

Peter Harrop, *Mumming past, present and future: What are we looking for? An introduction to the second Mummers Unconvention*, Mummers Unconvention, Bath, 2012.

## **Mumming past, present and future: What are we looking for? An introduction to the second Mummers Unconvention.**

When Steve Rowley and Peter Millington suggested the idea of last year's first 'Mummers' Unconvention'<sup>1</sup> the time seemed right to revisit both the subject area and the performance form. There'd been an increased popularity in mumming from what might be called the 'folk' angle on the one hand (a growth in Morris dance sides reviving local mumming traditions for example), and on the other a growing interest from the academy (among performance practitioners and theorists) in matters of site specificity and responsiveness, landscape, memory and performance.

Mumming is the generic term for a range of dramatic activity associated with different times of year in different parts of Ireland and the UK as well as further afield. It is a form of theatre where performers and audiences often revisit the same sites and repeat the same performances on particular dates and at particular times each year, eventually becoming an exemplar of what Marvin Carlson has termed "ghosting" or a "something coming back in the theatre".<sup>2</sup> First references to the type of activity we now recognise by 'mumming' come from the late 1700s, with an increasing trend for descriptions of the play from that period until the First World War. As A. E. Green has pointed out, this is the period from which "most of our records of the mumming plays came. And which, by reasonable inference, saw their diffusion and proliferation at least, and possibly their crystallisation into their present form."<sup>3</sup>

Broadly speaking, the annual mumming season in England begins with the soulcaking plays of the North West in late October, and concludes the following Easter with the pace-egging plays of West Yorkshire. These performances, like the Christmas mumming of central and southern England, the new year sword plays of the North East, and the January plough and wooing plays of Lincolnshire, depict the killing and coming back to life of a protagonist as a (usually) central motif in a procession of both presentational and representational characters and acts. Particular variants range in overall length from five to twenty or so minutes – 'give or take'. Performances are given on the street, in pubs, in car parks, in private homes, schools and village halls, depending on local custom and practice. An overview of the historic, geographic and performative contexts of these plays and performances, as well as detail of contemporary performances, can be accessed at websites hosted by the Traditional Drama Research Group and Master Mummers.<sup>4</sup>

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Looking at the ‘bigger picture’ of mumming there are a number of questions which it would be great to answer:

*Firstly, what is the relationship between the texts of mummers’ plays and texts contained in popular chapbooks from the late 18th Century? Secondly, what is the relationship between mummers’ plays and the ‘pantomimes’ created by John Rich and others in the early part of the 18th century? Thirdly, is it possible to trace a multiple historical dissemination of mumming both around Britain and following migrations and trade routes to Newfoundland, the Caribbean and further afield? Fourthly, what antecedents may lie with localised variants of house visiting associated with performative calendar customs?*<sup>5</sup>

There is also a fifth grey area. Most of us know surprisingly little - outside our own personal engagement - about the recent and current performances of these folk plays and the information, views and attitudes of the performers. Certainly this knowledge, even where it exists, is not always collated or disseminated as widely as one might hope. Finally, sixthly, and here the fun really starts, we have to acknowledge that there are often gaps between the known history of particular mumming performances, the not-so-known histories of the source material, and the fuzzy-geography of the constructed meta-tradition in which performers and audiences can choose to place their action. Indeed the study of mummers’ plays, the efforts to plug those information gaps, might be regarded as an enduring popular entertainment in its own right. This was recognised by Mat Levitt in 2010, in an MA dissertation submitted to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta:

There are a great number of stories told about the English folk play tradition known as ‘mummers’ plays’ These stories told by folklorists, historians, anthropologists, popular fiction writers, mummers and audience members, and lay folk in general, can be considered as part of a body of folk commentary or metafolklore. Within this body of metafolklore, there are, generally speaking, at least five types of narratives told to explain the origins of the tradition...it is possible to trace, if not the origin, then the development of each of the origin stories told about the tradition...through space and time but [also] across lines of scholarship, literary fiction and folk commentary ...perhaps scholarship and literature can be considered as part of the body of metafolklore; as constituents rather than objective observers.<sup>6</sup>

I think we (interested parties) are all constituents, all participants, all contributing to meanings and performances, because that’s what our species does. Without pretending to address all of these issues last year’s symposium refreshed a number of approaches. In fact most of last years speakers have at some point engaged in mumming, or work in the field of

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drama and performance, or both, and this is often clear from the kinds of understanding the papers reveal through their respect for performers and performing.

