them as less than human, less even than an animal. This still happens in many places today. The tortured Jesus stands with and for anyone, without exception, guilty or innocent, to whom this is done. And he offers them life beyond their present suffering.³¹

At Cockle Bay, Station 7, Simon of Cyrene is an aboriginal man who is released from chains to help Jesus by carrying the cross; aboriginal women perform a traditional ceremony of mourning that prefigures the distress of Mary and the women of Jerusalem; and an aboriginal woman presents the reflection and finally the prayer:

Lord, you tell us that whenever we help those in need, we help you ... you will not always be obvious in those in need; the sick, the starving, the gaoled, the depressed, the refugee and stranger, may not fit our image of you and this too, is so true of many first nation peoples of the world, and indeed the aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples of this country. Help us to walk together as your sisters and brothers and to lighten each other's burdens.³²

³¹ Rev Peter Steele, *Stations of the Cross: Supporting Text and Prayers*, booklet accompanying the official DVD of the event (Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 2008), n.p.

³² Steele, *Stations of the Cross*. This reflection refers to the Acts of Corporal Mercy that will be used to measure human contact at the Last Judgment (Matthew 25: 31-46). These Acts form the basis of the York 'Last Judgment' in the Corpus Christi Plays.



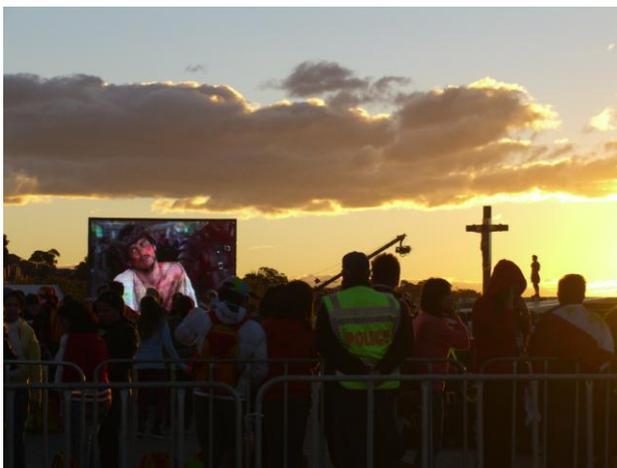
The announcer at Station 7

These politicised comments, combined seamlessly with the spiritual message of the Stations, were presented to those assembled for the event in 2008 and broadcast live on SBS and Sky television for audiences around the country and to an estimated half a million viewers internationally. Those watching from distant locations saw the well-known tourist attractions of Australia's premier city: the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge, and the magnificent harbour itself, which featured as Jesus travelled by barge towards Calvary and later formed the backdrop to the Crucifixion. Jesus had truly arrived in Sydney, just as he arrived in York in the fifteenth century. His presence in the city had a similar additional significance for local people as the events being portrayed occurred in the real-time experience of those who were there to watch and the words were spoken by Australian voices.³³

The Sydney audience was not permitted to walk along the processional route with Jesus as the audience had done in Toronto in 2002, partly because of the long distances between the performance sites, and partly to allow for larger audiences to assemble at the various vantage points. This possible disadvantage was overcome by placing enormous football-stadium style screens at key sites to keep the audiences assembled there up to date

³³ The only voice that was not Australian was that of Pope Benedict, who received a pop-star-style welcome when he emerged from St Mary's Cathedral to read the prayer at the conclusion of the first station.

with the narrative before, and in some cases after, Jesus arrived at their particular location. Popular television presenter, Ray Martin, hosted the broadcast and orchestrated a royal-visit style commentary to cover the periods when the cast was moving between venues. Far from deadening the experience for those who were actually present at the event, the television coverage allowed them to experience all the Stations from their own fixed location. For me, waiting at the final site at Barangaroo for the Crucifixion, the television coverage was an important and integral part of the event. When the broadcast began at 3pm, people around me, many of whom had arrived at noon to secure a good position, sat down on the ground and watched the screen, then, when the cast was between Stations, those of us with maps were in demand to help other audience members work out where 'he' was now and how long it would be before he arrived. At the final site, we also had the added advantage of viewing the unfolding story in the context of the Calvary image, with the three crosses standing there throughout the afternoon to remind us of the spiritual significance of what we were experiencing.



