

MAKING A MIME

ROSEMARY HEDDON

HOW is a mime made? Surely the methods must be as varied as the makers, so that any description will, to some extent, be personal.

First, the choosing of a theme. Mime is essentially simple: in its action, in its presentation, in its appeal, and to derive full value from it, the underlying idea needs to be simple too; simple because it is basic, a statement of fact, which is not to deny that it may be profound. Indeed, it is through the simple straightforward movements of mime that some of the deepest mysteries of our faith may be illustrated.

The theme of this mime was to be twofold: the linking thread was to be that of the angels, whose name both in Hebrew and Greek means 'a messenger', and it was in this manner that they were to be shown, as God's messengers to man. At the same time, the aim was to produce a mime suitable for Lent, showing sin, and God's answer to it in the promise of a Saviour, and the selecting of a Chosen People from whom should be born the Redeemer who would save man through the Passion and Resurrection.

To this end, seven episodes were determined upon. The first, to establish the idea of heavenly bliss, and the place of angels in God's creation, was to be a representation of Isaias's vision of the seraphim. The second, to show the fearful power of evil, and as a reminder that Satan, too, was created an angelic being, was to be the fall of the angels. From this, the fall of man followed as a natural sequel, with the struggle between the forces of good and evil personified in Satan and the angel bearing the fiery sword. Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac at God's command would introduce the idea that the way of redemption is one of suffering, and this would be followed by one of the most dramatic of the angelic visitations: the passing of the Angel of Death over the land of Egypt, and the sparing of the sons of Israel after their terrible tribulations. From there to New Testament times, and here the Presentation of our Lord and Simeon's prophecy to

our Lady would be the occasion of a heavenly messenger's offering to her of the sword of sorrow. The whole mime was to reach its climax in a Passion sequence, with a hint of the jubilation of the Ascension at the end.

Having selected the episodes, words were the next concern; but these words would not be spoken by the actors, but by a special group before and after each incident, so that while the eye rested for a moment upon the stillness of a tableau, the visual images could be reinforced and underlined by the words of Scripture, and perhaps, in the mind of the onlooker, some new aspect of the truth might be revealed.

These words were not to be a mere recounting of the episode concerned . . . rather, they were to lead up to it, or comment on it, though in actual fact their source might be some completely different book of the Bible. It was hoped that by thus placing words and action in a new and perhaps unexpected relationship, some original train of thought might be set in motion.

This search was a lengthy one, for not only must suitable texts be found, but they must also be in clear language, dignified and euphonious.

It was decided to use a rhythmical pattern throughout: first, words which would either lead up to the action, or describe it; then, the action, to be performed to music; this again, to be followed by more scripture, this time in the nature of a commentary, and finally a summing up of the underlying theme of the episode in a few bars of chant.

It might be useful to interpolate here, that this mime was constructed with the invaluable aid of a composer, so that music for both action and singing was written for that precise purpose. But while there is no doubt that this made the task incomparably easier, it must be realized that specially written music is not necessarily a pre-requisite for a good mime, and that many excellent mimes have been performed to 'ready-made' music. The search for something suitable is often long and arduous, but it can be done, and let no one be discouraged when, besides the services of an accompanist, there are available, nowadays, such versatile aids as the record-player and the tape-recorder.

In planning the action, certain principles must be borne in mind: first, mime is startlingly bare; there can be no padding as there is in dialogue. We are dealing with the naked bones of

action, so that a vast amount of plot is developed in a few minutes. Because this progress is so rapid, every action is essential, and it is vitally necessary that each stage 'registers' with the audience. The movements, therefore, must be slow, broad, and deliberate, and repeated, if necessary, for added emphasis. Moreover, to give them their full value, only one statement should be made at a time, the other mimers assisting in this pinpointing of the action by remaining still, and focussing their attention upon it.

In order to give to the mime a flowing and rhythmical quality, much can be achieved by thinking of the trunk as the centre where all movement starts and finishes; thus arm-lifting begins at the shoulder, the movement travelling out towards the fingertips. This, together with proper attention to such details as finger and hand positions, and carriage of the head, can add greatly to the quality of the whole.

Whilst the final choreography rested with the producer, it was often the result of considerable co-operation between actors and producer. Thus 'The Battle in Heaven' was the result of almost spontaneous improvisation on the part of the players, whilst in some other cases the actors would often make suggestions which would then be stylized, stripped down to essentials, and cast into a more poetic form.

