The Christmas Play

—AN ASHLEY HALL TRADITION—

100 YEARS ONSTAGE: THE ASHLEY HALL CHRISTMAS PLAY

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“Hear, ye! Hear, ye! The performance is about to begin!”

When the Town Criers call their lines, the church quiets down. Backstage, actors, dancers, singers, and musicians have already donned their costumes and gathered in a circle. Together, they read letters from alumnae, listening to fond memories of the journey they are about to embark on. They review their lines one last time, ready to be a part of what is now a 100-year-old tradition.

The Christmas Play began in 1924, fifteen years after Ashley Hall’s founding. Dr. Mary Vardrine McBee, Head of School, adapted a play she had seen on a trip and directed the first performance as both an educational and a celebratory event (1). Derived from Medieval “Mystery Plays” (3), *The Christmas Play* would quickly become a highly anticipated Ashley Hall event. According to an article published in 2004 by Frances G. Westbrook in Ashley Hall’s former magazine, *The Paw Print,* there was both a religious and an academic interest in the establishment of this tradition. Not only did Ashley Hall boarding girls attend church together every Sunday, but their education was steeped in medieval and Renaissance literature. Just like the Shakespearean plays that Ashley Hall presents in front of our Bear Cave, Westbrook writes, *The Christmas Play* was “A natural extension of the classroom curriculum” (2). For these girls, performing the “Mystery Plays” was quite an enticing concept.

"Mystery Plays" refer to the 14th-century English performances presenting the stories of the Bible. There were many different Cycles of these plays, all performed over the Feast of Corpus Christi. Beyond offering entertaining outlets for creativity, these plays were begun out of necessity. In Medieval England, religious services were in Latin, and literacy was so low that most could not read the Bible. The common English people did not know their own religion and their lives were dictated by stories and principles they had never learned. The plays were as much a source of information as they were one of entertainment. Ashley Hall drew from the Chester Cycle, from Chester, England, which contains over 20 plays. Since it takes days to perform them all, Ashley Hall focuses on the two that best fit the season: The Adoration of the Shepherds and The Offering of the Magi.

Soon, beyond its establishment as an Ashley Hall tradition, *The Christmas Play* became a staple in the Charleston community. It was presented as Ashley Hall's gift to the neighborhood and drew an audience from far beyond the school's gates. *The Christmas Play* was increasingly featured in newspapers and magazines as it became an integral part of the holiday season. The December 1958 edition of *Gateway to Charleston and the Low Country*, whose front page featured Ashley Hall, proclaimed that *The Christmas Play* would "attract a record throng that has come to regard the presentation as the true beginning of the Christmas Season" (3). Similarly, on December 13, 1968, *The Charleston Evening Post* published a large image of the play, titled, "Ashley Hall Play Sunday Is Gift of Joy," (4). In this publication, Mary Lily Bennett recounts that *The Christmas Play* is "a rare and wondrous offering" portrayed "with tenderness and with joy" (4). Ashley Hall alumnae speak of the play with equal reverence when reflecting on their days as actors, singers, dancers, and more. It has become a hallmark of the Ashley Hall

experience, in which each student can contribute their talents, passions, skills, or even just a helping hand.

We perform in the original Middle English, though edits have been made for the sake of time and the audience's comprehension. Yet the plays retain more than simply the language— the entire performance and environment are designed to reenact the original Medieval plays. Since they often performed on carts, traveling through the city, they had minimal props and no sets. A musical interlude "bridged the gaps between scenes as one wagon wheeled away and the next moved into place" (5), just as the Ashley Hall Orchestra and Red Choir fill the quiet as actors step from one scene to the next. Even the audience is a reenactment— in full medieval costume, a procession of students plays a medieval Congregation. There are even characters who declare: "Hear, ye! Hear, ye! The performance is about to begin!"

Once the Town Criers make this announcement, they lead in the Congregation, a parade of townspeople and their Duke and Duchess. The Choir and Orchestra regale them with *Personent Hodie* before the music picks up in excitement. The Jesters skip in, an assortment of dancers and tumblers, their makeup as colorful as their smiles are bright. In the most energetic part of the play, they dance jovially for the Congregation before joining them in the pews. They are followed by the more somber Monks, who chant in Latin before the plays within the Play begin.

