

The York Mystery Plays as Bricolage

Volume 1 of 2

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Abstract

This thesis and its associated performances uses creative practice research to explore adapting the York Mystery Plays, medieval plays typically performed by amateur casts. My creative practice between 2020-2022 involved three productions of the Plays. Each was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions, which limited available resources. I draw on Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage as a response to these limitations, using it as a versatile framework for devising and directing amateur theatre. Bricolage here is defined as using whatever is immediately at hand. I apply this to adapt the Plays to different spaces: my own home, a temporarily closed church, and a marketplace. In doing so, I identify sustainability as an underlying concern of theatrical bricolage.

Each chapter focuses on a specific aspect of bricolage: identity, process, and assemblage. These resonate with the concerns of amateur performance studies, particularly regarding the role of sites and their contents in rehearsal and performance. The participants in the productions include amateur performers, with a focus on their agency and aesthetic contributions, and the ways in which bricolage enables this. My involvement in these various performance traditions and communities informs the analysis.

Keywords: amateur theatre; bricolage; site-specific theatre; York Mystery Plays; adaptation theory; community theatre; medieval theatre

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List of Accompanying Material

This thesis provides a commentary on three performances undertaken for a PhD by Creative Practice. The accompanying material should ideally be viewed in advance of reading the corresponding chapters.

Performance Recording: The York Mysteries @ Home

These were released via YouTube with closed captions, and can be viewed in their original context here:

Play 1 – The Creation of the Heavens and the Fall of Lucifer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgb7NJJ4SDY>

Play 2 – The Creation of the World to the Fifth Day

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty0KqfzKuc4>

Play 3 – The Creation of Adam and Eve

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY_HUQ3K0cM

Play 4 – The Prohibition of the Tree of Good and Ill

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFX27imBxT0>

Play 5 – The Fall of Man

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so3rhs8eB6k>

Play 6 – The Expulsion from Eden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYWirg594NQ>

Play 7 – Cain and Abel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rscckclzpatw>

Play 8 – The Building of the Ark

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asKgu_pKs7k

Play 9 – The Flood

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYnI_BoSLKE

Play 10 – Abraham and Isaak

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPbFzpao8C0>

Play 11 – Moses and Pharaoh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCxtPe2kKY0>

Play 12 – The Annunciation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YHSfYzV7Aw>

Play 44 – The Death of Mary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFW8fvTYwKo>

Play 45 – The Assumption of Mary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn5oHHoEAf8>

Play 46 – The Coronation of the Virgin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41YZJlljY3c>

Performance Recording: Heaven and Earth in Little Space

A public version with closed captions can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdQ6LPml5yk>

Performance Recording: Fragments of The Shambles Market Performance 2022.
Due to issues with filming, the full performance is unavailable, and only some scenes can be viewed. This recording presents the remains, and should be viewed in conjunction with the script in Appendix 10.

Definition of Terms

My creative practice and thesis focus on modern adaptations of the York Corpus Christi Plays. These were originally produced and performed by craft guilds in the late Middle Ages, on a roughly annual basis (Beadle, 1994). Each episode was staged by a different guild on a pageant waggon in various outdoor sites ('stations') across York. By the late sixteenth century, economic, social, and religious factors led to their decline and eventual extinction. The Plays were revived in the mid-twentieth century as large-scale community theatre at York Museum Gardens. By the 1990s, they had diverged into two performance traditions. The first continued the Museum Garden Mysteries, at locations including the York Theatre Royal and York Minster. The second, closer to their medieval form, performed on waggons in York's streets.

The debate over the term "Mystery" plays is a long and complex one. Its use portrays the plays as either (or both) a dramatisation of the mysteries of the Christian faith, and as a synonym for the craft guilds who produced these. As Solberg outlines, the accuracy of either use is disputed (2016, p. 11). Some writers declare it an anachronistic eighteenth century invention, whilst others (including Solberg) argue for its medieval origins. As with many academic debates, the controversy has made no dent on its popular use. Modern theatre-makers – myself included – continue to call these the York Mystery Plays (or Mysteries).

In a thesis concerned with the connections and allusions between historical texts, historical performances, and modern adaptations, a distinction between these is useful. Although these categories often slip their bounds, within this thesis I use the following terms:

Corpus Christi Plays refer to the recorded scripts contained in the Register, the official manuscript maintained by York's Corporation (central authority) between c.1463–77.

Pageants refers to both the medieval performances of these texts. In quotations, it may also refer to the pageant waggons themselves.¹

Mystery Plays refers to modern productions and adaptations of these plays.

¹ The use of the double-g *waggons* spelling varies between writers. The modern Guild productions consistently use the double-g spelling, and so I use this except when quoting sources that use the *wagon* spelling. As Bloomfield suggests, this is "probably because it is

Acknowledgements

“It was the work of the guilds to catalyse new friendships between individuals of different background and experience. This was not a light undertaking. To treat a relative stranger as if they were a friend entails a risk. It only makes sense as an act of faith.”

(Rosser, 2015, p. 227)

This work is an act of bricolage – creating with the remnants of past projects. I am blessed that my predecessors (both theatrical and academic) have left such rich material to work with. I hope I have enriched the Mysteries for whoever comes next.

My thanks in particular go to:

My supervisors, Dr Kate Giles and Dr Ollie Jones. Their steadfast encouragement, advice and provocations over the years have made every difference.

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All those who have participated in performances and workshops: particularly Alan Lyons, Anna Baldwin, Cynthia Wood, Dr Emily Hansen, Livy Potter, Selina Song, Elizabeth Stanforth-Sharpe, Margaret Hillier, Mick Liversidge and James Swanton.

The PCC and Steering Committee of All Saints North Street, and Alison Freeman, for their support with *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*.

perceived as an ‘older,’ more ‘medieval’ form” (2020, p. iii). As we will see, this appeal to the past is characteristic of the Mysteries as popular heritage.

My parents, Strasz (the scientist) and Hilary (the bricoleur), for their gifts of time, support and awkward questions.

Stephen and Luke, for the lack of questions. Sometimes that's all that was needed.

Pip, who helps me look at the world differently. You can have your ~~props~~ toys back now.

Whitney. Voice of love and reason. None of this would have been possible without you.

And to all who push the waggons onward.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author, with the following exceptions:

Plays 44, 45 and 46 of *York Mysteries @ Home*, devised with (and performed by) Eleanor Bloomfield.

The script of *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*, devised with Cynthia Wood, Dr Emily Hansen, Livy Potter, Selina Song, Elizabeth Stanforth-Sharpe, and Margaret Hillier.

The York Mystery Plays 2022 programme, designed by Mark Comer. Other contributions are noted by name in the programme. The remaining content is my own. Reproduced in this thesis by kind permission of York Festival Trust.

This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Introduction

This thesis runs parallel with and critically reflects on my creative practice between 2020-22. This involved using site-specific theatre techniques to adapt the York Mystery Plays, a set of medieval plays generally performed by amateur casts.² By site-specific, I mean “performance that is not only enacted in your site, but devised in the site and *about* the site” (Smith, 2019, p. 83). In particular, I consider site-based work within the context of the ‘amateur turn’, in which theatre researchers have paid increasing attention to the place (and places) of amateurs within the UK’s wider theatre ecology (Holdsworth, Milling and Nicholson, 2017). My first production, *York Mysteries @ Home*, adapted the first twelve Plays within my home, responding to the ongoing conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second, *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*, focuses on the plays dealing with the Virgin Mary, using the Plays to explore a church undergoing restoration. The final performance, *The York Mystery Plays (or “waggon plays”)*, examines my place as Artistic Director of the 2022 production, in which eight communities each performed a single episode from the Corpus Christi Plays. All were significantly affected by COVID-19 lockdowns, greatly restricting the resources available to me as a theatre-maker.

In navigating the restrictions of the pandemic and its lockdowns, I explore the utility of *bricolage* as a theatrical response to limited resources. Bricolage is often used in site-specific theatre as a short-hand term for both the devising process and the resulting performance. This draws on its expansive use by the philosopher Lévi-

² During this time, I also:

- wrote *A Resurrection for York* (2021), based on the Corpus Christi Plays, on behalf of a consortium of York Minster, York Mystery Plays Supporters Trust, and York Festivals Trust.
- directed a rehearsed reading of Richard Brome’s *The Northern Lass* (1629) to support the doctoral research of Venegas Meza into accents in early modern comedies (2022).
- created a set of films comparing the *Corpus Christi Plays* and scenes from Shakespeare, as part of York Shakespeare Festival (2021)
- adapted and directed the *Lincoln Mystery Plays* (2022), based on the 16th century N-Town Plays.

As these did not directly address my research questions, I separate these from the thesis, which provides the critical framework that informed my practice. However, they represent other facets of my ongoing professional development as a theatre director during this time.

Strauss, to describe work created with whatever is immediately to hand (1974, pp. 16–17). However, as a performance methodology it is rarely developed beyond a poetic metaphor. My creative practice develops theatrical bricolage in greater detail. In using this as my creative framework, I found that the concept and approaches of bricolage proved a versatile response to unexpected working conditions during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. In each chapter, I use a specific aspect of bricolage to adapt the York Mystery Plays: as an identity, a process, and an assemblage. These resonate with concerns within amateur performance studies about the role of sites and their contents, and their use in rehearsal and performance (see Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling, 2019).

Rationale

The origins of this research are rooted in my practical experience as a theatre-maker in York over the past fifteen years, and in particular my involvement in the York Mystery Plays as director, adapter, and performer. As a starting point, however, I point to a moment of personal dissatisfaction with the 2016 performance at York Minster. In the script, Mike Poulton overlaid the building on the Biblical setting, so that the prophet Anna welcomed the Holy Family not to Jerusalem's temple but "Here to this Minster" (2015, sc. 41: line 63). This was a reversal of the medieval pageants – in which Jerusalem was superimposed onto York's urban landscape – and it was one example amongst many of the production's intermingling of biblical, medieval and modern eras. Yet the set and projection screen obscured the Minster's medieval architecture. Only the pillars of the nave could be easily seen, the rest of the site veiled in darkness. For me, the script's doubling of time and place was undermined. A closer attention to the site might have avoided this. I began to think more broadly about the interactions between the Plays and their settings. In particular, I felt that York's streets and squares, St Mary's Abbey, or the interior of York Minster were too often only a backdrop or container for the plays, the scenographic equivalent of retaining the 'thee', 'thou' and 'mickle' that nod to the Yorkshire origins of the plays. The performances did not arise from a close engagement with their sites and the communities found there. My creative practice and thesis responds to this: finding ways in which the Plays can be revitalised, or at

least reimagined, through close attention to their sites of production (Smith, 2019, p. 19).

This project was designed from the start as a PhD by creative practice, and this is reflected in its iterative process of creating through bricolage at differing scales and spaces. In doing so, I build on major surveys of the Mystery Plays undertaken by Rogerson (2009) and Normington (2007), and analysis of more recent productions, particularly those of 2012 and 2016 (see, for example, Bloomfield (2020) and Mitchell-Buck (2019)). However, its focus is on my own creative practice rather than on previous productions. In doing so, I highlight the benefits of creative research as a way to open up new theories of practice. A creative practice degree is more than the performance itself, but instead operates through an iterative process of discovering through doing. Nelson suggests that the creative output is not separate from the thesis, but instead occupies the central space within a triangle formed by:

practitioner knowledge, the embodied or tacit knowledge I have developed ('know-how'),

critical reflection, which places it within a lineage of practice ('know-where'), and

conceptual framework ('know-that')

(2009, p. 127).

Nelson suggests that creative practice creates new knowledge not by a focus on any one of these points, but by moving between points on the triangle. The creative output is the device that both prompts this movement, and allows the researcher to synthesise different approaches. My three productions provide moments of critical reflection, drawing together existing approaches to medieval studies, site-specific work and community theatre. They develop bricolage as a conceptual framework for discussing the Plays, and as a practical process for adapting these. Finally, they demonstrate my growth as a practitioner, in which I took on an identity as a theatrical bricoleur – somebody who works with the fragments of past performances. Each production uses bricolage as a way to adapt the Mystery Plays to a new site or

context. In each production, I worked with amateur performers, and it is within the context of amateur performance that I now locate my work.

Participants

Productions of the Plays involve a broad range of purposes, including religious proselytization, community-building, and research into their medieval origins. These are reflected in the involvement of a wide variety of groups, incorporating both professional and amateur casts and crews. It can therefore be difficult to define the place of the Mystery Plays within the wider theatre ecology, due to the many variations in form and content that have been adopted. However, my attention here is on productions performed by amateur casts. Broadly speaking, and acknowledging the frequent overlap of these categories, we might consider possible models:

- Applied theatre, where facilitators work with participants within an existing (and often marginalised) community (Nicholson, 2005, p. 3). Success here can be measured in terms of empowering participants and enacting social change. As Fişek notes, however, exactly what this empowerment and change might look like is contested (2019, p. 17). This model is unusual for the York Mystery Plays, and mostly used in educational settings such as the 2008 York Youth Mysteries (Tyler, 2010).
- Community theatre, instigated and led by a professional core team. These are generally rooted in the history of a geographic community, with the general model pioneered by Jellicoe's Colway Theatre Trust (1987). The 'fixed-site' Mysteries (described in the following chapter) take a similar approach, with professional directors and creative teams creating a single production. Within York's recent history, the success of the 2012 Mystery Plays has seen a series of large-scale community plays produced by York Theatre Royal, dealing with moments of York's history (e.g. the chocolate industry and World War One in *Blood and Chocolate* (2013), the Suffragette movement in *Everything is Possible* (2016), and Viking-era York in *The Coppergate Woman* (2022)). As with York's medieval pageants, productions are motivated in part by the potential to form and reinforce the city's broad communal identity. As Jellicoe puts it, "The play is the structure which allows everything else to

happen" (1987, p. 127). However, their aim of creating consensus through performance has been criticised for prioritising spectacle over empowering participants (Bishop, 2012). Political aspects of these projects are often minimised or couched in broad terms of 'community' or 'inclusion', for fear of alienating potential cast and audiences. Any political aims therefore require the sort of *devious means* that I will later identify as characteristic of bricolage (see Weston (2019) or Foreman (2019)). Nonetheless, wide involvement of the hosting town or city is used as a measure of success, not least because it can be easily quantified for funding purposes.

- Amateur theatre, organised by self-contained companies who produce plays on a regular basis. Although amateur dramatics have frequently been disparaged, the recent amateur turn in performance studies has prompted a re-evaluation of their value. Principally this has been framed in terms of *sociability* – the role of creative practices in forming bonds between individuals (see, for example, Walcon and Nicholson (2017), Holdsworth, Milling and Nicholson (2017) and, dealing specifically with sites, Edensor et al. (2010)). The long periods between Mystery Plays productions (often four years) means that these sociable networks must be continually re-established. Responding to this, the York Mystery Supporters Trust have begun to produce individual episodes, with the 2019 and 2022 Nativities positioned as an attempt to start a new performance tradition (Terry, no date). Success here might be seen in the *sustainability* of the groups, both in terms of maintaining their sociable role and the communities and sites in which they operate. This has a precursor in the medieval guilds and their pageants: "the work of the guilds [was] to catalyse new friendships between individuals of different background and experience" (Rosser, 2015, p. 227)

Like the Mystery Plays more broadly, my creative practice during this thesis occupies each of these porous templates. Entering the spaces of an existing community might be seen as a form of applied theatre, whilst my work with isolated individuals during lockdown through workshops and read-throughs became a temporary replacement for the sociable role of amateur theatre groups. As a professional theatre-maker, my involvement in the Mysteries slips into community theatre, in which I instigated new

productions as much for my personal development, as the creation of community. Finally, the Waggon Plays involve what former pageant-master Mike Tyler has often termed a 'community of communities'. The multiplicity of approaches provide opportunities for heterogenous performance styles in a way not normally seen (or indeed desired) in large-scale community theatre.

These overlapping motives are likewise reflected in the other participants. They may belong to multiple groups or productions, moving between them to take opportunity of different performance styles, directors or resources. Others may solely work within a single performance tradition, perhaps only involved in the major productions at the York Museum Gardens, or the waggon plays. Others may be involved because their existing community – such as a church not normally focused on performances – is taking part. The extent to which participants have agency over their performances forms a central concern of this thesis, with a particular focus on how this is reflected in the rehearsal process and aesthetics of the productions.

This provided initial parameters for involvement. First, I was interested in those who identify as amateur performers. Second, because I wanted to explore how they responded to past productions of the Mystery Plays, I sought those who had previously been involved in these. Participants for the first two performances were therefore recruited in ways typical to my previous approach to casting amateur theatre. These included:

- direct approaches to actors I had previously worked with, and word of mouth via these people
- posts on social media, principally Facebook and Twitter
- mailing lists, principally the York Mystery Plays Supporters Trust, and University departments
- publicity pieces with local journalists (Hutchinson, 2020)

Before the pandemic, I would normally also advertise casting calls using physical posters, displayed on noticeboards in cafes, libraries and community centres. Due to the pandemic, these spaces were initially unavailable. It is likely that this further limited my pool of potential participants to those within my existing networks, an initial sign of 'making do' that was to characterise working during the pandemic. This

was mitigated somewhat for the third performance (the 2022 Waggon Plays), as participants were instead involved via their individual performance groups. The process of engaging with these groups is detailed in Chapter Four.

Research Ethics

Working with amateur casts also meant that ethical considerations were paramount in designing each project. Research ethics were approved for Productions One (*York Mysteries @ Home*) and Two (*Heaven and Earth in Little Space*), and all participants were fully informed about the purposes of any data provided. Production Three (*The 2022 Waggon Plays*) instead focused on my own experience and process within a pre-existing production. As such, it did not fall under the specific requirements for ethical approval. The approved checklists and information sheets are included as appendices to this thesis.

Typically, research involving sensitive information, including religious beliefs, requires anonymity for participants under the Data Protection Act (2018). This was discussed as part of my Research Ethics process. As the productions draw on the experience and identities of participants, anonymity was felt to be undesirable if it underplayed or failed to acknowledge their active involvement and contribution to the devising process. On the other hand, they may instead have preferred to be fully anonymous due to the discussions that take place.

Discussing this became part of the rehearsal process. Performance participants (those taking part in workshops, rehearsals and performances) were asked to indicate at the start of the workshopping process whether they wish to be anonymous, use a pseudonym/stage name, or credited by name. Those who took part in the early workshops between April – July 2020 chose to be anonymous, due to the experimental nature of performing online. Those involved in the formal productions chose to be credited by name. They were given a further opportunity to withdraw this approval prior to the completion of this thesis.

Research Parameters

My research questions are therefore framed as a series of provocations:

- What constitutes the boundaries of a Mystery Play, in terms of content, form and adaptation process?
- How does theatrical bricolage provide a framework for adapting the Plays, in a way that enables agency in amateur participants through closer attention to their sites?
- How might bricolage sustain the Mystery Plays during moments of precarity?

In the following chapter I begin to address these questions. I begin by setting the scene, exploring the history of the Corpus Christi Plays, their modern revivals, and academic studies of these. I identify my particular concern with sites, material culture, and the involvement of amateur casts and creators. In the second part, I consider the plays as assemblages of these elements, and outline the ways in which bricolage provides a structure for adapting the plays. In doing so, I identify three distinct aspects of bricolage – process, assemblage and identity.

The following chapters examine each of the individual productions through one of these aspects. Chapter Two focuses on my initial encounter with the theory, and sees me establish my identity as a bricoleur within my own home in the context of COVID-19 and lockdown. Having done so, Chapter Three focuses on the process of bricolage, applying it to an adaptation of the Corpus Christi Plays within a heritage site, All Saints North Street, in the aftermath of the initial wave of the pandemic. Finally, Chapter Four sees me consider the 2022 waggon plays as an assemblage, drawing together multiple sites, communities and individuals returning again to York's streets. Whilst the first two productions were formulated as part of my PhD, the waggon plays are an ongoing part of my professional life. This production (and the reflective chapter) is used to examine bricolage as sustainable theatre, and its limitations as a model for the Plays.

The Context of COVID-19

Although this is not a thesis *about* the pandemic, its impact on my work and thinking during this time is intertwined with my creative practice. Above, I have mentioned issues in terms of restricted access to material resources, potential participants, and wider academic and theatrical networks. Scarcity led to my initial interest in bricolage, which offered a powerful response to these restrictions, and reframed

what resources remained as potent symbols of the conditions in which we found ourselves.

More difficult to convey is the uncertainty of the period, particularly before vaccines were widely available. The initial lockdown attempted, in Prime Minister Boris Johnson's words, to "turn the tide" within twelve weeks (2020). This tidal metaphor was unintentionally prophetic, suggesting not a one-off disruption, but instead an ebb and flow of lockdowns and attempts to reopen public spaces (see Appendix 3). Political wavering resulted in these being announced at short notice, often a matter of days. Although some guidance was available for professional theatres, amateur performances were initially left to their own devices. Specific restrictions on the mode of performance were also imposed or relaxed, so that singing and brass bands could only take place in professional settings (Johnson and Dowden, 2020). This made planning for performances an uncertain task, with many amateur groups choosing to cancel or defer shows in the initial year. One survey by amateur performance magazine *Sardines* suggested that only 20% of groups had produced online work during the initial lockdown (Hollander, 2020). As discussed in Chapter 2, online work did not always reproduce the sociability that might have otherwise attracted participants.

Even after the initial lockdown, in-person events were affected by a number of different restrictions. The 'rule of six' (preventing gatherings of more than six individuals) was initially waived for amateur performances, but then instated on 24 September 2020. This was intermittently in place until 17 May 2021, when it was fully removed. Other restrictions included the mandatory use of facemasks, 'social distancing' (keeping at least two metres from those outside one's household), and, in the first lockdown, a restriction to one hour of public exercise. This was set against a continual stream of reports of deaths, hospitalisations and infection rates. This focus on space (and proximity) and the infectious nature of networks and communities underlies much of my thought during this time. Even after most restrictions were lifted in 2021, developing or attending in-person events depended on personal tolerances of risk. Although the sociable and artistic rewards of amateur performance can be considerable, I found it difficult to describe meeting in person as *necessary*, at least until July 2021 when the UK's vaccination programme had reached all age groups.

Throughout this thesis, I therefore identify two main areas where the pandemic had a notable impact: first, the precarity and limited resources that led to my initial interest in bricolage. Second, the initial loss of sociability through amateur performance, as noted earlier in this introduction, and subsequent attempts to replace this, particularly online. Both of these challenged me to re-envisage how (or indeed *whether*) an amateur production of a Mystery Play might fulfil its usual functions as outlined earlier: social change or community-building, large-scale participation, and sociability. It is through considering the Mystery Plays as an *assemblage* that I addressed these issues, using bricolage as my framework. In the following chapter, I outline my approach.

Chapter 1 – Bricolage and the York Mystery Plays

Part One – Setting the Scene

The York Corpus Christi Plays

The medieval pageants were originally performed on an annual basis on the summer Feast of Corpus Christi. The highlight of this ceremony was a procession through the streets, displaying the Host – the wafer representing the body (corpus) of Christ. It is not certain when the pageants were incorporated into this, but by 1376 the council records show expenses for “one building in which three Corpus Christi pageants are housed” (REED : York, 1979, p. 689). For the scripts themselves, our principal source of information is the Register, created in 1463 and updated over the following fourteen years (British Library, MS. Add. 35290). This text is therefore only a snapshot of a moment within over two centuries of performances. Further information is found in the *Ordo Paginarum* (AY Memorandum Book), dating to 1415 and updated intermittently until at least 1517 (Twycross, 2017).³ This details the titles and contents of each pageant, although not all correspond to the texts in the Register. In adapting these medieval texts, modern theatre-makers must decide which of the extant forty-seven episodes will be performed, and how to condense their considerable length – around thirteen thousand lines, with an estimated run time of eighteen hours if performed consecutively. Indeed, an ongoing debate is whether the medieval pageants *were* performed entirely at every station – the ‘maximal model’ – or were instead performed in smaller sets at different stations (Boyer, 2019).

In any case, pageants were performed on individual waggons, processing between c. fourteen stations across the City. By 1415, around fifty guilds took part, each performing one episode from a wide range of biblical sources, from the Creation of the Heavens to the Last Judgement. Their choice of stories were related to the

³ Twycross pays particular attention to the manuscript as a palimpsest, a parchment scraped clean and overwritten to suit new purposes. I have previously found this a useful metaphor for the Plays themselves, but its violent imagery of erasing and over-writing the past does not fully represent the reworking of materials that takes place in each production.

liturgical structure of the church year (King, 2006). Although the links can be overstated, many of the guilds took on a pageant that alluded to their trade.⁴ The Shipwrights were responsible for the *Building of the Ark*, whilst the Bakers could provide their own bread for their pageant of *The Last Supper*. In doing so, the pageants publicly displayed the material quality of their craft (Beadle, 2022). By the mid-fifteenth century these were a significant part of the city's civic calendar, each play reinforcing the communal identity of both the individual guilds and the city as a whole – and occasionally, as Rice and Pappano suggest, dramatising these as allegories for intraguild quarrels (2015). In the sixteenth century, a combination of economic and religious pressures saw performances decline in frequency. 1569 proved to be their last recorded performance, despite occasional attempts to continue over the following decade (REED : York, 1979, pp. 355–56).

The Corpus Christi Plays are, however, only one element of either the medieval or modern assemblage. As King suggests, “the Register is an incidental and late-coming record, focusing on the spoken word and largely ignoring other aspects of performance” (2006, p. 2). Leaving aside the decisions made in translating fifteenth

⁴ Not every guild that produced a pageant was focused on a craft or trade. For example, in 1415, *Play 17 – The Purification of the Virgin* was produced by the religious guild associated with St. Leonard's Hospital (Davidson, 2011e, p. 423). In any case, the guilds performed a complex web of religious, charitable, economic and social functions, which are reflected in the Plays. Indeed, Rosser argues that the term ‘craft guild’ is “unhistorical, hybrid, and misleading”, drawing a distinction between lay religious confraternities (‘guilds’) and the craft-focused groups (2015, p. 153). Nonetheless, the term ‘guilds’ is in general use, particularly due to the modern York guilds and their involvement in the Mystery Plays. Rogers gives an illustrated introduction to the material archaeology of the York guilds for the general reader (2012). For the medieval Guilds as performers, see Beadle (2022), Rice and Pappano (2015, pp. 4–10) and Corbett (2009, pp. 67–97). For wider debate on the guilds within late medieval England and York in particular, see Rosser (2015) and Giles (2000), who both argue for closer attention to the role of guilds and crafts as voluntary corporate bodies, fulfilling some of the sociable functions that we now see in amateur theatre groups. Swanson (1989) and Beckwith (2001) instead argue for these guilds as agents of social control.

century English verse for a modern audience, adapters must address dramaturgical concerns.⁵ They must consider the site(s) of performance, the communities that participate, and the theatrical tools and techniques to be used – and those that they wish their co-creators to learn or develop. Many of these decisions have been discussed at length by Normington (2007) and Rogerson (2009). However, these studies have focused on the role of professional theatre-makers and the ways in which the wider context of British theatre influenced their approach to large-scale productions of the plays. These include the introduction of Brechtian techniques in the 1960s, or the recursive influence of the National Theatre productions adapted by Tony Harrison from 1977 onwards. Harrison conceived the latter in response to the 1951 production in York, and what he saw as its insufficient ‘Yorkshireness’, the text “taken away from northerners and betrayed, made genteel” (Jones, 1985, p. 6). The northern accents and working class aesthetic of the National Theatre production could be seen in turn in the York productions from 1980 production onwards (Rogerson, 2009, p. 76).

Beyond this, researchers have increasingly focused on the Mystery plays as theatrical displays of York’s heritage industry (Normington, 2007, p. 63), or the ways in which they involve communities of amateur casts (Johnston, 2011). Their performance sites have often been used as an interpretive lens for these concerns. For Beckwith, the common backdrop of the ruins of St Mary’s Abbey frames the plays as a concrete example of modern York’s reliance on nostalgic tourism (2001, p. 13).⁶

⁵ The challenges of adapting and cutting pre-modern texts are wide ranging, and include issues of clarity, staging requirements and cultural conflict. See Malone and Huber (2022), and Dessen (2002). The text used from 1951-1973, adapted by Purvis, had the additional difficulty of remaining within the confines of ‘transliteration’ required by the Censor, which otherwise banned depictions of God on stage (Rogerson 2009, pp.44-45). After the Censor’s abolishment in 1966, changes to the script no longer had to cover themselves with this legal sleight of hand.

⁶ This urge was not novel to the 1951 revival, as Johnston explores in his study of Yorkshire pageants in the early twentieth century (2020). The 1909 York Pageant incorporated one of the Corpus Christi plays – the Chandler’s *Angels and the Shepherds* – within the framing device of Richard III’s visit to York in 1483 (Bartie *et al.*, no date). Taking place in the

Wide-ranging academic research into the original performances provides a further influence on some productions. Academic experiments such as those at the Universities of Leeds (1975) or Toronto (1977, 1998) attempted to reproduce the architectural backdrop of the medieval York streets and squares. More recently, Lopez digitally recreated the soundscapes of the pageants, discovering that the orientation and design of the waggons did not produce consistent audibility across different locations (Lopez, 2013). Practical research can therefore suggest new ways to approach the plays, often by challenging our assumptions about their original form. Rogerson makes a convincing case that the full cycle of plays were never performed entirely in one place, and that instead different sub-cycles were seen at the various playing stations (2009, p. 202). Recently, Boyer has expanded on this theory, suggesting a set of sub-cycles that incorporate the full set's chronological sweep, whilst demonstrating thematic clusters such as 'sin and punishment', 'suffering and acceptance', or 'disbelief' (2019, p. 25). I will return to this suggestion on sub-cycles in Chapter Four, where I discuss the 2018 and 2022 York Mystery Plays.

Ways of Working

For the moment, however, my focus is how individual productions fit within the wider definition of a Mystery Play. It is important to note that York is not unique in maintaining performances of their medieval plays. Chester maintains a regular performance on a five-year cycle, whilst Lincoln has laid claim to the East Anglian N-Town Plays and produces these on a four-year basis. In Cornwall, there have been intermittent performances of the Cornish Ordinalia at St Just's medieval *Plen an Gwary* (or 'playing place'), most recently in 2021. The Towneley plays were long attributed to the town of Wakefield, but only individual performances have taken place, unable to sustain a performance tradition. What makes York unusual is that its

Museum Gardens, the Pageant promised spectacle through the involvement of over 2500 participants – a forerunner to the similar emphasis on spectacle at the same venue for the 1951 York Mystery Plays. However, both were also motivated by the opportunity to create communal bonds, reified by performing as a united city (Rogerson, 2009, pp. 34–35). However, attracting tourists was also a significant motive (Johnston, 2020, p. 35). The material heritage of the 1909 pageant can still be seen in the guild banners made for the occasion, which now hang in the Merchant Adventurers Hall (Rogerson, 2009, p. 35).

Mystery Plays are not centralised under any one organisation, but instead claimed by any group within the city with the resources to perform.

Within York, Rogerson suggests two dominant models, based primarily on their venues (2011, p. 7). The first ('fixed-place') takes its lead from the 1951 production, directed by E. Martin Browne and adapted by Canon Purvis. These are characterised by a single performance venue, with the script adapter attempting to produce a coherent narrative from the extant plays. These generally include the Creation, the Birth, Ministry and Death of Christ, and the Last Judgement. Typically a fixed-place performance includes a large cast of several hundred community performers, with a similar number of backstage volunteers. They are guided by a core professional team including a director, adapter/writer and design team. Between 1951 and 1992 the plays took place on a three- or four-yearly cycle, performed outdoors at the Museum Gardens in York. Despite significant changes in cast, creative team and aesthetics, this site provided a unifying boundary, or conceptual frame – a frame formed (and occupied) by the communal remnants of York's medieval past. In the 1990s, financial pressures (primarily seating costs) forced the Plays to move indoors to York Theatre Royal (Wood, Wragg and Tomlin, 2001). For Normington, the Plays' shift indoors to the York Theatre Royal in the 1990s was symbolic of a move from a communal space to what she saw as an inappropriately formal auditorium (2007, p. 149). Normington suggests that "the dominant aesthetic of an indoor theatre performance was often at odds with the festive nature of the plays", although this was counterbalanced by the continued use of a community cast, "cut(ting) through the fourth wall" (2007, p. 60). Despite the lack of a fourth wall, a formal tone also marked the 2000 and 2016 productions at York Minster.⁷ 1996

⁷ A religious site does not, however, necessarily demand a religious or sombre experience. The radical approach of John Constable's gnostic *The Southwark Mysteries* (1998, 2010) emphasised a "new medieval' carnival atmosphere", despite its location in Southwark Cathedral (Constable, 1999, p. 10). Constable strongly suggests this approach was enabled by the support of the then-Dean, the Very Reverend Colin Slee (ibid.). In York, the Dean and Chapter instead used the Millennium Mystery Plays to "revitalise the religious function of the Plays" (Normington, 2007, p. 61), whilst director Gregory Doran was described as seeking a production with "heavy religious content" (Furnell, 2002). With this commission, festival (in

marked the last production by the Festival Group, but the general form remained popular. Since then, these large-scale, fixed-site productions have been produced inside twice, at York Minster (2000, 2016) and outside in York Museum Gardens once more by York Theatre Royal and Riding Lights (2012).