Jesus on the way to Calvary

Television also allowed us to see the procession between the performance sites, something that was only fully visible via the camera; and larger than life close-ups at all the Stations added another means of engaging with the outdoor theatre event in a way that is culturally familiar and expected and also extremely moving.



Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus and Veronica follow Jesus



The Crucifixion

When the procession reached the final site at Barangaroo, the entire audience stood up for the presentation of the last Stations, a reaction that the arrival of Jesus and the rest of the cast seems to have had at other performance sites as well. The big screen gave the audience the chance of concentrating fully on the human agony of Jesus and the anguish of his followers as they stood at the foot of the cross, something that otherwise would only have been possible to the relative few who were placed close to the stage.



The raising of the cross

The simultaneous long view of the Crucifixion with the close-ups on the human suffering of Christ and the grief of the Virgin Mary and the disciples made available via the television coverage, promoted a context conducive to affective piety for the modern world. Around me people of all ages and walks of life joined in the responses and the traditional prayers, the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, as they grasped their rosaries and took in the images before them in the darkening night.

The invention of the Stations of the Cross is sometimes attributed to the Virgin Mary based on her experiences in Jerusalem after her son's death. Apocryphal writings record that she was a devoted visitor to the various places where her son had suffered in his final days on earth. In a late-fifteenth century text written for the nuns of Syon monastery we learn that after Christ's Ascension, Mary lived for just over fifteen years and that every day during that period of time she visited the fifteen places in and around Jerusalem where he had suffered, and at each place she remembered 'in her heart full inwardly what her dear son had endured and suffered ... and then she kissed every place with the greatest meekness and reverence'.³⁴

The Stations were initially associated with medieval pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where people could follow the Virgin's example, treading in her footsteps as well as those of Jesus himself. According to Jonathan Sumption's definitive work on medieval pilgrimage, the visitor to the Holy City could experience what amounted to 'a continuously repeated drama of the life of Christ', but this 'drama', Sumption tells us, was 'more than a mere passion play', rather it was an experience with 'something of the regenerative qualities of the celebration of the Eucharist'; an experience in which we find the 'origin of the modern liturgical practice' of the Stations of the Cross.³⁵ Medieval pilgrims to Jerusalem visited the sites associated with Christ's agonising journey to Calvary and offered prayers and meditations in which they recognised the enormity of his human suffering. They placed themselves imaginatively in the roles of people who were

³⁴ Sara Schwamb, 'Introduction to Lambeth MS 546, Fols. 1r-7r: The Fifteen Places Mary Visited after Christ's Ascension', *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 18.4 (2005), 20-30 (p. 27).

³⁵ Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 93.

actually there at the Crucifixion, often identifying with the Virgin Mary and her maternal sorrow.

The medieval Stations involved a re-Crucifixion of Christ in the minds of those who practised them, and they became so much ingrained in the culture of the English Middle Ages that they appeared in various forms in the drama of the period. In the York Corpus Christi Plays, for example, they can be traced through the Passion sequence; in the eucharistic miracle play, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, they are presented in hideous detail as the Jewish merchants test the consecrated host to see if Christ is really present there; and in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* Play, the three Maries, as Scott Boehnen has argued, function as both historical witnesses to the Crucifixion events and ‘pilgrims who have performed the stations of the cross’:³⁶

MARY [MAGDALENE]. Alas, alas, for that ryall bem!
 A, this percytt my hartt worst of all!
 For *here* he turnyd ayen to the woman of Jerusalem,
 And for wherynesse lett the crosse falle!
 MARIA JACOBI. Thys sorow is beytterare than ony galle,
 For *here* the Jevys spornyd hym to make hym goo,
 And they dysspytttyd ther Kyng ryall.
 That clyvytt[h] myn hart, and makett me woo.
 (ll. 993-1000, my italics)³⁷

The Maries enter ‘wyth the sygnis of the passyon pryntyd ypon ther brest’ (*s.d.* at l. 993) and, like medieval pilgrims, focus their recollections of the Crucifixion on the places in Jerusalem (*here*) where Christ suffered. They praise the cross as the means and symbol of redemption:

THREE MARIES. Heylle, gloryows crosse! Thou baryst that
 Lord on hye.
 Whych be thi myght deddyst lowly bowe down,
 Mannys sowle from all thraldam to bye. (ll. 1005-7)

³⁶ Scott Boehnen, ‘The Aesthetics of “Sprawling” Drama: The Digby *Mary Magdalen* as Pilgrim’s Play’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 98.3 (1999), 325-52 (p. 341).