The Shepherds' Play follows Hanken, Harvey, Tudde, Trowle, and his young apprentice. Trowle is very frustrated with the other shepherds, who have thrust their work onto him so they can relax. The Shepherds, in turn, are very frustrated with Trowle, who is always complaining. After a spirited argument and a dramatic fight, a light from the heavens stops them. An angel appears, telling them that the son of God has been born and they must go see him. The three first

Shepherds give the baby their only possessions: A bell, a bowl, and a cap. Trowle and his apprentice have nothing to give except a promise to be good for the rest of their lives. Dressed in tunics and furs, sporting scraggly beards, the Shepherds exit as the Choir sings *In the Bleak Midwinter*.

The Kings' Play also opens with a disagreement. As the three wise men pray for a prophecy —that a light will shine from the heavens when God's son is born— they argue over their prayers. Each insists that only he knows how to pray properly. A light stops their conversation in its tracks. They ask for a second sign, to be sure this is the light of the prophecy, and their answer comes in the form of an angel, who calls them to Bethlehem. The Kings present their lavish gifts and promises of devotion and express their shock that the son of God was born in a manger. They learn that this baby's might and grace will be meant for all, rich and poor, Kings and Shepherds alike.

Then, the arguably most anticipated part of *The Christmas Play* begins: The Angels' Play. It is not part of the Chester Cycle, but an Ashley Hall pantomime, a farewell to our Seniors. They step in, dressed in pastels and powdery white wings. A candle is pressed between their hands, held in prayer, illuminating beautiful and emotional faces. As the music plays, they process around the room in circles, their families holding up cameras and holding back tears. It is one of the moments where they realize they will soon be leaving this chapter of their lives. It is one of the moments where they look out at their classmates —some recent connections, some lifelong friends— and think about all the memories they have formed during their time at Ashley Hall. The Speaking Angels lead them to the stage, where they form a colorful arrangement around Mary, also played by a Senior. As the light points back to the center aisle, the Mother Angel appears with her 1st-grade Baby Angels in tow, and they complete the striking tableau.

For one hundred years, the show has gone on. It has undergone plenty of changes, from new locations to script edits to new costumes and props. Even in 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, *The Christmas Play* was shared as a video. The change was not without its artistic and logistical challenges, but even with masks and COVID tests, Ashley Hall girls came together to offer some Christmas cheer. It is this kind of resilience and teamwork that preserves our community, as well as century-long traditions like *The Christmas Play*.

As deeply as we love the tradition, we also understand where our world has changed. Both Ashley Hall and Charleston's communities have grown since 1924, and we are made up of many more religions and cultures than before. We welcome and encourage this diversity, and we do not restrict this tradition to the Christian faith. Those who do not share *The Christmas Play*'s beliefs can appreciate its rich history— not only local history, but that of Medieval England, of theater, of language itself. The universal themes of kindness, equality, and joy are not reserved for a specific religion. The story is beautiful, and the community is loving. You do not have to believe in the same things to be a part of the same tradition.

Ashley Hall has enthusiastically prepared for the 100th anniversary, with 163 students involved. On any given day, one might see actors rehearsing by the Bear Cave, working on memorizing, enunciating, and projecting. Stopping by the Recital Hall and the Muti House, one may catch the Red Choir and Orchestra rehearsing Christmas tunes. Perhaps the Jesters are dancing in Burges Auditorium, or the Angels are practicing their procession in Davies. The School is alive long after the day is done, and effervescent energy envelops the campus as we come together yet again to put on *The Christmas Play*.

Works Cited

(1) Caroline Pardue, description of Christmas Play, 12/11/1962, College of Charleston Special Collections, Box 51, Folder 41.

(2) Frances G. Westbrook, Article in the *Paw Print*, 2004, College of Charleston Special Collections, Box 51, Folder 16

(3) Gateway to Charleston and the Low Country Magazine, Vol.3– No.12, December 1958, College of Charleston Special Collections, Box 51, Folder 43.

(4) Mary Lily Bennett, The News and Courier, Charleston Evening Post, 12/13/1968, College of Charleston Special Collections, Box 51, Folder 43.

(5) The Ashley Hall Christmas Play Program, 2008, College of Charleston Special Collections, Box 51, Folder 21.