



Written by
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“The Second Shepherd's Play”

A Medieval Nativity Play

Adapted by Cora Alley

For the Christmas Madrigal Dinner

Scripture: Luke 2: 8-11

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord.'"

Dramatic Category: Christmas Madrigal Dinner Theater

What is a “Madrigal Dinner”?

A "Madrigal Dinner" is a trip back in time. Twelve singers dress in 16th century, English costumes and herald in the Christmas season with a harmonious concert of traditional, acappella carols. The ten members of the royal court join the King and Queen as they sit on stage in a semi-circle that opens to the audience.

The guests are seated at festively decorated tables ready to enjoy a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings: the Wassail (hot apple cider), the "boar's head" (prime rib), and Figgie Pudding (bread pudding). The King's Jester serves as the "Master of Ceremonies" for the evening, as he delights and surprises the audience with toasts, jokes, and comic asides.

A troupe of the "King's players" join the Court and present a traditional play that dates back to the time of classic European literature. The scenes of the play are woven among the courses of the meal and set up the sweet message of the Christmas carols. The audience comes away from the evening having enjoyed a delicious holiday feast, laughed and cried at the players, and marveled at the vocal talent of the ensemble.

NOTE:

See the “Madrigal Checklist,” at the end of the script, to assist you in producing the wonderful evening of celebration.

Topic: Forgiveness, mercy, and grace are the true meaning of Christmas.

Performance Time: 1 hour program + the concert and the meal = 2 hours total

Number of Players: 9 players, 12 singers, (with an option of 15+ entertainers)

Objective:

To use a fanciful depiction of the events leading up to the Birth of Jesus to illustrate the practical application of God's forgiveness in our daily lives.

Synopsis:

Have you every wondered what those shepherds were doing on the hillside the night the angels heralded the birth of Christ? You'd think they were tenderly caring for their sheep; but "No," they were preparing to hang their fellow-shepherd after discovering he was a sheep thief! How could such an evil scheme be hatched on such a holy night?

The Second Shepherd's Play is a classic medieval nativity play. It is the story of Mak, a sticky-fingered sheep-thief, who hatches a crafty plan to literally "pull the wool over the eyes" of his fellow shepherds, as he steals a sheep while his comrades sleep. When the shepherds awake, they hurry to Mak's shack where they suspect they will find the stolen lamb; however, to their great surprise, all they find is Mak, his wife, and their newborn child. Oddly enough, Mak will not let them see the baby, "After all, a newborn babe is no great sight." They are about to leave, when the baby bleats, sounding very much like a lamb! Outraged by Mak's deception, they hurry him off to a hillside where they intend to hang him.

Just as they are about to tighten the noose, the sky fills with angels (*The Madrigal singers.*) "The Prince of Peace is born! Peace on earth, good will toward men," is their melodious message. Will the shepherds hearken to the message of the "herald angels"? Or, is this Mak's last night on earth? Watch and see!

Cast:

The Royal Players:

Jester: *A fun-loving, clownish fellow who conducts the fun*
Coll: *The first shepherd*
Gib: *The second shepherd*
Daw: *The third shepherd*
Mak: *A sheep thief*
Gill: *Mak's wife*

The Madrigal Singers:

The King: *A commanding champion who wants the knight beheaded*
The Queen: *A sensitive woman who gives the knight his sentence*
Ladies 1, 2, 3, 4, 5: *Royal female members of the court*
Lords 1, 2, 3, 4, 5: *Royal male members of the court*

Note:

These 12 singers, dressed in Renaissance costumes, make up the king's court. They are an acappella singing cast, which also presents a concert of Christmas carols during the program. Mix the vocal parts as you see fit. The parts sung do not have any bearing on the parts spoken.

