

CMP 2/20/70

# Mystery history



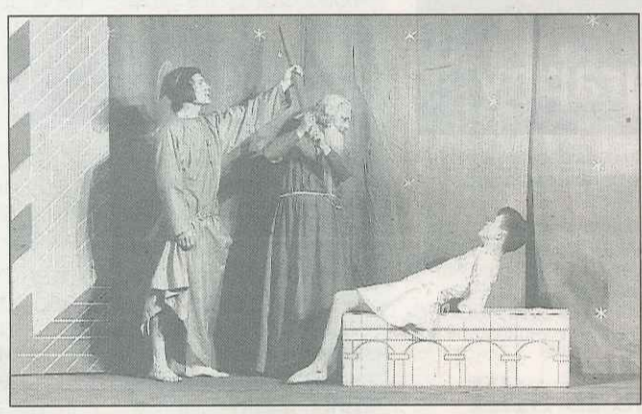
**ALMIGHTY:** Peter Dornford-May as God in the 1977 production of the Chester Mystery Plays.



**BIBLE STORIES:** Full cast of the 1951 production of the Chester Mystery Plays (photographs donated by Robin Ede, copyright Chester Chronicle.)

As the city looks forward to this year's Mystery Plays we take a look at some pictures from past performances

NEXT week, 300 community actors will perform a tradition that their counterparts in Chester began 700 years ago. The Chester Mystery Plays open at Chester Cathedral on Wednesday, June 26, 400 years after they were banned for 'Popery' and bawdiness and 62 years after a 20th century cast revived the theatrical experience for city audiences to celebrate the Festival of Britain. The medieval plays were first written by Benedictine monks at the Abbey of St Werburgh (now Chester Cathedral) in the 14th century to educate the masses at a time when services were in Latin. The Bible stories were performed by the city's Freemen and Guilds on pageant wagons in the streets for more than 100 years before being suppressed



**FILICIDE:** Abraham and Isaac (played by Maurice Kay and Duncan Miller) in the 1951 Chester Mystery Plays.

during the Reformation. The Chester Mystery Plays were revived in 1951 by Chester City Council in collaboration with the county drama committee of the Cheshire Rural Community Council (later known as Cheshire Community Council) as part of the city's contribution to the national Festival of Bri-



**LAST SUPPER:** Donald Hughes as Jesus in the 1951 production of the Chester Mystery Plays.

tain celebrations. They were performed in the cathedral refectory over two weeks in June of that year. According to archivist Diana Dunn, the 1951 revival is described in the programme notes as a 'modern production adapted from the medieval plays by Betty and Joseph McCulloch and directed by Christopher Ede.' She said: "Their aim was to try to keep to the original medieval feel of the plays, described as naturalistic, with 'a simple and direct approach' but 'using modern methods of production and lighting.' "There was also a desire to retain the original look of the plays through the use of medieval-style costumes in distinctive colours taken from the period. Chester angels were dressed in red and the Virgin Mary wore a light blue cloak for the Nativity

but a dark one for the Passion Play." Further performances of the plays took place in 1952 and then 1957 and since then there have been productions approximately every five years. Diana continued: "The 1962 production took place on Chester Cathedral Green, thus establishing a precedent for outdoor performances which continued until this year, when the plays will be performed inside the nave of Chester Cathedral."



**OPEN AIR THEATRE:** 1973 production of the Chester Mystery Plays cast in front of a set in Grosvenor Park (photo taken by Geoffrey Newcombe).



**TABLEAU:** The modern revival of the Chester Mystery Plays in 1951.

The Chester Mystery Plays Company recently received funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for a Sharing the Mystery project, to create an archive of the modern era. Chairman Jo Sykes said: "Recent donations have included programmes, scripts, music and photographs from the 1950s by Jolyon Dodgson, for which we are hugely grateful. "We would welcome further donations of material for the early years of the revival of the Chester Mystery Plays, in particular from the 1950s and 1960s." ■ IF YOU have any archive material from the Chester Mystery Plays contact archivist Diana Dunn by email [d.dunn@chester.ac.uk](mailto:d.dunn@chester.ac.uk).