

Introduction to proceedings of the Mummers Unconvention.

The first Mummers Unconvention was held in Bath, UK, in November 2011 under the general direction of Steve Rowley.¹ The broad structure of the three day event drew on the success of the pre-existing Pipe and Tabor festival series organised by the Taborers Society which had brought together musicians, musicologists and historians to celebrate and promote both playing and scholarship.² In that spirit, the organisers determined to attach a symposium to the first Mummers Unconvention. This was convened by Peter Harrop (University of Chester) with support from Peter Millington of the University of Nottingham and Mike Pearson of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The symposium was kindly hosted by Bath Spa University at their Burdall's Yard site on London Road in Bath and the organisers are particularly grateful to Ian Macnish and the Department of Performing Arts for administrative and hands on assistance in enabling the event to take place. Thanks also to Shelley Hanvey and Dunja Njaradi of the University of Chester for their assistance with the administration and delivery of the symposium.

The symposium theme was simply 'aspects of performance'. The underpinning notion was described in the initial call for papers as follows:

The Unconvention will be a celebration of all things mumming, with a clear emphasis on performances and workshops. For some time now, however, there has been little opportunity for folk play practitioners and researchers to share their work.³

In fact the last conference to specifically address the English Folk Play had been held at the University of Sheffield in 2002⁴ under the auspices of the Traditional Drama Research Group⁵ and the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language (formerly the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language) at the University of Sheffield.⁶ The time seemed right to revisit both subject area and performance form because of 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 a growing interest from the academy (among performance practitioners and theorists) in matters of site specificity and responsiveness, landscape, memory and performance.⁷ This is not the first time that the Mummers Play has provided a point of focus for people with very different ideas about what it is, what it might have been, and what it might offer. Peter Millington's earlier and introductory overview of some prevailing views⁸ as well as my own initial

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response to the Mummers Unconvention in the *Journal of Popular Entertainment Studies*⁹ go some way to contextualise this particular intersection in the history of ideas. The central idea behind the event was the bringing together of those who do mumming with those who study it. Pleasingly, these are not always different people.

The Mumming groups who attended the Unconvention and gave performances included Herga, Bal de Malcasats (Spain), Bristol Rag, Fine Lady's Revellers, Frome Valley, Gloucestershire Morris, Langport, Marshfield Paper Boys, Potterne Christmas Boys, Sompting Tiptereers, Stony Stratford, Suffolk Howlers and Weston. Although only the Marshfield Paper Boys and Bristol Rag are specifically referenced in the following papers, the variety of groups in attendance provides an indication of a range of performance styles. The photographer Graeme Walker has set up a Flickr page to hold the hundreds of images he made over the course of the event and this provides easy access to a valuable visual resource.¹⁰ Technique workshops in stage-combat, costume making, vocal command and commedia dell'arte were held throughout the weekend. Most interestingly, many of the performing groups work in isolation from one another and this was a relatively rare opportunity for them to see the work of others. The folklorist, archivist and curator Doc Rowe¹¹ gave two illustrated talks, and material displays were provided by the Traditional Drama Research Group¹²; Mastermummers¹³ and the Morris Ring Folk Play archive.¹⁴ Steve Rowley hosted 'in conversation' sessions with representatives from Hat City Mummers (USA) and Bal de Malcasats (Spain). In addition to offering a paper at the symposium, Lynn Lunde showed a DVD from the 2005/06 Newfoundland mumming season showing costuming for and performance of the St. John's play. The papers offered at the symposium on Friday 18th November are included here with one exception: Roger Duncan was scheduled to deliver a paper (listed on the original programme) 'Rockness Mummers play: Performed by the people of Rockness for the people of Rockness' but was unfortunately unable to do so. Harrop stepped in with a paper on the Antrobus Soulcakkers which has since been published in *Contemporary Theatre Review* under the title 'The Antrobus Soulcakkers: a consideration of site, mobility and time as components of traditional performance' and is not included in this collection for reasons of copyright.¹⁵ A plenary session was chaired by Dunja Njaradi with Harrop, Millington, Pearson, Rowe and Rowley.

Looking at the 'bigger picture' of mumming there are a number of questions which it would be helpful to answer:

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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? ¹⁶

There is also a fifth grey area. We know surprisingly little 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. Without pretending to address all of these issues, the symposium refreshed a number of approaches. Tom Brown and Bill Tuck both approach mumming from established theatre perspectives. Graham Clarke, Peter Harrop, Peter Millington, Caspar James, Mike Pearson, Steve Rowley and Gavin Skinner all look at particular examples of mumming but from different perspectives, variously emphasising the ethnographic, historical and performative. Lynn Lunde conducts a more overtly historical investigation, but the sense of the performative is never far away. In fact most of the speakers have engaged in mumming, or work in the field of 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.

