
Murder in the Cathedral

by T.S. Eliot

Director: John Buckingham

Reading: Monday, 13th February at 7.45p.m. at the Mary Wallace Theatre

Auditions: Monday, 27th February at 7.45p.m. at the Theatre

Playing dates: Thursday, 1st - Saturday, 3rd June 2023 at St Mary's Church, Twickenham

Rehearsals: Officially from Tuesday 4th April (and from then on, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday evenings & Sunday afternoons). Rehearsals usually take place in St Mary's Hall and Church.

AUDITIONS ARE OPEN TO ALL. The RSS actively encourages diversity in casting and casting decisions will *not* be constrained by the perceived gender or ethnicity of the roles being auditioned.

Twilight on Tuesday 29th December 1170 - a turning point in European history. Archbishop Thomas Becket conducts vespers in Canterbury Cathedral. Four knights, believing they are enacting the will of the King, murder him at the altar. Becket is canonised as a martyr and saint. The tensions between State and Church echo down the centuries. In 1935, Eliot's poetic drama is performed as a Festival Play in Canterbury Cathedral. It earns a national and international audience. Amidst the tensions preceding the Second World War, it assumes a resonance larger than the historical/religious event it memorialises. Today, beyond our responses to political assassination, religious martyrdom and international conflict, Eliot's play explores the universal significance of our human condition and launches a quest for understanding. Performed in a church, it takes on the power of a site-specific theatrical ritual.

There are **15 CHARACTERS (6F 4M 5F/M)** as follows:

THE CHORUS OF WOMEN OF CANTERBURY (6F) The "poor women of Canterbury" are drawn towards the Cathedral by a premonition that they must act as witnesses. Their poverty is less destitution than powerlessness, reinforced by their status as women. I see them as six present-day women of diverse ages and backgrounds – not congregants, but visitors to or employees of the *present-day* Cathedral. I have suggested the following characters, although these are not prescriptive and actors may choose to develop their own characters in rehearsal:

- **AN ELDERLY ACADEMIC**
- **A NURSE or PROFESSIONAL CARER**
- **A SHOPWORKER or CLEANER**
- **A CATHEDRAL TOUR GUIDE**
- **A YOUNG PREGNANT WOMAN**
- **A HOMELESS VAGRANT**

During their opening verses, the women dress for the coming ritual, thereby becoming the medieval Chorus of Women of Canterbury. Besides some interaction with other characters, there are nine lengthy choruses in the play, containing some of Eliot's most powerful and beautiful poetry. Although, at times they will speak in unison, Chorus members will largely speak lines individually, reflecting the polyphony of voices in Eliot's verse.

The Chorus should be regarded as six major roles.

THREE PRIESTS (3 M/F) In the 12th Century, all three would have been male, however, beginning the play in the present day, before shifting to 1170, permits us to cast the roles as male or female in Part 1 and gender neutral in Part 2. Besides their ceremonial role, the three are lightly characterised, as follows:

- **FIRST PRIEST** is the oldest of the three; calm, easy-going and kindly.
- **SECOND PRIEST** is more assertive and eager; a younger cleric keen to prove their loyalty. The account of the murder used by Eliot was based upon the witness chronicle by a cleric, called **Edward Grim**, who was seriously injured in the fray. I am considering characterising **the Second Priest** as **Grim**.

- **THIRD PRIEST** is the quietest of the three, meditative, more profound in religious commitment, who assesses the action of the knights for the audience.

A MESSENGER (M/F) A Herald sent in advance through the crowded streets of Canterbury to tell the Cathedral Priests of Becket's return from exile. With a present-day setting for Part 1, the Messenger becomes a male or female police motor-cycle outrider, a helmeted, visored figure, giving a sinister pre-echo of the Knights in Part 2. In this brief but commanding appearance, the Messenger emerges as a confident, intelligent interlocutor, who crucially conveys the circumstances and significance of Becket's return.

ARCHBISHOP THOMAS BECKET (M) Thomas is the protagonist of the drama with this large and challenging role, both physically and mentally. The play depicts the last month of his life, externalising the inner mental conflict preceding his death, then depicting the historical event and its significance. The part requires an ability to speak some wonderful verse and prose with both power and sensitivity. The real Becket was 50 or 51 at his death, but matching his exact age is less important than getting someone who can humanize and make us believe the journey he undertakes.

THE FOUR TEMPTERS are doubled with **THE FOUR KNIGHTS**. **The Four Tempters** in Part 1, are shadowy emanations from Thomas's subconscious. Each wears a costume that has symbolic significance. In Part 2, they return physically, in armour, as **The Four Knights** who will kill him. After the murder, each knight makes a speech directly to the audience, justifying their action.

- **FIRST TEMPTER /FIRST KNIGHT (M/F.)** **First Tempter** is a male or female medieval courtier, tempting Thomas to a return to youthful days of self-indulgence, as a friend of the King. As **First Knight, Reginald Fitz Urse**, acts as a chairman as the other Knights present their justifications for the murder. A female actor would play the Knight as a man.
- **SECOND TEMPTER /SECOND KNIGHT (M. any age)** **Second Tempter** is a figure from Becket's days as Chancellor of England, the most powerful politician in the land, below the King. He appears as a present-day sharp-suited politician. He offers pragmatic acceptance of the *status-quo* with the King, so Thomas can pursue good causes. As **Second Knight, Hugh de Morville**, he justifies the murder as 'social justice'.
- **THIRD TEMPTER/ THIRD KNIGHT (M. 50/60s)** **Third Tempter** represents the Baronial class which he regards as "the backbone of the nation." He proposes a patriotic alliance between the Barons and the Church - in effect, a military coup against the King. He embodies military power and appears as a modern Senior British Army Officer. As **Third Knight, William de Traci**, the eldest of the four, he argues that he is politically 'disinterested'.
- **FOURTH TEMPTER/FOURTH KNIGHT (M. any age)** Becket expects three Tempters, not four. **Fourth Tempter** wears a cross around his neck; he is Thomas's alter-ego. He urges Thomas to deliberately pursue martyrdom to achieve spiritual power over humanity. As **Fourth Knight, Richard Brito**, he argues that Becket's choice of action was *de-facto* suicide.

If interested in auditioning, joining the creative team, or for answers to your questions, **please contact me via the email below**. I will get in touch personally with details of **audition speeches**.

JOHN BUCKINGHAM johnonbike@blueyonder.co.uk

You do not have to be an RSS member to audition but, if cast, you will be required to become a member before the first rehearsal.

Membership Application forms are available in the theatre - or contact the Membership Secretary on (020) 8898 4397 or at - membership@rss-mwt.org.uk

Audition Application forms are available in the theatre, or can be downloaded via the GET INVOLVED and ACTING pages of www.richmondshakespeare.org.uk Please return your form to the Hon. Secretary at the theatre, or by e-mail to - secretary@rss-mwt.org.uk