³⁷ The Digby *Mary Magdalen*, in John C. Coldewey, ed., *Early English Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 219. All quotations are from this edition.

Finally they move on, now in real time as biblical characters rather than medieval pilgrims, to the tomb where the body of Christ has been laid ‘To anyont hym, body and bone’ (l. 1013), and here they are met by the angel who announces that ‘Jhesus is resun’ (l. 1024).

In the same play the Queen of Marseilles, who has been converted by Mary Magdalene and then dies in childbirth (later to be miraculously revived), performs her own version of the Stations of the Cross, even though her body does not stir from the island where it has been left while the King continues his journey to the Holy Land. As D.K. Smith observes, while the King of Marseilles travels physically to Jerusalem, the dead Queen ‘is allowed to experience her husband’s travels as if she had gone along’ and has ‘envisioned al the holy sights without moving from her isolation’:³⁸

QUEEN. O demvr Mavdlyn, my bodyys sustynavn's!
 Thou hast wr[a]ppyd us in wele from all varyawns,
 And led me wyth my lord i[n]to the Holy Lond!

...

*I sye the blyssyd cross that Cryst shed on hys precyus blod;
 Hys blyssyd sepulcur also se I.*

...

For I have gon the stacyounys, by and by! .

(ll. 1902-1910, my italics)

The Maries authorise the Stations of the Cross, offering through their compassionate visitation of the sites of Christ’s suffering a template for an imaginative engagement with the events that those sites represent, for emotional encounters with the human agony of Christ that are at the heart of medieval affective piety. Through their example they invite others to conjure up visual images as they weep for Christ in his torment and rejoice in the triumph of the sacrifice that he makes, reconciling the inherent contradictions of the situation. In the Digby play the Queen of Marseilles follows their example as she performs her own Stations.

³⁸ D. K. Smith, ““To passe the see in shortt space”: Mapping the World in the Digby *Mary Magdalen*”, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 18 (2006), 193-214 (p. 210).

Affective piety and medieval theatre: inspirations from Sydney

Theatre historians are often troubled by the fact that modern audiences for re-enactments of medieval plays in places like York are less uniformly attuned to the ‘myth’ that such plays present than were their medieval counterparts. They are thus unable to respond to them as reminders of it as a ‘communal possession’. As Frye puts it, the ‘appeal’ of such plays is ‘a curious mixture of the popular and the esoteric; it is popular for its immediate audience, but those outside its circle have to make a conscious effort to appreciate it’.³⁹ Sarah Beckwith takes this concern even further to claim that these plays are ‘hard to make present to us and hard for us to acknowledge’ even if ‘we ... believe in the things that *they* believed in’.⁴⁰ In the same vein, Peter Meredith warned in the mid 1990s that no matter how much scholars think they know about medieval theatre ‘we can’t know how what was being played was perceived by its audience’,⁴¹ but in the second edition of the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre* that came out in 2008, John McKinnell, a very experienced director of medieval plays, was much more positive, claiming that although ‘we cannot repeat the performances of past ages ... it is a mistake to exaggerate the differences between medieval and modern audiences—human nature’, he says, ‘does not alter all that much’.⁴²

McKinnell’s view is a heartening one, but it does not do to apply it too literally; the audiences for the modern reconstructions of medieval plays are a mixed lot and Beckwith’s caution needs to be observed. If we take the modern waggon plays in York as a case study, we can argue that many attendees are drawn to them as a tourist attraction, others are interested in history, others are motivated by local pride, and even those who are people

³⁹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 282.

