# MEDIEVAL THEATER

## 500-1400 C.E.

# The Dark Ages (500-1000 C.E.)

◦ Much political turmoil
  ◦ no reliable political structure
  ◦ Feudalism:  Lords, vassals, serfs
◦ The Church was the only stable "government"
  ◦ The church exerted increasing influence
    ◦ In the 4th Century, the Bishop of Rome established supremacy in church matters and in secular concerns
  ◦ Church edicts against secular performers
◦ Not much theater
  ◦ Traveling singers and storytellers
  ◦ Traveling troupes of circus-like entertainers

# Hrosvitha of Gandersheim (935-1001 C.E.)



HELENA A ROSSOW. VULGO
HROSVIDA SANCTIMONIALIS

- Earliest known female dramatist
- A German nun
- Wrote religious plays based on Terence's plays
  - Terence's style, but Christian stories
  - Were probably "closet dramas"
    - meant to be read, not performed
- Purpose was to glorify Christian virgins

# Theatre is Reborn

◦ Changes in music
  ◦ Tropes
    ◦ Extended musical passages spread throughout Catholic Mass
    ◦ Lyrics added later
◦ *Quem quaeritis*
  ◦ Trope added into Easter service in 925
  ◦ Angel asked, "Whom do you seek?" to three Marys visiting tomb of Christ

# *Quem quaeritis?*



*Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, o Christicolae?*

*Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o caelicolae.*

*Non est hic; surrexit, sicut praedixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro*

- Translation:
  - The Angels: Whom do ye seek in the sepulcher, O followers of Christ?
  - The Marys: Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified, O heavenly ones.
  - The Angels: He is not here; he is risen, just as he foretold. Go, announce that he is risen from the sepulcher.
    - —John Glassner, editor, *Medieval and Tudor Drama*.

# Liturgical Dramas

◦ By 975, church began incorporating drama into the service
  ◦ Clergy presented with assistance from choirboys
  ◦ Written in Latin
◦ Many playls developed dealing with biblical themes
  ◦ Mostly performed for Easter, Christmas, the 12th Night (Feast of the Epiphany)
  ◦ Usually serious, but at the Feast of Fools much dancing, foolishness and parodies of church practices

# Staging Liturgical Drama

◦ Different scenes set up simultaneously in mansions
  ◦ Mansions: scenic structure depicting some locale needed for a biblical tale
    ◦ Could be specially constructed or an existing area within church
  ◦ Used to indicate locale, but too small to perform in
    ◦ Would initiate play at a mansion and move to platea
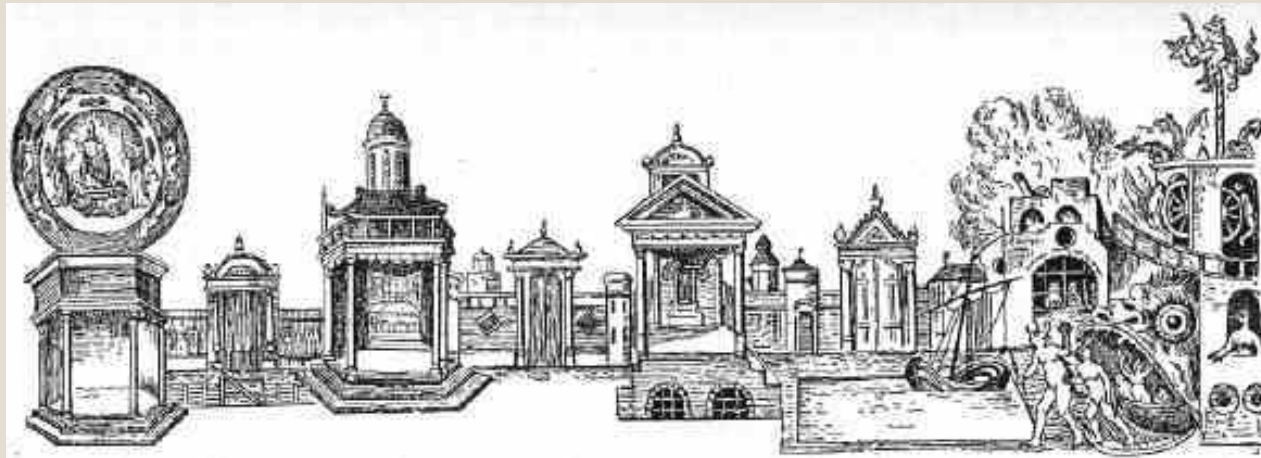
# **Vernacular Drama**

◦ Moved outdoors

◦ Written in language people spoke

◦ Two types of Vernacular religious dramas

   ◦ Mystery or cycle plays

   ◦ Morality plays

# Mystery/Cycle Plays

◦ Depicted scenes from the Bible
  ◦ From Creation to the last judgment
◦ Presented in cycles
  ◦ Series of short dramas of an episode
◦ Lasted several hours or several days
◦ Staged independently of church services
  ◦ Presented in spring and summer during festivals
    ◦ Feast of Corpus Christi was a favorite time

# Reaching the Audience

- Anachronism: presenting characters and events outside proper historical sequence
  - Makes characters more identifiable to audiences
- Highlighted the spectacular
  - 1501 production of the Flood used barrels of water to make it "rain" for 5 minutes
- Comedy introduced to make it more appealing

# Producing Mystery Plays

◦ Produced once every 2-10 years
◦ Confraternities, or craft guilds, assigned to a particular "appropriate" cycle
  ◦ Shipbuilders produce Noah's Ark
  ◦ Baker's guild produce Last Supper
◦ Pageant Masters supervised productions
  ◦ Responsible for construction of scenery, stage, casting, disciplining actors, money takers, and narrator between plays

# Acting

◦ Amateur actors doubled roles
◦ Fewer than 5 rehearsals for a cycle
  ◦ Fined for missing or disrupting a rehearsal
◦ Typecasting
  ◦ Choosing people who have certain qualities in real life to play characters with similar qualities
◦ Provided own costumes; Church assisted with more unusual costumes

# Staging

- Processional Staging
  - Cycle set up on pageant wagons
  - Could be moved from locale to locale
- Stationary Staging
  - Series of small scenic mansions stood side by side with huge platform stage
  - Heaven and Hell mansions placed at opposite ends of platform
- Important: neutral platform playing area

These pictures were taken during the performance of the York Cycle of Mystery Plays in Toronto on June 20, 1998.

# *The Second Shepherd's Play*

- Dramatizes the biblical story of the shepherds who are told about Christ's birth by an angel
  - First section is comedic
    - Stealing a sheep and find it in a crib, pretending it's a newborn baby
  - Second section is the Holy Nativity
    - First section sets stage for nativity
- Shepherds are characters from Middle Ages
- Reflects secular farce mixed with religious subject matter

# The Second Shepherd's Play

**1972 – UMBC Department of Theatre**

# **Morality Plays**

◦ Attempts to teach a moral lesson through use of allegorical characters
  ◦ People represent ideas
◦ Characters take journey through which they learn moral lesson
  ◦ Struggle between two forces, good and evil, for soul of main character
◦ Staging was similar to cycle plays
  ◦ Neutral platform stage

# *Everyman*

◦ Best known example of a morality play

◦ Character Everyman told by Death that his earthly life is over
  - ◦ Everyman seeks companion to accompany him to next world
  - ◦ Speaks to characters representing abstract ideas, but only Good Deeds will go with him to afterlife

◦ Lesson to Everyman (humanity): only Good Deeds can be of any assistance when one is summoned by Death



from 16th Century Woodcuts