Does the end justify the means? Always? Never? Sometimes? And, if sometimes, then which times? In order, for example, to maintain good health we sometimes use pain-producing means: sit-ups, jogging, no dessert, etc. But what of other examples?

Here’s one from Dostoevsky’s “Pro and Contra” in The Brothers Karamazov: “Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last. Imagine that you are going this but that it is essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature — that child beating its breast with its fist, for instance — in order to found that edifice on its unavenged tears. Would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me. Tell the truth.”

“The speaker is Ivan and he is asking his gentle and pious brother Alyosha for an answer. What would you do: Would the end (peace, rest, happiness for all) justify the means (death by torture for but one child)? How far can we go in our attempts to justify our actions by pointing to supposed to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me. Tell the truth.”

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From tonight to April 18 you will be able to see the stage production of The Canterbury Tales, on the boards at the Malaspina College Theatre. This production is Nanaimo Theatre Group’s spring musical and, as usual, tickets are going briskly for this annual highlight of the theatre season.

A poet by the name of Geoffrey Chaucer originally wrote the sparkling, amusing, raunchy, touching stories called “The Canterbury Tales.” It was his most comprehensive work and most scholars agree the production of his later years. This task was in a way the culmination of his long life as a poet, for he crams into the “Tales” material that he had been squirrel away over his entire life. His grand scheme was to frame some one hundred twenty tales within the journey from London to Canterbury and back. Each of thirty pilgrims was to tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two each on the return trip. Chaucer didn’t finish the entire project but what he did complete has made richer the life of everyone who lived since.

His stories are rich and varied, ranging from the spiritual to the bawdy. He seems to have felt, like all great artists, that judgement is up to God, and that his job is to relate the stories of his various pilgrims as accurately and as faithfully as possible. Clerks speak like clerks, knights like knights, and millers like millers. He is able to reveal character deftly with an image or with an ironic comment in the mouth of the character.

Each character chooses his or her tale from the collection of life experiences available to him. Each story reveals, not only something through the narrative, but also something about the person telling the story. Chaucer is at once subtle and bold. He can present the most refined of the theological arguments and also the most dirty stories of any story teller who has ever lived.

“The Miller’s Tale” will stand forever as the masterful story of sex, trickery, confusion, mystery and occupational chauvinism. I always used to send students who believed that all great literature was boring to read “The Miller’s Tale.” It always worked. They would find these lines, for example, and be hooked: Derk was the night as pieh, or. as the cole, And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole, And Absalon, hym fil no bet ne wers, But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers Ful savourly, er he were war of this. Later they would discover how this tale contributes to the “Knight’s Tale” theme of duty.

I haven’t seen the NTG production yet, but knowing what I do of the script and the company, and primarily of Chaucer, my guess is it will be the most fun you have had at the theatre since Twelfth Night.

And yes, Chaucer too was experimenting, as were Wilder and Ionesco. In fact, of course, every writer is an experimenter. One thing about Chaucer though — you do not need a degree or a course in Theatre of the Absurd in order to respond to his work. My guess is that all of you: journalists, critics, special events clerks and even sports writers will enjoy this show.