⁴⁰ Beckwith, *Signifying God*, p. 190.

⁴¹ Peter Meredith, ‘The Fifteenth-century Audience of the York Corpus Christi Play: Records and Speculation’, in Michel Bitot, Roberta Mullini and Peter Happé, eds. *‘Divers toys mengled’: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Culture in Honour of André Lascombes* (Tours: Université François Rebelais, 1996), pp. 101-111 (p. 109).

⁴² John McKinnell, ‘Modern Productions of Medieval English Drama’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre*, pp. 287-325 (p. 321).

of faith can scarcely avoid attending at least partly in the role of modern 'theatre-goers', interested in seeing how plays were performed way back then. Modern audiences cannot experience these deliberately reconstructed plays as a devotional marker of a religious festival observed by an audience with the potential to respond to it as a more or less homogeneous community. This is where productions like the Sydney Stations of the Cross can offer the theatre historian firmer grounds for speculation than any conscious efforts to reinvent original staging conditions. The context for the Sydney Stations was devotional, the live audience was made up of people who had registered as 'pilgrims', people of faith, who came understanding that they were there to take part in a liturgical practice, albeit one that happened on this occasion to be in the form of a spectacular theatrical presentation. The director of the Sydney Stations, Father Franco, summed up the distinction as he explained the nature of the event in the Compass program 'Stations of the Cross ... The Making Of' that was broadcast on Good Friday, 10 April, 2009:

It isn't by and large just a theatrical production. It actually is a prayer. And therefore there is another dimension at work. The disciplines are theatrical, sure. Acting, mime, music, lighting, text, costume, all those sorts of things. But then there is the other dimension which is the spiritual dimension.⁴³

On the day of the Sydney Stations, the television cameras sought out the reactions of the audience as they entered this 'spiritual dimension'; and the results are illuminating for anyone with an interest in the devotional theatre of the Middle Ages in that they suggest what it might have been like for an audience of people of faith participating in a communal devotional activity in their city, with their visitors around them, in a context where there were other devotional activities: processions, sermons, masses and the like. Many of those gathered in Sydney to recall (using Frye's terms again) 'their communal possession' of the Christian story, did indeed show through their 'pensiveness' that they were experiencing a 'continuing imaginative subjection to the story'. Some, particularly when they were caught during the processional interludes between the performance of the actual Stations, reacted with delight when they saw themselves on

⁴³ Father Franco Cavarra, transcript of Compass: 'Stations of the Cross ... The Making Of', hosted by Geraldine Doogue, broadcast on ABC1 7.30pm, 10 April, 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s2525844.htm>, accessed on 7/10/09.

television, indicating that this was a celebratory occasion as well as a sobering one:



Audience member watches Jesus and Veronica on the big screen—



and sees herself on camera

And one young television commentator, Jovina Graham, only just contained her tears when she spoke of the emotion that flooded over her when Veronica stepped forward to wipe Jesus' face as he made his way to

Calvary. To her it seemed to be ‘the heart of everything it is to be Christian’.



Jovina Graham gives a commentary on the meeting of Jesus and the women of Jerusalem



Veronica wipes Jesus' face

More revelations came in the Compass program already mentioned, revelations that were even more exciting to me as a theatre historian in that they gave me insights into what it was like to be an ‘actor’ in this kind of

'theatre'. Father Franco was caught 'by surprise' in rehearsal by the 'spontaneous outpouring of emotion by the female leads' in his amateur cast. Veronica, in particular, stands out:



Veronica in rehearsal



The disciple John and Mary the Mother of Jesus in rehearsal

The tears that were shed by the actors in rehearsal and in the performance itself are not ‘merely’ actor’s tears, rather they are the tears of the faithful as these young parishioners imagine themselves walking with Jesus on the road to Calvary; they have entered the ‘spiritual dimension’ and are there with him just as the Queen of Marseilles is with him in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play. They are performing the Stations for others to watch, but they are also concurrently performing the Stations for themselves as a devotional practice, performing, as Father France put it, ‘a prayer’.

