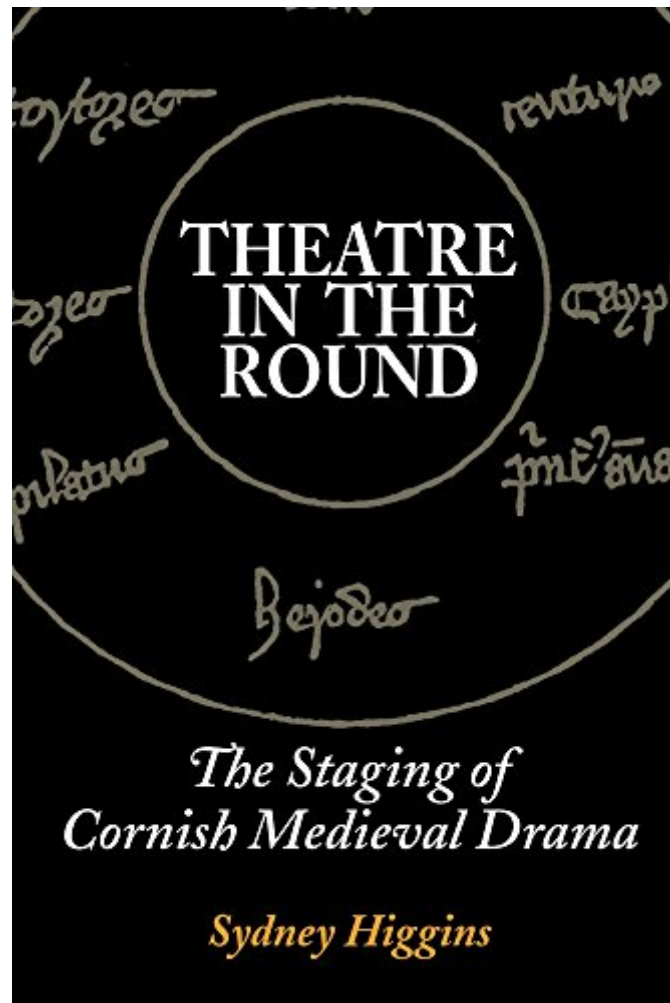


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Theatre In The Round: The Staging Of Cornish Medieval Drama



Synopsis

The important and rich collection of medieval plays from Cornwall has, in the past, been all but ignored by the majority of drama historians and critics. In this book, Sydney Higgins shows why this is a mistaken and ill-informed view. The oldest of the three surviving manuscripts is the Cornish Cycle - performed on three consecutive days - that is probably the earliest surviving British drama script. Next is 'Buenans Meriasek' ('The Life of St. Meriasek') that is the only full-length medieval saint's play to have survived in the literature of Great Britain. The last of the three, 'The Creation of the World' is the first day of another Biblical play. In the manuscript of the Cornish Cycle, there is a plan of the theatre for each of the three days and there are two similar ones in 'St. Meriasek'. Apart from these five, the only other other plan of a British medieval theatre that has survived is of 'The Castle of Perseverance'. Like those for the Cornish plays, it is circular. Among the many important conclusions in the detailed and meticulously researched examination of the staging of the Cornish plays is that the medieval circular theatres are far more likely to have been the inspiration for the circular theatres of Shakespeare's age than the highly unlikely notion that their origin arose from a pageant waggon being parked in a rectangular inn yard.* * *This reviewer found of particular interest Sydney Higgins's lucid reconstruction of the playing in the round.'Theatre Research International'. vol. 26, no. 1, p.117Insightful scrutiny of staging ... a full and detailed analysis.'European Medieval Drama - 2', Brepols, p.200.

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Customer Reviews

Having some familiarity with Piran Round, I was delighted to find this book so I could at last make some sense of how the Cornish mystery plays were presented in the great circular amphitheatres. Sydney Higgins provides wonderful descriptions of how he surmises the plays ran, including placement around the open air theatres of the many pavilions for principal parts (heaven, hell, torturers, saints, dukes and so on) and more particularly how the large audiences (as described by Carew in 1602) were accommodated. The author provides very convincing arguments, moving through the surviving medieval scripts scene by scene, highlighting important dialogue, the progress between scenes and the movement in and out of the round of extraordinary props (moving mountains, ships, the fire-belching jaws of hell, god descending and returning to heaven in a cloud, the flight of souls to heaven). What an amazing spectacle which the author brings to life. This is a well illustrated book, with staging directions and many works of art depicting similar medieval dramas. And my favourite insight from the book â “ the plays were of course written and presented in Cornish, with the only English being exclaimed by Lucifer when he is ejected from heaven and by Cain when he kills Abel. Must have been most amusing for the Cornish audience that the arch-baddies both spoke English!

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