Costume for mime is a debatable subject; while one school of thought urges a non-representational garment, with all the actors dressed alike, others advocate a more traditional type of dress. In general, with children, it seems more natural to let them 'dress up' in typical Biblical costume, but with the proviso that freedom of movement be given the greatest consideration. No elaborate beauty of costume can make up for ugly hampered movements. So much for the human characters.

But bearing in mind the didactic as well as the artistic object in scriptural mime, it always seems that on the angelic level, much can be done to counteract the chubby, feathery, white-nightied impression which is the almost inevitable result of many cribs, Christmas cards, and religious pictures, charming in themselves though many of these may be.

There remains the problem of how to present these incorporeal beings, but some guidance can be obtained by studying their nature. From this, one gets an impression of light, swiftness, and beauty, and of a power so manifest that, almost without excep-

tion, the first words of an angelic salutation are, 'Fear not!'

Various attempts were made, on a number of occasions, to translate this into terms of movement, costume, and make-up, and the results have been green, gold, or orange-robed figures of great height (always wingless) with out-of-the-ordinary make-up and head-dress to remove them still further from the realms of earthly beings. This time the angels were robed in shimmering garments which fell in long folds from wrist to ground: the 'good' ones in all shades of yellow, from palest cream to deep gold; the fallen angels in shades of red: scarlet for Lucifer, his attendants wearing shades of darker red, to deep maroon. Upon their heads they wore a flame-shaped halo, made of wire and cellophane, in the same colours. The height of the actors, already chosen for their tallness, was accentuated by this costume, so that they were able to tower majestically above human beings who were selected for their small size.

Picture then a smallish stage, roughly divided to represent Heaven, Hell, and Earth. Heaven, shown by stepped platforms, rose up to a narrow brilliantly lighted archway, the throne of God; in the opposite up-stage corner, Hell, ground level and red-lighted; all human beings came on to the downstage area, which was Earth, through a slim arch, and with these simple devices the scene was set, and the whole played through without the interruption of a curtain.

After a few opening bars of music, the curtain rose to show all the heavenly host, clad in gold and red, standing upon the steps of Heaven, facing the throne of God, arms folded at shoulder-level, tall haloed heads resting upon their arms. The silence was broken by a single child's voice: 'In a vision I saw the Lord, sitting on a throne that towered high above me, and the skirts of his robe filled the temple.' Immediately a group of voices took up the quotation: 'Upon it stood the seraphim: the one had six wings and the other had six wings: with two they covered their face, with two they covered his feet, and with two they flew. And they cried one to another and said', (and here, a great crescendo of full chorus) 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts; all the earth is full of His glory.' (Isaias vi, 1-4.)

Then, to music, the angels lifted their heads and began a movement of worshipping which can only be described as 'vibrating': a snake-like movement of the arms, one at a time,

from above the head to below the waist. The lifting and lowering of the brilliant draperies on their arms achieved a wonderful sense of pulsing, living movement. As the music ceased, they again came to rest, and once more, the single voice, followed by chorus, proclaimed: 'After this, I heard as it seemed, the voices of countless multitudes crying out in Heaven, "Alleluia; salvation and glory and power belong to our God."' Without a pause, thin and high came the chant from the angels: 'Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth.'

Again the speakers set the scene, this time as a chorus: 'Fierce war broke out in heaven, where Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought on their part, but could not win the day, or stand their ground in Heaven any longer; the great dragon, serpent of the primal age, was flung down to earth; he whom we call the devil, or Satan, the whole world's seducer, flung down to earth, and his angels with him.' (Apoc. xii, 7-10.) To music indicative of pride, Lucifer, who had stood upon the lowest step, now made his way through the ranks of angels, climbing up to the very throne of God, and there turned to face the assembled angels. His own red-clad followers moved towards him, but Michael, at a trumpet-call in the music, rallied his angels and seized Lucifer. Following his example, the good angels seized the bad, and clasped hand to hand, swaying with the movement of ballet, forced them down out of Heaven, where, upon their knees, the devils writhed into the furthest corner of Hell. And now, antiphonally, the chorus mourned: 'How wise thou wast, how peerlessly fair, with all God's garden to take thy pleasure in! All of gold was thy fair fashioning; a cherub thou shouldst be, thy wings outstretched in protection. From the day of thy creation all was perfect in thee, till thou didst prove false; and for thy guilt I must expel thee, guardian cherub as thou wert, from God's mountain; between the wheels of fire thou shouldst walk no longer. A heart made proud by its own beauty, wisdom ruined through its own dazzling brightness, down to earth I must cast thee, an example for kings to see. How art thou fallen from Heaven, O daystar, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, who didst lay low the nations! And thou saidst in thy heart, "I will ascend into Heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most