Additional Cast (optional):

(The play does not require these people, but they add a wonderful dimension to the program)

- 1 Juggler:** *entertains at mealtime*
3 Mimes: *perform antics during mealtime*
4 Minstrels: *serenade with instruments at mealtime, at the tables*
Trumpeter(s): *signal events with fanfare*
2 Beefeaters: *armored knights who stand guard at the door*
2 Announcers: *announce guests by name, at the door*
Serving girls: *dressed as peasants, to wait on each table (as many as you need)*
2 Litter bearers: *carry in the courses of the meal*
1 Magician: *entertains guests during mealtime, at their tables*
4 Troubadours: *sing to guests during mealtime, at their tables*
- Dancers:** *They add festivity to the evening. They perform a dance number dressed as “Merry Maids” with flowing dresses and flowers in their hair; like in the days of “Robin Hood.”*
- Orphan children:** *This is an opportunity for your “children’s choir” to get involved. They sing a song to the audience during the show. Dress these elementary-aged children in rags, dirty their faces, and give them bowls to beg at the tables. Then, put chocolate “gold coins” on each table and let the people give them to the children when they come by.*
- Disgruntled Serving Girls:** *An ensemble of six women who work up a few songs that are off-pitch, and silly in nature. They are generally irritated that their voices are not good enough to be one of those “uppity Madrigal Singers.” After all, “We clean up real nice, too!”*

Costumes:

Dress in Renaissance and medieval costumes. See specific cast descriptions above, for costuming suggestions.

Props:

Set the King’s table for a traditional Renaissance Christmas feast
Chocolate “gold coins” for the guest tables A few bushes to set out
6 sawhorses with styrofoam ball heads A doorframe that is freestanding
6 “wooly” covers for the sawhorses A stuffed lamb (the size of a toddler)
6 sheep head covers for the sawhorses A blanket that will cover 4 men
12 little stuffed sheep (for the head table) A large, artificial rock
A bag of artificial snow A sheep’s bell (hung around the neck)
6 sheets of “shining” white, angelic cloth

Lights:

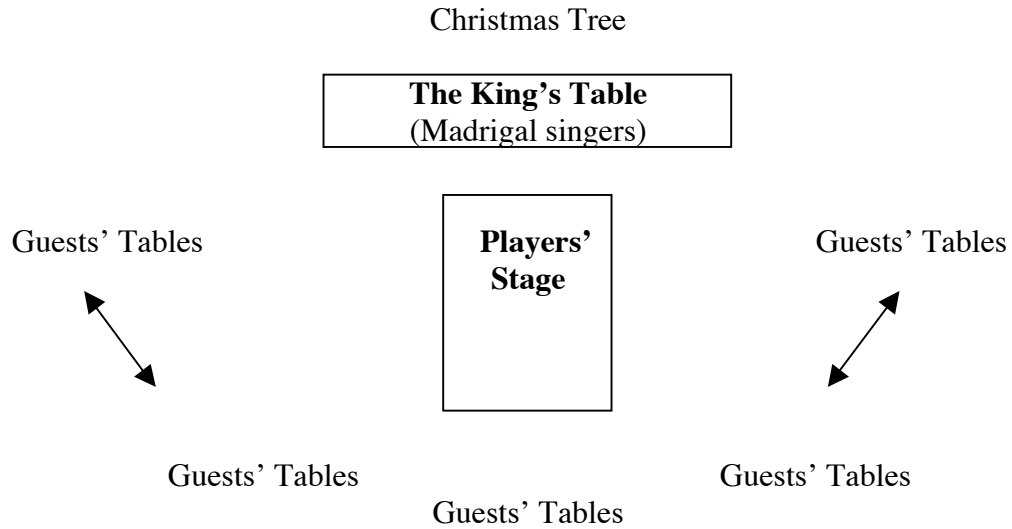
Design the lighting in such a way that the players and King’s Court are highlighted according to their dominance in the program.

Sound:

Microphones for the singers, at the table
Wireless mics for the actors with lines, who aren’t at the table

Staging:

If you can “transform” your room into a “castle hall” with “theater-in-the-round” seating, it will enhance the “ambience” of the evening. Here is a suggested diagram:



A Guide to 16th Century English Christmas Customs

Wassail - The festive holiday drink from the Anglo-Saxon, “Wes-hal,” means “be whole.” The old wassail bowls, usually of silver or pewter, were immense. It was the custom of the stewards upon entering the banquet hall to call out, “Wassail, Wassail,” and this was answered by the host and the guests alike with song or carol. A forerunner was “lamb’s wool,” a mixture of hot ale, sugar, spices, eggs, and roasted apples. Thick cream was sometimes added. It was served in the wassail bowl with pieces of toast floating on top. Hence, the origin of the drinking toast.

