Morality play staged successfully

By GORDON BRADEN
Thresher Fine Arts Staff

Morality, to get the inevitable quip over with first, made its annual visit to Brown this week in the vehicle of the anonymous 15th century allegory "Everyman" and met with varying degrees of success.

The Latin liturgy that Dr. Mackey picked to accompany this production — a corpus of hymns which has survived the secularization process as powerful poetry in its own right—provides an interesting approach to the problems of producing morality play.

Christian Experience

What Drs. Velz and Mackey, with the help of Brown College, assembled was rather disjointed, sometimes clumsy, often dull, but free from most of the more insidious varities of pretension, and not without, at times—as in the a capella Kyrie used as a processional, or Everyman's monody in the wake of the Libera Me Domine—a certain suggestiveness of the depth of Christian experience.

And even this suggestiveness, in an age in which most of us view organized religion from the point of view of outsiders, is of value, I think: even if we are not persuaded to believe, we may still know what it feels like to believe.

As for this particular production, the best thing about it by far was Michele Stojan's costumes, which were a remarkably unobtrusive mixture of elegance and allegory. They were suggestively medieval rather than accurately so — much as I knew, but never knew before quite so clearly, a personification should look—and provided nice epitomes of the characters.

Everyman's brilliant red and gold doublet was exactly right, as was the brown sackcloth that eventually covered it; and I think it was thoroughly appropriate that Good Deeds should look like a Quaker schoolmarm.

The music was another strong point. Latin liturgy sung to electric guitars is the sort of thing one has come to expect from Dr. Mackey, and most of his ideas here were good or better than good.

Strong Sound

Unfortunately, the electronic equipment proved stronger than the chorus: the hammer-like cross-rhythm on the bass guitar all but obliterated the Dies Irae, and the strong downbeats during the first part of the Gloria set a scale far too majestic and awesome for the twelve-member chorus to reach.

But when the balance was better, as in the Agnus Dei section of the Gloria, with the guitar discreetly in the background, and sounding remarkably like a minstrel's lute or mandolin, the effect was precisely on target.

The actors ran the gamut from vitality to rigor mortis. At the top would go Susan Metcalf and Kathleen Davis as Cousin and Kindred, who provided an excellent bit of comic relief (I had been told that

Everyman had none); at the bottom the two Wits (out of five) who read their lines with all the somnolent woodenness of a sarcophagus in the British Museum.

In between, Dennis Fontaine, as Everyman, projected with a sonorous resonance truly marvelous to listen to, though such histrionic subtleties as Weeping for Joy appeared to be beyond him. Joe English, who had, as God, what I think is poetically the best role in the play, over-articulated his speech, with the resultant unfortunate impression that the Deity suffered from hyperventilation.

A final note about the extraneous noise level, which was unpleasantly high. A lot of this came from the wooden sets, which creaked frighteningly when trod upon. And at one point, when ten allegorical figures clomped across the stage to swear on Everyman's cross, the resultant din almost drowned out the clatter of dishes in Sammys's kitchen next door.