The second model rejects the unity of a single cast and stage. Instead, they give individual communities the opportunity to perform a single episode on their own waggon stage. Currently, this 'multiple-wagon' or 'multiple-group' model can be seen in York's guild-led productions, performed on a quadrennial basis.⁸ This model is rooted in the academic experiments of the 1970s, whose aim was to critically reproduce the performance conditions of the medieval Corpus Christi Plays. Principle examples include the University of Toronto campus performances (1977, 1998) and the University of Leeds (1975). In the mid-90s, as the fixed-place model began to falter, a smaller set of waggon plays were performed in York, initially with local drama groups, and, from 1998, the existing Guilds of York. This model has been repeated on a four-year basis. My involvement in these includes as director of the 2014 Crucifixion pageant, and artistic director of the 2018 and 2022 productions. The latter forms a part of this thesis.

Around these two dominant models are a number of other production methods. Following the first model, some are professional productions that approach the Corpus Christi Plays as a historic text, which is then adapted for the stage much as any other historic drama might be. These include the National Theatre's *The Mysteries* (1977) and the Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Mysteries* (1997). Detached from York, they often incorporate the texts of other civic cycles such as Chester or N-Town. On a smaller scale, sections of the narrative have been adapted

the raucous Bakhtinian sense) was unlikely to result in something that satisfied the Dean and Chapter's vision of York Minster. In both York and Southwark, the physical site was less important than the occupants' view of it. This is something I return to in Chapter Three, when I consider the Mysteries within a parish church.

⁸ As I will explore further in the chapter on the waggon plays, these guilds include those with a direct link to their medieval antecedents, modern revivals, and new inventions that draw on the civic functions and symbolism of the medieval guilds.

by amateur casts, with the Nativity sequence dominating these. In adapting the texts, the theatre-makers take on the role of editors, reducing the scripts down to a manageable length.

If the first model suggests adaptation attempts to create unity, the converse is true for the multiple-group model. In this case, what is adapted is not so much the text itself, as medieval modes of production. Here, multiple groups or individuals take responsibility for a single pageant, resulting in a variety of approaches across the production. Often this allows more radical reworking of the Mysteries. The Flea Theater's *The Mysteries* (2014) assigned each episode to separate writers and directors, who reworked the originals' religious content for a secular audience. Meanwhile, describing an undergraduate module in which students built and performed on a waggon, Essin approaches the plays as backstage labour (2016). In doing so, she finds connections between the communality of the medieval guilds and modern trade unions. This shares an approach with Quittner's *MysterRus* (2022), a postgraduate performance in which they adapted iconic episodes of Ru Paul's *Drag Race* as Mystery Plays. Taking direct inspiration from their experience of the York Plays, Quittner aimed to "build community with a shared universal story vocabulary" by drawing analogies between the Plays' treatment of the Christian mythos, and modern queer icons (2022, p. 6).

It is important to note that these two approaches (textual adaptation and processual adaptation) often overlap. In addition, the aesthetics of the latter approach (an emphasis on communal theatre) has often been overlaid onto the former. The National Theatre's *Mysteries* used modern banners and costumes to evoke both the contemporary Trade Unions of the 1980s and the medieval Guilds (Normington, 2007, p. 82).⁹ Yet these *Mysteries* were not the product of many groups joining

⁹ Here, Normington argues that the analogy between the two is misleading, drawing on Swanson's account of York's artisan guilds as subordinate to the merchants, with the Plays as a means of social control and revenue for the city council (Swanson, 1989). However, there is a rich historiographical tradition that connects medieval guilds with modern unions, traced in Rosser's *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages* (2015). For Rosser, the guilds were loci of social responsibility and friendship, as well as ensuring access to work and political representation. My interest here is not to argue which of these depictions of the

together, but instead a top-down approach in which Harrison wrote a script for Bryden to direct – a production firmly part of the working processes of the National Theatre. There was no suggestion, for example, that the Lighting Department might control the Creation of the Angels, or that the Literature Department should perform the Last Judgement.

To take this further, we might also consider representations of the plays within other media, such as Minghella's *Two Planks and a Passion* (1992), in which *Play 35 – Crucifixio Christ* is paraphrased and performed before an onstage audience. Describing a fictional performance in 1541, the characters of Sansom's *Sovereign* watch a performance that reworks the music and sets of the pageant, performing not 'for the worship of the city' but for the King's entertainment (2006, pp. 221–222). In 2023, this performance was itself staged in York's King's Manor, as part of a community production by York Theatre Royal (Pratt, 2023). Here, though, the Creation pageant competed with the King's entertainment as a display of power. The production's writer, Mike Kenny, adapted the 2012 Mystery Plays. Productions spill out into others, fall apart, recombine, and are manipulated into new forms for artistic, political and religious ends. This raises a question about whether it is possible to identify a point where a production is sufficiently different that it can no longer be identified as a York Mystery Play, with all the expectations this term brings with it.

The York Plays as Assemblage

So, whilst there is a popular perception of the Plays as a single body of work, the multitude of approaches suggest it may be more useful to think of these as an assemblage. It is this that forms my understanding of the adaptation process, and why bricolage is particularly useful as a theatrical approach. Each performance is a gathering together of ideas, sites, people, concepts and objects, each with their own agency. This idea of plays as an assemblage is hardly new, particularly in site-based

guilds is accurate, but instead which are most useful to draw on in performance. During lockdown, in a moment when society was temporarily atomised as individual households, I was encouraged by the idea that medieval and modern performers might be linked by a common thread of mutual support.

theatre, although it is not always described in these terms. McLucas and Pearson, for example, describe their site-based work as capturing “a field of activities” or ecology, rather than a linear narrative (1995, p. 17). However, I extend this beyond the individual productions to incorporate the Mystery Plays as a category. Although they have been produced in multivariate ways, there are common qualities that link them, beyond the nominal text of the Corpus Christi Plays. Yet identifying the bounds of this assemblage is not easy. In an early workshop, I asked the participants – all amateur performers – to write down what they felt were vital parts of any production of the Mystery Plays. Their responses suggest recurring themes – of site, language, community – but there is no single aspect that links these visions:

“Character - Language – Colour.

For the people - so regional accents/ national accents welcome.

‘Spectacle’ - strong voices, community.

Direct address (talking to the audience, engaging them!) York site.

Community cast.

Locality (participants, location, audience).

York/passion/sincerity.

Ownership, right director, right Jesus.

A feeling of joint responsibility. Local backdrop. Of the people.

The York text of the play - York location (for wagon plays particularly) - the visual/spectacle element.

Suitable scenery. Willing participants. Group feel.

Recognisable sequence, language, large numbers.”

(Personal notes, Workshop on 29/05/2020)

Instead, I suggest that the Mystery Play assemblage is created not from individual aspects such as specific actors, texts or locations, but from the relationships between these – relationships created by continual performances. As Smith

suggests, assemblage theory is useful to site-specific theatre makers because it draws attention to the affordances of non-human objects, without necessarily removing human agency in forming the assemblage (2019, pp. 185–186).

A variety of assemblage theories could have formed the basis of my research, particularly those with a close focus on the interplay of people and objects. In archaeology, assemblages generally refer to groups of a similar material or type at a distinct site, or, on a wider scale, a collection of heterogeneous objects within a category, e.g. a type of site or a historical era (Hamilakis and Jones, 2017). This suggests the initial purpose of theorising assemblages: to define and understand the contents of a category. Defining these categories can be a deliberate act, much as the director or adapter decides what elements should be placed within a performance. Various theories of assemblage have therefore been developed, attempting to both explain how these assemblages form, and why we define them in particular ways. For Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages are characterised as an interplay of *content* and their *expressions* on one axis, and by the way in which they *stabilise* or *split* from this assemblage on the other (2003, pp. 102–103). In their imagery of the rhizome, an assemblage is something that can spread and take over, or indeed can be split apart from its original origins (ibid, pp. 2–12). A Mystery Play might be seen as the interplay of existing content expressed in new forms. Likewise, the fixed-site Mysteries might be seen as forming a new assemblage split off from the original expression (and sites) of the medieval pageants.

Object-oriented ontology – OOO – comes close to this approach, suggesting that objects (things that cannot be divided or added to) cannot be fully grasped (Harman, 2018). However, Harman suggests that art is a way – perhaps the only way – to mediate between the object as it actually exists, and the other objects (including humans) that interact with it (ibid, pp. 71). This has been increasingly used to theorise performances (see Graham (2020)). Unlike Actor-Network Theory, which focuses on the *relationships* between objects, OOO posits that a new ‘sensual object’ is created within the gap between the object-as-it-is and the object-as-perceived. In this case, we might imagine each performance of a ‘York Mystery Play’ as something created when an adapter tries to grasp the *idea* of a Mystery Play.

However, my aim here is not to find an assemblage theory that perfectly describes the Mystery Plays. Instead, it is to find a process of deconstructing and reconstructing its many forms, and maintaining the human agency of amateur participants. Developing her theory of assemblages in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett describes these groupings as “not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group” (2010, p. 24). Bennett’s rich description of assemblages suggests a continually changing entity, in which component parts can be replaced or altered, yet still operate as an identifiable whole. Whilst Bennett does not quite give a *process* of altering an assemblage, this imagery nonetheless influenced my approach to the waggons in Chapter Four, along with the Deleuzian sense of assemblage as rhizomatic – something that spreads into new spaces.¹⁰

Describing the Mysteries as an assemblage only provides an initial way to reconsider each production. No single element (e.g. props, sites, actors, themes) can be the sole determinant of how a production operates, although one element may dominate. The 2016 Minster Mysteries are not the 2000 Minster Millennium Mysteries, despite using the same script and venue. Rather than only considering the typical elements of a performance, we might see a production’s assemblage formed by the interaction of unusual aspects: between urban York and its rural hinterlands in the form of a rotting farm waggon, restored for urban performance (see Jones (2017)); between waggons and traffic (Davies and Pugh, 2011, p. 114), or the disruption of these assemblages by plague. In the context of COVID-19, I find similarities between the assemblages of the medieval Plays and the modern – for example the cancellation of the Corpus Christi Plays in 1552 “the better to avoid assembles of people ... beyng dangerouse for the sayd sykenes” (REED : York, 1979, p. 303). Here, the vibrant, violent buzzing of plague forced out all other aspects of the assemblage. As we will see in the next chapter, our modern assemblages instead found new, smaller sites and ensembles where these could find space. We do not know whether this was the case for the medieval performers, but we might imagine

¹⁰ As a gardener, I am familiar with how difficult rhizomatic plants are to dislodge: a hopeful metaphor for those working in community arts today.

them reworking their costumes, running lines in anticipation, even acting out their own play in their own homes, or privately taking on a long-sought role.

Importantly, Bennett argues that acknowledging the assemblage's component parts is not simply a descriptive tool, but an analytical one. The process includes identifying which individual elements have the most impact when adjusting or reworking the assemblage (2010, p. 38). Applied to theatre, we might consider whether attending to the dispersal of agency across the assemblage's components draws attention to dramaturgical choices. It is unsurprising that site-based directors have taken up this challenge, in places where "it may be difficult to distinguish what is in play" (Pearson, 2010, p. 219). As a community theatre-maker, I found it useful way to consider what aspects might be kept from earlier assemblages – a community's creations – and what might need to be reworked or replaced to reflect changes in the community. Other elements (political, social, personal, material) may prove determined to push back against these changes. I will later refer to this in the context of *inventorying* and *indirect means*. As Bennett suggests, this can become a democratising process when these pressure-points are made known to others, with the opportunity to alter or bypass these – what I will later discuss as not as *indirect* but as *devious* means. Nonetheless, Buchanan critiques Bennett for failing to "propose a power of selection governing the assemblage", arguing that her discussion of vibrant assemblages is ultimately little more than a list of connected elements (2021, p. 117). Instead, he suggests that assemblages are defined by their ability to produce new meanings or effects – otherwise, it is simply another way of describing a system. Underlying this criticism is an attempt to return assemblage theory to political uses. What interests me here is not whether different assemblage theories more accurately describe the Mysteries, but how they might allow us to adapt and revitalise the form.

It is here that bricolage comes into play. Bricolage here is both verb (the process of making an assemblage) and noun (the resulting assemblage), and the bricoleur is the person who undertakes this task:

"Bricolage is the practice of making something new out of odds and ends, that is, the remaining elements of old assemblages. It is something people indulge

in, in many places, for profit, for economy, or as a hobby, but in French there is a word for it.”

(Mehlman and Leavitt, 2021, p. 325)

In the next section, I discuss elements of bricolage that have influenced theatre-makers, amongst a wide range of disciplines. However, an analysis of the various ends to which the concept has been put is beyond the limits of this thesis, and in any case has been mined by a variety of papers (for example Johnson (2012), Visscher et al. (2018)). Many of these differences are as much to do with Lévi-Strauss’s description of the bricoleur, as the disciplines themselves. His intent was not to accurately describe a French bricoleur and his process, but to use this as a metaphor for the process of taxonomy and myth-making. From this, different disciplines have taken what is useful for their own devices. This itself is an act of bricolage, breaking down the materials of one discipline and reworking these for another purpose.

Part Two – Theatrical Bricolage

“We’ve referred to ourselves as BRICOLEURS: we’re always sourcing material/associations/concepts/narratives from the unlikeliest of places. We are most at home rummaging through FRAGMENTS; we play at seeing how the pieces come and don’t come together...”

(Pakula and Orton, 2014, p. 18)

“Whatever the nature of the assemblage, its animation may resemble a work of *bricolage*, an improvised response to an environment of fixed resources, a way of making sense with the materials at hand.”

(Pearson, 2010, p. 119)

The two quotes from theatre-makers above hint at two concepts of theatrical bricolage, as a verb (rummaging and playing) and as a noun (a performance drawing on what is to hand). Both draw on the notion of bricolage as described by Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* (1974). This work’s punning title has been variously

translated into English as *The Savage Mind, Wild Thought, or Pansies for Thought* (Leavitt, 2021, p. xvi).¹¹ Within this book, his description of bricolage forms a small part of a wider discussion of how different languages and cultures delimit and categorise the world around them. In doing so, Lévi-Strauss draws a distinction between wild or magical thought, and scientific thought. As a structuralist, he understands these processes in terms of identifying discrete units (of language, of myth, of material) and how these can be assembled to create new meanings – what he describes as ‘sets’ or ‘events’. For the wild thinker, or bricoleur, these are created from existing myths, materials and concepts – indeed the *aftermath* of these, brought together in new forms. For Lévi-Strauss’s ‘engineer’, however, these potential forms are the *starting point* – a hypothesis, or a design, for which tools, techniques and materials are sought out to suit their purpose:

“... the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilisation while the ‘bricoleur’ by inclination or necessity always remains within them.”

(Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 19)

That is, the bricoleur is defined not only as somebody who works with the remnants of past events, but one who takes on a specific identity or mindset.

Bricolage therefore incorporates various meanings: it describes assemblages from past materials; the process by which these are brought together; and identifying as a bricoleur. Nonetheless, the term is disputed. Derrida argues that Lévi-Strauss’s description depends too heavily on a false binary between the bricoleur and engineer: both are necessarily constrained by the world around them. The true engineer, making everything from nothing, would be nothing less than God (Derrida,

¹¹ *A note on the translation used:* I began to read Lévi-Strauss in the anonymous translation from 1966. A new translation was published recently, translated by Mehlman and Leavitt (2021). I was not able to access this until after much of the practical component of the thesis was complete. In addition, the majority of secondary sources and their reworking of bricolage have relied on the original translation. I have therefore used the earlier translation, except where the more recent version is useful to clarify a point.

2010, p. 360). Or, in the words of God in *Play 1 – The Creation of the Angels*, “all shall be made even of nought.” (Davidson, 2011a, l. 16). Yet, as Johnson suggests, the bricoleur is not only “constrained by his particular material universe but also *prefers to remain within it*” (2012, p. 364). Lévi-Strauss pre-empts this by suggesting the artist as “both something of a scientist and of a ‘bricoleur’ ... always midway between design and anecdote” (1974, pp. 24–25). Although my directing has often responded to what a site affords, my encounter with bricolage has given me a stronger framework for analysing this process. This began within the confines of lockdown during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, as I played with different ways of creating the Mystery Plays using what was to hand. As the world opened up again, bricolage had taken a hold of me; it became a way of viewing the world. By aligning my creative practice with bricolage, I expand on the brief descriptions I had found through site-based theatre. In doing so, I demonstrate ways in which the York Mystery Plays are adapted or assembled, beyond cutting and editing the text itself.

My research is also influenced and reworked by encounters with other bricoleur-researchers. I identify two approaches here. The first set of researchers, like Lévi-Strauss, approach the bricoleur as a topic of study. The second are those who research *through* bricolage. Examples of the first approach include Kincheloe’s work on educational research (2001), Roberts on interdisciplinarity in spatial research (2018), and Wibberley on supervising doctoral researchers (2015). The second approach conducts research by bringing together one or more existing methodologies, theories or presentation formats, as the topic of research demands. In terms of presentation, this might include not only traditional academic formats, such as papers, articles and reports, but include creative outputs such as poetry or artworks (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p. 45). In particular, it may prompt the creation of ethnodrama, the presentation of research through performance (Saldaña, 2018). As such, the work produced is often interdisciplinary, or may bring together unexpected subjects. Here, there is considerable overlap with writing on site-based theatre, such as *Theatre/Archaeology* (Pearson and Shanks, 2001), which brings together its eponymous disciplines to reflect on each other. This thesis does likewise, bringing together a variety of disciplines – theatre studies, medieval studies, heritage studies, craft studies – as part of the process of theatre-making. As such, this bricolage reflects my own eclectic history, trained as an archaeologist, theatre-

maker, home-maker, “recounting, through the choices it makes among limited possibilities, the character and life of its author” (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 25).

In the next stage of this chapter, I therefore outline my terms of engagement, as both a bricoleur-researcher and bricoleur-director. I use the three aspects of bricolage identified above: bricolage as process, as assemblage, and as identity.

Bricolage as Process

“Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it, and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. He interrogates all the heterogenous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could ‘signify’ and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialise but which will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts.”

(Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 18).

Lévi-Strauss identifies the process of bricolage as the gathering of pre-existing materials, followed by identifying their characteristics as both distinct entities and in their relationships. These are then brought together into a new form or ‘set’. However, the process through which the bricoleur might then bring these objects together into this new ‘set’ are not described in detail. For Lévi-Strauss, this description serves his purpose; he then moves beyond the concrete description of the bricoleur, to its application as a metaphor. Instead, I linger on the concrete, asking: How might a theatre-maker take the remnants of the assemblage titled ‘York Mystery Plays’, interrogate these, and remake them? This process is the focus of this thesis and will be elaborated on each subsequent chapters (in particular, Chapter Three). For the moment, this is an introduction to the terms I have used. I have identified these as four phases, although, as we will see, these are part of an iterative process that sees the bricoleur-director revisit each phase as they grow

closer to the finished 'set' (or performance). I identify these four phases as 1) *inventorying*, 2) *sifting*, 3) *assemblage*¹² and 4) *indirect/devious means*. This final phase might be better seen as an organising principle that applies to the process as a whole, rather than a separate phase. However, I have separated this out for the purpose of analysing my performances, and in any case it can provide a useful moment in which to consider whether to return to the earlier phases, by asking what difficulties or constraints might now need to be addressed through indirect means.

Notably, academic discussions of bricolage rarely isolate the various phases, focusing instead on the final product. In performance studies, its traces can nonetheless be seen in wider discussions of devising processes. Pearson briefly outlines his own process, beginning with research into site and subject, and the auditing of personal abilities and available resources. This is followed by '*selection*' and '*orchestration*', roughly corresponding to the sifting and assemblage phases, with the latter then overlapping with:

“fragments and traces: in acts of *assemblage*. Such assemblage is characterised by *omission* – it only includes a certain range of things – and by extra-daily *juxtaposition*: as like and unlike – without natural *affinities* or *linkages* – are drawn together in a new *taxonomy*.” (2010, p. 151)

Pearson then outlines various techniques (such as the introduction of new genres, games or imagery) to avoid, disrupt or question the assumptions or concepts imposed when first encountering the site. In this respect, Pearson follows the process of bricolage, with this final stage an example of the indirect approach identified by Lévi-Strauss.

¹² There is an issue here in terminology, in that Lévi-Strauss does not use a specific word to describe this. The word *assemblage* brings us back to the idea of assemblage theory, although Deleuze and Guattari use the word *agencement*, or arrangement, which (as Hamilikas and Jones note) gives stronger overtones of human agency than they actually argue (2017, p. 80)). Reflecting the close ties of archaeology and site-specific theatre, Pearson and Shanks draw a direct comparison between performance as formal arrangement of techniques, and an archaeological assemblage of found objects (2001, p. 55). As a bricoleur, I consciously use the term 'assemblage' to deviously overlap these approaches.

One rare example in which bricolage is explicitly developed as a process is given by Muftić (2016), a theatre educator who creates work through re-performing existing media (such as photos, music, or speeches). Describing the process of creating *A Day, Across*, Muftić asked his students to devise a play about South African experiences in WWI. They began by identifying their own archives of material (*inventorying*), using tableaux to *interrogate* (or *sift* through) these, before bringing these together as *assemblages*, which Muftić describes as ‘theatrical images’. To give an example, one is described as “the intersection of a photo displaying soldiers playing cards while wearing gas masks, a book extract on the plight of the South African women whose husbands enlisted in SANLC, and a short script from (the BBC series) *Blackadder Goes Forth*.” (Muftić, 2016, p. 370).

The fourth phase I have identified – *indirect/deviuous means* – might seem absent. For Muftić’s students, however, the initial inventories provided by the students “were too broad... They had received and stored arrays of images, but struggled extracting them” (2016, p. 370). Rather than simply writing a play about WWI, embodying media revealed not only the relationships between these heterogenous images, but between the 21st century participants and previous generations. Recognition of contemporary culture became the indirect means to encounter the past. The same process took place during my creative practice. Working at home, my performances reflected the overlapping of home and work within the medieval domestic sphere. Devising in a church undergoing restoration, the participants in *Heaven and Earth in Little Space* found antecedents in the church’s history. And the directors involved in the 2022 waggon plays drew not only on past performances, but found their own ways to sustain the Plays for the future. In each of these, the productions themselves became the indirect means to consider sustainability more broadly.

I now turn my attention to the phases in more detail, which provide a methodology for my creative practice:

Phase One: Inventorying

The first phase is clear: an examination of what already exists. In fact, past productions form a pre-phase, in which these materials are generated. A bricolage cannot be created from whole cloth; it depends on the “contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the

remains of previous constructions or deconstructions” (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 17). This would obviously include the Corpus Christi Plays – the medieval scripts – but cannot stop there. We might consider the medieval context as a sort of stock. Although material remains of the pageants are scant, descriptions of the original performances are still available to us through research by (for example) the Records of Early English Drama. As an example, the Mercers’ Guild in 1433 drew up an inventory of the materials required for their Doomsday pageant, which has become a “blueprint for modern productions of the play” (Beadle, 1994, p. 94). Yet whilst this inventory’s “pajent with iiij wheles; hellemouth, iij garments for iij deuels” (“pageant with four wheels; hellmouth; three garments for three devils”) might be familiar, its “vij grete Aungels halding þe passion of god” rarely find a place in modern productions (REED : York, 1979, pp. 55–56). Adapters must consider why they retain some medieval imagery, whilst excising others.

There are often gaps, both textual and contextual. A significant portion of *Play 7 -- Sacrificium Cayme et Abell* is missing, as is the central moment of *Play 27 – The Last Supper*. We do not know for certain whether actors used the streets themselves as a stage, or if women performed in the plays (discussed further in Chapter Four). If there are gaps, more recent remnants come into play. Existing costumes and props may affirm a production as the York Mystery Plays, repeated or modified from previous years. The site will also be part of this inventorying, both in terms of its contents and the site itself. Yet a site can overwhelm or harden the assemblage, acting as a sort of curing agent, so that future productions resist being moved or altered. This is most obvious in the move made by previous performances of the plays from the Museum Gardens to York Theatre Royal. The initial idea, as a response to prohibitive seating hire costs, was to move from the backdrop of the ruins of St Mary’s Abbey to the wider Museum Gardens, as a promenade performance. The initial director, Margaret Sheehy, attempted to rework the existing assemblage by drawing on the medieval form, with ‘clusters’ of performances by smaller groups and sub-directors, suggestive of the medieval guilds (Rogerson, 2009, p. 138). In the end, however, the fixed-place assemblage won out; despite moving inside the York Theatre Royal, the familiar elements (a single director, site and script) remained.

So, in addressing the plays as bricolage we must also consider the wider materials available, their qualities and potential uses. As the participants above suggested, community involvement is a significant aspect, and a writer might consider which episodes take advantage of this, giving opportunities for crowd scenes or choral songs. Expectations might extend to particular episodes that embody the wider assemblage:

“Yes, everybody want [sic] to see the crucifixion, granted. However there *might* be a way of ending one play with same [sic] (or at least the resurrection) then beginning the next play with a fuller, though overlapping, version of the crucifixion and going on to the Judgement.”

Lochhead (1992), cited in Rogerson (2009, p. 140)

Here, accepting the commission to write the York Mystery Plays in the Museum Gardens, Lochhead grapples with what is expected from the plays in the fixed-place tradition. Although the performance might be split over two evenings, both, she felt, needed to incorporate the Crucifixion in some form. Likewise, the modern waggon plays have, since 1998, settled into an established assemblage, with the Builders’ *Creation*, Butchers’ *Crucifixion* and Merchant Adventurers’ *Last Judgement* as the beginning, middle and end. Attempts to change this may meet with resistance; as with sites, the structure they provide may become calcifying. As I will explore in Chapter Four, the waggons themselves provide a further site that may encourage repetition or change.

We might also consider past participants, and the qualities and relationships to the plays that they bring. I recall, for example, a paramedic involved in the 2014 production of *Play 35 – The Crucifixion*, who drew on his medical experience to describe in excruciating detail the way in which a wound on one arm would affect the muscles on the other. These memories became part of the performance. Another actor might bring their own process of bricolage to a performance, deciding what aspects to incorporate or reject. John Hall describes playing Herod in 1988, 1992 and 1996. His first Herod appears stately, on a white horse; the second a strutting bully, a collage of contemporary dictators such as Idi Amin or Saddam Hussein. The third, however, saw him examine this approach and reject it, with Hall asking “that

worked, but now I want to take a different angle. How far can I go with this?” (2001). Casting decisions that might otherwise go unnoticed may take on new qualities. 1996 saw Ruth Ford as the first woman to play God in the fixed-place Mysteries; inevitably, this became a comment on the extension to women of ordination to the Anglican priesthood, so that these theological issues became part of the play’s assemblage.¹³

Phase Two: Sifting

As Rae suggests in his analysis of the Wooster Group’s use of bricolage, “Inventories provide no royal road to interpretation” – or indeed to theatre-making (2015, p. 119). Although it may help to reveal what is available to the theatre-maker, simply listing contents is unlikely to reveal their qualities, or the relationships between each component. Indeed, there is a question of what qualities should be considered. Mike Kenny describes his adaptation in 2012 as “paring back the outer layers and scraping away more recent additions to reveal the original story” (Haywood, 2012). For many adapters, however, myself included, these outer layers and recent additions are worth engaging with, so that the performance is not simply an act of *restoration*. It is the performance itself which will (per)form and display these relationships. Beyond this, the sheer quantity of past productions of the York Mystery Plays – in addition to the wider hoard of resources available to me as an individual, which we might refer to as one’s personal stock – threatens to overwhelm. Therefore, there needs to be a way to decide what is of use.

Having made an inventory, the bricoleur therefore engages with the complete set. However, there is no indication that all elements of the inventory will be used. Lévi-Strauss’s metaphor of a ‘discussion’ or ‘interrogation’ suggests that only those objects that respond are of use here. How that is determined is unclear, but I find some resonance in Pearson’s description of an abandoned shop, filled with abandoned objects. “We removed them, intending to integrate them into performances elsewhere. But out of context they became so much detritus ... We threw them away.” (2010, p. 45). When sifting disregards or even removes the

¹³ The repercussions of the Church’s decision can be seen in Chapter Three, where I discuss co-creating theatre in an Anglican church that still rejects the ordination of women to the priesthood.

relationships (the original context) of an assemblage, the remnants may be of little use. Introducing new elements may therefore be necessary; they may, however, feel out of place or artificial, or show up the gaps. This process of deciding what can be retained, reworked or discarded can also be framed as an issue of sustainability (or recycling), a point I will return to in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Phase Three: Assemblage

Lévi-Strauss leaves his initial description at the sifting phase, only briefly looking ahead to the “set which has yet to materialise but which will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts” (1974, p. 18). However, he then discusses potential materials – in which a cube of oak wood could either extend an insufficient length of pine, or else act as a pedestal to “allow the grain and polish of the old wood to show to advantage” (ibid.). Within this poetic description, his definition of assemblage becomes clear: the positioning of materials in such a way as to show off their qualities, rather than to disguise them (Dezeuze, 2008, p. 31).

Discussing their approaches to devising, DIY-theatre group Milk Presents mostly align with bricolage – generating material from what is available, sifting, and culling this. However, the next step differs from bricolage:

“Step 4: Start to stick together – and remember to take note of your joins, how can you piece the show together without noticing the selotape [*sic*] in between?”

(Doherty, Glaskin and Robertson, 2014, p. 86)

Here, the recognisability of component parts is undesirable, their transformation into a cohesive unity a sign of “high production values... A DIY approach should never be an excuse for a half assed show” (ibid.). In contrast, bricolage celebrates the way in which it brings together heterogeneous materials, and indeed makes a virtue of fragmentary performances. In my first production, moving between different spaces within my home prompted different ways to engage with the plays, based on their contents. Material fragments of domestic life were combined for theatrical purposes, but had to be possible to disassemble to return to household use. At All Saints, the

audience itself was fragmented, scattered around the church so that no single viewpoint could grasp the full performance. The fragmentary virtue of bricolage becomes most obvious in the episodic nature of the pageants, each displaying the particular resources of individual groups or creators within a wider procession of plays. If this results in different qualities, this is nonetheless reflective of the groups involved, and where their strengths, weaknesses and passions lie.

In this respect, bricolage's appeal to site-based work is clear: in this tradition, as Smith suggests, "there is a temptation ... to automatically embrace the fragmentary, the obscure, the conceptual and the reflexive" (2019, p. 159). The virtue in doing so, he suggests, is that this highlights the ways in which sites are themselves fragmentary, containing multiple spaces, histories and identities. These may not be possible to fully articulate through linear and coherent narratives. Likewise, the Mystery Plays, with their gaps, past-selves and multiple uses, may find themselves invigorated when they recognise and celebrate their fragmentary nature.

Phase Four: Indirect/Devious means

This final phase, as I have suggested, is one that runs concurrent to the earlier phases, finding use wherever an obstruction is found. The term comes directly from Lévi-Strauss's introduction to the metaphor. Originally a French word, the verb *bricoler* referred to:

"some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle. And in our own time the 'bricoleur' is still somebody who works with his hands and uses devious means..."

(Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 16)

Bricolage avoids obstacles, or finds indirect ways around a problem. It may seize on serendipitous moments, or rely on metaphor to create unexpected assemblages. In the 2021 translation, *devious means* is translated instead as "means that are skewed in comparison with those of the professional craftsman" (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 20). Here we might find a fruitful approach to wider studies of amateur theatre, by identifying deliberate differences with professional theatre. Still, much as Lévi-Strauss's distinction between a bricoleur and engineer is rhetorical rather than

substantial, we find that many of the shortcuts and dodges used in professional theatre are mirrored in amateur theatre-making. Furthermore, the Mysteries have never been purely amateur or professional; they have always enveloped the strengths (and weaknesses) of those involved. The Guild of Builders might rely on their particular talents to tell their Play's narrative in constructed form, whilst acknowledging the need for amateur actors from outside the Guild to provide the spoken performance.

Bricolage as Assemblage

I have talked above about the ways in which a theatrical bricolage may be created. This is then reflected in the material properties of the Plays. For Lévi-Strauss, the process and materials used are apparent in the end result:

“the materials of the bricoleur, are elements which can be defined by two criteria: they have *had a use* ... and *they can be used again*, either for the same purpose or for a different one if they are at all diverted from their previous function.”

(Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 35).

A bricolage-play therefore maintains either the form or function of its component parts, but reworks these into new assemblages. In this respect, any devised play might be seen as a bricolage. However, there are two essential parts that distinguish it. The first is practical – bricolage is a response to a *lack* of resources. As such, the heterogenous materials incorporated are those immediately available, or that can be obtained easily. The second feature builds on this – *they can be used again*. Gray identifies this as a particular feature of amateur theatre, in which deconstruction is an essential part of the ongoing life of creation, with set-builders “ensuring that every piece of material was unscrewed, unfixed and unstuck and stored away, ready to be remade in future productions” (2020, pp. 89–90). In this respect, bricolage can be framed as sustainable theatre, in which theatre-makers deliberate limit the consumption of raw materials. Finding shared practice between the medieval and modern performances, we might point to the re-use of costumes or props by the waggon plays, or the ongoing repairs to wagons. In doing so, they maintain the assemblage for the future.