Boar’s Head - Traditionally, this is the heart of the Christmas feast. Its mouth propped open with an apple, the head was brought in on a silver dish, to a fanfare and a special carol. Its origin comes from Psalm 80, in which Satan is the “boar out of the wood.” The head of the slain boar, paraded about the Great Hall, showed the defeat of Satan by the newborn Christ child. The master of the house would take an oath upon it to perform some charitable deed, and often the other gentlemen seated at the table would follow suit.

Flaming Plum Pudding - Everyone in the household stirred the plum pudding and made a wish. If a trinket were found in the piece one ate, the wish would come true; consequently, it became known as “Figgie Pudding.”

The Twelve Days of Christmas - Known liturgically as Epiphany, representing the traditional time of the journey of the Magi to worship the Christ child. The twelve days were a time of great feasting, celebration, singing of Madrigals and carols, plays and general merry making.

Madrigals - A vocal music idiom from the 14th and 15th century in Italy, the Madrigals developed chiefly in the 16th century in England. The word has its origin in either Mandrialis (pastoral song), or matricials (in the mother tongue). English Madrigals were variously called songs, sonnets, canzonets, and ayres.

Instruction for the beginning:

Do a cheery job of decorating the set like an old English castle. Use coats of arms, banners, swords, thrones, drapes of rich tapestry, etc. The Christmas tree should be magnificent, the wreaths and centerpieces should be studded with decorations and lights, and the entire mood should be magical.

Set all the tables with china and good glassware. No paper plates. Outfit each table with rolls and fill the water glasses. People want something to eat and drink the minute they arrive. Hungry people are generally grumpy!

Light the candles, dim the lights and instruct the minstrels to roam the house playing their instruments while the guests enter. The “announcers,” welcome each guest and shout out his/her name (i.e. “The Lord and Lady Parker”). Servers wait inside the hall near the door, with their guest list for their table in hand. When they hear a name called that is assigned to their table, they come to the door and escort them to their table. Mimes and the magician can entertain the guests.

Caution:

Assign the mimes, the musician, and the juggler, various parts of the house at various times, so they do not wear out their welcome by frequenting the same part of the house all night.

The Script:

Fanfare 1

(The trumpeters enter and march around the hall. They meet at the front of the King's table.)

(Prologue)

(Mak enters and steals a few things off of the tables as he approaches the front. He slyly sneaks up to the front table. His hand extends to grasp a goblet, and he stands to put it in his bag. He next, spies out the centerpiece, but pops under the table as the Jester enters.

For the remainder of the jester's opening discourse, he plays a vaudeville, "cat and mouse" game with Mak. When the Jester turns around, Mak disappears like a "Jack in the box.")

Jester: That scoundrel Mak, has He entered this hall?
If he has, grab your gold one and all.

Ne're so sticky a finger have I seen on a thief,
Of his tricks and deceit we have no relief.

(He rushes to the front table where Mak is hiding; when he looks behind it, Mak is in front, etc.)

I'm now content that we shan't be harassed,
By Mak, the thief, till this night has passed.

So, we begin...
(He clears his throat)

Alas, dear guests, you've come again,
To escape life's sorrow, strife, and pain!

So gaily clad in handsome dress,
(aside) No doubt this royal mob you'll impress

Unstick thy mind from present day,
Let it come with us, let it fly away,

(He begins to set the stage with wooden sawhorses decorated with lamb's "wool" covers, etc. He sets a few bushes out. Mak pops up to see the sheep and tries to steal one. He is unsuccessful because the Jester stands too near.)

On wings of laughter, wings of song,
Wings that carry each along,

To a special time and a special place,
That magically, mystically, cares erase.

(He admires the sheep he has set up.)

Ah, your imagination must not fall asleep,
For tonight, these wooden creatures are sheep!

