

November 2008 ❖ Interview with Kelly Morris, Director of *The Play of Herod*

Vicki Porter-Fink recently sat down with director Kelly Morris to learn more about The Play of Herod, a long-time holiday favorite in Atlanta, to be presented this December.

Porter-Fink: Kelly, you founded a full-time producing theatre group in the 1970s, back when there were only a handful of theater groups in Atlanta, including the Alliance and Academy Theatres. How did you decide to present *The Play of Herod*?

Morris: That's right. **Kelly's Seed & Feed Theatre** started in the fall of 1973, and it was located in a warehouse downtown near City Hall. We mostly did contemporary comic plays of epic scale—Sam Shepard, Paul Foster, Ken Bernard, and especially the work of our own playwright, Tom Cullen. I wanted to do something special for Christmas in 1974. The woman who was leading our just-beginning chorus (now Atlanta Schola Cantorum) suggested *The Play of Herod* and lent me the records of Noah Greenberg's New York Pro Musica production from 1964. At this point, I knew nothing about Early Music.

Using the libretto from the records, I edited the play, keeping everything that moved the story forward and deleting repeats. Somehow I was put in touch with Butch Spivey (who played, and still plays, King Herod), who led me to Ron Carlisle (who headed the first consort and served as our original music director, and who played in the consort for 25 years) and Sam Hagan (who sang the Archangel for twenty years).

The response to that first performance was wonderful. I can't emphasize enough what an unusual event it was—in the repertory of the theatre and in the cultural life of Atlanta. . .an 800-year-old liturgical music drama sung in Latin by the same people who were identified with profane contemporary comedies. It was quite surprising.

Some elements of the production have endured—rear-screen projection of the translated text (super-titles in 1974!) and an after-show reception featuring hot cider and cookies baked by the cast and crew, at which the audience members joined the performers in singing Christmas carols.

Porter-Fink: *What were the early years like?*

Morris: Well, the performances were in our warehouse theatre. It was very cold, usually. The heat was noisy, so I turned it off as the show began. We used to joke about the blue feet of the Innocents. . .I'm afraid that it was true. Neither the original Seed & Feed Theatre downtown nor our second space on Angiers Street still exist. After we closed the theatre in 1979, we continued to do Herod each December. For several years we did the production at Nexus Theater, and then we settled into Trinity United Methodist Church across the street from City Hall for many years. And that's where we completed the first quarter-century.

Porter-Fink: *And then you stopped?*

Morris: Yes, the 1999 production was going to be the last. I thought the show was getting tired. There were so many performers who had been in the play for more than ten years—several for more than twenty years—that we all needed a chance to

stop. Then, in 2004, Kevin [music director Kevin Culver] and I decided to revive the production at St. Luke's Episcopal.

Porter-Fink: *And [in 2008] you moved to St. Bart's?*

Morris: Our production dates conflicted with St. Luke's programming and St. Bart's has generously welcomed the production. Kevin and I have done several music-theatre pieces there—notably Hildegard's *Ordo Virtutum* in 1999 and 2000 and *Mother of Sorrows* in 2001—and we are very familiar with the space and its wonderful acoustics.

Porter-Fink: *How will the show be different at St. Bart's?*

Morris: The staging will be wider and shallower, much closer to the audience. We've performed *Herod* at a couple of cathedrals and at the monastery in Conyers, and those performances were spacious and grand. At St. Bart's, the theatrical experience will be more intimate and the music should have more presence.

Porter-Fink: *Why do you think there has been such longtime interest?*

Morris: I think mainly for two reasons. We first presented *The Play of Herod* as a thank-you gift. . . a Christmas present. . . to the audience that had supported Kelly's Seed & Feed Theatre. The evening had a sense of family celebration—a spectacle followed by a cider-cookies-carols party. People brought their kids when they were old enough; the kids later brought dates. There was a feeling of reunion among the cast members and among the audience that grew richer as the years rolled by. I think there still is.

Secondly, the work itself is remarkable. . . it's one of the beginning points of Western drama. Think of it: a 12th-century play sung in Latin. It is familiar—everybody knows everything that happens in it—the angels announcing the birth, the adoration of the shepherds and the Magi, the raging King Herod, the flight to Egypt, the slaying of the Innocents. And yet in this strange timeless form of storytelling these wondrous happenings you already know seem a bit unfamiliar. Everything about the stagecraft and the music is straightforward but clearly ancient, a different world, a legend, a dream. The pleasure of surrendering to this old, old story is very deep.

There is nothing quite like it.



[Note: *The Play of Herod will be presented at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church on LaVista Road in Atlanta on December 11th and 12th 2009 at 8:30 pm. Admission is \$20, and reservations are required. Visit www.herodplay.com for more information].*