Extrapolating from this point, a bricolage's components are not necessarily incoherent, but must draw on a variety of resources in order to 'patch' gaps. The original form of these components can be identified, and the bricoleur uses this playfully to show off their work. If we consider the York Mystery Plays as a bricolage, we might ask whether we should be able to identify their sources (and, indeed, their afterlives). The point is not to create something elitist or insular, only recognisable by those already familiar with the Plays, as Hutcheon warns more generally of adaptations (2013, p. 117). Instead, it is a way to highlight the enormous potential of the Plays for future theatre-makers. However, the means to do this through performance are not immediately obvious. We might point to paratheatrical devices such as programmes which indicate which Plays have been incorporated. A common theatrical device is to suggest a surrounding community – often medieval – who mediate the Plays for a modern audience. In doing so, the performance highlights that the Plays are not simply a retelling of the Bible, but instead portray a community and their stories. The selection of sites may help with this, by providing a medieval, religious or communal container for the performance.

Beyond this, site-based theatre suggests fragmentation and intertextuality as a dominant feature, as a way of simultaneously telling more than one of a site's stories (Smith, 2019, p. 4). This style of performance is not something always utilised by the Mystery Plays, although there are traces in the waggon plays, where multiple pageants are played simultaneously across the city. Instead, when I discuss the Plays with potential stakeholders there is often a desire to return to the familiar forms of the fixed-site Mysteries, or, as former participant Geoff Wragg argued, "a lot of the people were coming back for more, it had to be different, and – marginally different" (Wood, Wragg and Tomlin, 2001). In this, I find an echo of Hutcheon's discussion of the pleasures of adaptation, in which repetition gives delight first in recognition, and secondly in the recognition of *differences* introduced in the move to a new media or interpretation (2013, p. 114). Yet too great a change can cause disruptions to an assemblage.

In this respect, bricolage has the potential to be dangerously destructive if it does not look to future productions. This wider issue was identified by Altglas in her reading of modern religious practices as bricolage, where unrelated traditions such as qabalah,

yoga or meditation are dislodged from their cultural origins and re-assembled to suit a (predominately Western, neoliberal and white) social class. Rather than an “expression of cultural resistance, bricolage is now understood as evidence of the empowerment of playful and culturally skilled individuals who craft their own lifestyles, religious systems and identities” (2014, p. 479). A director intent on making their stamp on the Plays operates within an existing bricolage. Too radical a change might create future problems by diminishing the potential stock of the Mystery Plays assemblage. Or, put simply: participants may decide not to get involved again. Finding shared expectations (whether of form or process) becomes a way of avoiding this unfortunate outcome.

Bricolage as Identity

I believe that this can be mitigated somewhat by a focus on the long-term future of the plays, expanding the possibilities and bringing in new material. Lévi-Strauss identifies the bricoleur not as somebody who temporarily uses this specific process, but deliberately identifies as such. For Visscher, Heusinkveld and O’Mahoney, bricolage “implies a specific way of viewing and collecting resources, and developing intimacy with them over a long period of time” (2018, p. 356). Lévi-Strauss points to the limitations of this, in that bricolage is viewed as something amateur, which industrial societies “only tolerate as a hobby or pastime” (1974, p. 33). Here the ‘amateur turn’ in performance studies proves useful, rejecting the identification of amateur as *unskilled* or *low-quality*. Instead, like bricolage, amateur theatre can be seen as a combination of process, product and identity (Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling, 2019, p. 8). That is, both benefit from a long-term commitment, which in turn becomes part of the practitioner’s identity. In this there may be a useful response to accusations that both are the domain of dilettantes at best, or unskilled bodgers at worst – that instead, the practice demands skills that are simply undervalued or unrecognised.

Yet, as Gray suggests, this rigour threatens to move amateur makers into the professional realm, so that they “have unsettled their own identities as amateurs by making their particular amateur practice a full-time job” (2017, p. 24). Likewise, Visscher, Heusinkveld and O’Mahoney examine how some business consultants describe themselves as bricoleurs, whose “creativity enables them to craft unique

solutions for unique problems, and that, because of their broad experience, they can cover ‘structural holes’” in the businesses for which they consult (2018, p. 369). Refuting earlier work on bricoleurs, viewed at odds with professionalism, business-bricoleurs instead construct their identity around a virtuoso performance, drawing on a personal toolbox alongside the limited resources of the individual businesses they work with. In this, I recognise some of my own work with the Mystery Plays, as somebody who has consciously moved from amateur to professional directing. Yet this is not a simple matter of pay or identity. For the modern Guild of Builders, their professional identity intersects with their performance of the plays, so that they present the Creation of the World both as a metaphor for their work, and a concrete example of this. Nonetheless, there is a recognition that what tools they bring are also limited: “we do not know much about acting or about pushing wagons, except that it is hard work ... If we were wainwrights we would have made [the waggon] level, but being builders we just worked with what we had” (Bielby, 2011, pp. 132–133).

“Consider him at work and excited by their project.”

(Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 18)

Finally, I suggest that as an identity, bricolage can also be seen as a sign of *affection* for what has gone before. Like many who continue to research or participate in the Plays, discovering where the Mystery Plays have come from and where they grow is enjoyable for its own sake. Spending time rooting through their histories and usages provides moments of excitement and inspiration. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss reads bricolage as a game – “the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’ (ibid., p. 17). Adapting medieval theatre is also a game. The overlap of the Latin term *ludus* to refer to both performance and game in late Medieval England is well-attested (e.g. Tydemann (1994), Symes (2002), and Solberg (2016)). Elsewhere, Groves traces the ways in which the Corpus Christi Plays stage their content as games – both metaphorically, and literally in the case of the buffeting of Christ in *Play 33 – The Second Trial before Pilate* (2007). I hope that this thesis captures some of the excitement and playfulness I may have shared with my medieval predecessors.

Chapter 2: *The York Mysteries @ Home*

Early in his handbook on creating site-specific theatre, Pearson describes this process in terms of collaboration between theatre-makers and audiences, hinting at the identities formed by one or the other moving into unfamiliar spaces: “We go there and they do not [...] You and I and they go there together [...] No one goes [...] There is no here or there [...] There is no us and them” (2010, pp. 23–29). Identities – ‘you’, ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘them’ – are created by breaching boundaries. For Pearson, spaces where “no one goes” are warzones, icefields, nuclear sites – locations that are inaccessible, private, dangerous, cut off – yet briefly accessible through performance. In 2020, as the world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, those dangerous places became the world outside our homes. Like other theatre-makers during the pandemic, attempts to make theatre here was situated within wider debates about liveness, intermediality and the pressure of performing within the cramped frame of a Zoom meeting or camera phone screen (Fuchs, 2022, p. 117). Rather than ‘going there’, we were ‘stuck here’.

Through creating performances, I reworked my theatre-making identity to become a theatrical bricoleur, focused on what was to hand: the contents of my own home. Through this, I explored domesticity as an interplay between mess and order, between a theatrical aesthetic and the domestic, and what happens when the domestic breached these frames- sometimes accidentally, in the form of rain in the garden, or when a toddler invades the performance space- or deliberately, when Zoom backgrounds displayed a scenography of weighty books, or carefully excised domestic clutter. These transgressions highlighted the difficulties of producing work at a time when many of us were not so much working from home, as living at work. It also hints at the way in which domestic spaces were not always a place of security and firm boundaries, counter to government mandates to ‘stay home, save lives’.

This chapter discusses my sequence of twelve domestic performances of the medieval York Mystery Plays, performed and filmed over an extended period between July 2020 and March 2021. A detailed timeline of these lockdowns and performances can be found in Appendix 3. Across twelve plays, my choices reflected (and reflected on) the interplay of theatrical and domestic materials. However,

performing within a domestic environment created its own challenges. I begin by reflecting on an early attempt to perform at home, working with a small group of amateur performers from May to July 2020, during and immediately after the initial lockdown. I place this within two parallel theatrical traditions – amateur theatre, and domestic theatre – and in doing so draw attention to their use of the home as a rehearsal/performance space and as a scenographic resource. This is placed within the historical context of the Corpus Christi plays, in which the homes of guild members contained both their personal and professional lives. I then explore how the contents of my home informed the performances. Finding an appropriate domestic frame from what was immediately available - a matchbox, a suitcase, a bookshelf or kitchen table - became a method not only of devising and adapting plays. Drawing together ‘what belongs’ in a performance space informed what lines, themes and events are incorporated or rejected from the original playscripts. In doing so, I took on the identity of a bricoleur, recognising the affordances of my home’s contents.

Origins of the project

These plays (and the processes used) grew out of a community project I ran from May to July 2020, in which I led a group of amateur performers to discover how we might rehearse and perform in our own homes. Participants were contacted through the channels detailed in the Introduction, with the following information:

“I am also looking for a small group of people to participate in online read-throughs/rehearsals of the York Mystery Plays, with a view to creating a short performance of a section of plays as part of my PhD. As an initial exploration, this will last for around 6-8 weeks.

Ideally, you will have been involved in a previous production of the Mystery Plays. You must also consider yourself an amateur performer (as my research is focused on how amateur performers rehearse).

You will need access to a webcam (a phone with the ability to run Zoom or similar is fine), a couple of hours to spare each week on a weekday afternoon, and be willing to record your thoughts in a journal format.”

At the start, twelve people took part, with eight continuing after the initial meeting. Due to the initial (and unexpected) opening up in early July, many of the younger participants returned to work during this time. Due to these initial parameters, all but one of the participants were familiar with the Plays, but as actors rather than as adapters. After reading through a selection of the Corpus Christi plays, the group agreed on *Play Eight – The Flood*. As part of this, we found different ways of performing a flood, using various containers to pour water back and forth. Within their own small frame, each actor brought something different – a teapot, a bucket, a bottle (see Fig. 1). Yet each saw a similar motion: water contained, poured carefully, bounded off from flooding their houses. Nobody wanted their theatrical endeavours to ruin their carpets. I return here to the idea of *sociability* – forming community through creating a performance. Each participant attempted to find something unique to their own home or situation, and yet found in these a shared attention to their homes.



Fig. 1: The Flood in rehearsal (Straszewski, 10 July 2020)

In this chapter, I expand on the growing understanding that amateur theatre finds a reciprocity between the domestic and performance, with front rooms turned into costume-workshops, lines learnt on the sofa, and houses plundered for props and scenery (Holdsworth, Milling and Nicholson 2019, pp. 211–215). Site-specific work likewise draws on what is available at the site. For Mike Pearson, found objects are

both archaeological traces, but also serve in performance as a “talisman, tying each performer back to the months of research and rehearsal and the gradual clarification of intent and meaning...” (2010, p. 118). There is an overlap here between the creativity of one amateur costume maker described by Holdsworth et al. (2019, p. 195), whose “identity is indelibly tied to his ability to tease an idea into being”, and Pearson’s talismanic objects. For site-specific work, however, the story of making theatre is part of the story of the site. To paraphrase Smith, in attending to the site through performance, we write its next scene (2019, p. 236).

As I will explore below, this opens up a potent strand for amateur performers, in which transforming a mundane object into something theatrical can reflect their identity. However, my early workshops suggested that transforming a domestic space into a theatrical one was not simply a matter of using the contents of the home as a prop. For amateur performers and theatre-makers the home (and the mundane) was something to be distanced from the performance: rehearsals, costumes and props are designed to be translocated to a distant stage. I found that the actors would restrict their performance to faces and voices, their bodies rarely seen. The surrounding site was even further excised. Bordered or framed off by the limits of a computer screen, the participants often chose to use a digital backdrop, blur their background, or use a generic white wall. The use of performing objects from their homes became a way of reintegrating their performance with the site. Nick Kaye suggests that site-specificity deals with the incursion of ‘surrounding’ space,” so that breaching the boundaries between the artwork and the wider context can become the creative act (2008, p. 30).

For one participant, performing within the home was tied up in the sense of precarity and resourcefulness that characterises bricolage:

“The difference, I think, is that I’ve not done the Mystery Plays before and so this type of fun – ‘at home’ – is less alien for me. It’s a case of do it this way or not at all...” (Anonymous Participant, 2003).

Unlike the other participants, who came to the Plays with their own memories or preconceptions of ‘how they should be done’, this participant was not part of the existing assemblage that incorporated the waggons, Minster or Museum Gardens. Instead, she was alert to the potential of her surroundings:

“The Flood could be done with inanimate familiar objects – and in lockdown in a way I favour that. We see the same objects every day. The mundanity of it could be interesting rather than the creativity of theatre” (Anonymous Participant, 2023)

Yet this sense of mundanity in *opposition* to creativity would also be a continual challenge to both the participants and to me. As some participants returned to work, and as we had completed a performance of the Flood, the group agreed to take a break – which would become a permanent end to this element of the project. However, my interest in performing at home suggested that object-based performances could be developed further. I was particularly intrigued by the way in which we had found shared experiences through similar (yet individual) objects and sensations.

As the community project reached its conclusion, I began to adapt *Play One - The Fall of Lucifer* as a participatory performance. This interspersed speeches, object theatre, and audience participation. Originally livestreamed for the TFTI Postgraduate conference on 18 June 2020, the audience were asked to find objects from their own home, which might allow them to share sensations together, whilst physically distanced – tasting a familiar food, pushing a waggon, or tracing fingers through earth. In doing so, they were invited to find a connection with each other, despite the likely differences between their sites. One audience member’s feedback remarked that:

“i am perched on my wide windowsill (my wagon), I have it my matches an literally fallen off with you, I have my basil smell here and traced my earth place in it ... this is first time in lockdown I have COMPLETELY SUSPENDED DISBELIEF since lockdown whilst using my laptop.” [Original spelling retained]

Around the same time, I had encountered bricolage as a theatrical concept in Mike Pearson’s brief description of “an improvised response to an environment of fixed resources” (2010, p. 119). Exploring this further, I found a theory that described my initial stumbling attempts at object theatre, but also suggested a way to apply this to site-specific theatre in my home. For Lévi-Strauss, the bricoleur “derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he

‘speaks’ not only with things but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities” (1974, p. 21). In an initial burst of energy in July and August 2020, I completed four plays, using household objects, and staged in our home office. After this, however, they slowed to a roughly monthly cycle of experimentation. As we returned to a new lockdown in September 2020, I sought out new spaces within the home. My plays increasingly integrated not only the contents of my home, but also the processes and atmospheres of the individual rooms in which I performed – not all of which I was comfortable placing on display, particularly in a performance that (when recorded) would have a long afterlife.

Frames became a way of reifying these conceptual boundaries. Here, I draw on Derrida, whose analysis in *The Truth in Painting* identifies a number of ways in which frames operate (1987). Some aspects overlap with the process of bricolage. They define the boundaries or limits of a work, and in doing so define the assemblage they give an individual point of view, much as the bricoleur displays their identity through their work (p. 50); they provide a way of narrowing focus, so that they sift between the artwork and its surroundings (p. 51). Vital to Derrida’s reasoning is the idea that frames do not simply act as ornamentation, but instead act as a meeting point between interior and exterior – a hinge between the two (1987, p. 54). In doing so, frames point to absences or insufficiencies in the work, and yet at the same time allow the work to draw on these absences through the frame’s thick presence (p. 56). Increasingly, I found that bricolage’s focus on precarity or limited resources could be highlighted through the use of frames.

Nonetheless, Derrida’s analysis of frames is not directly applicable to theatre performances, in part because the frames he refers to are concrete objects used to enclose artworks. McAuley’s work on theatrical frames is useful here, principally in her suggestion that these are necessary to distinguish between the performance and the separate, everyday world (1999, p. 42). These frames might be physical, such as a proscenium arch; a paratheatrical device such as encountering Front of House, a programme or the bar. In practice, these frames transform their contents – everyday objects and bodies – into theatrical signs (1999, p. 178). Frames are theatrically useful because they form a binary divide between interior and exterior, theatrical and

mundane, actors and audience (and indeed backstage). McAuley goes further – these frame the expectations of the audience, suggesting a genre or style (which we might describe as an ‘assemblage’). I draw a link here to the way in which the bricoleur creates a new assemblage by suggesting a categorical frame, decided by the symbolic qualities of these objects. A physical frame is useful here to demonstrate this process, and the frame itself becomes part of the assemblage. In similar fashion, the scenography of Tadeusz Kantor proved useful, whose late play *Today is My Birthday* saw the actors step in and out of picture frames, suggesting that any division between memory (within the frame) and reality (outside of it) was illusory (Wiles, 2003, pp. 237–8). As I would find, simple binaries between domestic life and the theatrical world of the Plays could be swiftly disrupted by breaking, deconstructing or moving (spilling) into or out of the frame.

Domesticity

Nonetheless, I initially felt that the domestic and the theatrical frames were at odds. The early workshops and experiments were a response to the *difficulties* of performing (or working) in the home, made necessary by lockdown. However, critically reflecting on the domestic context of past performances opened up new reflections on the Plays, and offered up the house as a potent – if problematic – resource. I now turn my attention to points of similarity between home-working during the pandemic and late medieval patterns. I then trace the increasing emphasis on containment and boundaries in the post-medieval era, and the ways in which domestic theatre has responded to this.

The Medieval Home in York

Although the medieval plays were performed in the streets by York’s guilds, for many of their members, their labour took place within the home. This was the case both for the smaller homes belonging to poorer craftspeople and day-labourers in single-roomed houses, and the multi-roomed homes of the burgesses, the leading members of the guilds (Riddy, 2008, p. 22). For both groups, homes were both spaces for living, working and provisioning, potentially overlapping, and certainly requiring the organisation of space to incorporate these different activities (*ibid.*, p.26). Yet the borders of both the house as a whole and their interior spaces were

permeable, and not only by family and friends. Customers and guild inspectors – ‘searchers’ – entered shops and workspaces, examining labouring conditions and the quality of work. Indeed, Goldberg suggests that we might consider the medieval artisan home as a semi-public theatre, in which workers performed their professional identity in terms of their resources, rigour and integrity (2019, pp. 179–180).

What might York’s houses have looked like? Rees Jones details the evolution of these spaces, exploring how the development of timber-framed houses in the 14th and 15th centuries facilitated the construction not only of larger domestic buildings, but their subdivision into an open hall with multiple smaller rooms which “provided both working and living spaces, productive spaces and ceremonial spaces, spaces which could be either intimate or very public” (2008, p. 69). Liddy gives a fuller description of the objects that defined different spaces within the home (2015). Tapestries or standing screens might frame off sections within them, at particular times of the day or season. Surviving medieval household inventories also suggest that goods might travel from one to the other. Goldberg highlights how the utensils needed for a brewer’s business might perform double duty in his domestic kitchen (2008, p. 131). Bedrooms might be used as both a site of private devotion, or as a wife’s space to entertain close friends and relations (*ibid*, p. 138).

Due to this, a binary division of public/private spaces does not reflect domesticity in the late middle ages; instead, spaces took on multiple functions. Riddy suggests that these functions were also created by observation – who can see you, or who is prevented from doing so (2008, p. 33). She describes this as a distinction between privacy (*privé*) – what we *want* to do – and exposure (*apert*) – what we are *expected* to do. This could indicate social control, so that, for example, York’s girdlers’ apprentices and journeymen in 1417 were forbidden from practicing their craft either away from their master’s house, or in private (*ibid.*, p. 34). Their work reflected the household; it must therefore remain *within* the household. Although this might be seen as a form of social control over apprentices, it might also be a sign of paternalistic respect for the worker, preventing them from failing in public, or making expensive mistakes in private.

Reading these descriptions in the context of lockdown, I found a similar vein of material display. Videoconferencing such as Zoom forced us as home-workers to

consider how our domestic environment was framed. This ran concurrently with considering the role of privacy and display in the medieval artisan home. The portability of phones and laptops allowed the wider home to be included or excised as desired. In the early days of lockdown, talking-heads on news reports used bookshelves as scenography, as a backdrop to imply well-read expertise. The Twitter account Bookcase Credibility (@bcredibility) traced the course of this development, declaring (tongue in cheek) that “what you say is not as important as the bookcase behind you” (2023). For academics and politicians thrust into the media spotlight, these were “a handy representation of symbolic knowledge, a marker of cultural cachet and a source of analysis for those seeking to understand the particular individual who occupies the foreground” (Beer, 2020).

On Zoom calls, I found myself deliberating between virtual and physical backdrops depending on who I was calling. A white wall for strangers avoided individuality; the sofa was for family and friends; the fridge (and its collection of my toddler’s finger-paintings) was used to connote familiarity, or the double-life of working from home. A brief call in our shared office would inevitably include my wife busy at her own work, and occasionally on her own calls. Like many during the pandemic, I was discovering my house as a performance space, curating a particular image of conspicuous productivity. What interested me was whether these were similar concerns for the producers of the medieval pageants – the guild members and their households. I began to consider how the medieval home might have been reflected in producing the pageants.

In late medieval York, houses were not only places to prepare for the Corpus Christi plays, but may also have been comfortable places from - and within which- to watch and hear the pageants (Twycross, 1994, p. 48). Individual playing stations were organised (and charged for) by nominated individuals, which formed the majority of audience interaction (Crouch, 1991, p. 104). Across the lifetime of the pageants, descriptions of the playing stations in the York Register are often located in terms of homes, such as ‘Adam del Brigg’s door’ in 1399, or ‘Mr Fawke’s in Coney Street’ in 1569 (White, 2000, pp. 53–54). It is also likely that the jettied houses at some stations provided an alternative viewpoint to the streets. Here, a householder could gather friends and relatives to see and hear the plays from an upstairs window. As

White argues, the narrow topography of the York streets asks us to reconsider whether the pageants were an epic experience, or instead an intimate performance for select audiences, “a miniature for contemplation” (ibid., p. 57). This provides an alternative model for modern productions. Rather than emphasising spectacle, I suggest my domestic performances come closer to the intimate scale of the medieval experience of the plays. As I will later explore, playing with scale in this manner is characteristic of bricolage.

There is also a significant aspect of gender in the formation of medieval domesticity, in which the home was increasingly identified as a woman’s place, although still subject to significant variation between geographic and temporal moments (Salih, 2003, p. 125). By the 15th century, when the Plays were codified, the scripts nonetheless portray a world where women were not simply *confined* to the home. Rees Jones notes that Noah’s wife is “so overly attached to the attractions of the street (her gossips, friends, and family) that she is reluctant to join her husband in the ark” (2013, p. 253). The urban streetscape was decreasingly a *common* space, shared by men and women, but instead a predominantly male one, in which women were seen as suspect and out of place. As Kowaleski and Goldberg suggest, a corresponding shift occurred in which the late medieval home became a feminine sphere, with men’s role “to leave the safe haven of the house and venture into the polluting world of trade and manufacture” (2008, p. 3).

My point here is not whether women should perform Mystery Plays, but whether attention to the experiences and concerns of medieval women might be reflected in a modern adaptation in the home.¹⁴ Medieval women were involved in backstage roles,

¹⁴ Despite the general rise in cross-casting, both audiences and theatre-makers can be frustratingly resistant to non-traditional casting in the Mystery Plays. A reported quote from Poulton about his adaptation of the 2016 Minster Mysteries illustrates this viewpoint: “I want to make it perfectly clear to you that first of all we don’t want an Archangel Gabriella, the disciples are not Greenham Common women and the Last Supper’s not a Chinese takeaway!!” (Shephard, 2016).

This is separate to the question of whether women acted in the medieval pageants. At Chester, men played women, with records showing the name of men (or perhaps teenagers)

“servers of food and drink, comforters or seamstresses: all duties which could be prepared for at home” (Normington 2004, p. 53). Indeed, Normington suggests that these tasks are *invisible* (ibid., p. 38). I would argue, however, that for audiences intimately familiar with the material tasks of sewing banners, this was not an invisible task but one proudly on display throughout each performance. If this labour was performed at home, it was also a labour that both men and women would recognise. Might this be reflected in modern productions, opening up a broader understanding of the plays beyond simply retelling biblical narratives, ones dominated by male roles? I therefore turn to considering how modern theatre-making works within the home.

Studying the creative processes of amateur theatre-makers, Gray explores how their homes lend themselves to making things (2017). She looks specifically at home

against the roles of Anne or Dame Procula (Normington, 2004, p. 64). However, whether women performed in the York pageants is often asserted against, rather than argued. Wickham suggests that the guilds and civic bodies were exclusively masculine, and therefore would have excluded women from involvement in their performances (1987, p. 93). However, there is increasing evidence that women were members of guilds, and Stokes demonstrates the wider involvement of women in guild entertainments, although again this does not prove their involvement in York (2020). Practical issues are invoked in the recurring argument that women could not be clearly heard in outdoor performances (Twycross, 1994, p. 43). As Normington (2004, p.37-39) argues, there is considerable evidence that the voices of contemporary French women were admired in outside performances. Modern performances provide more than adequate evidence that women’s voices carry well from York’s waggons.

More interesting are arguments against women actors for dramaturgical reasons. Black, for example, suggests that the queer potential of cross-casting is necessary for the Towneley *Second Shepherds Play*: the comedy of a birth scene depended on performing “as a man *playing* a woman performing childbirth might” (2020, p. 135). However, we might complicate this further: Normington suggests that women were silenced not because they were physically inaudible, but because they were not allowed a voice when in public (2006, p. 54). Might those plays where the Virgin Mary does *not* speak indicate the presence of a woman actor?

studios, often temporary or multi-purposed, which allow a potential reciprocity between the theatre and the home. In particular, she suggests that social media has helped to enable this, where “visual platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have allowed the personal sharing of creative spaces” (ibid, p. 172). In contrast to professional theatre-makers, who are forced to ‘make do’ with a space provided by the venue, Gray suggests that amateurs instead shape their domestic spaces around their creative activities, in effect a reification of their creative process. She also explores “the home as a repository of these creative doings, where leftovers and experimentations of [costume-maker] Jeni’s creative practices decorate the spaces within.” (ibid, p. 174). The accountant and amateur producer Purdom (cited in Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling, 2019, p. 125), reflected on the burst of amateur theatre among the garden cities of interwar Britain, in which “amateur theatre invaded citizens’ domestic spaces, whose homes were ‘plundered for furniture, carpets, and all other kinds of properties’”. Yet the home is not only mined for costumes and props. The home is also a site of production, in which creators learn lines, create props, sew costumes, hold impromptu discussions and line runs. And the converse is true; when the production enters its performance site, its green room becomes a home-from-home, a place of hasty meals, a store for personal items.

Tied into this is a recognition of the home as an amateur space. For professionals, a space outside the home, or the creation of a separate room such as a home studio, helps to validate their professional identity. For amateur makers, Gray suggests that rejecting an external workshop is sometimes a deliberate choice. The ability to use any room in a house demonstrates their ownership of their home. In Gray’s case studies, John, a set designer, uses a clipboard as “a device that allows him to transform any room in the house into a studio” (2017, p. 190). For Jeni, a costume-maker, the lack of space and equipment at the community theatre means she works mainly from home. Like John, Jeni moves her work around the home, with qualities of light and access to space the guiding factor. Rather than being constrained to a single room, their amateur making overflows boundaries.

In similar fashion, Kucheva’s article on ‘Scenography at Home’ was prompted by her surprise that a friend saw her scenographic career reflected in her home (2013). Whilst there were some qualities that indicated an eye for scenography- a symbolic

thread of red across a display of fliers, a pyramid of hats- it was her home's ability to provoke performance that struck her, from the abundance of doors and windows, to the lack of curtains that made a stage of both interior and exterior views. Whilst Gray generally describes theatre as an invasive presence in the home, Kucheva's mentions of the home's specific qualities suggest that there are moments when the home reaches out to the theatre. But these traces are often unacknowledged on the stage – indeed, there is a sense that seeing the domestic origins of props and costumes would destroy the theatrical illusion. Due to this, these previous studies have focused on the creation of portable objects, which are then removed from the studio or workshop space and used on a distant stage. My work instead looks at how the domestic environment might become a stage for these performing objects, foregrounding the home as a site of production, in which the home spills onto the stage – and vice versa. This idea of craft overspilling is more characteristic of the medieval sense of the home than later formations. From the early modern period, domesticity increasingly came to mean a well-kept home, an extension of (and reflection on) the individual in charge of keeping it so. For the Victorians, it was the Angel in the House - conflating both occupant and house as “stable and contained, untouched by worldly flux, bustle, and mess” (Fraiman, 2017, p. 1). The term feels particularly potent for performing the Mysteries in its conflation of the divine and the domestic. For the interwar suburban estates (of which my home is a part), domesticity was part of a transition from “long-established and tightly knit urban communities... to a recognizably ‘modern’ mode, centred around the nuclear family and the home” (Scott, 2013, pp. 233–234). By the 21st century the Angel has become a domestic goddess, epitomised in the sideways glance of Nigella Lawson, whose baking (as a stand-in for domesticity) becomes a “useful metaphor for the familial warmth of the kitchen we fondly imagine used to exist, and as a way of reclaiming our lost Eden” (2000, p. 1). In this, the everyday mingles with the divine, yet also threatens to establish domesticity as something unachievable, out of reach of the messy, corrupting human presence. This concept of domesticity emphasises restraint and privacy – both in terms of behaviour (quiet voices, small families, and firm boundaries), and in the idea of cleanliness (in which these restraints prevent contamination from the outside world).

Here, I return to Derrida's use of the frame as a potential hinge between the everyday and the theatrical, and to McAuley's suggestion that a frame is needed to transform one to the other. I suggest that this cannot be simply metaphorical. Performance academics Owens and Green found in their own creative practice that the precarity of renting meant they were literally unable to 'make a mark': their performances were instead found through games played between housemates (2020). A separate experiment saw them spend twenty-four hours together at home, in silence. Reading their notes, I saw a familiar difficulty: "This is set to fail; this is a living space not a working space. We have not framed our home as performance." (Owens and Green, 2016). Other performances, however, suggest that this distinction is not an obstacle but *characteristic* of performing the domestic. Performance artist Bobby Baker's *Kitchen Show* (1991) is described as emotional bricolage, in which her domestic routines create a framework of physical actions and the marks they left on her body and home (Pollock, 2007, p. 180). Meanwhile, in Bennett's *Domestic Trainwreck* (2012) it is her mother's *failure* to perform domesticity that forms the basis of this autoethnographic performance (2013). For both Baker and Bennett, performing in the home is framed by the social expectations of being a woman in the home.¹⁵ That dwelling on (and in) the home prompts autobiographical dramas has been noted elsewhere; Heddon examines the ways in which moving through a site can be used to perform autobiographies (2008, pp. 88–89). Discussing the home as a place of shelter, LaBelle likewise suggests that the spatial arrangement of the modern home necessarily causes introspection: like our own selves, it is the fixed spot to which we return (2019, p. 42). Here, there is considerable overlap with bricolage, which likewise reflects the bricoleur's personality and interests. An alternative approach to domestic performance, and one perhaps more associated with amateur theatre, is the idea of performing *in* the

¹⁵ It is striking that masculine and nonbinary responses to the home are unusual in domestic performances, at least those subject to academic study. Bain's research on male creativity in heteronormative homes suggests that the place for these might be in liminal spaces such as gardens and garages (2007). There is a sense of stereotype here – the man in his shed, 'her indoors' – that I found both deeply unsettling and unfamiliar to my own lived experience, particularly as primary caregiver during the course of the PhD.

home. A longer history could be written that might take in visiting players in the Tudor great halls, the private theatricals of the 18th and 19th century, and parlour plays in which families and guests performed for their own entertainment. In the 20th century, the growth of amateur drama societies increasingly provided an alternative creative venue outside of the home. Indeed, Milling et al suggest that this was an essential part of reconstructing the nation in the aftermath of World War One, drawing communities together (2019, p. 38). What is clear, however, is that performing plays *at home* is now unusual, associated either with the sort of experimental work described in the preceding paragraph, or with children's play, puppet theatres and dressing-up boxes.¹⁶ Nonetheless, some amateur approaches persist. Shaw and Bould's *Domestic Theatre Handbook* (2011) or Frayn's evocatively titled *Matchbox Theatre* (2014) provides theatre to be read, rather than staged. Nonetheless, Frayn promises a sense of disrupting theatrical norms, its introduction demanding that we "feel free to obstruct the aisles. Leave luggage unattended! Talk among yourselves! Eat! Drink! Sleep! Snore!" (ibid., p. 1). These performances are untethered from the oversight of other audience-members and ushers. At the same time, they seem to reproduce a traditional theatre frame *in the home*, temporarily transforming one into the other.

