Hear Ye! Hear Ye! An Analysis of Katherine McGerr’s Modern Adaptation of The Second Shepherds’ Play!

Director Katherine McGerr gladly accepted Indiana University’s invitation to put on another production of The Second Shepherds’ Play this December of 2019. With the help of her mother and medieval scholar Rosemarie McGerr as well as their past experience with the play, the two have translated the original medieval play to suit a modern audience yet keep the integrity of the verse. This particular performance of The Second Shepherds’ Play takes the ideas and themes from the original medieval play and places the characters in a modern setting in hopes that today’s audience can still connect and empathize with the characters put into story so long ago. First, the play’s historical context will be explored to better understand the overall concept and approach of this performance.

The Second Shepherds’ Play is a famous development of early English drama as this was the time when dramatists were finally able to branch off from the church’s restrictions. Originally, plays were only performed during Christmas and Easter, but festivals of Mary as well as Saints days began to call for these dramatical performances (Bigelow 1). The use of these plays became more and more necessary for the medieval people who were illiterate and wanted to learn, as masses were held primarily in Latin. The knowledge of Latin is limited to the clergy and higher classes, so this makes understanding and engagement difficult for the lower classes. This play
was also for the people who wanted to capture inspiration and explore deeper into the theatrical expression of Christianity since the branching off of the church’s controls; thus, the Corpus Christi plays soon followed. *The Second Shepherds’ Play* was active in bringing the community together in celebration of the three shepherds and the birth of Jesus. With fine food and drink, the medieval English people would collectively engage with the actors of the Towneley cycle play, shouting and laughing at the events of Mak stealing the shepherds’ sheep and masking it as Gill’s newborn child. There is no collective conclusion whether the play from the Towneley cycle was performed on pageant wagons or in a set outdoor space in the round, but either staging allowed for participation from the audience regardless (McGerr 24). Set in a combination of both medieval England and biblical Bethlehem, these characters suffer from marginalization in their feudal structure yet find hope in the angel, Mary, and newborn Jesus. Although the medieval setting doesn’t quite match the true location of the events concerning the three shepherds and Jesus, this setting in medieval England was done in hopes of allowing the audience to connect with the characters in their extreme livelihoods. With this December 2019 production of *The Second Shepherds’ Play*, Director Katherine McGerr took it a step further by incorporating the original story into modern day, agricultural America.

The overall concept and approach of this performance from medieval England to modern day America can be seen through both Katherine and Rosemarie McGerr’s process of translating the original script, choosing songs that best fit the context of the play, and framing the big ideas and themes of the play to fit modern day society. Why *this* play *now*? “The play’s contemporary relevance—and message of hope—struck me, too, when I connected polyphony to the representation of community. Set in a society with such inequality that the poor must compete with the poorer, the play gives voice to the disenfranchised and shows acts of human mercy to
have divine rewards” (McGerr 23). This play performance explores themes of a dysfunctional society, where sheep are worth more than the people caring for them; suffering in poverty and poor weather conditions that come with their jobs; finding redemption for their suffering; having Christian charity, or giving mercy to those who have done wrong; and transforming through song in ways that are still relevant to today’s world and thus bridges the gap between the people from then and now. In previous translations of The Second Shepherds' Play, Katherine and Rosemarie McGerr have found that the changes failed to show the gravitas of what the characters were saying. Natasha Luepke’s 2015 translation is set in prose with a modern translation, to replace dead words and get the thought across clearly to a modern audience; however, for example, it neglects to keep the verse and emphasize Coll’s misery when he stresses the rhyme in his opening monologue (McGerr 30, 31). Katherine and Rosemarie McGerr agreed to find a “medium to the two extremes”, or a translation that keeps the integrity of the medieval verse while modernizing difficult words for the audience.

Rosemarie McGerr also informs that the original play has at least five songs, but no song selection survives in the original manuscript. With differences between the modal songs of the Middle Ages and modern music, they both feared that there would be a disconnect between the message of the medieval song and the modern audience. As a result, they decided to aim towards replicating “narrative effect” rather than sound. “McGerr explains that the shepherds’ division of the ‘tenory,’ ‘tryble’ and ‘meyne’ parts suggests a particular style of medieval polyphony called ‘discant’ used in both popular and liturgical music. She underscores the importance of the shepherds’ polyphonic singing at this moment to ‘present what they share in common, while still highlighting their individual voices’” (McGerr 33). For example, “Mirie it is” dates back to the age of the medieval English discant and has that crucial polyphonic element for the shepherds.
McGerr thought it to be a fitting song for the three shepherds following their opening monologues and short discourse. With the foundations of the play set in place, Katherine McGerr began her work as theatre director to aim for “theatrical meaning, beauty, and entertainment” in harmony with the extensive analysis of the historical Second Shepherds’ Play.