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

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.¹⁷

Brown draws 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 utilises a series of minimum constituent elements such as stage, auditorium, storyline, character and so on, as

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outlined by the theatre historian Glynn Wickham¹⁸, and around which there is broad mid-twentieth century consensus, to argue his case. Pearson takes this a step further:

...if, as Cass and Roud imply¹⁹ [and, indeed, Brown] the plot, text and performance of mummers' plays are inadequately apprehended through the conventions of dramatic analysis [of which Glynn 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. I'd like to rehearse a few basic proposals: concerning organising principles, compositional strategies and operational procedures.²⁰

Graham Clarke and Gavin Skinner embrace 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...²¹

There is something here of Pearson's use of McKenzie's phrase 'perform or else'²² or one of the Antrobus Soulcakery, Ian McCormack, who when asked "who's it for?" responded that 'you're doing it to do it'.²³ 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.²⁴

These remarks 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. 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 these papers have been shaped by the active performative experience of the authors, 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 offers a further case study where the

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primary evidence for connection lies 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. 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 *Annuals of the British School in Athens*.²⁵ As Rowley points out, further fieldwork and archival study may clarify points of contact – whether formal or functional – between tuk and mumming.

The shifting emphasis between text and action - exemplified by these Caribbean case studies - and the weight afforded to these components of performance have permeated mumming studies for years. It may be time to take advice from Pearson on the matter:

“Rather than worrying what came first – text or action – 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.”²⁶

These remarks provide a useful frame in which to place the final paper. Lunde has 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.²⁷

Overall, these collected papers 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. In the mid-1970s when I added the activity of reading books about mumming to straightforward mumming, I noted two commonly held views. Firstly, people who ‘did’ traditions knew those traditions never changed, but the people who studied them and didn’t ‘do’ them, knew they did change. The fact that it’s no longer always two distinct groups goes some way in blurring those certainties. Secondly, the ‘heyday’ of mumming was *always* the late 19th Century. Can we still be so sure?

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¹ <http://mummersunconvention.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/mummers-unconvention-2011/> accessed 21/5/2012

² <http://www.pipeandtabor.org/sample-page/tts-documents/> accessed 21/5/2012

³ <http://mummersunconvention.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/mummers-unconvention-2011/> accessed 21/5/2012

⁴ Eddie Cass & Peter Millington (Eds), *Folk Drama Studies Today*, Traditional Drama Research Group, Sheffield, 2003.

⁵ <http://www.folkplay.info/> accessed 21/5/2012

⁶ <http://www.shef.ac.uk/library/special/cectal>

⁷ <http://www.landscape.ac.uk/landscape/index.aspx> accessed 22.01.2012 gives an overview of the project but refer particularly to the listings of papers for the Living Landscape Conference at Aberystwyth in June 2009. Selected papers were subsequently published as Stephen Daniels, Mike Pearson, Heike Roms eds. "Special Edition: Fieldworks," *Performance Research* 15, 4 (2010). See also Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Eds) 'Site Specificity and Performance' Special Edition *Contemporary Theatre Review*, volume 21, 2012, forthcoming.

⁸ <http://freespace.virgin.net/peter.millington1/MysteryHistory.htm> accessed 22/5/2012

⁹ Peter Harrop, 'The Mummers Unconvention in Context', *Popular Entertainment Studies*, University of Newcastle, Australia, Vol. 3, Issue 1, pp. 77-82.

¹⁰ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/caporushes/collections/72157628130921617/>

¹¹ <http://www.docrowe.org.uk/> accessed 21/5/2012

¹² <http://www.folkplay.info/> accessed 21/5/2012

¹³ <http://www.mastermummers.org/> accessed 21/5/2012

¹⁴ <http://www.folkplay.info/Ron/Index.htm> accessed 21/5/2012

¹⁵ Peter Harrop, 'The Antrobus Soulcakers: a consideration of site, mobility and time as components of traditional performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 21. issue tbc, forthcoming, 2102, pps 268-274.

¹⁶ Harrop 'The Mummers Unconvention in Context' 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 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/>.

¹⁷ Bill Tuck, 'Experiments in the reconstruction of early 18th Century English pantomime', *The Mummers Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

¹⁸ Glynne Wickham, *The Mediæval Theatre*, London, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1974.

¹⁹ Eddie Cass and Steve Roud, *Room, Room, Ladies and Gentlemen: An Introduction to the English Mummers' Play*. English Folk Song and Dance Society, London: 2002. pp. 41-4.

²⁰ Mike Pearson, 'Perform or Else: The Marshfield Paper Boys in Performance', *The Mummers Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

²¹ Graham Clarke, 'Guisering today on the Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border', *The Mummers Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

²² Jon McKenzie, *Perform or else: from discipline to performance*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Cited by Pearson op cit.

²³ Harrop, P. 'The Antrobus Soulcakers' p. 274.

²⁴ Gavin Skinner, 'The Brunel Play', *The Mumming Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.

²⁵ 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*.

²⁶ Pearson op cit.

²⁷ Lynn Lunde, 'Illegal acts in disguise: Mumming as a component of collective social action in 19th century Newfoundland', *The Mumming Unconvention*, Bath, 2011.