

Tom Brown, *Six actors I've brought*, Mummers Unconvention, Bath, 2011.

Six actors I've brought

I want to compare and contrast the English experience of Legitimate Drama – the staged play – with that of Vernacular Drama – the mumming play. The content is drawn from some of my earlier work on English language mumming and its relationship to other forms of historic and contemporary drama¹.

It is an area of investigation that has been dismissed even by an ostensibly serious folklorist, like J.R.E. Tiddy:

Serious drama is an art for which the English folk has no special facility. The current survivals of mummers plays possess hardly any of the qualities that we look for in drama².

– And for example by Craig Fees, back in 1988:

In my view attempts to compare folk drama to legitimate theatre and to define ‘folk drama’ as a genuine literary or sub-literary phenomenon are... misplaced: there is nothing in the field to which ‘folk drama’ corresponds, while the persistence of the term obscures the nature of the phenomena which are truly discovered there³.

I beg to differ! So let's start by identifying the elements involved in performing a play, and see if there are legitimate comparisons. Theatre historian Glynne Wickham suggested that:

When we talk about ‘the performance of a play’ we are automatically, if uncritically, speaking about five things at once. We cannot think of a performance without assuming the existence of a theatre that is a stage and auditorium to contain it. We assume imitation of actions in sequence that is a story line. We take for granted some means of identifying person and place, costumes and settings: and we assume the existence of both actors and an audience⁴.

So, Wickham has identified the performance as comprising:

A theatre – rapidly redefined as a stage (performance area) and an auditorium (audience space). A *sequence* of actions which he calls a storyline and the identification of person

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and place, costumes and settings – that is character and location and, of course, actors and audience. If we are considering all the elements in putting on – rather than just performing - a play, I suggest we also need to add rehearsal, leadership and administration / management. Yes – all these exist in both legitimate and vernacular drama. It is the differences we find as we examine each element that, I believe, show the vernacular mumming tradition as a unique dramatic form in its own right. My reference points throughout this paper are, I should probably make clear, traditional sides such as Marshfield, Symondsburry and Antrobus, as documented, rather than revival sides. Let's start with the stage and auditorium.

STAGE & AUDITORIUM

Groundbreaking theatre director Peter Brook took a distinctive starting point, saying:

I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged⁵.

This is the approach that takes everyday actions in the course of living and defines them as acts of theatre – not helpful from our point of view. But let's stick with the assumption of a pre-determined area for performance – a stage – and an area from which the audience watches – an auditorium.

The shape of the actors' and audience's spaces is not relevant here. That which is nowadays called 'street theatre' is not within our remit as it does not involve performing a play – of course. Sufficient to observe that the *expectation* is of actor's and audience's spaces which exist *in a building, and to which an audience is enticed*.

A critical difference with the mummers – whether it be Marshfield, Ripon Sword-dancers, or a Tup Play - is that the performance is taken **to** the audience. And this is not a variant of the travelling troupes of players familiar to Shakespeare – for they established a temporary theatre space wherever they went, created a set and dressed it. The mummers travel no set, they wear their costume and carry their props, and they do not establish or

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dress a theatre space. They create their own stage area wherever they chose to perform and these stages are in places where drama does not usually venture.

STORYLINE

The second of Wickham's elements is that of Storyline – in his terms 'imitation of actions in sequence' – a singular story (sometimes with secondary stories, sub-plots, etc.) but with a beginning, a middle and an ending. The Mummers arrive, clear their space, are announced or announce themselves; they then proceed to enact in word and movement a series of interactions between characters. The audience is not shown a continuous story, or more than one side of a story, the actions are not rationalized, the audience is not asked, or led, to make assumptions or otherwise use their intellect – if they do, they could end up wondering what the story was.

The attention of the audience is not held by convolutions of plot, but by a combination of word and action, and by interaction with the audience, much as popular theatre had always done, as Tarleton and Kemp did, and as pantomime still does.

It can be suggested that absence of storyline is a characteristic of the mummers' play, and something that distinguishes mumming from other forms of presented play or drama. The 'play' as we usually understand it involves a developing story – or part of a story. The more convoluted or clever the plot, it seems, the more highly regarded the playwright. The self-contained play has become dominantly an intellectual exercise, and it is left to the mummers to remind us that simple action and even direct address to the audience are elements of an earlier dramatic style that has largely disappeared from the conventional stage.

CHARACTER & LOCATION

Let's now consider where play is set and who the characters are. Legitimate drama sets time and place by its costume, dialogue and set. This is not a problem – plays are set in a specific time and place – and then it becomes a mark of creativity when a production 're-interprets' a work – by setting a Mozart opera in Harlem or putting a Restoration comedy

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in modern dress. Even pantomime identifies time and place – although the modern use of celebrity bit-players and their associated performances can add an element of incongruity – belief becomes suspended even within our normal suspension of disbelief.

