

Mike Pearson, *Perform or Else: the Marshfield Mummers in performance*, Mummers Unconvention, Bath, 2011.

Perform or Else¹: the Marshfield Mummers in performance

I first saw photographs of the Marshfield Mummers in Alan Brody's *The English Mummers and their Plays. Traces of Ancient Mystery*² of 1969: King William with his sword and sceptre, captioned 'Costume as Disguise'; figures in the Marshfield Market Place, captioned 'The Stage as Circle'; and the sword fight outside the Almshouses, entitled 'The Play as an Action'. Whilst Brody's work is now regarded as largely derivative (there's some doubt that he ever witnessed a live performance), he sees questions central to an understanding of the mummers' plays – the relationship between performer and spectator, the nature of the playing area, the purpose of performance – reflected in the then contemporary experimental theatre work of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, Italian Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret and The Living Theater and Bread and Puppet Theater in the US. 'The occasion, the stage, the performers, the costume, the style of acting, the attitude of the performers to the text, and the audience are all subject to conventions far removed from those of the realistic proscenium theater'³.

For Brody the mummers' plays represented conflict at an elemental level, stripped to the basics of opposing forces. His analysis lays emphasis upon the performing of the *action*: he identifies the *visit*, the *circle* and the *acting style* as key constitutive features. But it was in the scratchy drawings in Richard Southern's *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*⁴ of 1962 – themselves impressions of the photographs Brody would later publish – that I first really encountered the Marshfield Mummers. For Southern, theatre is 'an address through doing' and it depends 'on a concentrated effort on one *particular occasion*'⁵, involving the employment of the personal resources of the player – voice, gesture, appearance, instruments/properties – and the secondary resources of place, stage and scenery. His *seven ages* model is based upon the a-historical evolution of theatrical space in *phases* rather than dated *periods*: importantly, each of his phases may exist at the same time, although he too appeals to primitive origins for theatre.

He places the Marshfield Mummers in his first phase, that of the Costumed Player: 'The whole man is transformed into a walking, rustling, white (sic) anonymity of fluttering'⁶. In this earliest moment of theatrical encounter, there is *visitation* by men in *disguise*, at a

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particular season. For him too the *action* is at the core of the mummers' play: he focuses his critical attention upon the *procession*, the *circle* and the *killing*.

Much subsequent folklore scholarship has concentrated upon the search for *origins*; and upon the scrutiny of *textual composition*. But if, as Cass and Roud⁷ imply, the plot, text and performance of mummers' plays are inadequately apprehended through the conventions of dramatic analysis, what might the interdisciplinary approaches of performance studies – which had its nascence in relation to the very practices to which Brody alludes – 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. Rather than worrying what came first – text or action – I suggest we might regard the performances of the Marshfield Mummers 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.

Incidentally, I first *met* and *interviewed* the troupe in 2002⁸.

The Boxing Day event takes the form of a *punctuated procession*: a traversing of the village of Marshfield; a choreography enacted within an extant architectural configuration, with irregular nodes or densities of dramatic activity.

It is played out on a specific terrain. A file of extraordinary figures, fantastically dressed, covered from crown to knee in strips of paper, with faces hidden, shimmering as they move, within a setting of buildings many in soft brown limestone; the effect is already aesthetic. Here, encounters and events are prescribed: planned and staged in relation to a particular landscape. There is a kind of – albeit imperfect – *fit*: action and place are mutually dependent, bringing each other into meaningful existence.

After an initial performance in the Market Place, the mummers proceed along the High Street, repeating the drama at the junctions of Sheep Fair Lane/Touching End Lane and

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St. Martin's Lane and then at the western edge of the village in front of the Almshouses, established in the early seventeenth century: a series of precise *locales* that – although they have changed within memory – are currently perceived to be the best places *for* performance, within the traffic-congested village centre. At each, crowds await them.



Figure One: The laid canvas. Photograph – the author

The costumed bodies of the Mummers – strategically deployed in extra-daily practices – are framed and observed in relation to particular facades, backdrops and screens; their movement is channeled through crowded streets that regulate patterns of visibility and hidden-ness – an articulation of watchers and watched, in complexities of viewpoint and meeting: approaching, passing, addressing, leaving...

