

'Two thousand turned up for Helmsley Festival Play, with 200 players; they waited for a miracle'

There is something indomitable about the English character. The continental view that "mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun" must surely have a reverse side. Why do the English persist in choosing August as the month of country pleasures, August the warm-hearted and tearful?

Why don't we put August in her coffin and nail her down for all time? Why do we constantly woo the faithless wench, the constant betrayer of our hopes?

Waiting for a Miracle

Two thousand of us turned up for the great Helmsley Festival Pageant on August Bank Holiday Monday. We sheltered under trees, crouched in the alcoves of castle ruins, looked at the sky, looked at the weather-cock and got wet. We waited for 7.30 - and a miracle. So did the 200 Pageant players. Their vivid Norman costumes were hidden beneath voluminous rain-proofs. The soldiers' silvered cardboard visors softened. Then the announcement came: The Pageant was postponed until the Tuesday evening. We had expected it: so had the organisers.

On our tickets was printed a warning that should the Pageant be rained off on its three scheduled nights, it would take place on the following evenings.

It is not that we forget August is the wettest month of the summer but that we always hope it will change its mind.

Gloomy outlook

As I write this on Tuesday it is still raining and the forecast is gloomy. I shall not make the journey to Helmsley again. It is too dispiriting - after twice being cheated of a simple pleasure. For when I went to the dress rehearsal last Friday, August had already begun to justify her dismal reputation.

At the rehearsal

The dress rehearsal was timed for 6.30: we waited for the rain to stop. How adept we are at kidding ourselves that in two minutes the sun will burst through! We are like innocent children who believe in the magic reality of rainbows; it didn't stop.

One stand was full of local children, there by special invitation. When, their faces queried, was the show going to begin? So the players came out from under the trees, shed rain-proofs and ran up the grassy moated side of Helmsley Castle ruins. Against the remnants of this Norman stronghold the pageant was to be played.

The Pageant is a Festival offering pre-eminently Helmsley. It is related to this market town in the same way as its moated castle. It is its own pageant of history; it was last given in 1898 by an all-children cast.

Organisation

What a stroke of genius, a flash of inspiration, or just plain common sense on the part of the Parochial Church Council to ask Dr Herbert Read to rewrite the Pageant for a more adult audience?

Dr Read, poet, critic, author (the Ruskin of our day) had but just returned to his native Yorkshire when the proposal was put to him.

From his house, the old rectory at Stonegrave, he looks out over Ryedale. Not two miles away is the farm where he, a farmer's son, was born and bred. He did not hesitate. He took the old script, discarded it and wrote a new one. The result, a noble narrative of Helmsley history in blank verse, stunned the Pageant organisers. But they quickly rallied; this was worthy of something more than they had planned. They set to work.

Dr Read persuaded his friend Robert Speaight, the noted actor, to leave London theatre-land and take on the part of narrator.

Instrumentalists from the Royal Academy were mesmerised into taking their summer holiday in Ryedale to supplement musicians from Scarborough in the playing of the Pageant music written by Father Austin Rennick of Ampleforth Abbey.

Workers who worked

Two hundred players, mostly from Helmsley itself, rehearsed the Pageant for months. Costumes were hired from the film studio that made 'Murder in the Cathedral'. But there were not half enough; in almost every house in Helmsley there has been ceaseless activity in cutting out and making up the colourful gowns and head-dresses of medieval maids and buxom dames, the silver chain mail of Norman soldiery, the trappings of horses.

This was to be no make-shift affair; all had to be correct in detail. The cast was short of 64 pairs of medieval footwear. Mrs Joan Stockhill, in between running her farmhouse kitchen and attending to the needs of haymakers, turned the handle of her ancient sewing machine and produced from bits of old coloured felt, 128 shoes all in sizes needed by the players

Optimists all

At the dress rehearsal Mr Speaight, the only player not then in costume, stood on his rock; the rich spectacle began. The bold ring of verse spoken in the open air without the aid of microphones cut through the curtain of rain; we forgot the wet. Women's costumes in red and green and blue and gold swept

the steaming grass. Soldiers marched on the scene; horses cantered and reared and backed. The narrator's voice rang out in the telling of the bloody, romantic story, and the first scene closed.

Cameramen ran on to the green, anxious to get pictures in an almost-impossible light, before players and horses dashed once again for the shelter. They knew the signs; the rehearsal was indeed over. The last five scenes were abandoned.

Down the steep sides of the moat across the market square hurried the bright figures, wet gowns clinging, felt slippers squelching - but spirits high.

“Dress rehearsals are like that!” “It will be alright on the night!” Alas!

The Opening

Monday, you remember it! What a day! What a deluge! The organisers, I learned, cheerful to the last had determined to make no decision till the hour of performance. I had promised to take Joanna, aged 7½; she is a girl for whom the modern pleasures of childhood are still largely a sealed book. She has been to the cinema only twice – to see filmed fairy tales. She has seen one ballet show; a pageant had to be explained to her.

She hardly slept the preceding night. You know how it is! She was bathed, had her hair washed and well brushed. She was garbed in her best. She was going to see a Pageant! She could not forbear emphasising her excitement by saying somewhat triumphantly, to a 2½ year old sister that “I’m going to see a Pageant tonight in the country, but you’re not coming.” A pardonable heightening of childish anticipation!

The Reality

Joanna's Pageant consisted of quick glimpses of pageantry figures, coloured garments peeping from beneath waterproofs, running across the market place. She filled in the time of waiting for the rain to stop by drinking orangeade, eating fish and chips (from a travelling van in the market place), munching chocolate and humbugs and insistently declaring that “it would stop soon.”

We rode home in time to see another entertainment sinking beneath the weight of rain – the Huby and Sutton Agricultural Show.

So ended the Bank Holiday! I can only wish as this goes to press, better luck during the week for Helmsley Pageant.

Postscript: the Pageant was held on Tuesday and Wednesday

Acknowledgements to Amy Dixon, The Malton Gazette, 10 August 1951