But the Mummers establish the identity of a character by the expedient of telling the audience who they are! Some clue may have been given by costume – dependant rather on whether the team use representational or tatter costume – but the assortment of characters do not allow for a singular point in history to be established. Scenery is not used. The text has no reference to a point of history - a 12th Century knight takes the stage with a Victorian Doctor. Properties are symptomatic of the character that carries them, and nothing else. All these aspects conspire – even when contemporary issues such as Free Trade, feminism or oil prices have been included in the text - to not allow the play to be anything other than outside of time and place. This is a timelessness which the series of interactions that replace a formal storyline also helps to re-enforce. The mummers play is here and now – it exists nowhere else.

ACTORS

Our next element is the actors themselves. In legitimate drama the creation of a cast tends to be by audition. This is particularly true in the professional theatre, but also largely true in amateur dramatics which tries to emulate the conventions of the professional theatre. Individual producers or directors, particularly for pantomime, may head-hunt particular celebrities, but, by-an-large, audition is still the predominant method. Some small scale professional companies may, of course, form from among friends – but these will be acting colleagues.

Consider the mummers: In the heyday of ‘collecting’, in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, it was asserted that the casts came from within distinct socio-economic groupings within communities. Frozen-out farm labourers, not infrequently a gang from a particular farm, would maintain a plough play; fellow workers from the same factory would tour a play; a particular family maintained a play – although subsequent research tends to indicate that casting from a single family tended to come about when a particular

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tradition was in decline, rather than stable or in the ascendant. In all these cases, the casts are drawn from a *pre-existing* social circle. This is also true of the 'folk-revival' mumming teams in the last forty years, where the new gangs always originate in pre-existing groups engaged in song or dance even though 55% of them went on to be independent of the original source group.

While considering actors, we should also consider performance itself – and here, perhaps, is the most distinctive aspect of vernacular drama.

With few exceptions, the mumming play is performed to an audience that is not pre-sensitized to a performance. It is more or less performed in the round and over background noise: it needs to grab and then hold the audiences' attention. These pre-conditions have given rise to a style – and here again I refer to old traditional gangs – that, it seems to me, is fairly consistent throughout the tradition, even though interaction between the mumming teams has been minimal and there has been no 'school' through which style can have been refined. Thomas Hardy made comment between traditional style and revival style even in his days:

For Mummers and mumming Eustacia had the greatest contempt. The mummers were not afflicted with any such feeling for their art, though at the same time they were not enthusiastic. A traditional pastime is to be distinguished from a mere revival in no more striking feature than this, that while the revival is all excitement and fervour, the survival is carried out with a stolidity and absence of stir... This unweeing manner of performance is the true ring by which, in this refurbishing age, a fossilised survival may be known from a spurious reproduction⁶.

I think that what Hardy is doing here is using his literary skills not only to enhance the mood of the novel at this point, but also to exaggerate the difference between the tradition and the revival in the light of his own identifiably Survivalist attitude.

It is certainly correct to credit the traditional hero/combat plays, in comparison to the revival plays – if these terms must be used – with dignity and less general stupidity, in-jokes, individual showing off and 'playing it for laughs'. And I would even suggest that

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this applies to the Tup and Horse plays too even though, as the latter's name suggests in common usage, they are designed to serve a different end.

Most mumming text is in the form of doggerel rhyme and, naturally enough, tends to be delivered in rhythm. But it is declaimed with poise, not turned into pantomime. In performance, pace and metre may vary from mummer to mummer within the side and certainly from team to team, but amongst established groups, the experienced mummer bends the metre across a complex underlying rhythm much as a blues singer will bend the sung phrase across a more even musical accompaniment. This underlying rhythm also carries across into prose sections of text and even the non-verbal interactions such as fight and cure sequences.

If you are unsure what I mean, watch Symondsburry, Antrobus or Marshfield. The use of rhythm lends an imperative drive and makes the entire play difficult to ignore. It is a style of theatre that is almost completely absent from the legitimate stage – the closest parallel I have seen in contemporary theatre is in some Asian theatre styles such as those Jetinda Verma used with Tara Arts and subsequently, on occasion, with the National Theatre.

While modern productions seem at times to fight with rhyme or even blank verse, the old mummers emphasise it and use its hypnotic potential to advantage in holding audience attention. It becomes evident that, although the style might be called naive, is neither accidental nor unskilled.

AUDIENCE

And what of the audience? Apart from some people who follow the team, and those turn up to watch every year because it part of their seasonal celebrations, the rest have been caught unawares - the play, as we observed earlier, has found them – whether they like it or not!

Many teams will check with their intended venues beforehand and even put up a poster in order to encourage audiences. Irish teams also seem to follow this model but the tradition

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of 'ceili' and the culmination of the performance season in a mummers ball tends to motivate the audiences differently to mumming in England.