We can transpose this awareness of a ‘spiritual dimension’ back to the Middle Ages to argue that in medieval York, when as we are so often reminded, the fourth wall encouraged by the proscenium arch theatre did not exist to divide the stage from the auditorium, the audience and actors were similarly engaged in a collective imaginative exercise of affective piety, placing themselves within the biblical narrative in a way that both lamented the physical sufferings of Christ and praised them.

Nicholas Love, prior of Mount Grace Charterhouse, not far north of York, encouraged affective piety in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, his early fifteenth century translation of a Franciscan work, *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.⁴⁴ Citing St Bernard, Love pointed out that lay people were ‘symple soules’, for whom ‘contemplacion of þe monhede of cryste is more liking more spedefull & more sykere þan is hyze contemplacion of þe godhed’; he encouraged his readers to envisage ‘devoute ymaginacions & likenessis’ of the Incarnation, Life and Passion of Christ to reignite and cement their faith as something that was very real to them.⁴⁵ When it came to the Passion, they were instructed to separate in their own minds the power of the godhead from the ‘kyndely(i.e. natural) infirmite’ of Christ’s ‘manhede’ (p. 161). Even though such separation was entirely fictional, it was an essential step in the true understanding of the magnitude of his sacrifice for humankind; as Love’s story continued, the readers were exhorted to ‘beholde how paciently he suffreþ him self to be takene, bonden, smyten & wodely (i.e. madly) ladde forþ’ (p. 167), and so it goes on in indignation and horror, tearing the heart-strings, urging the

⁴⁴ See also Alexandra F. Johnston, ‘The York Cycle and the Libraries of York’, in Caroline M. Barron, ed., *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), 355-70 (pp. 360-1).

⁴⁵ Michael G. Sargent, ed., *Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 10. All quotations are from this edition.

reader to imagine themselves as contemporary witnesses on the road to Calvary.

Fifteenth-century English mystic, Margery Kempe, described by a recent editor and translator of her autobiographical writings as ‘noisy, uncomfortable, and demonstrably pious’,⁴⁶ was an enthusiastic practitioner of affective piety. When she first went as a pilgrim to Jerusalem in the early fifteenth century, she joined a group-tour led by some Franciscan friars:

the friars lifted up a cross and led the pilgrims about from one place to another where our Lord had suffered his pains and his passions ... the friars always, as they went about, told them what our Lord suffered in every place ... [Margery] wept and sobbed so plenteously *as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eye* suffering his Passion at that time. Before her *in her soul she saw him verily by contemplation*, and that caused her to have compassion. And when they came up onto the Mount of Calvary, she fell down so that she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart should have burst asunder, *for in the city of her soul she saw verily and freshly how our Lord was crucified.* (p. 50, my emphasis)

As Claire Sponsler has pointed out, ‘Margery’s piety is remarkably demonstrative and histrionic’, she is an ‘expert in the arts of the theatre’.⁴⁷ In later visions back home in England, she imagines herself as an active participant in the Passion; she becomes one of the women of Jerusalem, she falls at Jesus’ feet and is comforted by him; and she herself comforts the Virgin and urges her to follow her son as he progresses towards his death on the cross:

[Margery] *thought she took our Lord Jesus Christ by the clothes* and fell down at his feet, praying him to bless her, and

⁴⁶ Lynn Staley, ed. and trans, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. vii. All quotations are from this edition.

⁴⁷ Claire Sponsler, ‘Drama and Piety: Margery Kempe’, in John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, eds., *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 129-43 (p. 130).

therewith she cried full loudly and wept right sorely, *saying in her mind*, ‘A, Lord, where shall I become?’ ... then answered our Lord to her, ‘Be still, daughter, and rest with my mother here and comfort you in her’ ... she went to our Lady and said, ‘A, blessed Lady, rise up and let us follow your blessed son as long as we may see him so that I may look enough upon him before he dies.’ (p. 138, my emphasis)