Bill Tuck, as both theatre maker and scholar, sought to shed some light on the context within which the folk-plays developed in the 1730s and after - he remarked that:

It is generally held that the earliest text of a folk-play performance is from 1780, the earliest chapbook text from the middle decades of the eighteenth century, while the earliest reliable description of a performance resembling the modern folk-play takes us back only as far as 1737. One possible connection that has yet to be explored is through the English pantomime tradition that originated on the London stage in the early 18th century, but migrated from there to provincial fairs and other performance spaces later in the century.<sup>7</sup>

Bill joins us again this year, but pushes his argument a step further back by considering the earlier theatrical migration of event-image and character type from the Italian Comedy to forms of popular entertainment such as the folk play. Last year Tom Brown's paper drew on a wealth of mumming experience, as well as a postgraduate dissertation and doctoral thesis on the management and organisation of vernacular form, to suggest a separate appreciation of vernacular form distinct from that of 'legitimate' theatre. He utilised a series of minimum constituent elements such as stage, auditorium, storyline, character and so on, as outlined by the theatre historian Glynn Wickham<sup>8</sup>, and around which there was broad mid-twentieth century consensus, to argue his case. Professor Mike Pearson took this a step further in his analysis of the Marshfield play:

the plot, text and performance of mummers' plays are inadequately apprehended through the conventions of dramatic analysis [of which Glynne Wickham was an esteemed exponent], what might the interdisciplinary approaches of performance studies ... offer traditional drama: to enhance both its description and its critical apprehension – in its current manifestation, in performance.<sup>9</sup>

Graham Clarke and Gavin Skinner also embraced the 'doing' of mumming plays and in so doing each had something significant to say about popularity and tradition.

This is Clarke:

Things can get quite chaotic if we meet a large hen party, but not all the venues are so popular, and we sometimes outnumber the audience, but we always perform the play, even to an audience of one. ... We have questioned why we do it, and 'part of the routine' seems to be the main reason. We know that hardly anyone locally is interested in the play, or would miss it if it stopped. We will carry on for a few more years yet...<sup>10</sup>

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There is something here of Mike Pearson's use of Jon McKenzie's phrase 'perform or else'<sup>11</sup> or one of the Antrobus Soulcakars, Ian McCormack, who when asked "who's it for?" responded that 'you're doing it to do it'.<sup>12</sup> And yet at the same time here is Skinner:

So while I was thinking about writing a mummers play, and who should be in it... I started thinking about Brunel-zebub and the man who had inspired the name of this character, and whether Isambard Kingdom Brunel himself could star in his own mummers' play and return for a showdown with his inner demon.<sup>13</sup>

These remarks – from two contemporary performers of mummers' plays - seem to me to indicate two quite separate sets of views about mumming performances, on the one hand ideas of perpetuity, tradition, ritual, and on the other innovation, invention, and creativity. Anne Gregsons paper on 'the making of a mummers opera', is a further indication of this innovative turn. This volume also contains four further domestic case studies to blur our thinking on the subject. Ron Shuttleworth, the keeper of the Morris Ring Folk Play Archive, discusses the Coventry Mummers. Peter Millington discussed Caribbean Mumming in the preceding volume of this series, but returns to his native Nottinghamshire with a consideration of the Owd Oss mummers and their scrapbook archive. Maureen James examines a particular history of the Peterborough Mummers and like Millington is purposefully side tracked by issues of documentation in the way we engage with tradition as a meaning making tool. Gwilym Davies provides insight and evidence around matters of evolutionary intersection of apparently separate traditions into new forms of performance. Their various papers provide insight into how their own experience of mumming plays out between these notions of perpetuity, tradition, ritual, innovation, invention, creativity and fun. Of course no one is suggesting these are mutually incompatible drivers, or that an emphasis on one set of motivations indicates indifference to the other – simply noting a 'tension of essences'.

While all these papers have been shaped by the active performative experience of the authors, last year Millington and James, and Rowley, were operating at greater geographic, cultural and methodological distance. Millington and James offered two detailed, related and historically evidenced case studies where the main focus has been on textual dissemination. Rowley offered a further case study where the primary evidence for connection lay in character type and associated patterns of action. The former offers an intriguing and very specific example of the way in which a popular form can find new life in two very different cultural contexts, and take on a 'new history' as a consequence. (From a vicarage in

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Victorian Ecclesfield to a UNESCO award in the Dominican Republic.) The latter Bajan case is more vague, but none the less intriguing. It rekindles some of the sense of mystery that an earlier generation of folklorists must have felt when they noted performances in the Balkans that were formally similar to English mumming and formed the subject of discussion in the *Annals of the British School in Athens*.<sup>14</sup> As Rowley points out, further fieldwork and archival study may clarify points of contact – whether formal or functional – between tuk and mumming. Lynn Lunde had focussed on mumming and related forms in her native Newfoundland, and specifically on a particular historical manifestation. As she puts it:

situating mumming within collective social action requires a shift in focus from mumming as a fun social visit and entertainment to a focus on several other characteristic elements of mumming: disguising as a means for creating anonymity; unpredictable, threatening and violent behaviour; social control and censure.<sup>15</sup>

Following her presentation in Bath last year she travelled on to Australia and her paper in this volume considers the very different development of Mumming in Canada and Australia as a possible consequence of very different patterns of migration. But North America is not entirely absent. Last year Claudia Chapman discussed her personal engagement with mumming in both New England and Connecticut and a revised version of her original contribution is included in this volume as one of a pair of papers. In the other Chapman reports on the strange world of New England Revels. In her notes she remarks

“If you can read the newspaper caption you will see that we told the reporter that St George represents the winter sun. Please remember this. It is what Americans believe, almost to a man, about the mummer’s play. This is what the plays have become in my country.”