We do not have enough time to explore the complex relationships between play and audience, but I would suggest that the concept of a mutually shared and mutually agreed common experience is stronger in our field than any other art form – even other popular art forms. This argument, of course, can break down when the players and audience are not of the same community – but can strengthen when players and audience have a common expectation of what mumming is.

REHEARSAL

Having briefly explored Glynne Wickam's aspects of performing a play, we now turn to the other aspects of putting on a play that I suggested at the outset. Firstly: rehearsal.

In the theatre, rehearsal enables the actors to learn or develop their parts both individually and collectively and directors to shape both detail and overall structure.

Rehearsal for the Marshfield Mummers in the 1980s was minimalist, as Simon Lichman observed:

[...] at half past ten the mummers assemble at the church hall. While they put on their costume, they have a quick run-through of the lines. This is the only rehearsal they have all year⁷.

Is that an 'amateur' approach and lack of caring – or is it group of men so familiar with each other, experienced in the form and adsorbed in their custom that further rehearsal would have been superfluous? I think the latter – enabled by the fact that, at the time of Lichman's study, there had been no change of cast for several years – however Father Christmas observed that, when he had moved from mat-boy to his present part, he was tested every night for two weeks by the leader⁸. Similar reports come from other traditional sides.

Similar attention to getting it right is often reported – by Henry Glassie on Irish plays⁹, by Ian Russell on Tup Plays¹⁰ – and so on. The evidence on rehearsal, both that cited above

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and gleaned from other records, show that, although patterns may vary to a degree, what they have in common is sufficient rehearsal to satisfy the requirements of the leader of the team – the master mummer – and no more. Similar to legitimate drama, then, but with less time constraints, less complexity and no imperative to take the production beyond the 'norm'. And of course, except with actor/manager groups, the producer is not also an actor.

LEADERSHIP

The issue of leadership is also interesting. So many times, the leader is not only the absolute authority on what will or will not happen, but several teams only exist because of the will and determination of the leader. BUT: his or her authority depends on the consent of the rest of the players – not on a hierarchical structure imposed from above, as is done in plays, pantomime and musicals. This inversion of the power of management is, I have shown elsewhere, ¹¹ symptomatic of all the vernacular performing arts and not just mumming.

ADMINISTRATION / MANAGEMENT

It is evident that mumming groups do not possess a formal administrative or management structure in the way understood in the legitimate theatre. Pretty well all the FUNCTIONS exist in both mumming and legitimate theatre but, whereas in the theatre jobs are allocated to individual employees, or volunteers, and either encapsulated in a job description or prescribed by a senior manager of some kind, in modern mumming the tasks are carried out by one or more of the actors themselves – or of their families. There is no scenery, or light and sound, so obviously these roles do not occur – but otherwise it is true of wardrobe, properties, planning rehearsals, tour logistics, financial control, advertising (which may or may not be used), legal issues (which may or may not arise – and may or may not be ignored when they do), etc.

In this sense, mumming is closer to amateur dramatics although even there, the 'am-dram' tendency to emulate professional theatre in allocating narrowly defined roles. Although all these jobs exist and need to be undertaken, the mummers do not elevate the

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importance of the administrative work to the extent to which it happens in the theatre: for the mummers, it always remains a function of performance not its determinant.

SUMMARY

In every instance: rehearsal, wardrobe, finance, etc. the mummers do no more than the bare minimum to make the thing work.

The mummers do not create a special space with stage and auditorium in which to perform, as legitimate drama does – they use what they find and vary it constantly as the performance environment changes.

The plays are located outside of any specific time. The Characters are incongruous when put together. The style of performance is unique, but disappearing or even disappeared as more and more teams adopt, write and perform plays without reference to, or understanding of, the older styles.

I think it would be a pity to lose, or even dilute, a unique English style of drama performance by mistaking it for professional or amateur drama or even pantomime.

Notes:

¹ Tom Brown, *Mumming: The Evolution and Continuity of English Vernacular Drama*, Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, City University London. 1991.

² Reginald Tiddy, *The Mummers Play*. Oxford: O.U.P., 1923, p.70.

³ Craig Fees, *Mumming in a North Cotswold Town with Special Reference to Tourism, Urbanisation and Immigration Related Social Change*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 1988. p.20.

⁴ Glynne Wickham, *The Mediæval Theatre*, London, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1974, p.36.

⁵ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, London, Pelican Books, 1972, p.11.

⁶ Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, 1878, - chapter 'The Arrival'.

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⁷ Simon Lichman, *The Gardner's Story and What Came Next*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981, p.64.

⁸ Lichman, *Op cit*, p.87.

⁹ Henry Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming*, Indiana University Press, 1975.

¹⁰ Ian Russell, 'Here comes me and our old lass, Short of money and short of brass', *Folk Music Journal* 3(5), 1979, pp. 399-478.

¹¹ Tom Brown, *English Vernacular Performing Arts in the Late Twentieth Century: Aspects of trends, influences and management style in organisation and performance*, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Arts Policy & Management, City University London, 2000, pp.479-484.