High." Yet thou shalt be brought down to Hell, to the uttermost parts of the pit.' (Ezech. xxviii, 13-18; Is. xiv, 12-15), till the angels broke into song again: 'O Michael Archangel, I have made thee Prince of all the souls to be saved.'

Then the chorus took up the story: 'One day, when the heavenly powers stood waiting upon the Lord's presence, and among them, man's Enemy, the Lord asked him where he had been. "Roaming about the earth", said he, "to and fro about the earth."' (Job, i, 6), and Lucifer came forward to tempt Eve, who, with Adam, had just entered upon Earth. Three times he tempted her, and each time she refused, but ever more reluctantly, till, at last, standing over her, overshadowing her, he persuaded her to pick the apple and offer it to Adam. Amidst the jubilation of the devils, and the mourning of the angels, they bit it, but instantly an angel descended, and with sweeps of his flaming sword, drove Adam and Eve from the garden, and Lucifer back to Hell, whilst the speakers sternly commented: 'So the Lord God drove him out from that garden of delight, to cultivate the ground from which he came; banished Adam, and posted his Cherubim before the garden of delight, with a sword of fire which turned this way and that, so that he could reach the tree of life no longer.' (Gen. iv, 23-4), and the angels sang: 'Remember Adam's fall, O thou man, remember Adam's fall.'

In the next narration, a strong voice, speaking above a muted choral monotone, was used to give power and resonance to the Voice of God: 'After this, God would put Abraham to the test. So he called to him, "Abraham, Abraham"; and when he said, "I am here, at thy command", God told him, "Take thy only son, thy beloved son Isaac, with thee, to the land of Clear Vision, and there offer him to me in burnt sacrifice on a mountain which I will show thee."' (Gen. xxii, 1-2.) This was followed by a simple showing of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, his upraised hand seized by an angel, and Abraham's obedience signified in these words: 'The Lord God hath opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away backward. For the Lord God will help me; therefore have I not been confounded; therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.' (Is. 50, 5-7), whereupon the angels sang: 'Abraham believed God and it was reckoned virtue in him.'

The mysterious deliverance of the Israelites through the blood

of the Paschal Lamb was introduced with Exodus xii, 3-7, 12-13, and the Angel of Death, performing a dance symbolic of his passage over the land of Egypt, struck down the first-born of the Egyptians, but was driven back by the sign of the blood upon the doorposts. After his departure, the Egyptians mourned for their dead, then, incensed against the Israelites, who were thanking God for their deliverance, drove them forth, while the chorus spoke these words: 'Son of man, wail for the multitudes of Egypt, and cast them down . . . unto the nether parts of the earth, with them that go down into the pit. Holy thou art, O Lord, and wast ever holy, and this is a just award of thine, blood to drink for those who have shed the blood of thy saints and prophets' (Ezech. xxxii, 18; Apoc, xvi, 5-6), followed by the chant of: 'There is no remission without shedding of blood.'

The words used to introduce the Presentation of our Lord were those which tell of the circumcision; they bring out the theme of the shedding of blood, and it seemed sufficient justification that St Luke himself used them to preface the same incident. 'When eight days had passed, and the boy must be circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name which the angel had given him before ever he was conceived in the womb.' (Luke ii, 21-22.) In a simple straightforward scene, our Lady and St Joseph brought in the child, and were met by Simeon and Anna, who were praying there. An angel indicated the presence of the Messias to Simeon, and after praising God, he foretold the sorrow which would fall upon our Lady, whilst she accepted the sword of suffering proffered her by an angel. 'Behold this child is set for the fall and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed' (Luke ii, 34-5) was followed by the angels' rejoinder: 'Lumen ad revelationem gentium'.

