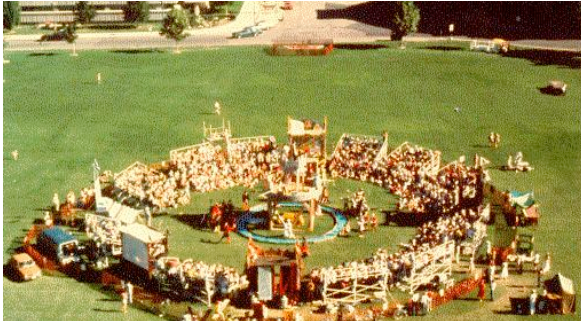


## The Poculi Ludique Societas (PLS)



Archival photographs

Three plays from the Chester Cycle of Mystery Plays are to be performed by the Poculi Ludique Societas (PLS) in St. James' Cathedral on Friday evening, November 11, 2011 as part of the Friends of the Crèche International Convention, and will include, *The King's visit to Herod*, *the Adoration of the Kings*, and *the Slaughter of the Innocents*. These seemed a particularly suitable choice for Remembrance Day Night. They will open with the scene in Herod's court as the strangers seek word of the king that they have heard is to be born, continue to the central scene at the Crèche as the Wise Men worship the Child Jesus and end with the chilling enactment of the killing of children by Herod's mercenaries. Taken out of the sequence these three plays portray the tragedy of Herod whose pride will not allow him to welcome the Son of God, and whose determination to kill Him leads to the death of his own son. They show his decline from the height of his power to his death. At the centre, however, is the reverent acceptance by the three stranger kings of the Christ Child, and their presentations to Him. The brutality of the soldiers as they kill the children remind us that all generations have experienced the scourge of war and occupation where the innocent suffer at the hands of the powerful.

The Poculi Ludique Societas (PLS) is the oldest dramatic troupe in the world dedicated to the performance of medieval and renaissance drama. Although they began as a part of a graduate course at the University of Toronto, they have shared their enthusiasm and expertise with the Toronto community for more than four decades and perform the popular, community based drama that was the native tradition from which Shakespeare drew the timeless vitality of his plays. The shows were originally created to celebrate community whether it was a large commercial city such as York or Chester, a port town such as New Romney in Kent, or a market town such as Reading in Berkshire. They were meant also to be money makers and were accompanied by fairs. They can extend over several days, sometimes in procession through the streets using purpose built wagons. PLS, with the help of their fascinated community partners (who often perform with them), have presented nearly 200 productions since 1965 and have attracted thousands of spectators from literally all over the world to Toronto. Learn more about them from their website (<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~plppls/>).

A research unit and centre for performance studies at the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto, they produce plays from approximately 1100 to 1650, and have been in the forefront of the rediscovery of the dramatic riches of this period. While the plays of Greece and Rome, and those of Shakespeare's time are performed with some frequency, the great dramatic tradition of the intervening centuries has traditionally been ignored. PLS have performed some of the most vivid, powerful and popular theatre in our heritage and work in close association with the Centre for Research in Early English Drama (REED) – an internationally scholarly project at the University of Toronto that is establishing for the first time

the broad context from which the great drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries grew. Founded in 1975, REED has for the last 34 years worked to locate, transcribe and edit all remaining documentary evidence of drama, minstrelsy and public ceremonial in England through the Middle Ages until 1642 when the Puritans closed the London theatres. Central to this revolution has been the recreation of early drama on stage. The unofficial ban on presenting the godhead on stage in Great Britain was lifted only in 1951 with the revival of a condensed version of the York Cycle in York for the Festival of Britain. Once the ban had been lifted, interest grew in the performance of this material and continues to gather momentum.

PLS made its mark early, and in 1966 performed for the Medieval Academy of America meeting in Toronto. During its first decade it concentrated in performing in Middle English, the language of the plays and verse form released from the confining limits of the page were central to the experimentation. From the late 1960s, there was an increasing interest in attempting the staging conditions, and renewed archival research into the external evidence for medieval and renaissance staging practice and the use of processions of wagons.

Its academic influence has been felt outside Toronto and they have toured across Canada, the United States and Europe, and been a part of major academic conferences. However, the PLS has not been exclusively an academic enterprise. The shift in scholarly emphasis from exploring the historical language to exploring the historical stage conventions made the work of PLS more accessible to the general public. The festival atmosphere of the large outdoor productions has drawn a loyal non-academic following. In this way the group also has acted as a bridge between the University and the Toronto public without compromising its scholarly standards. No other group in the world has what they have in terms of expertise, stage properties, costumes, or scholarly resources. It has become the major company for the exploration of the texts in performance in the world. Although colleagues in Britain and the United States have mounted important productions, only the PLS has managed to continue producing significant productions over a sustained period of time.

In May, 2010, Poculi Ludique Societas will stage a newly edited version of the complete Chester cycle of professional plays as it was performed in the city of Chester, England until 1575. The production, performed on colourful pageant-wagons at different locations on the campus of the University of Toronto will be shared by PLS and acting companies from all over North America, including both university and community groups. This vision of the Chester Cycle portrays the story of Christian Salvation History from Creation to Judgment as we believe was witnessed by Christopher Gordon. This is a unique challenge to its producers as the last performance of the Cycle was in 1575. Until about ten years ago, there was no way a reconstruction of such a performance could be attempted that had any grounding to the period. Then, over 400 years after its last performance, an "eye witness" account was found! Christopher Gordon was a Protestant minister and was so incensed by the Catholic version of the play that the city intended to produce that he wrote to the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in the north to put a stop to it. One of his letters contains a "List of absurdities" and from it they have been able to deduce what parts of the surviving text were actually produced that year. The result is an exciting version of the Chester Cycle as it may have been performed as a Catholic statement in the tense religious "stand off" in the north of England where a large part of the population were opposed to the Elizabethan Protestant Church. The three plays to be shown as a part of the Friends of the Crèche International Convention on November 11, 2011 are being taken from this Cycle and were last played as one amalgamated play in 1572.

Professor Alexandra Johnston is the Chair of the Board of Directors of Poculi Ludique Societas, and is serving as a member of the Program Committee planning the Friends of the Creche International Convention in Toronto.