

# Away with sinful priests

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EVERYMAN

The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon

In medieval religious literature, there is often a tension between God's timelessness and his *ad hoc* interventions in human history. One way of expressing, if not of resolving, this is to synthesize the infinite and the instant in narrative or dramatic cycles; the opening episode of this production of *Everyman* uses an appropriate image to convey the presence of the end within the beginning. *Everyman* (Joseph Mydell) lies naked – dead? – in a tin bath. A child enters and begins to clean the body. When *Everyman* suddenly rises to dress for Fellowship's wedding, we see his daily routine repeating the cosmically significant moments of birth and death.

The production by Kathryn Hunter and Marcello Magni has the Central European flavour of their work with Theatre de Complicite. *Everyman* and his friend Fellowship (Edward Woodall) are dressed in modern Western fashions, while Cousin and Kindred look and sound

like Yugoslavian peasants. In this cosmopolitan world, difference of dress-code means nothing, but those who wear least – Confession (Johnny Lodi) and *Everyman* at the end – are the holiest.

The story is familiar: Death waylays the unprepared *Everyman*, who must make his journey from this world while preparing an "account book" to show God. The text offers several opportunities to lighten what threatens to be a gloomy evening's entertainment, but not all are taken. *Everyman*'s first instinct is to offer Death a thousand pounds to go away; when this is rejected, he asks for a reprieve: could God wait twelve years? One day? The declension of requests, punctuated by Death's patient refusal, shows a mind slowly grasping the enormity of its situation, but the comedy of *Everyman*'s prevarication is downplayed. His attempts to find companions for the journey are, by contrast, wittily teased out. Finding no fidelity in humankind – Cousin and Kindred having abandoned him – *Everyman* calls upon the personification of his wealth, Goods (Paul Hamilton). Being "trussed and piled so high", with no spiritual or physical backbone, Goods is unable to stay seated in order to attend his master, and so slithers to the floor.

The mid-point of the cycle of renewal is reached when *Everyman* decides to approach his Good Deeds (Myra McFadyen), who advises

him to seek out her sister, Knowledge (Josette Bushell-Mingo); thence, the journey leads to Confession and to spiritual cleansing. Good Deeds insists that Strength, Beauty and Five Wits (the senses) must accompany *Everyman*, but this production's representation of these physical faculties ignores a potentially startling dramatic reversal. Strength, Beauty and Five Wits enter as a circus troupe, impersonating a motor cycle and a ship. In other words, they are so *unlike* the slow-moving and sincere Knowledge and Good Deeds that their failure to stay with *Everyman* all the way to death is not the instructive surprise it might have been. This is, after all, the upward arc of the play's cyclical progression, and the audience does not expect *Everyman* to experience loss of companionship all over again.

In the text, *Everyman* exits to receive communion and extreme unction (the sacraments were not to be represented on the medieval stage). As he leaves, Five Wits reminds the audience that "priesthood exceedeth all other thing" and Knowledge concurs, with the caveat that a few "sinful priests giveth the sinners bad example". The rotten eggs affirm the integrity of the rest, but this production interpolates a scene which shows us the bad priests. A Roman cleric enters and begins to narrate the history of the Church, only to be interrupted by an Islamic call to prayer offstage and the noisy entrances of a mad hermit, an Ulster evangelist and an African witch-doctor. This reification of schism and charlatany is contrary to the ecumenical function of the play, which was sanctioned by the church precisely because it acknowledged contemporary anxieties about the priesthood so as to allay them. More intelligibly, the impostor priests leave behind a wounded Confession who, Christ-like, administers the sacrament to *Everyman* while lit from above. This, and the re-use of the tin bath as *Everyman*'s grave, make for intelligent emblems in keeping with the play's essential seriousness and economy of means.