Creating the Plays

As I began to create these plays, my central research question was simple: could site-specific theatre techniques enable me to adapt and perform the Corpus Christi plays within my own home? The first four plays (*The Fall of Lucifer*, *The Creation of the World*; *The Creation of Adam and Eve*; *The Prohibition of the Tree of Knowledge*) are created from domestic resources - scrap paper, a matchbox, spare change - but do not strictly engage with domesticity in itself. *Play Five - The Fall of*

¹⁶ This is complicated by the rise of livestreaming from the home, and the creation of video skits for social media such as Tiktok or Instagram. The extent to which this can be categorised as domestic theatre is beyond the immediate confines of this thesis. However, the link between Tiktok aesthetics and authenticity (see Granados (2020)) is suggestive of the sociability that characterises amateur theatre. An unpublished conference paper by Stoyanoff likewise found Tiktok a useful medium for teaching the Mysteries during lockdown (2022).

Adam and Eve and *Play Six – The Expulsion from the Garden* marked a turning point, and came about as I began to engage directly with bricolage as a concept. Rather than crafting backdrops and puppets, I began to engage with the house as both a repository of past performances and a domestic site. Its contents included picture frames from my 2019 production of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, a wedding dress used as a display for Whitney's_(my wife's) crafting business, old costumes. Yet I also included domestic goods put to new use – a wooden spoon, a dishcloth, a roll of binbags. To explore why I made these decisions, it is useful to turn back to bricolage, which provides a way to overlap both 'performing the domestic', and 'performing within the home'.

Like Lévi-Strauss, I use another bricoleur as a model: Mr Wemmick, a character in Charles Dickens' 1861 novel *Great Expectations*. At work, Wemmick is a hard-headed chief clerk and bill-collector; at home, a genial host and dutiful son. His home is itself a bricolage, a scale-model castle whose domestic architecture is represented through theatrical symbols - not only wooden battlements and sham Gothic windows, but a drawbridge rather than a front door. Through this, Lévi-Strauss identifies three approaches to bricolage. Wemmick's hand-crafting becomes a way of creating meaning through aggregation. He plays with scale, reducing a grand castle to suburban size, so that "being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable" (1974, p.23). Finally, bricolage frames identities; as Wemmick explains, "the office is one thing, and private life is another. When I go into the office, I leave the Castle behind me, and when I come into the Castle, I leave the office behind me" (Dickens, 1994, p. 192).

Much as Wemmick's castle-home helped him distinguish between home and work, I would increasingly begin adapting each play by identifying or creating a frame or boundary. However, my use of domestic objects complicates this, as McAuley's theory suggests, as these became overlapping frames of theatrical and quotidian objects (1999, pp. 270–271). My adaptations attempted to rework household materials and the Corpus Christi Plays as a new assemblage, drawing on the symbolic properties of both.

I will now follow these threads – small-scale, handmade, and framed.

Thread One – Small Scale

Initially, working at a small scale was a practical requirement of working within the spatial confines of one half of a shared study. Yet I swiftly recognised that this small scale implied intimacy. In *Performing Proximity*, Hill and Paris discuss the radius of intimacy as around 18 inches, which was around the distance of most of my plays between the point of performance and camera (2014, p. 12). On screen, we do not share the intimacy of body heat or soft breathing, although intimacy may be implied when the visual field extends and contracts depending on whether it is viewed on a small screen, a computer or television. Here, the human body – the human *frame* -- becomes an indication of shared human scale between the actor and audience.

As such, a recurring feature of the plays was my hands. I was not consistent in whether I framed the plays facing the audience, or with myself sharing the audience's point of view (so that my hands appeared as if their own). The first five plays alternate between situating the camera either facing the performer or from the performer's perspective. Often this was prompted by the staging. In *Play Two - The Creation to the Fifth Day*, the bottom edge of the screen allowed me to switch the different contents of the matchbox, acting in much the same way as the wings of a proscenium arch stage. When I moved to the smaller sewing machine desk for *Play Three – The Creation of Adam and Eve*, in order to keep the props in focus I had to find a new position for the camera, without displaying the script pinned to the wall. *Play Four – The Prohibition of the Tree* turned this around to display the script itself. In doing so, I tried to use the (absent) audience as an active participant, regaining some of the sense of liveness that was lost in recording the plays.

All, however, have my hands in close-up, so that the objects used have a familiar reference point, indicating the tiny scale of the plays. By *Play Five – The Fall*, I began to use larger objects, particularly the garden shears that form the head of Lucifer in his serpent form. In this play – the first in which my torso and legs are shown – I play with the change in scale between the craft scissors used to cut out the paper angel, and the garden shears that replace these, as if creating a close-up on Lucifer that these cutting tools represent. It is perhaps unsurprising that the larger borders of the garden prompted this playing with scale. In the following play, *Play Six – The Expulsion from Eden*, I used scale as part of the sifting process, using

three picture frames to reduce Adam and Eve from human scale (a wedding dress and suit) to the miniature (a roll of bin bags and tissue paper). At the end, only the wider frame remained, a way of indicating their journey into the wider world beyond the Garden of Eden.

Yet varying scales within each performance made it difficult for the camera to focus. In *Cain and Abel*, a playdough session with my son inspired me to make little heads. Playdough resists subtle marks, and I was intrigued by the severe faces created by a toothpick. Reproduced in Milliput, I then found that these were too small for the camera to clearly focus on, particularly when placed on the kitchen table. I tried several lenses to try and work through this, but even the final version sees distortion, for example at 00:36-40 when the faces of the puppets blur and reform. Like my camera, I often failed to clearly focus on the scale models I had painstakingly created, coming to represent my own frustration with working at home. Not yet fully focused on bricolage, I struggled to find a methodology, instead shifting between different ways of performing at home. I oscillated between intense attention to the task at hand and wider demands on my time. And the home itself caused issues focusing. Sometimes this was simply an interesting book, or a video-game, or scrolling through social media to check the progress of the surrounding pandemic. At other times it was a household task – the need to go food-shopping, or to clean, or parent. Indeed, by paying close attention to my site, I felt my attention wander from the play itself. Noticing a crumb, a dirty cup, a pile of toys, my mind would find itself in a stream of domestic tasks unrelated to the performance itself. And the inverse was also true. In short, I slipped between the theatrical and the domestic, in ways that were not always to the benefit of either.

Thread Two – Handmade

If working at a small-scale focused attention on specific areas of the home, transforming these locations went hand-in-hand with crafting what I found there. My use of handmade props and puppets was initially a response to the focus on the digital that characterised Zoom performances in the early stages of theatre's move online (Fuchs, 2022, p. 40). With the community participants, we had experimented with movement with our individual Zoom boxes, and introduced objects from around the house to break the potential monotony of 'talking heads'. My first solo play, *Play*

One – The Creation of the Angels and Fall of Lucifer, likewise engaged with the form by breaking up the play into smaller movements, editing together brief passages in which a remote audience might share a sensual moment – in tasting a familiar food, pushing a waggon, or tracing fingers through earth. As far as creating a shared experience despite our different sites, I was successful.

This response to material props and set struck me as important during a period when theatre was digitally distanced. I had made use of what was immediately available within the study, including items from previous performances (stage lighting, a picture frame); domestic items (a handmirror, a box of matches, a handful of earth from a dead houseplant) and crafted items (a puppet of Lucifer, a cardboard waggon). The process of selecting and transforming materials was initially aided because I had experienced the wider home as a site of material transformation, not only for props and costume-making but through DIY and home-making. Before we lived here, the house had remained in the possession of a single family, who extended and reworked it over sixty years. By 2015, when we purchased the property, the house had fallen into disrepair. Although the renovation of the property was mostly carried out by a contracted builder, the work of laying the fabric bare was carried out by me. In the winter of 2016, I would finish my desk-job in a 1960s concrete college, rehearse the Minster Mystery Plays in the late medieval Saint William's College until 10pm, and then spend the remainder of the evening tearing out rotting wood and stripping away layers of wallpaper in a 1950s house.

In doing so I uncovered the house as a bricolage, put together with odds and ends. Under the carpets were patchworks of different woods. A single built-in wardrobe might include a diverse assortment of screws, both flat-head and Phillips, of varying lengths - presumably, whatever was immediately to hand. Every socket seemed to be different. Whilst I could not access the memories of the previous occupants, I could see their approach to the house – crack on with whatever was to hand. It was this way of working that lingered in my mind as I created the plays. Although my first four plays focused more on adapting the text, the craft involved in their production provided a secondary source of physical and dramaturgical material. Working during and immediately after the first lockdown, what was readily to hand was the contents of a shared study, where both Whitney and I now worked from home. The room

reflected the house as a whole – an assemblage of our work, hobbies and domestic clutter. Our desks and bookshelves reflected our personalities. Mine were piled high with textbooks, boxes of old electronics intermingled with props, paintbrushes and paints, model kits in varying states of assembly, and various stationery. Whitney's bookshelves contained a collection of books on costuming and medieval fibre crafts, along with an array of her fibre craft supplies (including balls of wool and roving, a carding machine, and knitting needles). Unlike my desk, it was tidy and uncluttered. Both, however, were productive work- and craft-spaces.

With these tools to hand, I drew on my existing hobbies, painting a miniature background for *Play Two – The Creation of the World*, or creating a collage of the Garden of Eden for *Play Four – The Creation of Adam and Eve*. Handmaking took place 'among the scenes', rather than 'behind the scenes', which allowed me to view the puppets or set *in situ*, perhaps speeding up the process of making these as I did not have to reimagine them in use elsewhere. Nonetheless, I found that my preparation time was dominated by creating these props, often discovered by chance encounters with the room's contents, or even my working conditions. The shift from working in the study to the wider home illustrates can be seen in the playing surfaces. Plays One and Two were filmed at my own desk, a cheap vinyl-covered affair with a fake wood effect. The next two plays took advantage of Whitney's move to elsewhere in the house – chasing more comfortable seating. Her desk, an antique sewing machine that had been left behind by the previous owners, now provided a rich backdrop to the third and fourth Plays. When her employer provided a desktop computer, Whitney returned to work in the study permanently, no longer able to roam the house freely. This marked the end of our home office as a performance space, although I continued to use it as a space in which to quietly read and adapt the plays.

My movement from the shelter of the study to the wider world of the house conveniently coincided with *Play Five – The Fall of Adam and Eve*. The play deals with Lucifer's successful temptation of Eve, and the decision of both Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree, in the belief that they will become as gods. Rather than simply stewarding Creation, they desire to take an active role. Although in the preceding plays I had sometimes struggled to find a theatrical framework for each

play, the physical frame was restricted to a bookshelf or a desk. The handmade props of my initial plays had reflected this *workspace* or *craftspace*. Now, however, I tried to work in an explicitly domestic location – our kitchen. I picked up kitchen items to see how they felt in my hand, before settling on a mug-tree as the Tree of Knowledge. After a session playing with possibilities, my attempts failed to convince me that this was something ‘out-taken’, as the play describes it: forbidden, and tempting. Whether festooned with mugs, real apples or cardboard cut-outs, it failed to take on the existing weight of its iconic role. This did not immediately create a performance that felt awake to the connotations and affordances of the performance space and its objects. Dislocated from its usual position next to the kettle, the mug-tree never quite felt at home in both the theatrical and the domestic frames. The kitchen offered a symbolic space of transformation, in which raw materials are transformed into something new and nourishing. However, it was ultimately an artificial space, at odds with the text’s imagery of a flourishing garden of Eden.

In my second attempt at the play, I moved to the back garden. Here, the runner beans and rhubarb, and the scrub bushes beyond this, connoted the Garden of Eden, and yet as a domesticated space it also precursed Adam and Eve’s fate to “ete and swynke/And travayle for youre foode” (Davidson, 2011b, ll. 61–62). This was a messy space of domestic work, which I had transformed through my own labour from the pristine suburban lawn found when we moved in. Even so, it would be too simplistic to suggest that the garden tools used as puppets were obvious choices in this setting. They were normally stored in the garage, and required me to actively seek them out and put them to use. What I suggest here is that the process of handmaking is useful to theatrical bricolage not because of its aesthetic charm, but because it required my close attention to materials, where they came from, and the meanings they might take on in performance. Both drew on what I found in the space, but the theatricality of the first four plays – created by rendering it distinct from the surrounding space - was difficult to reproduce outside. Having moved from the *handmade* to the *found*, my emphasis moved from crafting (principally in the form of collages) to bringing together an *assemblage* of materials. That is not to suggest that both cannot coexist in performance, but that I required a different approach to bring these assemblages to life.

Here, I found a conflict between the theatrical and domestic, between things ‘out of place’ and ‘in place’. In retrospect, this was a moment in which I was relearning the domestic site through circumspection, the wary side-eyed viewing of a space and its contents. Already looking ahead to *Play Seven – The Building of the Ark*, I explored the process of ship-building. Here, I found Martin’s article on experienced boat-builders, who “seemed not to notice their tools at all while they worked, intently focused on the surface of the wood as the plane floated across it” (2020, p. 6). Underlying Martin’s work is the idea of ‘the feel’, the intuitive knowledge of a material that allows the boat-builder to work swiftly and freely. As I read, I began to recognise this in my own craft of theatre-making, translating or adapting a text rapidly without asking myself why a specific line might be required – it just ‘feels right’. Although this is common to many accounts of directing, such as the “kwoth” described by Trevis (2012, p. xvi), I found this to be particularly the case in this series of domestic performances.

When ‘what felt right’ was not obvious, I often referred back to the original plays to find a synergy between the craft responsible for this, and a modern equivalent. This was particularly the case in *Play Eight - The Building of the Ark* and *Play Ten – Abraham and Isaak*, which referred directly to ship-building and bookbinding respectively. However, there was a significant issue here in that my craft was not book-binding or boat-building, but theatre-making. In the absence of the traditional master, and with my ‘apprenticeship’ restricted to around a fortnight of rehearsals, it is perhaps unsurprising that I struggled against the restrictions of my materials. I found a way to avoid this in the form of *sloppy craft*, a description of craftwork that focuses not on precise and skilful work, but on discovering the qualities of materials. Although speaking in a pre-Pandemic, Canadian context, site-specific performer Bennett found a similar practice in her practiced amateurism as a way to perform failure:

“a method of representation that falters, unravels, creates pauses, makes claims only to retract them later, that is messy and laden with paradox. A performer who ‘fails’ in performance is awkward, self-critical, aware of the limits of their memory, self-conscious of the spectators’ gaze, embarrassed of the vulnerability of exposure and ashamed at their incompetence as a

performer. This method of animation is sensed as a kind of practised amateurism that challenges Western theatre's idea of an artistic labour that strives to create a polished performance.”

(2013, p. 47)

Discussing this process, craft scholar Alföldy suggests that “many sloppy craft artists are not professional craftspeople finding sudden liberation through lazy technique, but art students just proficient enough in a craft material to have fun playing with it, or sculptors enjoying the opportunity to riff off craft materials” (2020, pp. 81–82).

Although my handmaking revealed moments of incompetence in *crafting*, I was increasingly comfortable with the fact that this failure could be exploited for dramatic effect, for example through my failed attempt to create a model ark. In doing so, my performance allowed fresh insight into the apprentice-like Noah:

“Of course what the script doesn't say is what happens when things go wrong, what happens when I, er- when I look and I think what have I got, these don't work, how can I turn this into a boat? Does it change things when I cut myself, when there's blood all over my finger, getting all over the wood. It doesn't really help, when I think to myself- how is this going to turn these lumps of wood, these odds and ends from old projects, into something that can carry a whole family-” (*Play Five – The Building of the Ark*)

In my running commentary during the performance, I broke down the stages of boat-building described in the script, and in considering these drew attention to the process of crafting this play. In doing so, I carried out bricolage as a semi-conscious act of breaking down (mentally, physically), in which I picked at a variety of materials, examined them, transformed them, and in doing so reduced (or refined) the many potential themes of each play to what a single room of my house might comfortably hold within its frames.¹⁷

¹⁷ In discussing theatre as hand-made, there is a wider conversation – beyond the extent of this thesis – concerning the ways theatre-makers invoke their work as a craft, which can be taught and developed. See, for example, Ayckbourn's *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* (2004) or Mitchell's *The Director's Craft* (2009). Comparing the structures of training might also be

Thread Three – Framed

My performances often utilised a physical frame. Initially, these frames provided a way of focusing attention and providing unity to the performance, as discussed by . These frames were sometimes literal ones, such as the picture frames used in *Play One - The Fall of Lucifer*, the bookbinding frame of *Play Ten - Abraham and Isaak*, or the matchbox in *Play Two – the Creation to the Fifth Day*. I also found conceptual frames, such as the game of Solitaire that forms *Play Three – The Creation of Adam and Eve*. Often I combined the two, so that the suitcase of *Play Eleven – Moses and Pharaoh* becomes both a practical holder of the props required, and a symbol of refugees past and present. Other than the first and final Plays, the camera itself provided a single, unmoving frame. With this, I carved out a performance space from the home, beyond which the audience could not see. This was a response to the experience of creating *Play One – The Fall of Lucifer*, in which I moved the camera around different ‘stages’ of the study, taking in bookshelves, picture frames and mirrors.¹⁸ This whirl of movement drew on the Play’s themes of falling angels. However, it also proved immensely difficult to choreograph, as I juggled props, lines, phone and effects.

In the next play, the stability of a single camera, looking down on my desk, echoed the stable five-act frame of each day of *Play Two – The Creation of the World to the Fifth Day*. This was also influenced by the modern production by the Guild of Builders, whose design was based on children’s pop-up books (Bielby, 2011, p. 132). A plain sheet of A4 paper and a matchbox allowed me to contain the various creations. As described above, however, after *Play Four – The Fall of Adam and Eve*, I began to work outside of the study. This forced me to consider how much of

useful, with assistant directors expected to act as apprentices, without the long-term stability (and sustainability) of the medieval apprenticeship structure.

¹⁸ A major influence was a performance of Roswitha of Ganderheim’s medieval play *Sapientia*, reported on by the directors Muneroni and van Leeuwen (2019). Their article focuses on object theatre as a way to reframe medieval theatre for a modern audience. In their use of domestic objects to represent female martyrs, they provided a new frame of reference for the text’s positive view of female martyrdom.

each room might be seen. In retrospect, what strikes me is how much the filmed performances exclude the surrounding house, instead providing a simple white wall (or sheet of paper) as a backdrop. Often this would exclude identifying features of my family.

But it also reflected my intense uneasiness performing as myself; it took me until *Play Nine - The Flood* to reveal my face, by which point I had begun to reveal myself through autobiographical asides. A tight frame instead focused attention on the objects. Like Mr Wemmick's castle-house, these allowed me to separate my performing (working) self from the wider home. At the same time, these frames (and the objects they contained) were drawn *from* the home, and reflected my own domestic life. These objects performed the home *for* me, in the sense that they were selected to represent my concerns at the time. A collage made from English Heritage magazines suggested an idyllic Eden that was temporarily denied to us. A slipshod and blood-stained boat became a symbol of my haphazard DIY. I therefore suggest that frames do not simply provide a distinction between the home and the performance, but instead create a theatrical frame *through* transforming the site and its contents. As Kear suggests in his discussion of theatricality, theatre is "the material space in which the apparatus of theatricality is rendered tangible and distinct" (2019, pp. 307–308). If theatricality can be found in the domestic, it is through reworking, reimagining and reframing what we find at the site. The frame *is* the theatre. And because the frame is drawn from the home, it will inevitably contain both 'performing the home' and 'performing in the home'.



Fig. 2: Frames from *Play 6 - The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*



Fig. 3: Frames from *Play 10 - Abraham and Isaac*

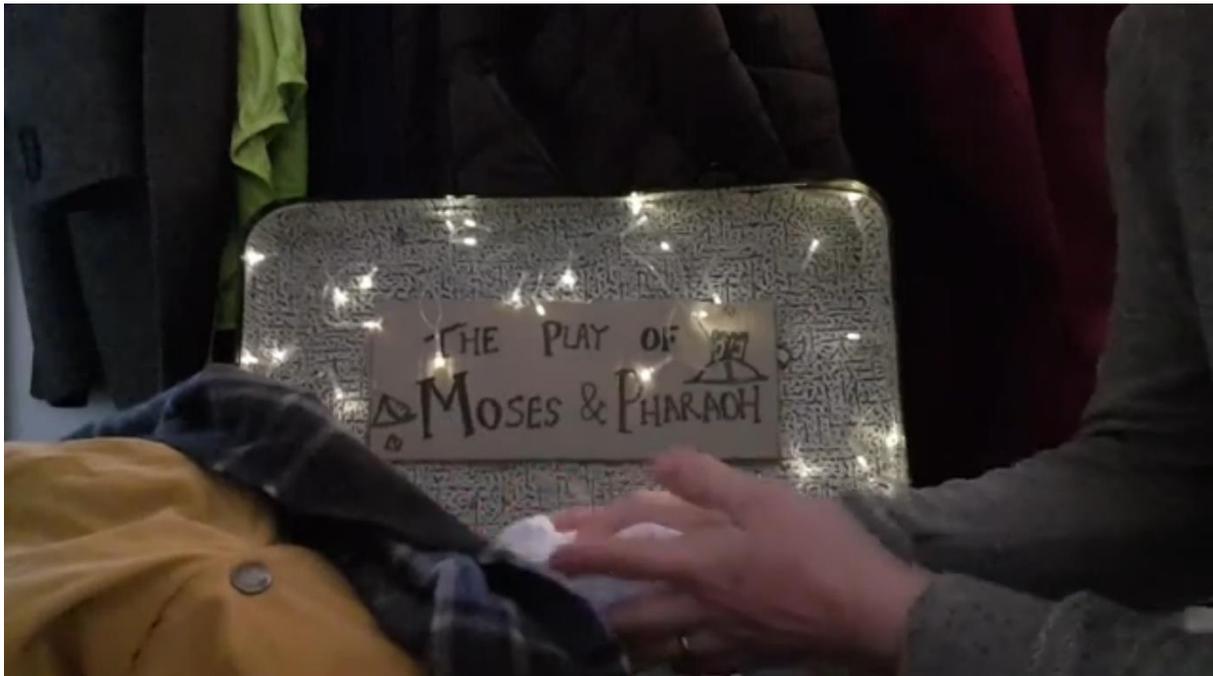


Fig. 4: Frames from *Play 11 – Moses and Pharaoh*



Fig. 5: Frames from *Play 12 – The Annunciation and Visitation*

Spillage

These physical frames do not simply demarcate the border between domestic and theatrical properties, but instead draw attention to spillage between the two. This spillage was particularly prominent when performing in the garden, in *Play Five – The Fall of Adam and Eve* and *Play Nine – The Flood*. In both cases, my performances were disrupted by two significant elements. One was a sudden rainstorm, which cut short my recording time, and the second was external sound in the form of the neighbour's dogs. In my reflective notes, there is a recurring worry that performance was, if not an imposition on the rest of the household, something that was disruptive and noisy. Yet my attempts to address sound is itself suggestive of the domestic environment. As LaBelle highlights in his analysis of acoustic territories, the porous nature of the home is most obvious through the leak of sound (2019, p. 37). I was constantly aware not only of noise spilling into the frame of the plays, but my own noise spilling back out. I was familiar with sound bleed in amateur theatre, in which rehearsals are often in multi-purpose community halls, sometimes with noise restrictions, and which need to be swept clear of all traces by the end of the rehearsal. I initially expected that performing in a home might overcome these issues, but instead the opposite was true. In *Play Five – The Fall*, the neighbouring dogs provided a cacophonous background noise for the play, entirely unrelated to its content. On reviewing the recording, I found that this overwhelmed or entirely obscured the dialogue, and instead I created a voice-over. With my head outside the frame, and the performance lacking exegetic sound, the recorded performance is at odds with the natural backdrop. In a sense, this was the aural equivalent of the featureless white walls of many of the plays, a misguided attempt to deny the reality of the home.

Given the deeply personal nature of the performances, I was curious whether my approach to the plays could be replicated elsewhere. In September 2020, with the first five plays published on Youtube, I tried to engage with further community participants. As part of this, I developed a website (www.yorkmysteriesathome.co.uk) to provide a central resource of scripts and inspiration. However, I found little success except through a direct approach to existing contacts, and it was not until

January that I was able to rehearse (via Zoom) with a participant.¹⁹ Given the initial interest in rehearsal workshops in the summer, and the ongoing reading group that ran until May 2021, this lack of responses surprised me. However, I return here to the idea that community theatre is a sociable activity. The early group workshops and ongoing reading group had provided this sociable context of joining together in play (see Walcon and Nicholson (2017)). Conversely the Mysteries @ Home were framed as an individual undertaking, and therefore failed to allow for the sociability that might have engaged amateur performers.

In January 2021, having failed to re-engage with community participants, I instead approached Eleanor Bloomfield, a fellow researcher on community productions of the York Mystery Plays. Located in Leicester, still in the midst of a targeted local lockdown, this provided her with both a sociable experience and an opportunity to engage with the Mystery Plays from afar. Together we developed her own set of three performances, focused on the last days of the Virgin Mary. As an amateur gardener and flower-arranger, Bloomfield was keen to use her garden as the performance space, using seasonal plants, with each play tied to a particular season (Winter, Spring and Summer). The initial performance, of *Play Forty-Four – The Death of the Virgin*, took place in mid-March, using windfall apples and bare branches to evoke a barren landscape of mourning. However, the second play of the sequence, *Play Forty-Five – The Assumption of the Virgin*, was hit by torrential June rain. With the last of the Spring flowers disappearing, Bloomfield took the decision to perform indoors, at the kitchen table. Here, we saw bricolage as a way of closely attending to the home's contents, and in doing so creating work that reflects this. In her reflective notes, she wrote that:

“Technically it was definitely much easier performing inside, without the inevitable background distractions of wind, weather, traffic etc... I also ended up really liking the effect of the candles, which would have been lost outside or at least not picked up by the camera. That said, I would still have done it

¹⁹ The other participant did not wish to be identified by name, but wrote a moving poem based on her experience as an expectant mother, and her complicated response to Mary in *Play Fourteen – The Nativity*. Although not a performance, it responded to a specific room in her home, in this case an empty space about to become her child's nursery.

outside if I could. The mysteries just somehow seem to ‘belong’ outdoors, especially during the spring/summer and around Corpus Christi. There is also something magical about the unpredictability of performing outdoors and the way in which the environment can interact with or influence the performance. During one of my failed outdoor takes, a blackbird started singing, with perfect timing, just as Our Lady was being assumed into heaven. Doing it indoors felt very sterile after that.”

(Bloomfield, 2021)

Aftermaths

Working within the home reveals new ways of constituting a Mystery Play. Rather than the emphasis on scale and spectacle that has dominated the form, this project opened up new ways of viewing the Plays as intimate reflections, in a way that may more accurately reflect how these were conceived by medieval practitioners.

Although these could not (and did not aim to) perfectly reproduce the conditions of the medieval households, they drew on similitude between working practices, in which the house was the focal site of production. Considerations of privacy, framing devices and the role of craft were indirectly performed through adapting the plays within the home. I emphasise here that my understanding of domesticity, interpreted through the Corpus Christi plays, is inevitably limited to my immediate context: a 1950s semi-detached house in suburban York, in the working-class Tang Hall neighbourhood, and it is within this context that my performances operate. I cannot claim that my approach would apply universally. However, bricolage is particularly suitable as an adaptation method because it makes a virtue of these limitations, through incorporating objects of personal significance. In doing so, it can highlight the complex ways in which different concepts of domesticity might be performed within different spaces.

Unlike the medieval households, which were porous spaces in which family, guests and customers might mingle, my work during the pandemic became increasingly solitary. This was apparent in my adaptations, which became introspective or confessional in nature. Although the sociable aspect of the Mystery Plays had initially been maintained online through workshops, there was a strong sense amongst participants that this had a defined endpoint. As an amateur craft, theatre operates

through discrete projects within an ongoing structure (the theatre company itself). The Mysteries@Home, whilst allowing a space to learn and develop skills, did not fully embrace this element, and therefore struggled to engage participants. A revised approach with a clearer endpoint and greater collaboration between individual participants might prove more successful. This is an issue also seen in professional companies – Creation Theatre, for example, reports on the difficulty of maintaining sociability online, particularly when there is no opportunity to socialise outside of the rehearsal itself (Aebischer and Nicholas, 2020, pp. 73–74). Still, although the necessity of working at home may have diminished, the Mysteries@Home briefly provided a way to engage with the Plays, on the participant's own terms and schedules. For people still unable to gather in person (perhaps due to health or caring responsibilities), this makes the Mysteries@Home a potential model for future practitioners.

As I moved into my solo work, I developed a clearer sense of the strengths of bricolage as a theatrical process. Initially, my interest in domestic theatre had been due to necessity, a response to the limited resources (and spatial limitations) of working in the home during lockdown. However, as I began to explore bricolage, I discovered a precursor in Joseph Cornell's shadow boxes, created in the mid-twentieth century. Like my early performances, Cornell's art initially used collage, before moving to the assemblage of objects found in his neighbourhood. These were arranged in glass-framed 'shadow boxes'. Dimakopoulou traces the development of this practice as a process through which Cornell both preserved the objects' wider history and contexts, yet subjects these to his personal fantasies (2007, p. 210). Within the boundary of the box's frame, both "the assembled fragments are put in the service of a new integral whole that is evoked and contained within" (ibid.). Cornell's shadow boxes are static. Behind their glass, they capture a set of objects, fixing their meaning through the implication of unity. My solo performances took on a similar role, capturing a momentary assemblage or bricolage, within a personal symbolic framework drawn from the site and the individual Play. Bricolage provided the theoretical framework to focus my adaptation process.

However, unlike Cornell's shadow-boxes, the contents were only briefly held within this assemblage. After each performance, my found objects were returned to their

usual use, with garden tools returned to the garage, the kitchen spoons returned to the utensil jar. Indeed, an object's future use influenced how much I could rework them. Those that already had a purpose could not be physically broken down and remade. However, those that were formed from raw materials remain scattered around the house. Transformed into a medieval beast, a cereal box lives on beyond its contents. The broken head of Abel still sits among tea caddies in my kitchen. A broken pot that formed an Easter Garden, in which I began working in miniature, still sits in my garden. Our son has earmarked it to act as a fairy house. My ongoing use of scrap cardboard and paper, which would normally be recycled or discarded, was strangely hopeful. As Kenneth Gross suggests, "Such puppets also mirror our fantasies of surviving violence, or the simple decay of our bodies, in ways that corporeal actors would find it hard to reproduce" (2009, p. 184).

If these initial attempts at bricolage had focused on what I found within a site, I was increasingly interested in how they might be repurposed after the performance. In the following chapter, I explore how my next performance used bricolage to develop the adaptation process, framed around three questions:

What do you bring here?

What do you find here?

And what do you take away?

Chapter 3: *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*

In this chapter I further develop my use of bricolage as an adaptation process for site-based productions of the York Mystery Plays. Where *Mysteries@Home* investigated this process on a small scale, as a solo domestic work, my next project applied bricolage to a larger site and range of plays, with an amateur cast of six participants. This performance, titled *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*, took place at the church of All Saints North Street, York. The process behind this is discussed in this chapter.



Fig. 6: Nave under reconstruction, All Saints North Street (Straszewski, 2022)

I begin by setting the scene, describing the church and specific elements that informed the performance and devising process. I then outline the initial parameters of the work, to establish the expectations of the various groups involved, and where these intersect with the wider concerns of site-based community theatre. The process therefore overlaps with applied theatre, and particularly with ethnodrama (the performance of research through theatrical techniques).

In particular, I am concerned with the ways by which community actors are incorporated into the creative process. The central research question was to explore ways in which bricolage provides a useful mode of engagement for these participants. My focus was on how sites can be used to select and adapt episodes

from the York Corpus Christi cycle, framed by the wider life of All Saints. This approach situated *Heaven and Earth in Little Space* within the growing sense that site-specific theatre is no longer about the revivification of theatrical techniques, but instead “about how its attention revives the site” (Smith, 2019, p. 19). However, this secondary aim was not entirely possible, due to the temporary closure of the church site. Instead of a process of engaging directly with the site’s community, the focus shifted to the work of outsider participants, drawn from York’s amateur theatre community. Bricolage provided a powerful structure for this process.

The second section of the chapter is therefore structured around the four phases of bricolage (inventorying; sifting; assemblage; and indirect means). I identify moments which enabled the participants to take a direct role in the adaptation process of the York Mystery Plays, and their interactions with the wider demands of the site and its occupants. The devising process used bricolage’s use of *indirect means* to interrogate the site, with empty frames as a potent theatrical metaphor for the temporary emptiness of the site. In doing so, I further develop my use of frames in site-based performance, building on my domestic work described in the previous chapter.

