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*‘Away with sinful priests’.
Review of Everyman,
directed by Kathryn Hunter
and Marcello Magni at The
Other Place,
Stratford-upon-Avon, 14
November 1996*

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In medieval religious literature there is often an irreducible tension between God's omnipresent perception of all time and his ad hoc interventions in human history. Cyclical patterns combining linear development with recurrent imagery can synthesise the infinite and the instant, and the opening episode of this production uses an appropriate image to convey the proleptic presence of the end within the beginning. Everyman (Joseph Mydell) lies naked, apparently dead, in a tin bath. A child servant enters and begins to clean the body. When Everyman suddenly rises to dress for Fellowship's wedding we see a daily routine repeating the cosmically significant moments of birth and death.

Kathryn Hunter and Marcello Magni's production has the central European flavour of their work with Theatre de Complicite. Everyman and his friend Fellowship (Edward Woodall) are stylishly dressed in modern Western fashions, while Cousin and Kindred look and sound like Yugoslavian peasants. In this cosmopolitan world difference of dress means nothing, but those who wear least--Confession (Johnny Lodi) and Everyman approaching his end--are the holiest.

The play dramatises Death's waylaying of the unprepared Everyman, who must journey from the world while preparing his '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, and 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 explanations of refusal, shows a mind slowly grasping the enormity of its situation, and this is subtly conveyed. Humour is not antithetical to the irony, and Everyman's inappropriate responses might easily have been made comically desperate.

The comedy inherent in Everyman's attempts to find companions for the journey is, however, carefully teased out. The failure of Cousin and Kindred to live up to their protestations of love plunges Everyman deep into despair, which does not diminish the black humour of their callous volte-face. Finding no fidelity in human company, Everyman calls upon the personification of his wealth, Goods (Paul Hamilton). Being 'trussed and piled so high', lacking spiritual and physical backbone, Goods is unable to remain seated to attend his master and he slides to the floor with all the floppiness available to a talented actor called upon to portray a bag of cash. With Goods' refusal to accompany Everyman, the nadir is reached.

The reversal occurs with Everyman's decision to approach his Good Deeds (Myra McFadyen), who advises him to seek her sister Knowledge (Josette Bushell-Mingo), and thence the journey leads to Confession, and spiritual cleansing. Good Deeds insists that Strength, Beauty, and Five Wits (that is, the senses) must accompany Everyman and in their representation a potentially startling dramatic reversal is ignored. Strength, Beauty, and Five Wits enter as a circus troupe performing athletically demanding impersonations of a motorcycle and a ship. So clearly are they 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 might not expect Everyman to again experience loss of companionship.

In the text, Everyman must exit to receive communion and extreme unction because 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 a caveat that a few 'sinful priests giveth the sinners bad example'. The rotten eggs are acknowledged to affirm the essential integrity of the rest, but in this production a scene is invented to show the bad priests. A Roman cleric with a tiny Bible enters and begins to narrate the early history of the church, only to be interrupted by an offstage wail of Islamic call to prayer, and noisy entrance of a mad desert hermit, an Ulster evangelist and an African witch doctor, who mingle with the audience and spout hysterical babble. This reification of schism and charlatanism is quite contrary to the spirit and indeed the religious function of the play, which was sanctioned by the church precisely because it acknowledged contemporary anxiety about the priesthood in order to dismiss it. The witch doctor is particularly absurd, having no connection with Christianity.

More successfully, the interpolated scene ends with the departing charlatan priests leaving behind a wounded Confession who, Christ-like, administers the sacrament to Everyman while lit by a divine glow from above. This, and the recurrence of the tin bath image at Everyman's well prepared-for death, are intelligent and subtle images in keeping with the play's religious message. One sympathises with a company attempting to fill the regulation ninety minutes minimum performance time with a play of barely nine hundred lines, and the extended wedding celebrations at the beginning and occasional musical interludes are by no means out of place, but the charlatan priests introduce a theological absurdity which, although amusing, is intolerable in this essentially serious work.