The Passion had of necessity to be more symbolic than the fore-running scenes, and hints and glimpses of these were woven into its music. 'When the hour came, he took his place with the apostles beside him. He said to them, "I have longed eagerly to eat this passover with you before I suffer."' (A pause.) 'He withdrew about a stone's throw and knelt in prayer, saying, "Father, if it please thee, take this chalice away from me. But thy will, not mine, be done." And an angel from heaven appeared,

to strengthen him.' (Luke xii, 14-15, 41-43.) Our Lord and the three apostles were seen as in the garden. The apostles slept whilst our Lord (whose face was never seen throughout this episode: he knelt or stood, back to the audience) prayed in agony till an angel entered, bearing the chalice, which he accepted. With a return of the 'Eve' music, Lucifer came from Hell, and tempted him to bow down before him. After the third refusal, Lucifer caused our Lord to look into Hell. There two devils had seized a third, and were beating, buffeting, and scourging him, imitating the suffering and indignities of our Lord's own Passion. In spite of Lucifer's taunts, our Lord remained gazing, unmoved, turning only once when our Lady entered. Lucifer, now thoroughly incensed, seized our Lord's left arm in an attempt to drag him away, but again he stood impassive, only throwing out his right arm towards the angels bearing the chalice, the crown of thorns, and the instruments of the Passion. Suddenly, he threw off Lucifer, who fell back, dragging off our Lord's cloak, and leaving him standing in the position of the crucifixion. The stage was completely darkened save for a small spotlight directed from behind, silhouetting the cruciform figure. Out of this darkness the chorus spoke, antiphonally, and this time against a background of thin mourning music: 'Surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our iniquities: he was bruised for our sins. The chastisement of our peace was upon him: and by his bruises we are healed. The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was offered because it was his own will, and he opened not his mouth. And the Lord was pleased to bruise him in infirmity. If he shall lay down his life for sin, the will of the Lord shall be prosperous in his hand. Therefore he shall divide the spoils of the strong: because he hath delivered his soul unto death and was reputed with the wicked.' And almost in triumph, the angelic choir burst out: 'And he hath borne the sins of many and hath prayed for the transgressor.' (Is. liii, 5-7, 10, 12.)

After this the mime moved swiftly to its conclusion. 'What shall I return to the Lord for all that he hath given to me? I will take the chalice of salvation: and I will call upon the name of the Lord' (Ps. cxv, 3, 4) said the chorus, and as our Lord lowered his arms, and turned forward for the first time, St Peter received

the chalice from him. After offering it to the people, St Peter stood for an instant, holding the chalice as at the offertory, whilst our Lord momentarily stood as he had done for the crucifixion. Then, to the sound of trumpets, he ascended the steps of Heaven, and turned, blessing his apostles, as the last words were spoken: 'And the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God' (Mark xvi, 19) and the angels, worshipping once more with their vibrating movement, sang: 'The Lord is gone up with a joyful sound.'



REVIEWS

THE HOLY INNOCENTS AND OTHER POEMS. By Charles Péguy. Translated by Pansy Pakenham; foreword by Alexander Dru. (The Harvill Press; 15s.)

PÉGUY. By Alexander Dru. (The Harvill Press; 15s.)

Péguy is a difficult author to grasp, not because he is dense and tight but because he is so diffuse. If a Shakespeare sonnet is a *magnum in parvo*, Péguy's *Mystères* and *Tapisseries* may be called *parva in magnis*. His writings are like those foods which one has to absorb in huge amounts, to the point of indigestion, in order to receive sustenance therefrom. It is necessary to read him for hours, to travel with him many miles through jungles of platitudinous chatter, rich in repetitions, to begin to understand what his work is about. If there is a way of saying in fifty words what can be expressed in five, be sure that Péguy knows it; only Gertrude Stein has excelled him in this. So fatiguing a procedure is held in check in his poetry by the limits imposed by French classical prosody and it is there that he is most accessible.

Mr Dru's admirable study might be called *Péguy Made Easy*. One who knows our author will realize how much compression has been needed to bring his thought within tolerable limits. Mr Dru's plan has been to depict the political background of his early years and in particular the Dreyfus affair. The chapter devoted to the ten years covered by this episode traces rapidly the history of the conflict between the two branches of the French tradition, the Revolutionary and the Catholic, throughout the nineteenth century. These pages, though condensed, neither deform nor over-simplify the facts, though perforce they cannot include everything.

Mr Dru treats Péguy's work chronologically and follows the