Part One – Encountering the Site

All Saints North Street

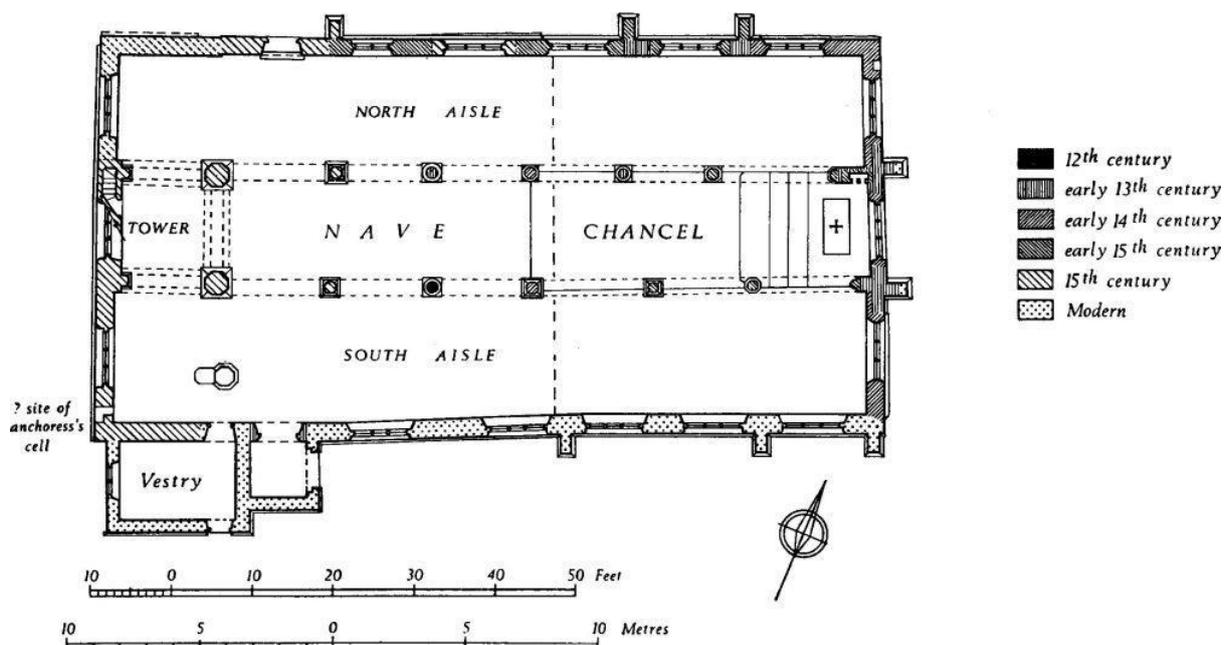


Fig 7: Floor plan showing architectural development of All Saints North Street
(*An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in City of York, Volume 3, South west*, 1972, fig. 24)

The site is a medieval parish church on the south bank of the River Ouse in York. Considerable attention has been paid to architectural history and archaeology of the church (Gee, 1980). In particular, its medieval glasswork has provided a rich topic of research (Gee, 1969), focused on its patronage (Barnett, 2000) and devotional practice (Daw, 2015). The oldest surviving element (the nave) dates to the 12th century, and extended in the 14th and 15th centuries to include side chapels, aisles and tower (Wilson and Mee, 1998, p. 26). In the late 14th and early 15th century, the current stained-glass windows were installed, funded by wealthy local patrons such as the Blackburn family. Around the same time, an anchorage was built, a small domestic space permanently occupied by an anchoress as an act of spiritual devotion. One anchoress, Dame Emma Raughton, has become the focus of modern interpretations of the anchorage's medieval history, due to her receiving visions from the Virgin Mary ('Our Lady of North Street – All Saints Church', no date).²⁰ These visions brought her national renown, and her advice was sought by national figures including Richard Beauchamp (1382-1439), thirteenth Earl of Warwick (Rous, 1483, p. 50). The anchorage itself did not survive, although it is not noted when it fell into disuse and when it was destroyed. It would be rebuilt in the 20th century in concrete, amid a wider reworking of the building to reassert its medieval character.

By the 16th century the church was under threat of abolition, to be amalgamated with a neighbouring church (Barnwell, Cross and Rycraft, 2005, p. 60). Nevertheless, the church survived. The church was restored in 1867, and a sermon reported in the *York Herald* (1867) indicates not only the change from Georgian box pews to open Victorian benches, but places this within an attempt to restore a lost heritage. This is situated within wider movements of the 19th century to reassert medieval traditions, which would become the Anglo-Catholic tradition, adopted in the 20th century by All

²⁰ These interpretations nonetheless remain restricted to passing mentions or information from All Saints itself. There is a significant gap in the scholarly literature on Dame Emma Raughton, with discussion of medieval English anchoresses dominated by her more famous counterpart, Julian of Norwich (c.1343 – after 1416).

Saints. The Oxford movement (or Tractarians) argued for the restoration of pre-Reformation liturgy. Closely linked, the Ecclesiologists (before 1845, the Cambridge Camden Society) argued that church architecture was a text to be read and experienced. Cleaving to its idealised medieval past, the church building became for them a machine to “reshape the body and soul of the worshipper” (Whyte, 2020, p. 64). In his sermon celebrating the 1867 restoration of All Saints, the Dean of York Minster argued that in the previous atmosphere of the church:

“The material fabric was dilapidated, and the worship was formal and slumbering... That was the age of selfishness when men built high-sided pews; they were under the influence of exclusiveness, and brought into the precincts of the temple the ways of the world.”

(York Herald, 1867)

The sermon conflates physical, political and spiritual boundaries, arguing against these for a more open church. Boundaries and breaching frames became a recurring theme throughout the devising process.



Fig. 8: The interior of All Saints Church, viewed from the anchorage (Straszewski, 2022)

These frames are echoed in the architecture of the site as it stands today, architecturally divided into smaller subsections. In particular, the chancel (holding the central altar) is sectioned off from the wider church by a rood screen, a set of wooden frames, depicting the crucifix (or rood). This feature was introduced in the early 20th century as part of the wider refurbishment of the church. These elements were part of a re-working of the church's identity from broad Anglicanism to Anglo-Catholicism, under the guidance of Father Pat Shaw. The reintroduction of the rood screen, Marian statuary and the reconstructed anchorage literally built over its more recent past, asserting the modern All Saints congregation as heirs to an unbroken medieval heritage. This approach to the building continues to the present day, with an implied conflation of theological tradition and the church's medieval inheritance. However, this is not entirely uncomplicated. Describing their liturgy (which we might view as a script for worship), the church website states that it is:

“wrong to assume that the worship at All Saints is as it has 'always been' and that it belongs to one unaltered 'Anglo-catholic' tradition. Today our liturgy is an eclectic mix, a 'hotch-potch' of the English Use and the Tridentine rite.”

(‘Our Worship – All Saints Church’, no date)

This description gives the initial impression of a bricolage, drawn from existing traditions and adjusted to suit the needs of worshippers. It is far beyond the scope of this thesis to fully consider the process of liturgical development as a form of bricolage, but it is clear that for All Saints, their worship heritage is an ongoing process, continually performed.

All Saints' current identity is also imbricated with the church's membership of Forward in Faith, a collective of churches who reject the ordination of women in the Church of England (*Forward in Faith*, no date). These churches fall outside the usual hierarchy of the Church of England, so that rather than existing within a geographical diocese, they are led by 'flying bishops' sympathetic to these communities. Inside the building, All Saints' membership of Forward in Faith is displayed in the front porch notice board, half-hidden by the main door. Its manifesto positions its members as heirs to tradition, and guardians of this for the future:

“We affirm the Faith of the Church as revealed in Scripture and Tradition.

We proclaim our Faith through the Creeds, the Sacraments and the apostolic ministry of bishops and priests of the Universal Church.

We seek a guaranteed ecclesial structure in which we can pass the Faith on to our children and grandchildren.

We have a vision for unity and truth and we are going FORWARD IN FAITH.”

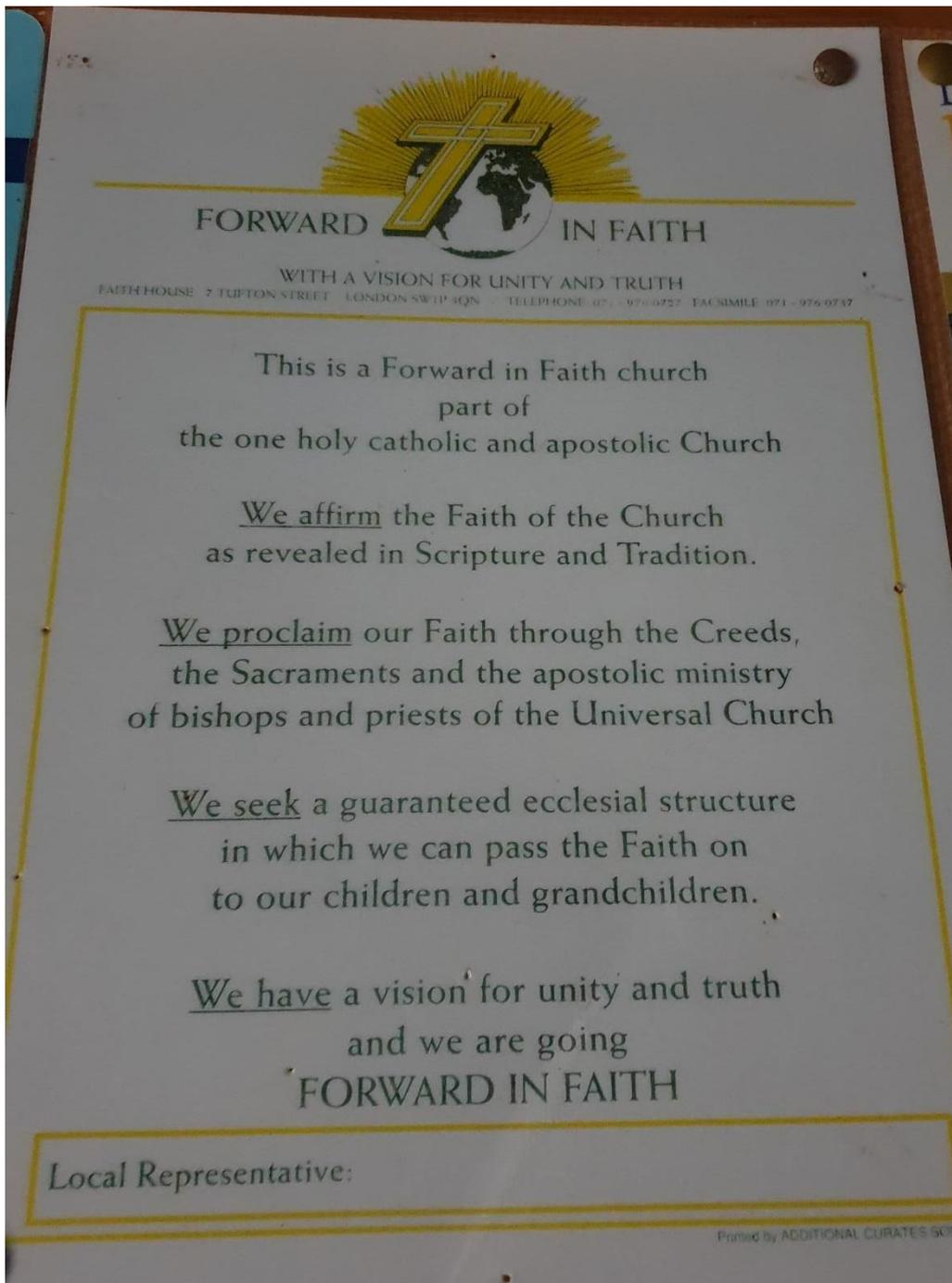


Fig. 9: Forward in Faith statement (Straszewski)

Here, the church and its worship is intertwined with its status as a heritage site. Unlike *community*, that “warmly persuasive word” (Williams, 2014, p. 76), *heritage* is more equivocal. Heritage is not simply the inherited past, but a continual act of discourse that shapes our perceptions of the past. As an assemblage, a heritage is formed by the relationships between objects, sites and the people who use these. It can be fought over, claimed or reclaimed, its components reworked or removed entirely. As *Authorised Heritage Discourse* (AHD), carried out by trained professionals, the past is “saved ‘for future generations’ ... a rhetoric that undermines the ability of the present, unless under the professional guidance of heritage professionals, to alter or change the meaning and value of heritage sites or places” (L. Smith, 2009, p. 29). However, as Smith notes, heritage is not necessarily nostalgic or conservative, and the assemblage can (with effort) incorporate otherwise marginalised individuals and communities – though not without a reconfiguring of what that heritage might mean (ibid., p. 41).

Put in these terms, it is hardly surprising that site-specific theatre has frequently found common ground with heritage studies. Theatre provides a way of exploring a site’s multivalent heritages without undue deference to *authenticity*, the latter defined in narrow terms of ‘historical accuracy’ (see Bianchi (2020), Smith (2012)). This is particularly the case in a religious site, where worshippers, tourists and heritage professionals all view the site in different (if overlapping) ways. As Aulet and Vidal suggest, in churches “art, religion and tourism are mixed, the common feature being that they can provide highly intense experiences, whether it be through contemplation, creation or participation in worship or cultic observances” (2018, p. 243). As such, a theatre performance in this space had the potential to draw out these different experiences, and, through bricolage, allow them to comment on each other. The performing nature of the medieval church, with its numerous processions, might provide rich material for this. At All Saints itself, there was already a precursor for this in the 2002 reconstruction of a medieval mass (Barnwell, Cross and Rycraft, 2005).

In April 2019, I was approached indirectly by the Steering Group for All Saints North Street, via the York Festival Trust (responsible for the Guild productions of the York Mystery Plays). They hoped that the Trust would produce a Mystery Play at the church. As this opportunity fell in line with my initial plans for the Creative Practice

elements of my PhD, the Steering Group and I agreed to co-produce a performance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, work on this production was delayed, initially to March 2021, and then, due to the third lockdown, to March 2022. Further COVID cases (including myself and one member of the cast) forced a final delay to April 2022. The recurring March date was intended to tie into the Feast of the Annunciation on 25th March. This date celebrates the announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary that she would become the mother of Jesus Christ, and is the subject of the first York pageant dealing with Mary.

At our first meeting, on 21st January 2020, the Steering Group revealed that they were applying for funding to restore the church's 15th century stained glass windows, and associated stonework. The majority of this work would be funded by a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant. The Fund's mandatory outcome is that a "wider range of people will be involved in heritage" (The National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2021). Although this aim was not explicitly requested at this initial meeting, the performance would aid this outcome. Funding was obtained in August 2020. The initial agreement created considerable goodwill between the Steering Group and myself, although it created expectations on both sides that did not entirely overlap. I will now explore these expectations, and where they intersect with common frameworks of devised site-based community theatre.

Communities and Site-based Work

I approached the church intent on engaging with the existing community. However, this community was not easily defined. The parish (the surrounding streets from which the congregation would normally be drawn) consists primarily of hotels, commercial businesses and office properties, with only 28 residential households in the 2011 census, and only 54 residents in the 2018 update (Eames, 2022). Of these, only 36.8% defined themselves as Christian. However, as a member of Forward in Faith, the church casts a wider geographical net, providing a place for Anglicans who refuse the administration of women priests in their own parishes. Its use of the English missal (a revival of medieval services) is also unusual and forms a further attraction ('Our Worship – All Saints Church', no date). The church also acts as a focus for Marian devotion, and before the pandemic saw various Feasts (religious festivals) attended by representatives of the Society of Mary from across the UK.

A second community might be found in those who interact with the church as a heritage site – before the pandemic, around 8000 visitors per annum (PCC of All Saints North Street, 2020, p. 3). Outside of tourists, the church’s principal engagement was through hosting lunchtime organ recitals, occasional poetry readings and concerts, and taking part in city festivals such as Illuminate and Residents First. However, All Saints recognised that their capacity to act as a heritage venue was limited by their small pool of volunteers and the lack of facilities. The Heritage Fund would help to address this, by building a new kitchen and hiring a Community Engagement Officer (ibid., 2020). Furthermore, the church is positioned away from the main tourist thoroughfare from the train station to the Minster, so that it is not easily discovered by visitors to the city. Despite this, the church is normally unlocked during working hours, and takes pride in being open to visits. I hoped to engage these groups – visitors and congregation – as active participants in developing the performance.

This was partly a response to the problematic use, in site-based work, of framing human occupants as resources, rather than active participants. In part, this approach reflects site-based work’s attempt to engage with resident communities indirectly, through the wider life of a site. As Smith suggests,

“[a]lthough the ‘community play’ movement... has repeatedly established the capabilities of non-trained local performers to engage audiences with performances on local themes and issues, this human resource has been, paradoxically, far less engaged by site-specific and performance makers.”

(2019, pp. 123-4)

Combining site-based approaches and community theatre provides an alternative (and challenging) model. Access to the site directly informs the kind of work that can be produced. At its extreme, Brady analyses Touchstone Theatre’s *Steelbound*, where control of a performance site, the empty steelworks of Bethlehem Steel, was used to reinscribe the management’s narrative (2000). Brady highlights how the script failed to confront the reasons why the site was closed (underinvestment and failure to modernise), ignoring the success of other steel factories throughout the USA. Instead, through a tight narrative of freeing the bound Prometheus from bondage to the factory, the neoliberal narrative of America’s post-industrial decline

and shift to service industries is celebrated. In return, ex-employees are recast as community actors, finally allowed to regain access to the site from which they had been cast out.

Kathleen Irwin develops this discussion further, highlighting the devising process as vulnerable to gatekeeping (2012). In her case study, she examines her play *Windblown/Rafales*. This was commissioned by the Catholic church in Saskatchewan, Canada. She describes the difficulty of working in a space whose

“identificatory unity is constructed and maintained through the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Diocese that regulates its parishioners by strategically including/excluding individuals and certain historical moments from its narrative” (ibid., p. 86).

Here, the commissioning community – who have invited a theatre-maker in – wished to use the plays as a way to perform *consensus*, a united image of their site and status, much as the Corpus Christi Plays once did for York. This identity was reinforced by the usual process of devising theatre, in which multiple sources are slowly edited and adapted into a coherent narrative. However, Irwin notes that site-based work can be used to undermine this, by spatially presenting a wider variety of narratives and characters, all with equal claim to a site. This concept – *dissensus* – would increasingly become the real focus of our performance at All Saints. I would use the variety of sub-spaces and viewpoints (or frames), combined with a similar plenitude of Marian narratives, to examine the ways in which people encounter the church and its heritage. Bricolage, with its focus on what is readily available, would enable this to be performed.

In particular, I wanted to find ways to actively incorporate the resident communities – the congregation and steering committee. My concerns were both ethical and dramaturgical. Bridget Foreman writes of her use of existing congregations in a site-generic play, *Simeon’s Watch*, in which each church’s congregation becomes “a form of human architecture; a specific space, with a particular character, within which the performance is situated and experienced” (2021, p. 53). Here, the resonance between the church as a communal space and the community depicted in the play is used to dramatic effect. Likewise, Mike Pearson addresses congregations as a potential *audience* for site-specific performance in religious architecture, “conversant

with how to conduct themselves in here” (2010, p. 63). This is not simply a case of marketing, a built-in set of ticket sales; in both worship and in performance, they are active participants. For both Pearson and Foreman, the congregation’s reactions become part of the performance. When, as in Brith Gof’s *Gwyl y Beibl* (1985), the performers embrace discomfiting images, “they tore bibles and ripped them with their teeth”, Pearson depends on the dissonance between the subject matter (the apocalyptic Book of Revelation) and the more reflective mood of the congregation (2010, p.63).

Still, I was concerned bricolage’s emphasis on tools and materials would too easily frame the congregation as ‘human resources’, just another element that a performance-maker can draw on, manipulate or transform. These ethical concerns extend beyond human bodies to include any output such as interviews or physical ephemera found at the site (such as signage, service booklets or prayer cards). Any use of these needed to foreground the people who created these. I therefore hoped to include the congregation as co-creators and as cast members, so that they were directly involved in adapting the plays. Furthermore, I wanted to integrate their experience of the church into the performance, so that the church’s heritage was seen as one part of the church’s ongoing life.

These motives (and associated ethical concerns) overlap with documentary theatre, and particularly ethnodrama (the adaptation of research and its related texts into performances). In their review of ethnodrama processes, Ackroyd and Toole outline four key concerns: social responsibility; ethics; representation and misrepresentation; and gatekeepers and constraints (2010, p. 28). Of particular interest to my process was Ackroyd and Toole’s suggestion that social responsibility – the use of research to change society for the better – can partly be performed through the use of multiple viewpoints to offer new or alternative narratives. Site-based performances therefore offer communities the opportunity to rework their sites – or to reinscribe their preferred narratives. In a similar fashion, Heddon and Milling identify devised community theatre as a way in which to “empower community participants to speak publicly about those issues or concerns that are not being addressed by existing government agencies or public discourse” (2006, p. 148).

To me, this felt pertinent at a time when All Saints was undergoing restoration work, in the midst of a global pandemic in which the congregation was unable to gather normally. However, I found that the resident community were difficult to involve in the performance, either directly (as actors/devisers) or as contributors to the plays. Initially I planned to engage in person with the congregation during November-December 2021. This would allow me to see how the congregation and visitors viewed the site, outside of the church services I had occasionally attended. However, the rapid rise in Omicron-variant cases during this period, including the reintroduction of facemasks, meant that I felt it prudent to restrict data gathering to written surveys. Then, as we began to rehearse, the restoration process required the church to be shut entirely.

Even before it became clear that the church would be empty during our devising process, the Steering Group suggested that few of the congregation would want to be involved as active participants. Age, time commitments and geographic distance were given as possible reasons. Furthermore, no members of the Steering Group responded to the survey or other outreach. However, their reluctance to engage with the performance may also have been due to my failure to sell the play as a useful way to tell the congregation's stories. This provides a counterpoint to Heddon and Milling's proposition that devised work can highlight marginalised identities and narratives. For those already part of a site's cultural orthodoxy, what impetus is there to become involved in a performance?

Nonetheless, if the congregation proved difficult to engage, they were still able to contribute. This was not only through surveys, but because they left material traces of their use of the church. Bricolage – using what is to hand – proved useful as a framework through which to discover and perform these traces. Those outside the current congregation - temporary visitors and tourists, passers-by, or those who were already excluded from the space - would prove much harder to engage. In some respects, this was surprising. The church's material heritage – in particular the stained glass that would be the focus of the restoration efforts – is internationally renowned and a significant draw for tourists. The next section details the challenges involved.

Initial Engagement

In early October 2021, I met with the Community Engagement Officer, followed by a wider meeting with the Steering Group. The Officer had been employed as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and was interested in the play's ability to engage groups beyond the church's congregation. In particular, the Officer suggested that the Steering Group had ambitious suggestions for the scope of the performance, by incorporating approaches by the church to refugees or homeless individuals in the area. These had been identified as potential new audiences in the Fund application (PCC of All Saints North Street, 2020, p. 18) I warned that working with vulnerable communities required a longer timeframe than my Creative Practice element would allow. The ethical issues would also be substantial, and I did not feel equipped to tackle this within the limited timeframe of the performance. Instead, I suggested a variety of ways to reach beyond the existing congregation, including surveys, a postbox for brief responses, and a response board on the outside of the church. These would ask 'What do you think is inside?'. By positioning this on the fenced boundary of the site, I hoped that this would reach those who would not normally enter the church site.

However, the Steering Group refused to permit this, and were particularly concerned about unmonitored responses – for example, the possibility, however unlikely, of obscene graffiti being left on the response board. Whilst such an act might represent an outsider's honest response to All Saints, it could also threaten the church's reputation and self-image. Engagement, understandably, needed to be on the Steering Group's terms. Nonetheless, I felt this was at odds with the play's potential as an act of community engagement. This new image of the church became an example of the *indirect approach* that defines bricolage. That is, where before I was thinking of how to engage the wider community, now both I and the Group viewed the performance in terms of frames and boundaries – and what was appropriate to the site. In this respect, this meeting saw us all work as bricoleurs, examining what data might be found, and how it might fit into the resulting 'set' (by which I mean a performance in this church).

Nonetheless, this uneasy response reflected a wider issue with community engagement at the church. I later became aware, for example, that in the autumn of

2022 another community artist had worked with local children to create a temporary design for a stained glass window, as part of the project's community outreach. After completion, the design was removed from the site – an approach that has continued with other outreach projects following the reopening of the church site. As we explore the site, the only traces of previous community engagement were limited to advertisements for services, or occasional lectures on the history of the building. In this light, perhaps I could have pushed harder for wider engagement by emphasising how this would meet the requirements of the Heritage Fund grant. As I was wary of losing access to the site, I chose not to pursue this. There is tension here between what happens when a site (and its community) is asked to open up on other people's terms. This tension was reflected in our choice to emphasise particular aspects of the Mystery Plays – in particular the pastoral and liturgical role of Mary as 'Mother of the Church'.

The introduction of outsider participants, and the prioritising of their viewpoints within the devising process, proved to be a useful way of discovering multiple frames through which to view both All Saints and the Mystery Plays. Our encounters with the building and its contents would be framed by the life of the Virgin Mary. In this I build on Novacich's reading of Mary in medieval plays. In these, characters such as Joseph undertake the same interpretive work as the medieval audiences, performing "awed, earnest, frustrated, and hostile attempts to interrogate and understand the Virgin's miraculous and confusing body" (2017b, p. 466). In doing so, women in these medieval audiences might reflect on their own bodies, not only finding comfort through devotional attention to the Virgin's body, but recognising how they did not receive the protection afforded to Mary. Much as these complex recognitions were filtered through performance, participants in *Heaven and Earth in Little Space* would likewise explore this complex church, its texts and contents.

A Closed-Off Space



Fig. 10: Statement of Church Closure (Straszewski)

Yet before we could enter the site for the first workshops, we were suddenly unable to access the church under ‘normal’ conditions. I arrived for a site visit on 8th January 2022 to be confronted by a sign, declaring the church closed for restoration, with a promised reopening ‘as soon as possible’. As nothing about the church’s closure had been communicated to me, for a moment the work felt in jeopardy. I began to hastily consider solutions. Might we, for example, perform from the outside, obliquely glancing into the church? The empty windows might form a useful frame, but how might we investigate the church if this formed an impermeable boundary? And, from a practical perspective, how would the participants cope rehearsing outside in the cold winter months? The problem turned out to be an issue with communication, and we were still allowed to use the site, with a key provided for us. Although this made some aspects easier, and implied their trust in me as a professional, it was deeply disappointing in terms of the relationship-building that I had hoped would be a part of the development of the work. Smith’s advice on gatekeepers was pertinent here – “it may be easy to see these people as barriers to your work - and indeed, they may be obstructive, that is their prerogative - but they can also be participants and partners” (2019, p. 88). This potential partnership had been heavily diminished. The closure of the building also meant that the surveys were enclosed inside, so that any further responses were unlikely.

I therefore note three aspects from across these early encounters with All Saints that would inform our performance:

- A closed-off, bounded space, yet under renewed pressure to open up
- Our inability to engage directly with the congregation, instead encountering them through surveys and remnants left at the site
- Our own sense of independence, encouraged to work without direct oversight from the Steering Group

Our attempts to interrogate, adapt and perform this space would be informed by our use of bricolage as an adaptive method.

Part Two – A Bricolage-led Analysis

In this section, I therefore explore how the devising process and performance itself teased out some of these issues, using the focus of bricolage on indirect means. I

structure this around the four-phase process of bricolage outlined in Chapter One. In Phase One, I discuss an initial intervention at All Saints, focused around one actor participant's response to the site and the process of inventorying.

In Phase Two, I examine our process of sifting through these, deciding what elements and symbols would fall within the 'set' (that is, within the wider structure of what a performance in this space would look like, by this group). In doing so, we begin Phase Three, assemblage (in the form of a script and performance), "limited by the particular history of each piece and by those of its features which are already determined by the use for which it was originally intended or the modifications it has undergone for other purposes" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 19).

Running alongside these phases, we conduct Phase Four - indirectly approaching the wider issue of engaging with All Saints through performance - echoing Levi-Strauss's description of a bricoleur's work as "an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities" (1974, p. 21). In particular, I identify the use of frames as not only the theme for the performance, but the *indirect means* (or *bricoler*) through which a wide variety of our concerns could be addressed.

Through this discussion, I further establish the potential of bricolage not only as a devising process, but as a conceptual framework for discussing this.

Phase One - Inventorying

In this section I examine the process of inventorying, identifying the tools and tools and materials found at the site, and the methods we used to discover these. The initial stage, carried out by all participants and myself, began with a series of tasks inventorying this space.

If we are to inventory, it is useful here to introduce the participants. These were recruited in a variety of ways across December 2021, including: casting calls to local amateur theatre groups, the University's Drama Society and the Department of Theatre; social media; direct approaches to individuals I has previously worked with. Eleven people asked to take part or for further details. Of these, five did not wish to participate, the majority of these students due to time constraints.

I asked each of the remaining participants to provide a self-description of their religious and theatrical background. In their own words, they are:

“Cynthia - an elderly great grandmother who has participated in am dram spasmodically throughout her life. Initially a trained nurse and midwife, changed to piano teaching to fit in with extended family. Baptised and christened in the Church of England but currently involved with a non-denominational church.

Emily - a woman in her early 30s who has lived in York for over a decade but is originally from Canada. She has a PhD in history and has participated in amateur theatre (including performing in churches) since 2013. Christened in an Anglican church but not subsequently brought up as a Christian, she is interested in Christianity in its historical context and relates to the faith in a more general 'spiritual' way.

Elizabeth - a Writer, Artist, Creative Practitioner and RSN trained Broiderer. She has studied Theatre Making, Acting, and Directing, and has formerly held residences with Jawahar Kala Kendra Arts Centre, Rangarang Natsantha Theatre, and the University of Rajasthan. Elizabeth has an eclectic jumble of loosely vague spiritual heritage, but attended an evangelical theological college ‘many years ago’, and served as a Methodist Local Preacher for thirty-nine years.

Livy - a woman in her 20s, currently living in York. She has been acting in community theatre since 2016. She was educated at a Church of England high school and attended her local Baptist church regularly until early adulthood.

Margaret - a retired drama teacher with some experience in teaching drama and acting. Has acted in 2 large Mystery Play productions in York. A Quaker all her life and taught drama in two Quaker schools and The Minster School in York.

Selina - A young lady from China, with no religion. She studies in the University of York with the undergraduate course (Theatre: Writing, Directing, and Performance). She has some theatre experience in performance, costume design, and set design.”

Moving beyond the participants themselves, I focus now on one moment of inventorying, in Margaret’s initial reaction to the site and its contents. During this, I carried out my own inventorying of Margaret as a participant. From this, I suggest that theatrical bricolage depends not only on the inventorying of objects and spaces, but the people involved in this, through which the adapters interpret the site. I then develop this further with attention to the anchorage, as an easily-overlooked aspect on the border of the site.

I begin, then, with an evocation of the first encounter between site, participant and myself:

We begin with a brief chat outside, in the *edgelands* between the work and the wider world.²¹ Margaret and I have worked together previously as actors, and we briefly reminisce, before discussing the broad methodology we will use to devise the play - the use of bricolage. At this stage, building on my solo work, this is focused on exploring a) what we bring to the site, b) what we find there, and c) what we take away. This primes the participants to include not only potential narratives, objects and places within the church, but those that reflect their own entry into the space.

I am conscious that I have already set boundaries on the performance – the participants know that the play will be about the Virgin Mary, the mother of

²¹ Edgelands are described by theatre-maker Ned Glasier as “the spaces in between the work where you do most of the work: the breaks, the walk home, the meals, the chats, the little glance that people have across a workshop room that you don’t notice that means loads to them and then they connect and talk later on” (Co-Creating Change, 2021). Although Glasier discusses youth theatre specifically, I have found this concept helpful in working with community participants. It refocuses attention on the wider work of this type of theatre, and the overspill of this across borders.

Jesus. My concern is that Margaret will prematurely focus on things that she relates to the Virgin Mary, rather than taking in the wider environment of the church. In retrospect my tentativeness was unnecessary, as bricolage is not aimless. In Levi-Strauss's analysis, the bricoleur is focused on the task, selecting from a plenitude of objects that might threaten to overwhelm him. What becomes apparent from Margaret's progression through the site is how swiftly something might be put aside or disregarded. And yet there is a sense that things can be returned to, reconsidered. Later exercises would involve finding spaces related to the plays (such as nativities, weddings, funerals), and identifying their performance potential, building on the initial encounter with the site and playtexts. In the absence of formal auditions, these exercises operated as my own inventorying process, identifying the individual strengths and interests of the participants.

Nonetheless, in my instructions, I give Margaret little guidance, asking her to simply walk the site and take note of what stands out to her. She begins by dropping off her bag near the door. Despite this, her manner reminds me of visitors to heritage sites, slowly pacing, observing things of obvious beauty or value, in particular the nearest visible altar in the South Aisle. On her way there, her eyes are drawn to a series of empty display boards. I can see a slight disappointment when she realises nothing is available to read. As she crosses into the chancel, however, Margaret begins to appear more excited by the site. The Lady Chapel (a side-chapel devoted to the Virgin) is blocked off, as scaffolding has already been erected here, and the furniture is piled up out of the way. She is forced to peer through the Rood Screen to see the large statue of the Virgin Mary. She looks to me for permission to enter this space; I am being inventoried as a gatekeeper. However, the stack of furniture prevents her from roaming further. Instead, she passes by the repositioned altar, noting the Nativity scene underneath it. Although this would normally be covered following the Epiphany on 5th January, the sudden transformation of the church into a building site has seen it left open.