Margery is an extreme case, her emotional outbursts made people around her nervous. She notably disrupted the preaching of Friar William Melton whose sermon to the people of York gave only luke-warm praise to the local Corpus Christi Plays.⁴⁸ Melton came to her home town of Lynn with a reputation for ‘perfection of preaching’ (p. 109) and was warned that Margery would be in the congregation that came to hear him and that she habitually ‘weeps, sobs and cries’ when she hears of the Passion, ‘but it last not long’ (p. 110). Melton suffered her outbursts on the first occasion but made it clear that she would not be welcome again. Despite the entreaties of two priests in support of Margery, he was not willing to be upstaged by her again: ‘if she came in any church where he should preach and she made any noise as she was wont to do, he should speak sharply against her; he would not suffer her to cry in any way’. (p. 110)

Margery’s histrionic weeping and vivid imaginings ‘in her soul’ make her an exemplar of both actor and audience in medieval devotional theatre. She can practice the Stations of the Cross both in Jerusalem and in England and she can conjure up images at the mere mention of the Passion. She is a perfect, albeit extreme, example of someone who undergoes ‘continuing imaginative subjection to the story’. As audience, she weeps as she is moved by what she sees unfolding before her, as actor, she takes on the role of a woman of Jerusalem.

Margery’s tears as a member of the audience at the Passion recall the complaints against devotional theatre in the fifteenth-century *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*.⁴⁹ Tears shed at Passion Play are dismissed in this treatise

⁴⁸ For the identification of Melton with the friar who objected to Margery’s outbursts at his sermon see Barry Windeatt, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Longman, 2000) pp286-7, note to l. 4979.

⁴⁹ Clifford Davidson, ed., *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993). All quotations are from this edition.

as shallow; those who are ‘moyvd to compassion and devocion, wepinge bitere teris’ (p. 98) are accused of superficiality and are said to weep only for the ‘pley of Cristis passion’ and not for their sins or in deep contemplation of their faith: ‘not principally for theire oune sinnes ne of theire gode feith withinneforthe (i.e. inwardly), but more of their sight withouteforth (i.e. outwardly)’. (p. 102) Actors are similarly dismissed as self-indulgent, they care not for what they are playing but for their own satisfaction: ‘they puttun God bihinde and ther owne lustis biforn, as they han minde of God onely for sake of ther pley and also for they deliten hem more in the pley than in the miralis silf’. (pp. 109-10)

The author of the *Tretise*, clearly an opponent of medieval religious theatre, raises a number of complaints besides these, even down to the complaint that too much money is spent on them (‘hideous covetise’), money that would be better spent ‘upon the nedis of ther negheboris’. (p. 111) In medieval York, according to the establishment viewpoint that emerges from the civic records, money spent on the Corpus Christi Plays was money that was well spent, to the honour of God and the honour of the city,⁵⁰ and for the benefit of the citizens and visitors who came to the festival.⁵¹ The benefit may have been partly financial in that the play and the festival brought more people into the city and therefore fed the tourist trade,⁵² but a clear definition of what that benefit was is available in a description of the play in 1422 that states that it was originally devised as a devotional activity and for the ‘extirpation of vice and the reformation of custom’.⁵³ Like the Creed Play that alternated with it once every ten years, the York Corpus Christi Play was designed to be performed for the ‘spiritual health’ of the audience.⁵⁴

While not all the actors would have necessarily entered into the same level of imaginative engagement with the subject matter that Margery Kempe did when she acted out the Stations of the Cross in her mind, and while not all members of the audience would have engaged with the sights she saw with such effusive weeping and roaring, it is possible that the kinds

⁵⁰ REED: *York*, pp. 11, 697.

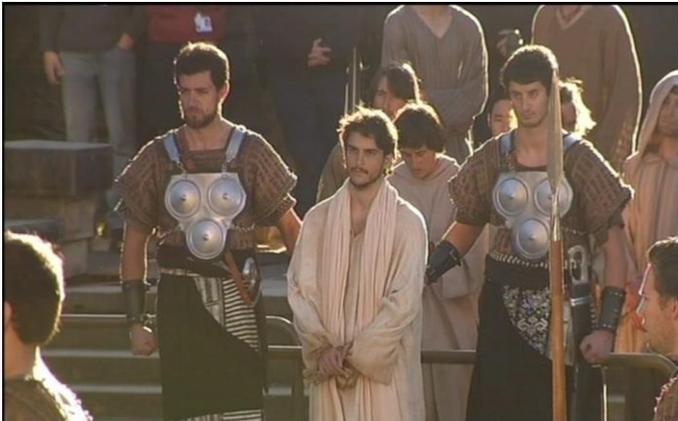
⁵¹ REED: *York*, pp. 28, 713.