(appears insulted because the sawhorses don't look like sheep)

A little fluff here, and a nose there will do.
Don't laugh; they look better than some of you!

(He puts the finishing touches on the sheep.)

There! This room is now a castle hall,
And we are players, one and all.

Option: “Merry Maids” Enter

(They enter the hall, giggling. The Jester notices them.)

Oh what lovely things are girls!
Their beauty, like a rose, unfurls.

(He is obviously caught up in the show of lovely ladies.)

“Merry Maids” Dance

Jester:

(as the Merry Maids exit)

As graceful as snowflakes, as light as the air;
God's crowning achievement, with bows in their hair.

(He slaps his own face, and comes to his senses.)

Now, speaking of grace and dignity,
Our Madrigals enter, in harmony!

(He motions to the back door, and the Madrigals strike a chord.)

Processional:

(The madrigal singers enter as they sing a Christmas carol. “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” is a favorite. They line up at opposite doors as they enter, weave through the audience as they sing, meet at the front, curtsy and bow to each other, and finally the Ladies are escorted to their seats by the Lords.)

Opening Prayer:*(This could be a song)*

King:

(opens his arms wide as he welcomes his guests)

Welcome guests from far and wide,
From hill, and vale, and countryside,

My bounty is yours' eat, drink, and be merry!
With jests and fine song this party will terry!

The feast before us is beyond all compare,
Let us bow to our maker in most humble prayer.

We thank Thee, Lord, for this fine feast tonight
as we gather together to honor you. In your beloved
Son, you have given us hope, life eternal, and joy beyond measure. We lift our
praise to Thee, and honor Thee in merriment and song. We pray in the name of
Jesus, whose birth we celebrate tonight, Amen.

Queen: *(looking over the table at the wooden lambs)*
My Lord, these lambs, they're really quite boney.

King: The reason, my love, is because they are phony.

Queen: *(puzzled)*
Boney? Phony? Why this wood at our table?

King: The Jester will tell us. Let's pray that he's able.

Jester: *(running in)*
I'm able, my Lord, and willing my Lady,
To weave the tale of the miracle baby.

(He places little sheep on the tables, one by each Madrigal's plate.)

Tonight's story is the greatest 'er told.
A miracle already two thousand years old.

On a hillside cold, four shepherds tarry,
Near frozen to death, and hardly merry!

(He tosses out styrofoam snow.)

It was the very hillside where His birth was proclaimed,
On that "Silent Night" when the earth was changed.

When the angels cried out:
"Peace on Earth, good will towards men,"
These shepherds were caught in a dastardly plan.

(The Madrigals react in shock)

One was a prisoner of the other three;
Who had wicked intent.
(aside) Well, you'll just have to see.

But, how could they execute their evil plan,
In light of the birth, of the great "I am"?

The "Prince of Peace" foiled their plan,
So, all they could ask was, "Where is the Lamb?"

(Madrigals begin to ask questions, but the Jester hushes them all.)

But, alas, how did they their hearts fill with such guile?
Their story unfolds;
(aside) it'll make you smile.

Here come our three shepherds; hang on each word;
For, I'll wager, a sorrier lot, you've not heard.

(He exits and the shepherds enter.)

Scene 1: "The Shepherd's Plight"

Coll: What a horrible night, and I am ill-dressed.
My fingers are numb, and my legs all distressed.

With a shepherd's plight, I am poorly impressed.
I must surely be dumb to loose all of my rest
For some lambs!

Gib: Through rain or through snow, wherever we go,
No relief can we know, from our rams!

Coll: We poor men of the hills, nearly die of the chills;
You should see all the bills, we run up for our pills,
We poor men!

We are so underpaid, over-taxed and dismayed,
Earning hardly a yen!

Daw: Our debts grow deeper, the less we can buy.
The snow on these hills, like our debts, is piled high.

(Madrigals throw snow at the shepherds.)

Our houses are shacks, and we break our backs;
Those are the facts, as surely as sin!

Coll: Aw, cold and wind won't ruin our lives,
But I'll tell you who will: Those shrews we call...

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