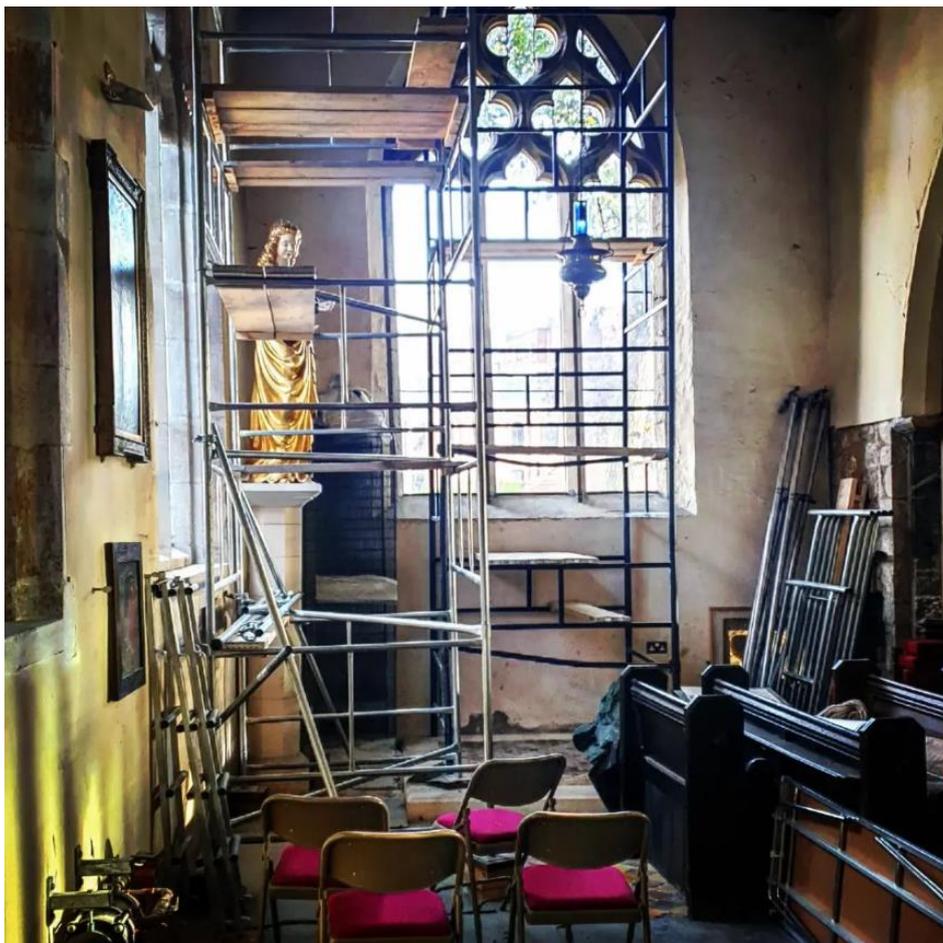


Fig. 11: The Lady Chapel under restoration. The altar has been removed and the space turned into storage. (Straszewski)

After Margaret returns to the nave, we discuss her initial reactions. Although certain physical objects stand out - the statuary, the rood screen with the Virgin Mary looking down, Mary's mother teaching her to read - Margaret also notes the atmosphere of the site. For her, there is a sense of calm and peace, which she suggests evoking in the performance. Many of the participants noted the church's peacefulness, established by the architecture of the site.²² In her own inventoring, participant Elizabeth suggested that "the tombstones

²² Sensory experiences, particularly vision, have become a dominant concern in writing on parish churches and other religious sites, across historical/archaeological studies (e.g. Dyas (2021), Giles (2007)), and heritage studies (e.g. Shackley, (2002)). Although these did not directly inform our work, our inventoring develops this understanding that churches have always been experienced through the body. Performance – reproducing and clarifying our physical responses – can help evoke this for a wider audience.

draw the eye down... peaceful, not ghostly.” This response was not unique to our group – the visitor’s comment book is studded with mentions of peace. In this atmosphere, noise and movement – integral to most dramatic performance – threatens to become invasive or disruptive. We would use this for the distinctly male character of Joseph, who bangs, crashes, and disrupts the scenes – only withdrawing when confronted with the (imagined) male priests, “so fancy in vestments fine” (Straszewski *et al.*, 2022, p. 15).

Margaret does not notice the anchorage. Despite its unique status (no other church in York has one), from the inside of the church only a small square hole can be seen. When I point it out, Margaret’s face lights up, and our initial hesitation to discuss the performance vanishes. Instead, we discuss the possibilities presented by this. Although these are framed in terms of practical issues based around sight - restricted viewpoints, limited audiences, sightlines - it is clear that the anchorage engages Margaret far beyond the other objects and elements found at the church.

This thick description of Margaret’s reaction to the church gives a sense of the ideas and images that were already beginning to form, and in particular her fascination with the anchorage. This fascination would be repeated in the sessions with the other participants. When we were finally able to access the anchorage itself, even partners of the participants were eager to visit this closed-off space. I now turn to exploring our research work on this feature. In doing so I suggest that theatrical bricolage has a broader sense of ‘what is to hand’ than the merely physical. It brings in the wider context of the site and its objects.

As we discovered, the popular (and Protestant) image of anchoresses as walled up and abandoned was misleading. Anchoresses were not simply “sealed away from the world... located in bodies without histories, locked away both from outer event and physiological change” (Wogan-Browne, 1994, p. 24). Instead, anchoresses reached beyond the threshold, breaching their frame. This might be embodied by looking or speaking, or by written communication with the congregation and the wider corporate body of anchoresses (whether in the local area or further afield). In

his introduction to *Ancrene Wisse* (Advise for Anchoresses), Hasenfratz argues that its:

“prohibitions offer a tantalizing glimpse into some of the social functions of the typical anchoress in her village setting. At least some anchorholds, it seems, became the center of town life, acting as sort of bank, post office, school house, shop, and newspaper.”

(2000)

We cannot say for certain whether this was the case for All Saints, or even that that *Ancrene Wisse* was used at All Saints. Other guidance such as Richard Rolle’s *The Form of Living* (1910), written for a 14th century anchoress in South Yorkshire, may have been more familiar. Nonetheless, a modern-language *Ancrene Wisse* was more readily available. Its focus on the body offered us dramatically rich material through which to present the anchorage. Although bricolage may suggest authenticity in its use of what is to hand, we were not attempting to tell a true account of the history of anchorages, but to evoke its complex position within the site’s heritage.

At All Saints itself, educational resources for the anchorage focus on Dame Emma Raughton, an anchoress attached to the church during the 1420s-30s. This attention is due to a prophecy, “as our blessed lady shewed by revelacion unto Dame Emme Rawhton Recluse at all halowes in Northgate strete of York”, of the coronation of Henry VI of England in Paris, made to Richard Beauchamp, 13th Earl of Warwick (‘Cotton MS Julius E IV/3’, no date, p. 24). Enclosure is complicated by these visions of international affairs and the wider world, something repeated in the anchoresses of the twentieth century:

MARGARET ... walled in, a sort of mortification of the flesh - isn’t that unhealthy, morbid -

SELINA Became a spiritual advisor to the midwives of Kentucky-

MARGARET - the influence of this little space spills out across the world.

(Straszewski *et al.*, 2022, p. 7)

Indeed, Wogan-Browne suggests that *Ancrene Wisse* frames both the physical body and the corporate body of anchoresses as labile, in a state of constant decay and degradation. The changing body resists the self-regulation of the “chaste and stable enclosure” (Wogan-Browne, 1994, p. 29). For the writer of *Ancrene Wisse*, the decaying female body was identified with the cell in which she lived, and, in Wogan-Browne’s reading, its permeability through its narrow squints becomes a source of both danger and hope, “the winds and floods of sin and redemption whistle and pour through her body-cell, the beasts of temptation prowl around and through it, and the devil and Christ woo and assault the castle of her body-heart” (Wogan-Browne, 1994, p. 28).

We might see this imagery resurface in All Saint’s determination to preserve and hand on its inheritance, a declaration that challenges the threat of crumbling walls, fading windows and declining membership. The shared language of resistance, work and renewal was one that we could draw upon in the script. As we would later read in notes from a lecture on Dame Emma, the anchorhold at All Saints was concurrent with the installation of the stained glass windows, which we were now seeing removed and restored:

“Masons, glass painters, joiners, woodcarvers, would have been an almost permanent and disruptive fixture inside the church, perhaps getting in the way as masses were said at the newly dedicated chantry altar.”

(Upton Holmes, 2007, p. 3)

Reading these lecture notes in the midst of a new window installation – noisy, disruptive, performed piecemeal around services – we found a common ground between past and present. Indeed, the anchorage that survives today is the product of a similar impetus, rebuilt in modern concrete to host a series of hermits across the twentieth century. By expanding our inventorying process beyond the frame of the site, we could enrich our understanding of what we found at All Saints. Our next stage was to try and define the boundaries of the performance, as we sifted through the tools and materials that our initial inventorying had revealed.

Phase Two - Sifting

Having explored and inventoried our eyes over the available material, our next stage was a process of *selection*. In this section, I explore the ways in which attention to the spatial dynamics of the site allowed us to find a consistent thread of framing. Here I suggest that sifting according to thematic concerns is an essential part of this process. We consider and select sub-spaces, objects, texts and other items that fit within this 'set' or theme. Having agreed this, any further inventorying assesses new discoveries against this theme, in an iterative process. This overlaps with the later phase of *assemblage*, which focuses on how these elements, once agreed by the cast, are placed together to create the performance.

Temporal Sifting

The process of sifting also considered which actors were available, and when. Due to cast availability, we held three rehearsals each week. Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling (2019, p. 158) suggest that "the rhythms of rehearsals define the week... the liveness of performance means that it is impossible to separate time from place". We found that the church site in turn defined the rhythm of rehearsals. Place is not simply the building (the *space*) but its interplay with the wider community that uses it, particularly where the building has multiple uses. Economic pressures also saw our rehearsals shift. Thursday morning rehearsals were moved to 9.30am, as this allowed one participant to use their bus pass. Community theatre-makers must take these influences into account, particularly where they themselves do not need to balance paid and voluntary work. For the actors in work, it was not possible to meet before 5pm on weekdays. Instead, three actors attended a morning rehearsal, and the other three met in the evening.

This had a far-reaching effect on the performance itself. I suggested that each group should take responsibility for a block of the plays - one dealing with the Nativity (the 'Joyful Mother') and the other dealing with the later childhood, ministry, and death of Christ (the 'Grieving Mother'). Both groups would then rehearse on Saturdays together, focusing on the final section of the play ('Mother of the Church'). In turn, this affected what roles each participant might play. Sifting through calendars may

not feel as essential to the devising process as text work or site explorations, but has the potential to drastically alter the resources available to the theatre-maker.

Spatial Sifting

An examination of our site-based work demonstrates how themes might be developed through attention to a particular category of resource, in this case the variety of frames in the building. As discussed earlier, my initial work had suggested a theme of boundaries and breaches, and I was keen to further investigate the use of frames developed in the *Mysteries @ Home*. An initial inventorying of physical frames was useful as a way of familiarising ourselves with the church. However, this inventorying moved into the sifting phase as we explored their performance possibilities. One early experiment was to find spaces for momentous life experiences, acting out a birth, a wedding, a death, or their associated rituals (such as a baptism or funeral). Often this resulted in simply replicating the functions of the church site – a font for a birth, a memorial for a funeral. Selina, however, used the vestry door to represent a birth, the door groaning as it opened. This felt like a simple yet effective way of conveying the birth, but Selina expanded on why this space was chosen (as opposed to other doors in the building). Above the door was an image of an old man and a young child, and to the side were a handful of Christmas cards, which Selina saw as celebrating the birth. For myself and the other participants, the door frame contained the performance, but the wider space was as important to Selina's creation of meaning.

Building on this, our focus on frames expanded to incorporate their symbolic or dramaturgical functions. Cynthia, for example, noted in our readthrough of *Play 12 – The Annunciation* that the Doctor's long monologue provides prophecies as a frame for the events to come, with the nativity sequence bracketed by Simeon's prophecies in the later *Play 17 – The Purification of the Virgin*. However, the participants were also adamant that the monologue was too long. Instead, we looked at aspects of the church that might fulfil this introductory function, sifting through possible texts, positions and frames. An earlier visit to the church provided the initial impetus. I attended a Thursday afternoon mass, a service primarily aimed at the existing congregation, which I noted as a rapid march through the liturgy led by the priest. Although familiar with the wider structure of the service, I was constantly trying to

find my place within the text, and in consequence felt physically out of place in this section of the church. Separate to my own impressions, the other participants established that this aisle's lighting and austere monuments suggested a place of distanced authority and ritual. In contrast, when we workshopped small sections of the Annunciation - Gabriel's appearance to Mary - the participants gravitated toward spaces that felt enclosed, such as the corner of the chancel, or the Lady Chapel (see fig. 12).

Through this, the plays and the site operated on each other, allowing us to perform both *consensus* – a single narrative of reverence for the site - and *dissensus*, as the site's different purposes clashed. The process of sifting took place as the church continued to work around us, and this informed our perception of the site.

Occasionally we felt as if we were a benign intrusion, to be tolerated until we had produced something of worth to the church. Even with the church closed to visitors, our rehearsal times were restricted by services, meetings and the work of the restoration team, along with occasional Parochial Church Committee (PCC) meetings. On several occasions, sharing the space was an exercise in competing voices. Our negotiation of the space highlighted that whilst visually divided by the architecture, the church was nonetheless aurally open. On one occasion we left the building to work outside due to the high level of noise from replacing a window. Within a performance context, this suggested at an early stage that an audience might hear the play, even if they could not see it.

At the same time, our sense of overlapping sounds and voices became a part of the play itself. It allowed us, for example, to simultaneously present the Doctor, in his place of authority, with Mary and Elizabeth as parishioners in the pews. Both were focused on their different forms of worship. Overlapping speeches framed Mary as a disruptive voice, momentarily hushed by the authority of the Doctor. Yet both speeches dealt with the same subject matter – heralding the birth of Jesus. Sifting through the different materials was a way to find new juxtapositions and analogies.



Fig. 12: Livy embodies an angel, in the corner of the chancel. (Straszewski, 24th January 2022)

Although the above description might suggest that sifting is a precise and deliberate phase, this is clearer in retrospect that it was at the time. Our sifting process was not simply a way of deciding what areas of the church might be used, what objects, what people. Instead, I suggest that it operates as a mid-point between the inventorying and assemblage phases. I believe this is because bricolage is an iterative process. Increasing familiarity with tools and resources prompts the bricoleur-deviser to return to earlier phases, taking new inventories, or re-assembling parts. In the next section, I investigate how we assembled the various texts found at All Saints.

Phase Three- Assembling

If the architecture suggested one way in which to frame the plays, it was not yet clear how the variety of texts we had gathered might themselves operate as a frame. These texts were drawn from the church itself (including service booklets, signs, and a lecture from the website); books on the Virgin Mary; and copies of the Corpus Christi plays. This process echoes the Corpus Christi plays themselves, which we might view as *cento*, literary texts formed by quotations. This is particularly apparent in the *Annunciation and Visitation*, in which the Doctor's speech is framed by direct quotations from scripture, whilst Mary's dialogue is adapted from Luke's gospel. As discussed in Chapter One, modern productions of the Mysteries invariably include textual patchwork, particularly where the scripts are incomplete, such as in *Play 27 – The Last Supper* or *Play 33 - The Second Trial before Pilate*. The material for these is normally drawn from other extant civic cycles (such as Towneley or Chester), from the Gospels, or made up as pastiche. By using similar sources to create a coherent narrative, these patchworks attempt to hide their seams. Bricolage, in contrast, is often characterised by the conspicuous display of its component parts. And so textual patchwork became a central part of our adaptation strategy.

However, we had not yet worked out a process by which the texts could be adapted. A turning point was a workshop exploring multiple texts, using a modified cut-up technique. Cut-up work usually relies on reducing a text to component parts – a sentence, a line, or even a word – and then rearranging these at random. As Govan et al. suggest, this randomness is intended to subdue craft and skill, instead relying

on the re-framing of a randomly selected everyday text such as a newspaper article (2007, p. 22). It is here that bricolage differs slightly from these techniques, because it does not rely on random selection but instead deliberately selects from the accretions of the site. In our experiment, however, we were already introducing elements that would not normally be found at All Saints – not only the Corpus Christi texts themselves, but the participants who interpreted them.

We gathered several texts to work on – the Corpus Christi plays (in this case the participants picked the Annunciation); congregation surveys; a lecture on the anchorage; textbooks on the Virgin Mary; the advice for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*; the service for Vespers; a medieval mass; and any written text encountered at the church. The participants were asked to choose one of these texts and select around ten lines that ‘spoke’ to them. I did not define this, allowing the participants to decide for themselves. These were then placed at random on the tiled floor of the church and read out. In this, the participants found a consistent theme of observation and reflection. We began to consider *who* might be speaking these words, and from this discussion created a framework in which each text framed the next. One set of lines was given to an actor playing the Church building, commenting on the anchoress. another played the Anchoress, whose lines commented on a vision of the Virgin Mary. A third actor played out this vision as Mary, responding to Gabriel’s message. This nesting of texts echoed the church architecture. Its external domestic space in the anchorage/vestry overlooked the congregational space of the pews and aisles, which in turn watched the interior, sacred space of the chancel. Although we did not use the resulting text in the final performance, it gave us our prototype: a variety of texts drawn from the church, framing the Corpus Christi texts and in turn being framed by the site.



Fig 13: A selection of texts (Straszewski, 31 January 2022)



Fig. 14: Assembling the extracts (Straszewski, 31 January 2022)

However, we found that assemblage cannot be forced. Instead, it relies on testing combinations, alert to the possibilities of new arrangements. In a later session we tried to identify potential narrators to frame each episode of the plays. This was a frustrating process due to the closure of the church and subsequent absence of visitors, diminishing the ways in which we could see how the church was used. Whilst we could respond to the site itself, the participants struggled to identify other

people who might enter the site. This was the case whether we sought named individuals or generic archetypes – a congregation member, a tourist, a security guard, a priest. Unable to picture who might enter this space, we instead relied on the “remains of events” (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 22), and what we ourselves brought to the site. This complicates Smith’s work on site-based theatre, in which he fights against imposing new narratives onto the site, instead viewing actors as signposts that draw the audience’s attention to the site’s characteristics. Smith’s motive here is to minimise the actor as a boundary between audience and site, rather than using the site as a backdrop. In doing so, his desired performance will “proceed from, rather than replace or overlay, the acting body’s interface with the immediate environment” (P. Smith, 2009, p. 160).

Building on this approach, Bianchi’s *In Hidden Spaces* (2016) developed a technique in which the actors attempted to avoid simply embodying a character – whether or not these were actual figures encountered at the site – through the assemblage of narratives, activities (such as games), and the actors’ own words. As Bianchi demonstrates, this ‘flexible characterisation’ is a particularly useful approach when these actors or stories are marginalised by the site, to “represent the lives of these women and the issues inherent in their stories without pretending to be them” (2020, p. 364). Rejecting attempts to replace the actors with their characters, or the site with external narratives, both Bianchi and Smith represent their performance sites as an assemblage of bodies and activities that shift and flex between past, present and even future. This was something that our own assemblage developed through combining found texts, objects and our own occupation of the site.

Of particular interest was Bianchi’s rehearsal technique in which images of the historic women represented in her play were projected onto the bodies of actors. Her aim was to manifest the transparency of ‘flexible characterisation’ in performance. In our final scene, Bianchi’s acetates were replaced with a series of blue cloth strips, made of recycled material, each painted with a title or attribute of Mary found through our research. The participants covered Mary - played in this moment by Livy - in these strips, the frame of her body overlaid with the weight of these expectations. Shrugging them off not only represented the end of playing Mary, and the heavy weight of expectations on both Mary and the actor. It also represented the

momentary emptying of the site, allowing the actor to step away from the assemblage and the frame of the chancel, back into ordinary life.



Fig. 15: Sequence of Livy divesting herself of the Virgin Mary (Straszewski, 2022)

Phase Four – Devious Means/Bodging

What we had found at the site was best represented through frames - and particularly those that stood temporarily empty, waiting to be restored or filled with new possibilities. In this, we found a strong tradition of representing Mary as a frame. Often the content of the frame is Jesus, with Mary as *Theotokos*, or God-bearer. In the common image of the Madonna and Child, Mary's body encases or frames the body of the Christ-Child, and this is repeated in her later life as the Pieta image, in which she holds her dead son. The imagery of stained glass is also relevant. In the N-Town plays, Mary is compared to a glass window, through which Jesus shines, "The glas not hurte of his nature" (*Play 21, Christ and the Doctors*, no date, l. 98). Within the church we found the Lady Chapel East Window, in which six frames show Mary ageing, passing through time and space from the earthly Annunciation to the heavenly Coronation of the Virgin. Through our reading, we discovered the sculptural *vierge ouvrante* ("opening virgin"), a triptych in which Mary's body opens up to reveal

either an image of the Trinity, or a biblical narrative (Katz, 2012, p. 45). These images of Mary as a frame for multiple narratives remained in the forefront of our minds. The birth of Jesus – the emptying of Mary – may indicate the end of her popular (and Protestant) narrative, but the York plays deal with her later life and death in as much detail as her early role in the Nativity. The participants welcomed the chance to play women across multiple ages, unsurprising when the limited repertoire of women's roles is still of concern in amateur theatre (Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling, 2019, p. 77). This rich layering of Marian frames became our approach to the site and the plays, finding, in their momentary emptiness, the indirect (or devious) means through which to occupy the site. Our inventorying phase had revealed a multitude of these frames, both physical and metaphorical, that might define the edges of our assemblages. In the final part of this chapter, I consider ways in which these frames were used.

It is worth briefly considering the ways in which frames might operate. First, frames might be considered in their own right, as an object. However, they are objects with a purpose – to isolate and define its contents, setting these apart from their surroundings. As such, they focus attention on their contents, to the exclusion of what lies outside the frame. In setting their contents apart, they suggest that the contents are a deliberate assemblage, and elevate these. As in Cornell's shadow boxes, their edges unify their contents. Frames tidy up mess; when their contents breach the frame, or when the exterior world reaches in, the effect is disturbing, even violent. As Sallis suggests, "this extension serves only to render the framing all the more conspicuous" (2020, p. 246). This conspicuousness increases when the frame loses its purpose and is found empty. Two questions arise - where did its contents go? And what fills it in their absence?

These questions have provoked multiple responses in site-based work. Many of Brith Gof's foundational works took place within the post-industrial remnants of factories, offices and other buildings, which "recontextualises such sites: it is the latest occupation of a location at which other occupations – their architectures, material traces and histories – are still apparent and cognitively active" (Pearson 2007c in Pearson 2010, p 35). With *Heaven and Earth*, the work was a temporary occupation, which would – following the performance – collapse, to be filled back in with the

same congregation, though now with added heritage interpretation. In this context, our methodology needed to address this gap, and relate it to longer absences. It draws attention to the difference between *empty* as an adjective, and *emptied* as a verb.

Smith suggests considering the *absence* of a specific quality as a useful starting point for devising work, asking “what is missing? What is evidently and explicitly absent?” (2019, p. 12). As an example, he imagines an emptied swimming pool, with a performance taking place as if the water was still there. Smith does not expand on this, but we found this to be a useful exercise when considering the church. These emptied spaces complicated the peaceful atmosphere that the participants had noted. As we became more comfortable in the space, we asked whether this peace was due in part to *emptiness*. Peacefulness, I suggested, was used as a synonym for stillness – unchanging and unchangeable – and yet contradicted by the site as scaffolding went up, and works on the windows began to fill the church with noise and dust. Margaret noted that the church took on a new energy from the surrounding traces of labour, even when works were not in progress. Our performance therefore became an attempt to perform this moment, filling and reanimating this empty frame.

Other absences became integral to the play. Several participants noted the absence of children in the church - no Sunday school, no box of toys at the back, no children’s paintings on sugar paper. This absence of children felt strikingly at odds with Forward in Faith’s desire to ‘pass the Faith on to our children and grandchildren’. This became one motif, which our focus on Mary revealed in the repetition of her loss of Jesus – first in the temple, and then on the road to Calvary. “Where are the children?” and “Have you seen my child?” became critical statements, gently asking what legacy the church might convey in the apparent absence of a new generation. In performance, the shepherds became a missing Sunday school activity, complete with tea-towel headwear, each making the cobnut band, tin brooch and horn spoon. Outside of the Christ-child, the only trace of children was in the stained glass - a small chorister in the Nine Orders of Angels, and the Virgin Mary learning to read. The latter was removed for restoration three weeks into our workshop process, and remained absent until after the performance. However, its temporary absence

provided another striking metaphor for our occupation of the site, as it momentarily allowed the wider city to be seen from within the church.

And, as previously discussed, the church's places of power framed women's bodies, calling attention to the absence of women in authority. When the participants and I discussed Forward in Faith's position on women priests, there was unanimous disagreement with this. Due to this, we were wary of performing in a way that seemed to personally endorse this theological stance. Whilst at All Saints a woman could not lead the Eucharistic Mass and hold up the Host - the representation of the Body of Christ – in the performance, Livy could lift up her own representation of the Body of Christ. As we noted in an early workshop, focusing on Mary as the mother of the Christian church, in a position of authority over the disciples, might act as a counterpoint to All Saint's position. This did not go unnoticed by the audience; as Respondent 8 wrote, they "Loved the focus on Mary and female cast especially in a Forward in Faith church." On the other hand, a congregation member in the audience verbally queried why only women were in the cast – was this a deliberate comment on All Saints? I could honestly answer that, like the Marys at the Resurrection, only women turned up.

Occupying empty frames was a productive way of performing our reactions to the site, and indirectly asserting our presence in this space – a method enhanced through our use of bricolage. However, I felt that our dependence on frames would not be entirely clear to the audience. Instead, I decided to develop the use of frames in site-based theatre established by Turner (2000). As part of an intervention at the post-industrial, pre-restoration Exeter Quays, her site-specific work *Pilot: Navigation* used literal picture frames, held up by the audience. These formed "a space for the audience, an openness to the piece, an acknowledgement of the audience's different perceptions and of the possibility for chance occurrence and physical changes within the site itself" (ibid.). I developed this idea, using suspended picture frames, to represent the multiple (and yet restricted) viewpoints we had found. Across the three performances, I adjusted the ways in which these were suspended. The first hung these in front of each audience member, so that the main playing space was seen through overlapping frames. In the second performance, frames were only suspended in the front row, whilst audience members in the other rows were

provided with an unfixed frame, which they could decide whether or not to use. In the final performance, all frames were unfixed.

Turner suggests that in *Pilot: Navigation*, frames used in this unfixed manner “were able to contain this activity [the performance], without imposing additional meanings” (ibid.). I reject this idea – a frame is *not* neutral, either in form or function. For Turner, these frames were successful because they allowed the audience to re-work the Exeter Quay site as their own artwork. Frames were used to isolate a small portion of the landscape, elevating that section as if in an art gallery. Yet their mobility meant that any movement by the audience member reframed the site, suggesting that that the run-down post-industrial quay was a continual work of art.

At All Saints, our fixed frames placed the audience in a far more restricted role – the anchoress – whose engagement with the wider site was likewise physically restricted. Our script drew attention to this:

ELIZABETH At the back of the church, hidden away, is an anchorage. A home bolted on the back, a tomb for an anchoress who has died to the world and dedicated herself to God. From that little squint no bigger than a laptop screen, she saw seven visions from Mary. Saw the life of a church, from baptism to last rites. Heard, in the distance, the Mysteries performed in the streets.

Just as you look out now.

(Straszewski *et al.*, 2022, p. 1)

From observation, the audience engaged most closely during the later performances, when there were fewer barriers between the actors and audience members. In all three performances the audiences tended to avoid the side-chapel spaces – with none choosing to occupy these spaces for the third performance. Those on the edges, unable to clearly see the main action in the crossing, might have felt they were not experiencing the full play. Still, for those who braved this viewpoint, their limited vision was reworked into a closer engagement with the site and the themes of the play. Without reproducing a strictly medieval experience of worshipping at All Saints, the performance nonetheless suggested the experience of lay members, in which direct participation in the liturgy was minimised when the

clergy retreated to the chancel (Barnwell, Cross and Rycraft, 2005, pp. 130–131).

Even so, there was a tension between this aim, and engaging with the wider spaces of the church, and my script attempted to find ways to bridge this gap. The audience were invited to breach their frame at moments most distanced from formal liturgy or authority – such as when they made little gifts, led by the Shepherds, in a pastiche of Sunday School activities. Following the death of Christ in the narrative, and the formation of the ‘church’, the frames were cut down entirely, so that the cast and audience were united. Despite this, I was never fully happy with the use of picture frames. These had been acquired in part from my own stash from previous projects, but were reinforced by new frames from Ikea. Much as trying to impose external narrators felt at odds with what we found at the site, I never felt at ease with these. Bricolage pushes back against introductions to the site, even when they feel in keeping with thematic discoveries (in this case, ‘frames’).

In retrospect, I might have fully engaged with the absence of the congregation and removed the central nave from use entirely. However, I had agreed with All Saints that there would be room for at least twenty audience members, and we had arranged the play’s action with this in mind. By the point this became clear, we were in the final week of rehearsal. For some participants, already struggling with lines following COVID infections and the break from rehearsals, changing a major element would be destabilising. As ‘John’, Margaret mirrored the statue of John above her in the nave, both holding their book and mourning before the cross. Margaret’s use of a prompt-book on stage allowed her to present her performance as one part of our assemblage of texts.

Nonetheless, this points to the limitations of bricolage when working as a group. As envisaged by Levi-Strauss, bricolage is a solitary endeavour. Whereas my solo performances had allowed me the freedom to make rapid changes to the work, a larger cast and complex site maintained the potential to resist being forced into the assemblage. On the day of the first performance, I reluctantly refused one congregation member’s last-minute offer of the bridal veil used to dress a statue of the Virgin Mary. Adding an additional element at this point was impractical for a cast already struggling with the discomposing delay due to two COVID cases. As with any

devising process, bricolage is subject to time restraints and the practicalities of performance, particularly after the creation of a script that locks in performance decisions. To mitigate this, the script included its own empty frames – moments where the participants might improvise, add in their own thoughts, or respond to what they found in the church in the present moment. These were integrated into the script, for example Cynthia’s description of losing her daughter at the beach, or the actors’ reflections on what they had found at the site. These were moments in which the actors made their own solitary bricolage – assessing their audience, their site and their own ideas to bring these into play.

I am aware here that my description of this final phase of bricolage is in itself devious, eliding attempts to categorise and pin it down. Were these last moments *devious means* (a desirable use of trickery, to enhance the assemblage we had devised), or was it *bodging* - the hasty shoving of material into place, with the potential of a shoddy end product? It is perhaps appropriate, in this production and this site, that the boundaries between these two frames were easily breached – if these boundaries existed at all.

Aftermaths

In devising and reflecting on *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*, I have developed the use of bricolage as an explicit tool for devising a performance of the York Mystery Plays. Participants were encouraged to bring their own ideas and perceptions to the site, with a series of provocations that allowed them to reflect on what they brought to the performance, what they found there, and what they might take away. Finding moments for participant intervention at each phase – including in performance – allowed them to respond directly to what was found at the site. It also revealed both the benefits and difficulties of bricolage as technique. Indirect means felt a suitable method when we felt uneasy about our status in the site. A more critical response to the heritage of All Saints might have been required if the participants had been hostile to Christianity. Consider, for example, how different the play might have been if Audience Respondent 11, with their “continuing dislike of the ornaments and acoustics of All Saints”, had taken part in the devising process. Would *indirect means* have been able to represent their distaste?

Moving straight into rehearsals for the Lincoln Mystery Plays, and with preparations for the 2022 York Mystery Plays already underway, I was unable to find time to follow up on this project. The play reflects a specific moment of the site, using bricolage to negotiate with the site's complex meanings. What is particularly striking is how little the church changed following the restoration. When I returned to the church a year later, in May 2022, the windows had been restored, with the final interpretation literature in place around the church. At the back, tables and chairs provide a space for coffee mornings. No obvious signs remain of our performance, dependent as it was on temporary scaffolding and building works for its energy. The picture frames used to represent the anchorage window were briefly used by the Community Engagement Officer for work with school groups, but after her departure these were disposed of. In this respect, this reasserts the temporary nature of our intervention. Yet it is unlikely that our performance would have felt so dramatically rich in what is now a clean and tidy church. Almost 60% of audience respondents were new to the space, suggesting that this style of performance might reach a wider group than normally found there. Meanwhile, those familiar with the church described "Plenty of food for thought" (Respondent 9), or taking away "New things to think about; pleasant memories" (Respondent 2). Ephemeral as it was, the play may have an ongoing impact on those who were able to view it.