To bridge the gap between medieval England and modern day America for this play performance required a reexamination of staging, characterization, script content, costumes, and setting. As mentioned earlier, there is no conclusion whether the play was performed on pageant wagons or on a set stage in the round. Katherine McGerr has resolved to set the performance in Indiana University’s Collins Dining Hall, where the architecture features medieval woodwork, regal upholstered seating, and historic hanging light fixtures. She wanted to hint at the play’s medieval origins in the staging while making bigger adjustments in other areas. The actors performed with a thrust arrangement, the audience seated on three sides, with entry and exit points at all four corners of the small performance space. This brings the audience closer into a more intimate space with the actors and allows the actors to speak directly to the audience members. Music stands were placed at all four corners as well as the middle to aid the actors with their lines of verse. This was done because the director had little rehearsal time with the actors and wanted them to perform in a relaxed environment on-book. As with previous performances of The Second Shepherds’ Play, McGerr incorporated paper snowflakes and Christmas string lights on the back wall of the show space. “I envisioned a fabric snowscape that would transform into the angel by being lifted up off the ground. Winter winds could become the breathing undulations of wings through different handling of the same inexpensive but large-scale materials. Since the moment needed to be actor-motivated (I had no crew), I considered having actors make other simple weather effects with fans, paper snow, or even water, to
reinforce the characters’ struggle, sometimes comical, sometimes serious, against the elements” (McGerr 26). Katherine McGerr aimed to keep the performance “low-tech” and “high-imagination” to honor the medieval original in hopes of bringing awe to the modern audience.

When it comes to costuming, two of the shepherds were dressed in heavy winter coats and boots and, more importantly, American farmer’s clothing. Daw, Mak and Gill wore whatever clothes they had to keep them warm. What all characters had in common is the lack of fancy garments and even lack of preparation for the weather to differing extents. It was crucial for these characters to visually display their poor living conditions through their clothing. The only additional changes to the script during rehearsal time involved adjusting the medieval references of places and people. For example, the director incorporated references to Bloomington, Martinsville, and even people like Bobby Knight. These changes were made with the purpose of getting laughs from the audience as they know of these places and people rather than the medieval references, and it succeeded.

An American characterization of the roles did not change much from the original script. There are not enough stage directions in the script to tell modern scholars what sort of physical humor and portrayals would be present in the performance; despite having more or less physical humor or giving an overall tone of humor or darkness in the play, the modern performance still held true to the relationships between characters. One clear difference would be the use of the blanket toss. In the Middle Ages, there were no laws protecting actors from injury during performance like the laws society has today. In the original play, it is quite possible that these actors were actually tossed in a blanket while, in the modern performance, the blanket toss was faked for safety and to give a different angle of humor for the act. It is clear that Director Katherine McGerr and medieval scholar Rosemarie McGerr shared the same goal of keeping the
integrity of the medieval play while still providing a modern day adaptation for audiences to enjoy. Whether these performance choices were successful or not was made apparent by the audiences’ reactions throughout the show and after the performance when they spoke directly with the actors.

This performance of *The Second Shepherds’ Play* captures the ideas and themes from the original medieval play and places the characters in a modern American setting in hopes that a modern audience can still relate and have compassion for the characters put into story many centuries ago. Keeping the historical context of the play in mind, Katherine McGerr aimed to further explore the script, music, setting, staging, characterization, and costumes for her performance to honor the purpose of the play’s creation. That purpose is to celebrate the story surrounding the three shepherds, Mary, and the birth of Jesus, or a divine moment that occurs amidst suffering and despair. In a similar and respectful way as the original, McGerr brought a community together to bring awe and hope from a medieval play to a modern audience.
Work Cited


McGerr, Katherine E. “Sheepish Confessions: Notes on Directing an Irreverent *Second Shepherds' Play*.”