⁵² Alexandra F. Johnston, ‘An introduction to medieval English theatre’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre*, pp. 1-25 (p. 7).

⁵³ REED: *York*, pp. 32, 722.

⁵⁴ REED: *York*, pp. 88, 765.

of engagement evident in the Sydney Stations of the Cross also operated in places like York in the Middle Ages. Much of the evidence that I have presented here relates to the participation of female actors and audience members and to actors who took the roles of virtuous characters, but ‘affective piety’ can apply to role taking of a different kind. As Laurelle Levert has pointed out, advocates of affective piety ‘sometimes encouraged [readers] to take on the roles of other characters (such as the soldiers) or even inanimate objects (such as the nails used to crucify Christ).’⁵⁵ This was what Kathryn Smith has described in her discussion of the fifteenth-century *Complaynt of Crist* as a ‘rhetorical strategy’ that ‘was a powerful and effective tool for provoking a sense of contrition or penitence in an audience’, reminding them that they re-crucified Jesus ‘every day through vice and sin’.⁵⁶ Actors who played roles such as Judas, Pilate, and the soldiers—in York in the Middle Ages and in Sydney in 2008—were practising affective piety just as devoutly as those playing other roles. They dwelt on the horror of Christ’s human agony and the way that humanity remains implicated in that agony in a manner that is no less conducive to entering the ‘spiritual dimension’ than the roles of the women of Jerusalem, the disciples, or Jesus himself:



The soldiers lead Jesus to his Trial before the Sanhedrin

⁵⁵ Laurelle LeVert, “‘Crucifye hem, Crucifye hem’: The Subject and Affective Response in Middle English Passion Narratives’, *Essays in Medieval Studies* 14 (1998), 73-98 (n.p. in online version).

⁵⁶ Kathryn A. Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England: Women and their Books of Hours* (London: British Library, 2003), p. 160.

Appendix

World Youth Day, Sydney 2008. 'Stations of the Cross', Friday 18 July.

- Station 1: The Last Supper (St Mary's Cathedral)
- Station 2: The Agony of Our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane (Domain)
- Station 3: Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Art Gallery of New South Wales)
- Station 4: Jesus before Pilate (Sydney Opera House)
- Station 5: Jesus is Scourged and Crowned with Thorns (Sydney Opera House)
- Station 6: Jesus Takes up His Cross (Sydney Opera House)
- Station 7: Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus to Carry His Cross (Cockle Bay)
- Station 8: Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem (Barangaroo 1)
- Station 9: Jesus is Stripped of His Garments and Nailed to the Cross (Barangaroo 2)
- Station 10: Jesus Promises Paradise to the Good Thief (Barangaroo 2)
- Station 11: Jesus Entrusts Mary and John to each other (Barangaroo 2)
- Station 12: Jesus Dies on the Cross (Barangaroo 2)
- Station 13: The Body of Jesus is Brought down from the Cross (Barangaroo 2)

The actors do not speak. Each station begins with a prayer, led by the announcers:

Announcer: We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Each station has a Gospel Reading as approved by the Sacred Congregation of Rites and Pope Paul VI in the 1975 Jubilee Year. This is followed by a reflection and a prayer by the announcers, and finally by the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary led by the announcers (Pope Benedict XVI read the Reflection and Prayer at the first station).

The text of the Reflections and Prayers was prepared by Rev Prof Peter Steele SJ, Professor Emeritus in English at the University of Melbourne and an esteemed Australian poet.

Margaret Rogerson teaches medieval English literature at the University of Sydney. Her recent monograph, *Playing a Part in History: The York Mysteries 1951-2006* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), examines the modern production history of the York Corpus Christi (Mystery) Plays in their local context and considers the relationship of this tradition to that of the Middle Ages.