Chapter 4: *The Waggon Plays*

Assembling the Waggon Plays

In Chapter Two, I examined how I assumed an identity as a solo bricoleur, working within the small space of my house during the pandemic. In Chapter Three, my work opened out, incorporating both a larger space, and a wider range of participants. This allowed me to explore the various phases of bricolage as a deliberate process. In the next chapter, I consider how my experience as a bricoleur-director informed my work as the artistic director/pageant master of the 2022 York Mystery Plays (often referred to as the *waggons* or *waggon plays*). As artistic director, my work on the plays was at a step removed, instead focused on drawing together eight communities and directors as a bricolage, across multiple sites across the City of York.

The waggon plays were established in 1994, and belong to the 'multi-group' model outlined in Chapter One, in which responsibility for each pageant is assumed by an individual group and director, under the wider direction of a pageant master/artistic director. Each pageant is performed in turn at a number of public sites across York (usually four), on two consecutive Sunday afternoons. Having directed a single pageant in 2014 (*The Crucifixion and Death of Christ*), I successfully applied for the role of pageant master in both 2018 and 2022. In this role, in addition to organising the pageants, I wrote and directed the Shambles Market performance, which saw a sub-set of the plays performed at night, linked by a narrator.

In this chapter, I explore the 2022 production through bricolage as an assemblage. I examine how the position of artistic director is a bricolage of different roles and expectations; how I brought together the pageants, groups and sites involved; and finally, how I reworked the wider assemblage of pageants to form a mid-week performance at the Shambles Market. In doing so, I consider these different assemblages as a 'stock' from which future participants might draw.

I begin by exploring one aspect of identity bricolage discussed in Chapter 1, where bricoleurs construct their working methods by bringing together a variety of techniques and models (as discussed briefly in Chapter 1, and the work of Visscher et al (2018). Here, I explore what I draw from previous artistic directors/pageant

masters of the waggon plays. Indeed, the terms are often used interchangeably by the Festival Trust and participants, reflecting the dual nature of the role as one that both assembles a modern performance, and re-enacts a medieval heritage. There is a certain tension between the role as a theatre professional (as Artistic Director), and (as Pageant Master) a community facilitator focused on presenting the Plays as part of York's communal heritage. I also examine the frequent use of 'curator' to describe the artistic director's role, along with other models such as 'dramaturg', before finding a synthesis of these through the model of 'bricoleur'. Having 'assembled' the role itself, I then turn to the work of assembling the various groups, Plays and waggons into the overarching event. This section focuses on the process of creating and renewing a theatrical 'stock', formed by both the existing bricolage of the waggon plays, and other resources that might be obtained and made use of. In Chapter One, I introduced Bennett's idea of vibrant assemblages, in which human and non-human materials interact with each other, forming a network of meaning (2010). Responding to this, Buchanan warns that "Bennett does not propose a power of selection governing the assemblage", arguing that her discussion of vibrant assemblages is ultimately little more than a list of connected elements (2021, p. 117). Wary of this, I focus on how one aspect – the physical waggons – interact more widely with the assemblage of the pageant productions as a whole. These provide moments for the pageant master/artistic director to create the *conditions* of performance, within the constraints of what is available. In doing so, I argue that whilst previous discussions of bricolage emphasise what has come before, we must also consider how future projects inform and sustain the assemblage. As in previous chapters, I use frames (both physical and symbolic) as a way to focus this discussion. In this case, these frames are the waggons. I identify the waggons as a bricolage-assemblage in microcosm: they are recognisable objects that must be reworked for each production. As a moveable site, these waggons develop new relationships: between their contents, between participating groups, between the actors and audience, and between the waggons and their surroundings. In doing so they represent qualities of the bricolage-assemblage as identified in Chapter One:

1. Its components are recognisable
2. They are immediately or easily available

3. These have been rearranged, so that new relationships are formed between its components
4. They maintain the stock for the future

In the last section of this chapter, I focus on these qualities, applied to both the physical waggons, and my work on the Shambles Market performance derived from the initial 'stock' of the Sunday performances. This provides a way of considering the waggon plays as an assemblage, and the ways in which their components can be utilised by future participants.

To give a sense of the timeline involved in assembling the 2022 waggon plays, I identify four main stages:

1. June to September 2021. Given the quadrennial nature of the waggons, some groups habitually involved already start planning, without central oversight. Other groups, nervous that they will lose out on the opportunity, approach individual directors and partners. Although not yet formally appointed, there is an assumption by these groups that I will be involved as artistic director again, and I begin to field questions about possible plays. This suggests an initial assemblage in the Deleuze/Guattari model, in which groups and participants assemble based on their desire to perform. The central Festivals Trust (representing the Guilds) are wary of the financial and organisational requirements, due to the impact of the pandemic on their generally older membership. Nonetheless, they are aware that without central guidance, the groups may conflict (e.g. over their choice of pageant), or run into practical difficulties. I meet with the Festival Trust, and suggest a smaller production using eight pageants (one for each Guild), rather than the larger eleven or twelve seen in previous performances.
2. October to December 2021. I expand on this with a pitch based around *sustainability*, with the additional intention to produce some form of site-based performance at the Guildhall, which is now occupied by the University. This will draw on the history of the space, interweaving this with pageants from the 2022 waggon plays. During this time, I negotiate with other groups to establish an initial list of groups, pageants and individuals that will form the

2022 production.

3. January to March 2022. It becomes clear that the Guildhall will not be financially feasible. Instead, I pivot to finalising the list of participant groups, their pageants, and their directors, alongside the performance spaces for each of the four stations. This process runs concurrently with rehearsals for *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*.
4. April to June 2022. Having finalised the groups and their pageants, my role is split between dramaturgical advice to the groups, and dealing with the wider production elements including rehearsal and workshop spaces, Health and Safety, and publicity. During this time, I create a performance for the Shambles Market, drawing on the existing 2018 text, and the affordances of the new set of pageants taking place in 2022.

Assembling the role

I focus this initial discussion on the role of artistic director and the ways in which this role is responsible for creating an assemblage. In this I am indebted to my predecessors in this role. After six artistic directors and seven productions, it is possible to talk in terms of a generic “artistic director” because they attempt to deal with a similar task: bringing together groups, their plays, and waggons; arranging four performance sites (or ‘stations’); and creating the timetable for the route between these. When discussing the artistic director I write in the third person, to identify common approaches. When discussing my specific decisions, I revert to the first person. Even so, both modes of writing are inevitably influenced by my own experience of the role. I am conscious here that, whereas *York Mysteries @ Home* and *Heaven and Earth in Little Space* originated as performance-as-research projects, the waggon plays are an established part of the York theatre ecology. I initially approached the plays not as an academic intent on research, but as a professional theatre-maker, engaged for the production as the artistic director. As such, I engaged with participants primarily as creators in their own right, rather than as objects of study. My focus here is on my own role within the process, reflected through my understanding of theatrical bricolage.

The artistic director has been a central part of the modern waggon plays, although not inevitably so. I begin by tracing the origins of the role, and how this formed the framework of the early productions. These originated in academic reconstructions by Jane Oakshott at the University of Leeds (1976) and Meg Twycross in York (1988). In 1994, Oakshott was invited by the Friends of York Mystery Plays to produce a set of nine plays. Unlike its predecessors that also used waggons, these were not intended as an experiment to convince other academics of particular theories (such as the orientation of waggons), but instead as a broader exercise in expanding public understanding of the medieval roots of the plays (Rogerson, 2009, pp. 182–183). The 1994 production formed many of the conventions that are still seen today, in particular its multiple performance groups and sites, under the umbrella of a professional artistic director and production team.

Even so, Oakshott felt that the 1994 production fell short of its potential to unite academic research and local communities. She argued that the earlier street performances in 1988 and 1992 had “experimental purpose but no local input; and Mystery Plays ’94, performed by local drama groups with the motives of enjoyment and discovery, lacked a solid structural base” (1999, p. 271). That structural (or organisational) base was provided in 1998 by the involvement of the Guilds. These are civic groups rooted in the occupations of their medieval forebears: a focus on charitable works, the mutual support of guild members and their trade, and maintaining the Guild for the future. Of the seven guilds involved in the 1998 production, three (the Merchant Adventurers, Merchant Taylors and Butchers) survive from the medieval period; two (the Cordwainers and Scriveners) are reformed; and two (the Freeman and Builders) were created in the 20th century (Oakshott, 1999, pp. 273–277). In 2015, a further guild (Media Arts) was formed, taking on their first waggon play in 2018. All eight continue to engage with the waggon plays. Some (such as the Builders) produce their own play, with members of the guild taking on both production and performance roles. Other guilds form partnerships with local performance groups, with various levels of delegation. Beyond this, other groups are involved at the invitation of the Artistic Director; these might include local schools, universities, churches or performing groups.

Oakshott returned to the role in 1998, but was adamant that only their original form as community theatre could hope to sustain them in the long term (Rogerson, 2009, pp. 183–184). An artistic director needed to come from the community, but this was After the success of the 1998 plays, the Guilds recognised the need for a central body to produce the plays, forming the York Festival Trust. The Trust then delegates specific tasks to a production team, including the Producer (usually Chair of the Board), Artistic Director and Production Manager, with the latter two paid. This replicates the role of the medieval City Council, coordinating the groups, performance sites, routes, and public safety (Oakshott, 1999, p. 280). The artistic director, appointed by the Festival Trust, provides the central point of contact between these two entities, but also takes a creative role in defining the wider framework for that year's performances. I interpret this role as a bricolage, in which the artistic director draws on different approaches (director, dramaturg, curator) and assembles their role according to the available resources for the task of ensuring the Plays go ahead. I now turn to a consideration of these different approaches.

The Artistic Director as Dramaturg, Curator, Bricoleur

Within my initial conception of the role, the three central tasks of the artistic director are to:

- assemble the groups, their plays, and waggons
- arrange the performance sites
- create and enforce a performance timetable, to ensure a continuous performance at each site

They do not take an active role in directing individual pageants, although they may make suggestions to the pageant directors.²³ It is important to note that they do not have complete control: they rarely appoint directors, and do not cast actors, although they may make suggestions where this is requested. Directorial decisions reside with the producing team for the individual pageants, although again the Artistic Director may suggest particular concepts or suggest solutions.

²³ The sole exception was in 2018, when I directed *Play Twelve – The Annunciation* at short notice, as the intended director was no longer able to take part.

In certain respects, the artistic director acts as a free-ranging dramaturg, in the vein identified by Pearson and Shanks:

“Dramaturgy, as cultural assemblage, works equally with settings, people, bodies, things, texts, histories, voices, architectures. In these connective networks that are the dramaturgical, it is usual to consider things and people as separate, their conjunction considered after their distinction. We propose instead the inseparability of people and things, values, etc.”

(2001, p. 89)

Importantly, they draw attention to what might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Sometimes this is a simple case of diverting resources where required, for example by suggesting an alternative prop, or passing on details of rehearsal spaces. For groups who have not previously performed on the waggons, I might highlight issues with blocking in the early stages. It might involve rewriting a section of script, or clarifying a historical point. Increasingly, precarious resources require the artistic director to act as a mediator between conflicting interests. For example, *Riding Lights Act Up!*, a youth theatre for performers with additional needs or disabilities, required the waggon storage space to be quiet and empty, in order to rehearse on the Crucifixion waggon. This cut into the preparation time for other groups, and so I coordinated alternative times and venues for the affected pageants, and volunteered my time as a stagehand to mitigate this.

If *dramaturg* is one way of assembling this role, another is *curator*. Pakkar-Hull describes her role in the 2014 waggon plays as “a curator, responsible for overseeing the sharing of plays that resonate with spiritual, civic, artistic and historical significance” (2014, p. 4). It is one I picked up again in 2018 and 2022, in part to differentiate the process of selecting and nurturing individual Plays from my work as director, which might instead suggest an inaccurate level of top-down control over individual pageants. Tracing the origins of the term, Balzer suggests that the role initially involved care-taking, ensuring the safety of the artwork or performance (2014, pp. 30–33). The curator here is an administrator. However, within the wider art world there has been a “changing perception of the curator as carer to a curator who has a more creative and active part to play within the

production of art itself” (Rugg and Sedgwick, 2008, p. 15). That is, curating a festival is not simply a process of selecting plays, but of creating the conditions for performance. Demonstrating the complexities that develop when working across multiple venues, festival curator Deborah Pearson describes the curator in terms of a matrix (literally, a womb), the over-arching framework within which the festival develops, “from one-to-one performances in a site-specific location to a big concert in our largest civic theatre. To be able to keep that matrix in mind, there’s a lot of tracking, and we use spreadsheets” (Zaiontz, 2020, p. 158). On a smaller scale, my process in 2022 depended on a grid of post-it notes, which I could easily rearrange as decisions were made (see Fig. 16). This was a visual representation of the negotiations taking place, a performance in miniature.

Within performing arts festivals, Jump likewise identifies curating as a series of “artistic and practical negotiations around the complexities of a site” (2020, p. 69). Her description of the process is preoccupied with the practical challenges of finding appropriate sites for visiting artists, and enabling the conditions for their performances to take place. The curator here is a mediator between the heightened (and temporary) life of the site, and its everyday users and usages. There is, perhaps, an echo of the site-specific artist here, particularly the sign-post performer theorised by Smith, who “points performer and audience directly to the immediate site and its material specificities” (2009, p. 160). This aligns with a common view of the festival curator’s role, which is to find a way of unifying the heterogeneous performances, despite the precarious nature of festivals: “...there must be an organising principle to a programme, expressing an idea that has been conceived by a curator or a link that has been established between a number of works... The reality is that a programme is often guided by artistic enquiry, but governed by expediency” (White, 2018, p. 633). Importantly, this act of mediation produces something new: an assemblage.

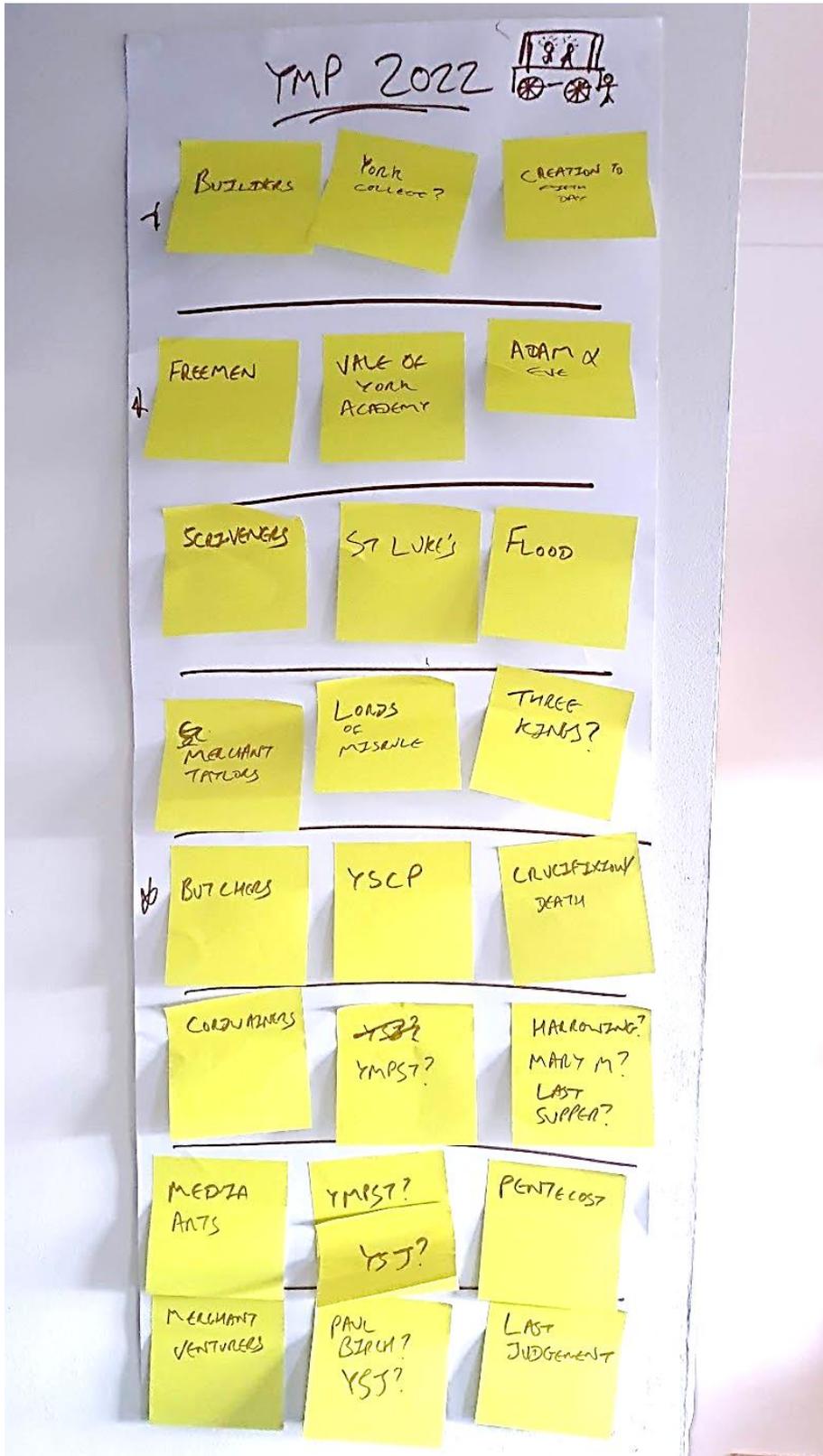


Fig. 16: My low-tech spreadsheet of guilds, groups and plays. (Straszewski, 1 November 2021).

Strangely, a theme or unifying concept has not been generally used by previous artistic directors of the waggon plays. Indeed, this may not be strictly necessary, as the ‘organising principle’ identified by White can be fulfilled through the ‘cosmic narrative’ frequently evoked by artistic directors. Toy describes his 2010 production as a “vast cosmic take from the Creation to the World to the Last Judgement” (2010, p. 7), whilst Pakkar-Hull finds in her 2014 choices “a compelling and coherent story... the narrative follows Jesus through joy and tribulation, trial and redemption” (2014, p. 4). A linear narrative provides a framework for choosing the individual pageants, with their selections representing the wider cycle in microcosm.²⁴ Approaching the plays in 2018, I considered on Oakshott’s challenge:

“Processional staging is like any other form in this: that it needs to have an over-arching vision, linking each unit of the whole...”

(2013, p. 373)

Creating and carrying out this vision is an exercise in assemblage, and requires the artistic director to consider the extent to which this unity is required, and if so, how this might be developed and maintained across the groups. Oakshott suggests that the medieval pageants were united by shared aesthetics, but this is not utilised by the modern pageants. Instead, Oakshott suggests this unity might be found by engaging with ongoing research on the medieval plays. However, she stops short of suggesting specific discoveries that might provide this (ibid., p. 374). I used this approach in 2018 by engaging with recent research into the role of typology in the Plays. This medieval theology identifies events of the Hebrew scriptures which prefigure, inform or are supplanted by Christian narratives.²⁵ Reflecting on recent

²⁴ Proposing a set of ‘sub-cycles’ for the medieval Plays, Boyer has suggested a similar motif for selecting these groups of plays (2019, pp. 24–25). Each station would see the same twelve subjects performed, but each subject would be represented by a different pageant.

²⁵ The idea that Christian narratives *replace* Jewish ones is understandably fraught, particularly in York (Watson, 2013). Although space and confidentiality precludes me from detailing the various discussions, I was adamant that, for example, the pageants should not be performed in front of Clifford’s Tower, the site of a notorious 12th century pogrom, as they had been in 2010.

developments on this topic, many of which informed my approach, Black suggests that “a range of discourses have developed on multi-temporality, topological time, temporal collapse and anachronic objects” (2020, p. 19). My choice of pageants used these medieval pairings, so that we might see two Temptations performed in succession (of Adam and Eve, and Christ), or a father sacrifice his son (*Abraham and Isaac*, and the *Crucifixion*). Breaking away from linear narrative not only highlighted the disruption of linear time within the plays, but the echoing of past and present that articulate the modern waggon plays as both heritage performance and modern community theatre.

While this over-arching vision does not necessarily require a top-down approach, in practice it benefits from a significant engagement with medieval studies (and the history of the plays). This depends on access to academic resources, along with the time to engage closely with these – which may not be possible (or desirable) if carried out by individual groups. If a unified theme is desirable to lend unity to otherwise heterogenous groups and their materials, other aspects also prioritise a top-down approach, which in turn defines (and is iteratively defined by) the role of the artistic director. The various directors and groups join the waggon plays at different points. Adopting a theme too early might exclude later groups from being actively involved in its development; too late, and those that spread their rehearsal process over a long period might feel unable to prepare effectively. Nonetheless, because the artistic director is appointed by the Guilds, this enables at least some of the groups to modify or reject a proposed theme in favour of other approaches.

Indeed, my initial pitch was based on my familiarity with what the Guilds *would* accept, and that could respond to the increasing precarity of the production as we approached 2022. The usual planning timetable of c. eighteen months would see us begin in January 2021. It was unclear whether further lockdowns or restrictions would be in place by the following year. Furthermore, *The Resurrection for York* (2021), co-produced between York Festivals Trust, York Minster and the York Mystery Plays Supporters Trust, had been delayed due to the pandemic so that this took up the attention of these groups. The Festival Trust Board was uncertain whether funding would be obtained. All of us were particularly concerned that the pandemic would continue to impact the availability of actors and other volunteers.

More worryingly, several of the guilds were no longer certain that they could continue their involvement in the plays. This reflected widespread concern about whether the Plays were sustainable in this form, at this time.

Responding to this, and not yet formally reappointed as artistic director, I pitched a theme of *sustainability* to the Board. In practical terms, ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ was a way to focus our minds on the considerable challenges that surrounded the production, and the Guild involvement more widely:

“Our theme this year is “reduce, reuse, recycle” - and more broadly the idea of sustainability and transformation. That includes sustaining the plays themselves, the community of communities that have formed around them, and the wider environment. That also works on a practical level- you’re encouraged to re-use old set, props, costumes, and to source as much as you can from charity shops, junkyards, attics etc. Many of you are already doing this, of course, but I encourage everybody to start thinking about this now.

(And- whilst it’s still early- what happens after the plays are over? What can be reclaimed or recycled? What do you want to sustain for the next round of the cycle? And most importantly - who will take on the responsibility? Some of you might want to think about an informal apprenticeship for the next waggon master, for example, or creating a dossier to be handed over.)”

(Straszewski, 2021)

Through this, and in subsequent meetings, I encouraged groups to engage with wider environmental issues, and signposted the guidance in the recently published Theatre Green Book (2021). Nonetheless, although I could create conditions for sustaining the plays, the responsibility for carrying this out remained with the individual groups and directors. In this context, we return to the idea of curating as a matrix – creating a supportive framework through which to develop individual performances.

Nonetheless, the use of *curator* is loaded with aesthetic judgement. Here I seize on Balzer’s description: “A curator is someone who insists on value, and who makes it, whether or not it actually exists” (2014, p. 32). Sellar likewise notes that the growing

use of *curator* in the performing arts may be aspirational – conjuring up images of “glitzy biennials and well-capitalized art galleries” (2014, p. 26). But Balzer also describes curating as a form of bricolage, in its gathering together of disparate objects (2014, p. 29). My experience of producing the 2018 and 2022 Mysteries is decidedly unglamorous, spending much of my time pacing through the streets of York, tearing rotten planks from waggons or screwing stairs together.²⁶ Bricolage, with its undertone of grubbing about in old rubbish, is perhaps not only accurate in terms of function but also identity-building. And so it is to bricolage that I return to here. It captures the wide-ranging nature of the role: creating through combining heterogenous elements, alert to the relationships between these and to opportunities to refresh this stock but, inevitably, reliant on the remnants of past events. As a bricoleur, significant creative decisions are made through selecting and assigning specific pageants to the groups, constrained by the availability of resources, not least the waggons themselves. Indeed, the word ‘assign’ does not quite grasp the intense negotiations that took place over the preceding year, and the practical pressures that influenced these. Within this, the artistic director in any year must follow a process we might recognise from my earlier descriptions of bricolage:

They **inventory** the city, identifying which potential groups, sites and plays are available. They may find some decisions are made swiftly because group, play and wagon already form a tight-knit assemblage that it would be difficult (and indeed counter-productive) to break apart. *Play 47 – The Last Judgement*, for example, has always been produced by the Merchant Adventurers, both in its medieval and modern form. On the other hand, whilst the Merchant Taylors prefer to produce a pageant linked to their medieval antecedents, they normally defer to the artistic director’s suggestions and the desires of their collaborators in the Lords of Misrule, a postgraduate theatre group based at the Centre for Medieval Studies at the

²⁶ Jump (2020) finds a similar concern with walking in her account of curating a site-specific festival. As the festival swings into action, dispersed across Prague, her birds-eye view as director becomes grounded at the street level. The challenges of communicating over this distance has seen various solutions, from Oakshott’s flags and bells (1998) to modern walkie-talkies. The production team are now discussing the potential of drones or GPS tags to track the waggons as they process across York, although this may simply be technology in search of a problem.

University of York.²⁷ School and university term dates also prevent or allow involvement, depending on whether the plays take place in the early or late summer. Between production years, previous performance sites may be altered or taken out of use, so that these must be reassessed, and alternatives discovered.

They **sift** between these resources, and they **arrange** groups, guilds and plays that will make best use of their qualities. For example, I am unlikely to suggest that a small guild with few resources produces *Play 25 – The Entry to Jerusalem*, with its large cast and multiple locations. Conversely, a well-supported group would be inappropriate for the smaller plays such as *Play 39 – The Appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene*. Much as Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur might select "a particular cube of oak... to make up for the inadequate length of a plank of pine" (1974, p. 18), I have brought together different groups to fill in gaps of expertise or resources. This is particularly the case where a guild might have significant material resources but lack the personnel to make this happen. Often, though, the groups make their own arrangements, drawing on their pre-existing networks. A group confident of its own abilities (such as the York Mystery Plays Supporters Trust, or St Luke's Players) may also resist being partnered with another group. This confidence may change between productions. My offer of script-editing help to the Builders in 2018 was kindly (if firmly) refused by the experienced team. In 2022, their use of a first-time director prompted a series of wide-ranging dramaturgical discussions, and material help in the form of props from my own stock (not least gold braid from *Heaven and Earth in Little Space*).

However, Oakshott argues that the 1994 and 1998 production teams "replaced the tradition of performance common to the medieval Guilds, by providing intellectual help (information, interpretation, style) and materials (wagons, sets, props) as needed" (1999, p. 280). That is, in the absence of a recognisable 'stock' of past performances, the production team acts as a sort of bricoleur's stash for the groups

²⁷ Play 11 – *Pharoah and Moses* (Hosiers) Play 42 – *The Ascension* (Tailors), Play 44 – *The Death of Mary* (Drapers) were all associated with the medieval antecedents of the Merchant Tailors. The Tailors and Drapers amalgamated in the 1550s.

to engage with as they require.²⁸ Since Oakshott's article, however, a further six productions have taken place, so that this central stash has both been continually refreshed, and new ones created by each Guild that reflect their own past productions and future possibilities for their own purpose. We might therefore consider what these 'stocks' or 'stashes' might include, not as an inventory, but to examine what elements are retained between productions, and the relationships created between these. Finally, then, I turn to the bricolage created by this process, examining its qualities through the use of the waggons themselves.

The Waggons

Modern waggon structures are generally based on existing hay waggons, although as Twycross points out, the rural imagery conjured by these does not accurately represent the medieval pageant waggons, "custom-built theatrical machines" that were carefully maintained and stored between uses (1994, p. 46). The modern versions provide a platform of c. 160cm by 340cm, standing around 120cm off the ground. The bed of the waggon is formed by wooden slats, with the potential to attach sets directly to the bed. The waggons move on either steel-bound wooden wheels, or pneumatic tyres. The front axle can be rotated using the steering haft, giving a surprisingly tight turning circle in the hands of an experienced crew (although the latter quality is not a given). Safely moving the waggons through the streets requires a minimum of six pushers and a waggon master.²⁹

There are some exceptions. The Crucifixion waggon used by the Butchers Guild was custom-built to suit the requirements of the performance, although it visually resembles the farm waggons used by other groups (Wright, 2011). In 2018, St Luke's Church built a pair of 'mini-waggons' which are smaller in each dimension, and mounted on castor wheels for ease of movement during performance. These

²⁸ It is perhaps due to this that of the six artistic directors to date (Oakshott, Tyler, Toy, Wilkinson, Pakkar Hull and myself), the majority have backgrounds in medieval studies. It may simply be the case that medievalists are drawn to direct medieval plays. Deleuzian assemblages, after all, are formed by the *desire* between components.

²⁹ Waggons can be repositioned or moved short distances by one strong person. This is not viable across a day of performances.

returned in 2022. Alternatives have occasionally been used, such flats transported by handcart, painted banners, or a Land Rover to replace the pushers (Tyler, 2011, pp. 122–123). However, the standard format of a hay waggon with either a box-set, flat background, or free-standing set tends to prevail.



Fig. 17: The Merchant Taylor’s Waggon, a typical example (Straszewski, May 2022)

The waggons form a useful framework here because they act as a bricolage-assemblage in microcosm: they are recognisable objects that must be reworked for each production. Acting as a moveable site, the process of reworking these waggons develops new relationships: between their contents, between participating groups, between the actors and audience, and between the waggons and their surroundings. One example might be seen in the cross used by the Butchers for their *Crucifixion*. For the actor playing Christ to be raised safely, the cross must include three holes with ropes (one for each hand, and another for the feet) and a small platform on which to stand. New holes must be drilled for each actor, unless they are roughly the same height. The Corpus Christi Play makes reference to the cross being pre-bored, but the holes are in the wrong place, preventing their use – “In faith, it was overe skantely scored/ That makis it fouly for to faile” (Davidson, 2011c, ll. 111–112). The line has been explained in various ways. King and Beadle suggest it is a reference to

the 'Legend of the Rood' in which the cross itself resists its role by warping itself out of shape (1999, p. 211). Aronson-Levi pushes this further, explaining that it allows the Soldiers to also tie Christ to the cross, "the result of the theatrical inability to *really* nail him" (2011, p. 178). Both, however, treat these performances as a one-off event. In the modern productions – and likely in the medieval pageants – the holes are a remnant of previous performers, a reminder of the cyclical nature of the plays, and a provocation to each new director. Like the Soldiers, their material may excite, frustrate or evade them.

Much as a site might provide the initial inspiration for a theatre-maker, the waggons both restrict performance possibilities, and suggest potential ways forward. Tyler, pageant master for the 2002 and 2006 productions, spends much of his reflection of the role focused on the logistics of obtaining waggons, storage for these, and the impact of different waggon layouts on productions (2011). Some of the tensions between the plays as heritage and as performance can be seen here. There was a distaste for anything too modern in appearance (conflated here with *rural*): "there was a general feeling that somehow we were cheating and most of the performing groups took steps to conceal the rubber wheels of their wagons" (ibid., p. 117). Even in 2022, one group favoured a wooden-wheeled waggon when given the choice. The waggons percolate meaning, concentrating the 'medieval' heritage of the plays through their appearance. This can have a stultifying effect, with modern costuming seen at odds with the play. In 2018, audience reactions to modern costuming were mixed, with some "Quite disappointed with the modern style, Ray guns etc ... hated the Crucifixion in boiler suits." (Audience Responses, 2018). Despite the fact that the medieval pageants were most likely performed in contemporary costume, our own audiences and performers often prefer the plays to be temporally distanced from their own time. Even where non-medieval costumes are used, they tend to draw on folk/mid-twentieth century visual cues, such as waistcoats and knitted tops. In any case, the artistic director has little influence over the aesthetic of individual pageants, unless they choose to spend goodwill enforcing a particular era.

Practically, the waggons provide a visual element that stands out against the surrounding streetscape, and raise the actors above the audience.³⁰ Much like the frames in my home that allowed me to transform household objects into performances, the waggons provide a way to assert a claim to public spaces. Furthermore, they help to define the various spaces of the play. The common model for this is that medieval performances engaged with three types of sites: those occupied by the actors, the *locus* and *platea*, and the site occupied by the audience (Twycross, 1994, pp. 57–58). Of the two used by the actors, the *locus* is a representational site, such as Heaven, Herod's palace, or the stable in the Nativity. The *platea*, however, is an open space, midway between the represented site and the audience's world, and indeed forming a gateway or permeable space between the two. Again, we return to the idea of the waggon as a porous frame for the performance, within which the various components are assembled. It is easy to see how these might be represented by a waggon (*locus*), the immediate space before the waggon that might be opened up by the performers (*platea*), within the wider streetscape (audience). Modern productions have used this productively, and Williams, Merrylees and Richmond consider this in detail in their 2004 production of *Play 5 – The Fall of Adam and Eve* (2011, pp. 150–153). Here, the three locations of Eden, Earth and Hell were represented, with the waggon (*locus*) as Heaven, and the street before it (*platea*) as Earth. Hell therefore became the audience from which Lucifer emerged, perhaps giving considerable sympathy to the devil.