And who am I to question that?

It may be time to take advice from Pearson on the matter:

“Rather than worrying what came first ... I suggest we might regard the performances ... as both a practice and a composition, organised and manifest in space and time in a specific location, according to a set of governing aesthetics and techniques that constitute an idiolect – a unique body of enduring stylistic traits, but which are ever subject to change.”<sup>16</sup>

Overall, our two symposia demonstrate a healthy range of approaches to a performance form that is probably more disparate than once thought, more widely distributed than commonly perceived, and possessed of a contemporary presence that refuses to be pigeon holed. I’ll

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finish this paper with a couple of sentences that concluded my recent article in *Popular Entertainment Studies*:

Mumming sustains as a shifting manifestation of popular entertainment, keeping one step ahead of the scholarship and refusing to be nailed down: It is celebratory, reflective, entertaining and odd. The Mummers Unconvention is an interesting way forward for those who care for the form and want to contribute to the meta-folklore of this meta-tradition.<sup>17</sup>

I hope this second volume provides something of what the symposium set out to achieve. In using the title *From the horse's mouth – Mummers talk about mumming* we hoped to start placing in print the ideas that performers hold about the activities they engage in, side by side with the development of our historical, geographical, literary, theatrical and 'otherwise' performative understandings. The second Unconvention attracted as many groups of mummers as the first, and those who contributed to the symposium were able to contextualise their thoughts and observations within a wider performative frame. Brafron Guizers; Coventry Mummers; Fine Lady's Revellers; Frome Valley Mummers; Ripley Guisers and Stoney Stratford Mummers all performed around the streets of Bath. Fingal Mummers from Ireland sustained the international connection provided in 2011 by Bal de Malcasats from Spain. There is no finer provocation for theorists of performance than being confronted by the performances they theorise.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.) p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Green "Popular Drama and the Mummers' Play" in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama* ed. by David Bradby et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pps. 139 – 166.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.folkplay.info/> 22.01.2012 and <http://www.mastermummers.org/> 22.01.2012. Both sites contain extensive information and links on English Folk Drama. See also, Harrop, P. "The Antrobus Soulcakers – a consideration of site, mobility and time as components of traditional performance". *Contemporary Theatre Review*, special edition on Site Specificity and Mobility, forthcoming 2012

<sup>5</sup> Harrop, P. 'The Mummers Unconvention in Context', *Popular Entertainment Studies*, vol. 3, issue 1, 2012, p.79. Taking each of those four questions in turn the following references are particularly helpful: Chapbook texts see, Michael J Preston, Georgina Smith & Paul S. Smith, *Chapbooks and Traditional Drama, Part 1: Alexander and the King of Egypt Chapbooks*, CECTAL Bibliographical and Special Series, no.2. University of

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Sheffield, 1977. Pantomime, see Thomas Pettitt, 'Ritual and Vaudeville: The Dramaturgy of the English Folk Plays', *Pre-publications of the English Institute of Odense University*, no.19. Oct 1981. For the Caribbean and Newfoundland see Roger D. Abrahams "'Pull out your purse and pay': A St. George Mumming from the British West Indies", *Folklore*, 79, 3 (1968): 176–201 and "British West Indian Folk Drama and the 'Life Cycle' Problem", *Folklore*, 81, 4 (1970): 241–265. Herbert Halpert and Graham Story eds. *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969. For associated traditions see <http://www.folkplay.info/>.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew J Levitt, "The Laughing Storyteller: Metafolklore about the origins of Mummers." (MA diss., University of Alberta, 2011.) Abstract.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Tuck, 'Experiments in the reconstruction of early 18<sup>th</sup> Century English pantomime', *The Mummers Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Glynne Wickham, *The Mediæval Theatre*, London, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1974.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Pearson, 'Perform or Else: The Marshfield Paper Boys in Performance', *The Mummers Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Clarke, 'Guisering today on the Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border', *The Mummers Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Jon McKenzie, *Perform or else: from discipline to performance*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Cited by Pearson op cit.

<sup>12</sup> Harrop, P. 'The Antrobus Soulcakery' p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> Gavin Skinner, 'The Brunel Play', *The Mumming Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Dean-Smith "The Life Cycle or Folk Play: some conclusions following the examination of the Ordish papers and other sources", *Folklore* LXIX, 4 (1958). Dean-Smith references volumes VI; XI; XVI; XIX; and XXVI of the *Annual of the British School at Athens*.

<sup>15</sup> Lynn Lunde, 'Illegal acts in disguise: Mumming as a component of collective social action in 19<sup>th</sup> century Newfoundland', *The Mumming Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Pearson op cit.

<sup>17</sup> Harrop, P, *The Mummers Unconvention in Context*, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> Photographs of the various performances are held on <http://www.mastermummers.org/> accessed 30.01.2013.