

## Theatre

In some ways, the entire SCA itself is theatre. We wear costumes, we assume at least the name of a fictional character, and we engage one another in one long unscripted improvisational skit.

But there are also opportunities to learn about medieval and renaissance theatrical styles, and recreate them. My name in the Society is Christian d'Hiver, and I'd like to tell you how I've gone about producing period plays.

Most of the drama productions I've seen in the SCA have been ad hoc: someone decides to produce a play, gathers the actors, script, props, and such together, runs practices, and sets a performance date. Once the production run is over, the troupe disbands.

### SCRIPTS

It's not too hard to find good sources for period plays. Early Shakespeare, of course, fits in before 1600 CE, as do mystery plays, Tudor court masques, and so on. See the bibliography at the end of this article.

I've also found that it's only a little more challenging to adapt a piece of medieval literature, such as one of the Canterbury Tales, a story from 1001 Arabian Nights, a bardic poem such as Sir Orfeo, a passage from a Norse Saga, or an Arthurian tale, to the stage.

Then comes the fun part. Once you have your script, think about how many actors you'll need. (It's not unusual --either in period drama or the SCA-- to have a single actor play more than one character.) Make some preliminary decisions about costume, set design, blocking, any musical interludes, etc. Pick a performance date. (At a local meeting, or maybe at an event.)

Then announce your plan, and solicit people to join you. I've never had any problem finding people in the SCA who'd like to act on stage. Fit their strengths to your vision of the play, but be open to new possibilities. If a big hulking fighter plays the title role of "Everyman," it'll have a different feel than a production where you get your old, decrepit Baron to play the role, or if you decide to have each actor take a turn playing Everyman. (Oh, and here's a good rule: don't cast yourself. You're busy enough.)

Now the real fun begins! After you cast the play, and get a list of any previous commitments from your actors, then you can set up a schedule for rehearsals. If you've never run rehearsals before, here's my advice: break down the performance of the play into small chunks. People will have to (a) perform this dance, (b) recite the lines in the first act, (c) sing that song, (d) know where to stand in this scene, and so on. [begin boldface or italics] Each rehearsal should have, as it's goal, the cast mastering one or more of these chunks. [end bold or italics]. It's not enough to walk through the play a bunch of times. Each rehearsal has to have a reason. If you approach rehearsals this way,

your cast will understand why they can't just skip a rehearsal or two. They'll say "This is the rehearsal where we learn the dance in act 3, and --while I already know the dance-- the other actors can't learn it without me there."

It's been my experience that a short, intense schedule of rehearsals works much better than a more drawn-out one. For example, when we performed *Sir Orfeo*, we had 14 rehearsals over a 3-week period. (Not every actor or musician needed to be at every rehearsal.) Making two rehearsals a week for seven weeks would have been much harder on the cast.

During the rehearsals, people may come up with great ideas about their character, the blocking of a scene, or the production in general. On one hand, this is your production, and you have the responsibility for putting it all together. Maybe their idea isn't really all that good, or maybe it is a good idea but wrong for the effect you're trying to achieve. On the other hand, drama is a collaborative effort. Be open to wonder.

And then, of course, comes the best part: the performance. Make sure your cast, crew, props, and such get to the performance area. Make sure you've got the audience's attention, and let 'em go. Get pictures.

After it's said and done, thank everyone. (Everybody remembers to thank the cast. But what about the rest of the crew? Did you thank the event steward for letting you perform at her event? Did you thank the guy who made the costumes and masks? Did you thank the photographer?)

And then get some sleep, 'cause you'll want to help out when the next play gets proposed!

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

If you have internet access, you might try checking out the following "routing site":

<http://www.wsu.edu/~hanly/drama/drama.html>

Another "site of links," with more of an SCA flavor:

<http://users.ev1.net/~jacinth/entertain.html>

As of late July 2003, the following site is "down for repairs," but it looks promising once it gets operational:

<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/DRAMA/MedievalDrama.html>

For a good introduction to a type of period improv theatre, see:

<http://www.commedia-dell-arte.com/>

For people who like to read books, I recommend:

Playing Period Plays (Lyn Oxenford, ISBN 0 85343 549 9)

Stage Management (Lawrence Stern, ISBN 0 205 27303 3) [The best book on being a grown-up in theatre I've ever read.]

Compleat Anachronist (#9 -- Mystery Plays; #48 -- History of Theatre; #98 -- An Elizabethan Player's company)