Yet this separation of the waggon-*locus* is not rigidly observed within the various pageants or their texts. In *Play 35 – Crucifixio Christi*, the crucified Christ on the

³⁰ McGavin and Walker consider the difficulty of assessing how a medieval audience may have responded to the pageants, but suggest that the different levels of audience would permit different responses (2016, pp. 5–18). The impact of different waggon structures and orientations on audibility has been the topic of an extensive study by Mariana Lopez (2013). She concludes that there is no one way of constructing these that benefits every audience member, whether in the streets or on scaffold seating. This suggests that a variety of approaches are beneficial to the event as a whole. However, we might ask whether there was pressure to produce plays in a style that suited the (presumably) richer audience members in houses and stands, rather than those standing in the streets.

waggon appeals to “Al men that walkis by waye or street” – all men that walk by way or street, both accusing the immediate audience and those who, distracted by other business, did not attend to the performance (Davidson, 2011c, l. 253). As Wright suggests, the Corpus Christi plays did not use waggons to distinguish between the imagined world of the play and the present audience, or between the divine and material worlds, but instead pointed out their permeable nature, and in doing so:

“sought to collapse time and space, to merge biblical past with the medieval present, so that participants might not only understand the events of the past, but also their own direct contributions to it and, therefore, their role in the outcomes of sacred history.”

(2017, p. 201)



Fig. 18: Last Suppers at the Shambles Market. Diners at The Market Cat find themselves unexpectedly part of the action, now framed as modern counterparts to the medieval/biblical scene below. (Straszewski, 22 June 2022)

There are limits to this in the modern productions. We cannot recreate the mindset of the medieval audience. Wider theatrical conventions - costumes, speeches, music, sets – push the audience to expect *theatre*, set apart from the surrounding streetscape, or merging only with the medieval backdrops such as St William’s College. Synonymous with *spectacle*, this is heritage theatre, as Rees Leahy

describes it: “even those who carry on watching the performance may not be wholly absorbed in it: they may keep one eye on the performance and another on the surrounding spectacle of the museum and its population of objects and people” (2012, p. 29). Yet, I argue, this misses the point of the waggon performances. As discussed in previous chapters, a frame may attempt to demarcate the limits of the performance space and the wider world, whether a museum or streetscape, but in doing so it draws attention to what is not included. Modern performances may not collapse *sacred* history, but the waggons continually break up, reassemble and reframe our ideas of York.

I now turn my attention to how some of these ideas might be used, within the 2022 bricolage. I do so using the framework identified earlier: recognisable materials, readily available, rearranged to show off their qualities, and sustained for the future.

Taking stock: what is recognisable

Despite early experimentation with alternatives such as small carts or banners, the processional plays from 1994 onwards have become identified with the waggons. Despite the lack of surrounding signage to demarcate the playing stations, the waggons themselves provide a visible sign that a performance is about to take place. The individual waggons are often reused. As we will later see, in the interim years they are vulnerable, particularly when poorly stored in a post-play rush and then forgotten about. This is in stark contrast to medieval York, in which permanent pageant houses on Toft Green provided storage space for their waggons.



Fig. 19: The York Mystery Plays logo, featuring a box-set waggon (York Festival Trust).

We might consider the pageants that have featured in the majority of productions as physical stock – an existing set of material that can literally be wheeled out each time by a guild, drawing on their past investment in their property. However, they also carry the memories and affects of past performances, within the assemblage of the waggon plays. These are captured in the repetition of physical moments – sometimes small, in the joy of the Creation’s whale spouting water across the crowd, and sometimes grand, as the Butchers raise the cross once more in the Crucifixion. As such, these moments provide structure to the Waggon Plays, beyond the narrative itself.

My question here is why some pageants persist across each production. Is this simply a question of the bricolage-director seizing on what is already available? A look at the most frequently produced pageants demonstrates this point:

Play Two – *The Creation of the World to the Fifth Day* (seven performances)

Play Forty-Seven – *The Last Judgement* (seven performances)

Play Thirty-Five and Thirty-Six – *Crucifixio Christi* and *Mortificacio Christi* (six performances, combined as one play from 2010 onwards)

Play Five – *The Fall* (five performances)

In contrast, the remaining forty-two Plays have seen only one or two performances, with a few used two or three times. The repetition of these plays can be partly attributed to their position within the wider cycle of plays: between them, they provide a clear beginning, climax and end. *The Last Judgement* fulfils the end of this narrative, so that its inclusion in every waggon production is unsurprising. It does not however explain the consistent presence of the two central plays of the passion sequence (*Play 35 – Crucifixio Christi* and *Play 36 – Mortificacio Christi*, combined from 2010 onwards). Why are these consistently performed instead of *Play 34 – The Road to Calvary*, which also sees soldiers fetch tools and bind Jesus to the cross? Narrative function fails to fully explain the repetition of *Play 2 – The Creation of the World to the Fifth Day*. *Play 1 – The Creation of the Angels* gives the creation narrative, as does the later *Play 3 – The Creation of Adam and Eve*. The physical waggons, however, provide a convincing reason for repeating *Play 3* and *Plays 35/36* each time. Both are performed using waggons that have either been heavily modified (the Creation) or purpose-built (the Crucifixion). These cannot be used for

other plays or performance groups, and have been created at considerable expense for specific guilds (Wright, Bielby in Rogerson 2011).

The frequency of *Play 5 - The Fall of Adam and Eve*, on the other hand, cannot be explained simply by its narrative position, nor by the waggon itself. Although the Freemen own their own waggon, it follows the more usual form of a flat-bed hay waggon, with all set stripped between performances. This could easily be swapped for those provided by the Merchant Taylors or the two 'Morton Waggons' provided by the eponymous local farming family. Instead, continuity in this waggon can be seen through a continuity in *personnel*, in which local teacher Bec Nicholson has worked with the Freemen since 2010, with performances in 2014, 2018 and 2022 cast from her drama classes. Although I was open to a change of play in both 2018 and 2022, Nicholson chose both times to restage the Fall. This suggests that specific responsibility – for a waggon, a play, or an experience – is a major factor in maintaining the plays for the future.

Taking stock: immediately/easily available

A second issue of the waggons is their availability. Put simply, the number of waggons acts as a limiting factor on the number of groups who can perform, and the steady decline in the availability of waggons has forced difficult decisions. Waggons have rotted away when stored unsheltered, whilst contact has been lost with other owners. Indeed, at a meeting with one group I was asked bluntly whether providing their own waggon was the price of admission. Whilst we (that is, the Festival Trust) would do our best to provide a waggon for each group, this was certainly the easiest way to guarantee a place in the production. Ownership and maintenance of a waggon, whilst expensive, is therefore an investment. Does a group plan for the future by investing in their own waggon, as St Luke's Church did in 2018? Or do they avoid the considerable expense of storage and maintenance, but then run the risk of being unable to take part? There are some alternatives to individual waggons, which might mitigate this. In 2018, I asked the Freemen to share their waggon with the Cordwainers; the two plays were thematically linked as two temptations (*Play 5 - The Fall*, and *Play 22 – The Temptation of Christ*). Between the two plays, the waggon set was transformed from a lush Eden to a barren desert. However, this requires negotiation with each group, and limits how the waggon can be used. Furthermore, a

double-length performance forms a major difficulty for ensuring continuous flow of waggons at each performance station.

Temporary unavailability can become permanent. York Settlement Community Players (YSCP) had been involved in the performances from 1994 onwards. As one of the dominant amateur theatre groups in York, and one with a lengthy (if informal) link to the fixed-site performances, represented on the Advisory Board for the 1951 Mysteries, their presence in the waggon plays reasserts this relationship. In 2018, my initial approach had not been put to the membership; the opinion at the time was that the Settlement Players were not in a position to take part that year. Further approaches for the 2022 production suggested that this break was seen by the Settlement Players board as a permanent one. The individuals who had driven their involvement had moved on, particularly to the York Mystery Plays Supporters Trust. It is perhaps surprising that the Settlement Players might see this as a permanent break, after performing prominently from the start of the waggon plays in 1994. They had partnered with the Merchant Adventurers to produce the Last Judgement from 1998 to 2006, and took on two further productions in 2010 and 2014. The waggons provided a novel performance style outside of the studio-based dramas and comedies that have come to characterise their recent output (YSCP - York Settlement Community Players, no date). I believe that part of this decision rests in the *absence* of stock. Like many amateur theatre companies in York, the Settlement Players have no permanent performance venue or stores. We might compare this to other amateur theatre groups, such as the Letchworth Garden City Settlement Players (Gray, 2020) or the Criterion (Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling, 2019, p. 204). These groups have formed and retained their identity through the ongoing use of props, sites and materials. For the York Settlement Community Players, their relationship to the waggon plays was not maintained in physical form. Without this, there was little to sustain their involvement.

Taking stock: rearrangement

The semi-permanence of waggons also calls attention to the shifting nature of York's streetscapes, and the continuous negotiations required during performances. In his article on the Mysteries as heritage theatre, Tyler argues, "Mystery Plays introduce a human, participative element to the essentially inert landscape of the built

environment.” (2010, p. 322). I would argue that the landscape is not inert, particularly when considered across the four years between each production. A close examination of one site – St Helen’s Square – illustrates this point.

In 2022 as in 2018, this formed the third performance site, but proved much more difficult to use four years on. Unlike the other sites, it was an original medieval playing station for the Corpus Christi pageants (King and Beadle, 1999, p. xii). Between the heyday of the plays and the modern era, it has been a continuous reminder of civic power, positioned outside the medieval Guildhall, and, for a modern audience, the eighteenth-century Mansion House which hosts the Lord Mayor. At the opposite end of the Square is St Helen’s Church, a 14th century building still in use as a place of worship (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England, 1981, pp. 20–22). Between these are a number of restaurants and pubs that overlook the square, most notably tourist attraction Betty’s Tearooms, shops, street sellers and buskers. This rich site is also an intersection between the shopping streets of Lendal, Stonegate and Davygate, with a continuous flow of shoppers and tourists. As such, it offers a rich variety of meanings, which can be altered depending on which side of the Square acts as a backdrop. In 2018, the plays alternated between positions either side of the square, in front of the medieval St Helen’s Church and the Georgian Mansion House, much as the pageants that year alternated between Old Testament and New Testament subjects. This provided a useful dramatic structure for the site, with the audience turning from one to the other. Rather than encouraging a static audience that viewed the plays as part of a grand narrative, I intended this site to capture transient observers who might watch one or two pageants and then move on. As waggons entered and left the space, there was a continual renegotiation with the audience, clearing a performance space and reframing the play.

Changes to St Helen’s Square between 2018-22 meant that this became more difficult for the performing groups. The introduction of new signage and hoarding meant that the available playing space was reduced (see Fig. 20). More time was required to set up and manoeuvre the waggons into place. It was now highly difficult for the the Crucifixion wagon to use the space outside the Mansion House, as their wagon is staged ‘end-on’ rather than the more typical ‘side-on’. The Merchant

Adventurer's *Last Judgement* and the YMPST's *Building of the Ark/The Flood* also had trouble with this site, as both used the street as a performance space. The waggon masters for these larger waggons made their own judgement whether to use the smaller space across from St Helen's Church and Betty's, or to brave the street furniture at the risk of damaging the waggon itself. During the second Sunday, St Helen's Square became more hostile to performance. The abundance of plastic bunting that festooned the square rustled constantly, filling the site and drowning out all but the loudest of performers – a complaint made by several audience members and participants.³¹ It is unlikely that St Helen's will be used again; the concrete realities of the site no longer support its symbolic qualities. Nonetheless, this indicates a significant issue in terms of theatrical bricolage, in that not all elements of the assemblage are immediately obvious to the bricoleur. Again, indirect means (in this case, delegating responsibility to waggon masters) may be all that can be done.



Fig. 20: St Helen's Square. The circled signage was introduced in 2022.

Taking stock: maintaining for the future

³¹ During the performances in July, these were Pride flags, which had replaced the previous Union Flags celebrating the Platinum Jubilee the previous month. It is impossible to say whether the complaints would have remained the same had the Union Flags remained.

Broadly speaking, performances not only expend existing stock, but also provide opportunities to renew resources, particularly in terms of the waggons themselves. 2022 saw a significant reduction in the cosmetic restoration of waggons – the Merchant Taylors waggon, normally repainted, was left a patchwork of peeling green paint, whilst the Builder’s waggon, usually refreshed each year, was kept in the same style as 2018. Elsewhere, two waggons normally provided by a local farmer were received in poor condition. The one intended for the *Building of the Ark* and *The Flood* required a complete replacement of the top (see Image 14). This was restored in lieu of the usual hire fee, a mutually beneficial agreement that sustained the waggon for future performances. Nonetheless, this added considerable strain to the volunteer set builder, who now not only needed to build the set itself, but rebuild the waggon it rested on. This considerable work may not have been apparent to the audience, but came through (for me) in the performance itself, in which Maurice Crichton’s Noah first strained to understand the process of ark-building, before skilfully demonstrating what he has learned to produce this restored waggon-ark.



Fig. 21: Waggon in disrepair (Straszewski, June 2022)



Fig. 22: Noah (Maurice Crichton) demonstrates clinker-clad boat-building, in front of the refurbished wagon.

Lévi-Strauss's description of a bricoleur's assemblage focuses on the idea of a pre-existing stock of materials. This stock suggests the resulting set (or performance). So far, I have considered moments where the bricolage reflects what is available. This might be seen as stating the obvious: of course the pageants will reflect the opportunities and constraints of the performing groups and their waggon. However, there is an under examined element of bricolage, which focuses on how a project can be dismantled and reused in the future. As I work on plays, my mind turns to what future opportunities might be created. I have found myself designing sets that can be reused for future projects, or buying props with an eye to future uses. This may not be simply theatrical – a colander, originally bought to represent a helmet in my 2017 production of *Henry IV*, now sees more use in my kitchen. Working concurrently on the York and Lincoln Mystery Plays, the devil's apron from the Shambles Performance became Joseph's costume in Lincoln. Noah's Ark was designed to be taken apart and reused as a garden shed (although, perhaps inevitably, other sets and building work have delayed this transformation). Importantly, there is often a tension between a play's immediate requirements (such as using cheap, temporary materials due to a limited budget) and long-term use.

It is therefore possible to present the waggons to an audience as icons of sustainability, but this has its own perils. In 2022, two waggons broached the idea of using artificial grass as part of their set: for the Freeman, to represent the Garden of Eden, and for the Scriveners' and Media Arts, the garden in which Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene. Artificial grass has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years as a pollutant and inhibitor of wildlife. The Society of Garden Designers campaign against its use, and in 2022 the Royal Horticultural Society banned it from their shows and events (Society of Garden Designers, 2023). For a production trumpeting the urgent need for environmental sustainability, I was understandably alarmed when two groups discussed using this material. However, close attention to other forms of sustainability was useful here. In previous years, the Freeman had used plastic plants that had been donated and passed on, or real plants sourced from the participants' gardens. Real turf was both expensive and would add considerable weight to the waggon, which would cause difficulties for the waggon-pushers. Furthermore, the artificial turf could be used again, reducing ongoing expense and sustaining the involvement of the guild. Although I still disagree with its use, the artificial turf made sense when framed in terms of sustaining the pageant itself, if not the wider environment. For the Scriveners and Media Arts, however, there were few signs that any symbolic or environmental cost would be recouped, as it was unlikely that the play or the groups would produce this pageant again. Instead, the garden was represented by paper flowers in wine bottles, a nod to the original Winedrawers Guild, and in microcosm by an Easter garden contained within a terrarium.

A step removed: the Shambles Market performance as bricolage

I turn my attention now from the Sunday afternoon performances, which saw all eight productions take place across four stations, to the midweek performances at the Shambles Market. I examine how the availability of waggons from the Sunday performances informed how I reworked these within a new assemblage. The Shambles Market performance involved five pageants, selected from the wider group of the Sunday performances. These were linked by a narrator played by a professional actor who I had previously worked with (James Swanton in 2018, and Mick Liversedge in 2022). In both cases, my casting decision was based on time

constraints, and confidence in their previous work in audience engagement. I originally developed this format for the 2018 waggon plays. This was a financial success, subsidising some of the expense for the free Sunday performances. It also met strong reviews from the local press, with the Chair of the Festival Trust declaring this structure to be a winning formula for the plays (Hutchinson, 2018). With this in mind, we planned a mid-week performance for 2022, and in October began exploring potential sites. The University of York had acquired and were refurbishing the Guildhall complex, and had expressed an interest in hosting the production there. However, delays in completion meant that this was unavailable for the waggon plays, and so we returned to the Market as our venue.

The Shambles Market is an unusual space in York, carved out between the medieval Shambles to the east/south-east, and the mid-20th century buildings to the south and west. Originally called Newgate Market, it was built in the 1950s to replace the market in Parliament Street (On-Site Archaeology, 2015). In 2015-16 the site was redeveloped, and renamed the Shambles Market, to tie it more closely to this medieval street (and tourist attraction). As Mitchell-Buck suggests, whilst the architecture of the Shambles itself is medieval, the shops that occupy it increasingly rely on fantastical medievalism – a ghost shop, a potions shop, three wizard shops (2019, p. 4). Mitchell-Buck instead argues that the Market itself is closer to the medieval markets, with locally sourced goods. Although the medieval markets were specialised – so that the Shambles was the street of butchers (with their *shamels* – stalls – still existing) – the modern Shambles market draws the various trades together, under shared canopies. Much as we found at All Saints, a sort of bricolage takes place here, reworking overlapping frames of nostalgia and authenticity. In the Shambles, medievalism is reworked as a tourist attraction, whilst something closer to a medieval marketplace takes place in the distinctly unmedieval Market. Displaced from their original context, both sites monetise their ersatz pasts. At night, however, both lose their commercial drive. The stallholders are subject to a strict 6pm curfew, so that any evening performance takes place in the aftermath of the working day, rather than as a natural part of it. The Shambles Market after hours is hollowed out and empty, save for the occasional skateboarder and ghost-walk. Empty performance spaces are at a premium in York, and returning to the Market (as opposed to alternative sites) was a practical decision.

However, simply replicating the 2018 performance was impossible for a number of reasons. The principal issue was the change in pageants. Due to the turnover of plays detailed earlier in this chapter, three of the five pageants from 2018 were not being performed in 2022 (see Table 1). What plays *were* now available had been reduced, as the total pageants had decreased from eleven to eight. These might be worked around. However, we had moved our performance dates from September in 2018, to June in 2022. The physical darkness that characterised the 2018 production was no longer available. In that script, I used the character of Lucifer to narratively reverse the Sunday performances:

“Yet God’s Mysteries burble on a Sunday bright
And left me the wreckage of a night on the town.”

(Straszewski, 2018)

The 2018 Shambles Market performance was therefore themed around darkness, both literal and metaphorical. Rather than beginning with the *Creation of the World*, as the Sunday performances did, this mid-week Lucifer recounted his first success with the *Fall of Man*. He followed this up with a performance of the first murder, in *Cain and Abel*. Enraged by the failure of *The Temptation of Christ*, Lucifer established *The Crucifixion*, complete with audience participation, before realising that this allowed his defeat in *The Harrowing of Hell*. *The Last Judgement* re-established order over the plays, as darkness covered the marketplace.

This sense of reversal in 2018 also affected how I positioned the audience and waggons. The Sunday performances have the waggons move from station to station, encountering a new audience at each. In the Shambles this was reversed. Instead, the audience moved. Starting in the Food Court, they were led from waggon to waggon by Lucifer, as Master of Ceremonies. This was a practical solution to the smaller scale of the site, in which moving waggons in and out of a playing space would be difficult, and in any case would fail to show off the wider marketplace.

Table 1: Plays performed in 2018 and 2022.

Bold type indicates plays also performed at the Shambles Market

2018	2022
Creation of the World to the Fifth Day	The Creation of the World to the Fifth Day (Thursday)
The Fall	The Fall (Wednesday)
Cain and Abel	
	The Building of the Ark and The Flood
Abraham and Isaak	
	Herod and the Three Kings
Moses and Pharaoh	
The Annunciation and Visitation	
The Temptation of Christ	
	The Last Supper
The Remorse of Judas	
The Crucifixion and Death of Christ	The Crucifixion and Death of Christ
The Harrowing of Hell	
	The Appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene
The Last Judgement	The Last Judgement

So, whereas in 2018 I had created a script based around five moments of darkness, in 2022 the plays and atmosphere no longer fit this theme. Instead, the initial attempt to use the Guildhall had resulted in a selection of Plays based around the Guilds and restoration/sustainability.. Sustainability might imply environmentalism, as seen in *The Building of the Ark* and *The Flood*. But it could also emphasise the Guilds' role in

creating and sustaining traditions. *The Last Supper*, in which a feast is reworked as a new communal identity, suggested a metaphor for the Guilds themselves. My suggestion of *Herod and The Three Kings* for St Luke's, on the other hand, was originally an attempt to highlight the recent identification of York's Three Kings as guild searchers, who reinforced a communal identity through trade standards (Rice and Pappano, 2015, pp. 83–101). Bricolage is evident here by my taking the remnants of a failed project (the Guildhall) and repurposing these in a new context (the Shambles Market). The focus on the Guilds now suggested a structure based on the trades now found at the Market, evoking their medieval ancestors. However, this required a new script for the narrator. As in 2018, I lifted passages from a variety of the York plays, patched with pastiche, pop cultural references and other civic cycles, particularly Chester (see Appendix 10- The Shambles Market Script). 68 lines (out of 167) were repurposed from the 2018 performance. The ninety-nine new lines drew mainly on the many moments in the Corpus Christi Plays that deal with buying and selling, whose plenitude (perhaps unsurprisingly) reflect a preoccupation with merchandise by the medieval Guilds.

My selection of pageants found links, without drawing a direct lineage. The greengrocers suggested the fruits of the garden of Eden in *The Fall*, with its prop apple bought at the market itself. The Mariner's play of *The Flood* evoked the fishmongers, and the Baker's *Last Supper* was at home in the Food Court (on Wednesday) and near the Bluebird Bakery (on Thursday). Although these plays were not adverts for these businesses, it echoed the medieval links between crafts and pageants. Meanwhile, the Butchers were represented briefly by their waggon. However, their performance group were unable to take part, with the actor performing Jesus in *The Last Judgement* raised in his place. Time constraints prevented the reworking of the cross-piece that might normally occur, so that once again the cross played its part in resisting its role. A miscommunication meant that the cast of *The Fall* were only available for the Wednesday evening. Its narrative replacement, the Builder's *Creation* waggon, was unable to fit under the canopies of the market stalls to reach the Food Stalls, instead lingering in the location originally intended for the *Last Supper*. This necessitated not only rewriting the script to reflect these absences, but reworking the processional structure for each night. In short, the

shifting availability of elements of the assemblage demanded the sort of rapid bodging or devious means that characterise bricolage.

Aftermaths

In describing the process of creating the Shambles performance, it may appear that I was entirely reliant on the remnants of what was to hand – past environments, old scripts, available pageants, and the established structure of the performance. However, by expanding the terms of bricolage to include maintaining and expanding its stock, two points can be made. First, the assemblage demands adaptation or flexibility: never becoming too reliant on any site, set or group. This may imply maintenance of the stock – building up the groups that take part, or instead finding replacements that might make participation in the plays part of their identity. In performance, flexibility can be integrated into the script itself. Lucifer is given moments to ad lib, or to adjust the intensity of swearing to suit the audience. More importantly, the waggons demand that the groups take responsibility for their performance within the larger structure. This is clearest when they work directly with the artistic director to assess the best position for their waggon within the space (as *The Last Judgement* did in 2022). Here, manipulating the physical waggons reflects the wider relationships that form the waggon plays. The artistic director must carefully maintain and develop these relationships.

This, however, is complicated by the idea of the artistic director as curator, focused on novelty in order to attract new audiences (and funding). Describing the challenges of festival curating, Pearson describes this as “something that smacks of consumer capitalism ... “I’ve got to get the newest thing! What’s the newest thing?”, as opposed to really maintaining some of your commitments to artists you’ve worked with for a long time” (Zaiontz, 2020, p. 159). We return, then, to the idea of the Mysteries as a rhizomatic assemblage – something that is constantly pulled between the opportunities that come from reworking their form, and the need for familiarity that engages existing participants and audiences. My formula – a framing of available plays by Lucifer, whose specific appearance depends on what is found at the site – provides my (as yet unknown) successor with a model that can be reworked. This depends on a careful consideration of what plays, groups and

resources are available, their salience to the sites as they come to exist, and the willingness to rework these different elements to suit.

What is salient and worth considering will inevitably reflect the wider assemblage of people, communities and ongoing research into the Corpus Christi plays. At this point in their history, the waggons come with their own tradition, their own ways of working. As such, they are no longer academic reconstructions (if they could ever really attempt to operate as such). As my predecessor Mike Tyler suggests:

“There is an extent to which the revival productions staged from 1951 onwards may be classified as productions ‘about’ the Mystery Plays, characterised by a desire to recognise and celebrate the achievements of the community which created the tradition, drawing the audience into a shared admiration for the sophistication and achievements of the creators of the tradition.”

(2010, pp. 334–335)

Tyler also warns that this reliance on the memories of past performances can be ultimately limiting: echoing Beckwith, he suggests that “ruins provide us with ancestors, not descendants” (2010, 335). As bricolage, however, ruins provide the building blocks for our descendants.

The Last Judgement

“Nowe is fulfillid all my forthoght,
 For endid is all erthely thyng;
 All worldly wightis that I have wroght
 Aftir ther werkis have now wonnyng.”

(Davidson, 2011d, ll. 373–376)³²

Play 47 – The Last Judgement begins with God reflecting on his work, which in turn reflects him as their mirror. He examines his work – individual humans – according to whether or not they have helped others. Having done so, he saves or discards them accordingly. Although the *Last Judgement* looks forward to the end of the world, and provides a definitive ending for each production, the pageants undermine this. The waggons are returned to their rightful place in storage. Props are reclaimed for the home, or sent off for repair. The works of charity declared in the plays must be re-enacted in daily life. For myself, props remain scattered around the house: the ark still sits in the garage, Moses has been returned to the toybox, the shepherds’ headdresses are dishcloths once more. Friendships I have made or sustained during the PhD must be maintained. These conclusions provide a further example of the Plays’ Last Judgement as what Black describes as *double-time*, a moment of both finality and ongoing work (2020). Taking my cue from the final play, I turn my attention first to the things I have wrought.

I approached the plays with three interlinked questions: what constitutes a Mystery Play? How might bricolage provide a framework to adapt these for new sites and contexts? In doing so, does bricolage sustain the Plays, particularly during moments of precarity? Following this, I consider where my research might next lead.

³² Now is fulfilled all my forethought,

For ended is all earthly thing:

All worldly souls that I have wrought

After their works have now their dwelling.

Things I have wrought

In Chapter 1, I considered various assemblage theories such as Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), vibrant assemblages, and rhizomes, which provided different metaphors for the ways in which the Plays have survived as broad possibilities rather than as rigid forms. All, however, suggested the continual absorption of novel aspects into the wider assemblage. In doing so, I focused attention not on the texts, but on my understanding of performances as an assemblage of heterogeneous aspects, organised according to their affordances and availabilities. My performances became a way of uncovering, analysing and absorbing these aspects of the assemblage, with a particular focus on the contents of sites. These sites had differing levels of connections to the existing assemblage. First, my home during lockdown, otherwise only tangentially connected to the Plays, instead acted as an analogy for the medieval home as a productive space. By reasserting the intimacy of the Pageants, I drew attention to the home itself as a significant element of both the medieval and modern productions, yet one currently under-represented in performances of the Mystery Plays.

In the second production, the restoration (or re-assembly) of All Saints North Street provided a way to consider how one character – the Virgin Mary – became a framework through which to consider physical and social boundaries at the site. Theatrical bricolage – the process of gathering and repurposing materials, the shared responsibility for creating and adapting performances, and a collective engagement in problem-solving created a bond among the participants. Whilst this failed to directly engage with the church's existing congregation, it showed the potential of bricolage to respond to the creative challenges of an unfamiliar site.

Finally, in the waggon plays, I examined the ways in which York's continually altering streets both constrained performances and provided new affordances. From this, I created a secondary bricolage in the form of the Shambles Market performance, which drew on the neomedieval marketplace to structure the performance. Beyond this, bricolage provided insights into the artistic director's role. By drawing on the work of my predecessors, I understood this as producing the conditions for performance, within which individual groups and directors create their pageants.

I suggest that this is a way to scale theatrical bricolage to larger events. In this respect, the process of bricolage can address some of the issues identified by Love-Smith in democratising large-scale community theatre (2020). These include the use of existing groups, embracing flux (in terms of timescale, involvement and resources) and, vitally, the willingness to embrace failure. More generously, this may instead be a case of recognising the very different measures of success that might apply to different participants and theatre-makers. In human terms, bricolage is simply the ability to recognise the different qualities of participants, and to show these in their best light. This has increasingly informed my directing process.

Through these productions, I have expanded on the concept of theatrical bricolage as both a way of adapting the Plays, and analysing their contents. By drawing on existing research on the productive sites of amateur theatre, I have argued that bricolage is not only concerned with the remnants of the past, but on continually refreshing the Plays for the future.

After their works

'Rehearsal' has medieval roots. In Old French, we find the word *rehercier*, or *harrowing*, an agricultural term for raking over the ground to prepare for sowing. If rehearsals suggest working over familiar ground, we are left with the agrarian imagery of the performance itself as a fruitful crop. After this comes the *aftermath* – the second crop, the *after-mowing* – a term we now associate with the consequences of harrowing catastrophes. Across this project, and as I have developed bricolage as a theatrical approach, I have become increasingly concerned with the aftermath of plays, whether in the sense of revivals or the material traces left behind, and how these might be reused.

I use *harrowing* deliberately, because environmental sustainability in the face of climate change focuses our attention on theatre's material remains. A recent report on sustainable practices in the sector suggests a number of barriers, which I have also encountered during my creative practice. These include a series of lacks: of training in sustainable techniques, sufficient timescales, communal support, public recognition, and funding (Mock, 2023, pp. 12–14). But we might instead see these as a challenge or opportunity. The report suggests that theatre professionals are wary

of losing the aesthetic impact of new material – or, as one anonymous respondent suggested, sustainable productions “will all look like junk yards” (Mock, 2023, p. 13). These concerns are ones shared by the fixed-site Mysteries, with their emphasis on spectacle and novelty, within the constraints of an existing understanding of what the Plays should look like. However, bricolage does not simply reproduce ‘junk’ on stage, but instead draws attention to their past histories, and the craft used to transform these.

Nonetheless, certain aspects of the reuse of materials through bricolage still feel discomfiting to me. First, although academic bricolage can draw attention to its sources through careful citation, I have not yet managed to find a similar process of citation on the stage itself. How can we clearly show the origins of our materials, without disrupting the other narratives taking place? Another strand of research might therefore investigate further how the histories of texts and objects are displayed and referenced on stage, fulfilling Lévi-Strauss’s idea that bricolage’s materials remain identifiable. Work on participatory theatre as hypertexts might suggest practical solutions (see Page and Thomas (2012) or Swift (2016)). In theatre studies this might build on the work of (for example) Novacich, who describes medieval theatre “as narrative realised through bodies laden with backstories, bodies carrying or quoting text, and text recalled through suggestive gesture” (2017a, p. 143). Elsewhere, Hodgdon describes the way in which photographs of performances form their own adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays (2015, pp. 73–79). The ongoing York Theatre Royal Photographer’s Group might be of use here, originally formed to record the 2012 Mysteries, and which continues to record rehearsals of their community theatre projects. There is a risk that the Mysteries might become self-referential, opaque to those outside academic research. My work on *Heaven and Earth in Little Space* suggests that bricolage may avoid this if it considers the assemblage more broadly, bringing in material related to its *participants* and their own personal assemblages drawn from wider communities.

Related to this concern with material remnants, the use of printed scripts still troubles me. My adaptation and directing process is still dependent on printed copies. In the *York Mysteries @ Home*, these became part of the performance itself, as in *Play 4 – The Prohibition of the Tree of Knowledge*, *Play 8 – The Building of Noah’s Ark*, or *Play 11 – The Annunciation*.. However, whilst these are kept securely as part of my

small archive of past scripts, I still occasionally find scraps of script around the house. It is unlikely that old scripts will take over my home, but I pivot here to the possibility of running out of space. Mock identifies this as an environmental issue, where props, costumes and sets without an afterlife must be disposed of, often into landfill. As I have described earlier, the lack of a central storage site for the waggons means these remain vulnerable to neglect and decay. This is despite the clear intention to maintain the waggons for future productions. For those productions where there is little hope of revival, many props and costumes are auctioned off or simply destroyed.

However, the disposal of material may suggest different ways to engage with the Plays, and it is with this thought that I end this stage of my own involvement. They may become a symbol of involvement, such as when an auctioned ass's head reappeared in charity runs for York Mystery Plays Supporters Trust (*Lord Donkeyhead 2021*, 2021). Immediately after our performance at All Saints, Askham Bryan College used the site for a floral display. Afterwards, the flowers were turned into 'lonely bouquets' and left around the parish for passers-by to take home (Laycock, 2022). We might find here a way of encouraging future involvement in the Plays. Might audiences take home a prop, with the intention of bringing these back in future years, now part of their own personal assemblage?

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