



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for The First Breeze of Summer

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at drama festivals was for someone to ask, "Is that a Miracle?" and someone else to reply, "It's a Mystery to me."

This may not sound funny to our modern sophisticated ears. But to audiences who were used to watching stalks of wheat it was hilarious.

(Hilarious, incidentally, was a leading playwright of the period, although he spelled it "Hilarius." He wrote plays in Latin about saints, and considered himself a serious person. It is not known whether Hilarius ever met Hrosvitha. They probably would have hit it off.)

In some English towns the trade guilds produced a series of Bible stories called Mystery plays (or possibly Miracle plays). Each guild performed a single play from the series on the back of a wagon, which was then moved to another spot in town where a different play had just finished. The rolling stages were pulled around by the performers themselves, a procedure known as "hitching your star to a wagon."

[[image - drawing of a man in a cart hitched to a star, by STUART LEEDS]]

Meanwhile, in Italy they were busy trying to reproduce the theatre of

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ancient Greece, because it was the Renaissance. The fact that nobody had the vaguest idea what Greek theatre used to be like didn't slow them down for one second.

A nobleman named Giovanni Bardi, for example, set out to create an authentic Greek production and invented opera by mistake. He tried to cover it up as fast as he could but it was no use. Once you invent something like opera you can only leave it alone and hope for the best.

It was about this time that a certain young man was poaching deer in the forests around Stratford-On-Avon. He was not particularly successful, since he was under the impression that you poached a deer in much the same way you poached an egg.

But that story can wait until another time. It's not really important anyway.

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