The performers' knowledge of this place is intimate: you can, after all, only become a 'Paper Boy' if you were born in Marshfield. They know where to stand at each place – ready to enter the drama, to cue each other – although by the time they reach the

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Almshouses they are confident enough to swap places to confuse King William, and to add moments of humour as he seeks out his old enemy Little Man John.

Text and action

Dramatic meaning is here generated as and in both text and action, within what we might call *visual* and *aural* frames: in varying tones of voice and different levels of animation.

There are I suggest two basic modes of performative activity – *procession* and *presentation* – each with differing organisational and rhetorical characteristics, though no periods of rest or break to distinguish them; and signaled as much spatially as through changes in demeanour. It resembles an *interrupted* – or discontinuous – *practice* – with distinct concentrations of dramatic engagement and intensity set within longer phases of discursive perambulation. On procession, performers talk casually to visitors and greet villagers, though this is difficult in single file as they move quickly on, especially when windy.

The play involves the modification of the vocal and physical resources of the performer to varying degrees and with differing emphases; this includes elements of *mimesis* – ‘hard man’ Tenpenny Nit is portrayed in his posture *as* a hard man, King William swaggers after the fight. There is however little attempt at characterisation; to quote the late King William, ‘When I’ve got the costume on, I am King William. That’s it, end of story.’

The trajectory of the text is a series of individual annunciations in which gestures accentuate and elide with the spoken words: to emphasis, to demonstrate, to show intention. Where text and action part is in the perfunctory clash of wooden props during the fight – though Little Man John falls dead upon the tarpaulin with few histrionics – and in his revival, with a drop of ‘old English turpentine’. Even here Doctor Phoenix’s words describe his own actions: ‘I place a drop on his lips, and a drop on his thigh’ – or perhaps it’s vice-versa...

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And the fall of Little Man John onto the Mummer's canvas tarpaulin is mediated by the road surface: there is the restraint of enactment here, through sheer common sense.



Figure Two: Inside the circle.

Photograph – the author

Space

The genesis and delineation of the performance space is precisely enacted here. Initially, there is no formal arrangement of performers and spectators; no preordained acting areas; no fixed viewpoints; no framing devices. The Mummers are drawn into a circle by the Town Crier, who may walk round once, twice before stopping at his point of entry: ‘I get them settled, then get them on their way.’ Processing and entering in the same order, they always take up the same position on an unmarked street corner. They adopt a circle as the most basic of performative configurations; and the Sheetman lays the canvas at the centre. The circle affects the type, nature and quality of the activity and its reception. The performers have an innate understanding of the requirements of performing here: they walk and turn whilst speaking; they stand at the centre to declaim. With their backs to the

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crowd, they hold the circle intact. For the crowd, it's democratic: everyone is equidistant from the centre, there are no hierarchies of viewpoint. A temporary space – a provisional playing area – is created within the everyday, constantly redefined by the activity of the combatants, who remain in three-dimensions. In sum, the arrangement of the performance area, the configuration of performers and spectators, architectural and scenographic enclosure and restriction all affect the nature and quality of the activity and its reception. And as quickly as performance space appears, it disappears...

In Marshfield, there are, of course, clues to past spatial practices, as the once *indoors* has become *outdoors*. Father Christmas demands 'If Little Man John is in the room, let him step this way'; Old Father Beelzebub invites us to 'Sit down at your ease.'

Time

The Marshfield Mummers perform six times: once in the town square, three times in the main street and once outside the public house nominated as annual host. Yet the whole event is often finished within an hour: each performance lasts little longer than six minutes. Each is in *event* time: the activity takes as long as it requires for completion, all the business has to be done in order, narrative order, until the story is told. It is resolutely in the present; everything we need to know is here, although the text does refer to other times and places: 'I slew the fiery dragon...'; 'As I walked up to London all on St. David's Day...'

And one hour may be long enough for older performers; or to fulfill an annual commitment to communal continuity; or indeed to collect all the money for charity they are going to collect.

Pattern

The narrative structure of the play derives from the single incident of conflict: the fight is preceded by boast, challenge, counter challenge; it is followed by death, revival and celebration. But the performance exists rather as a programmatic sequence of directives and obligations not predicated upon dramatic notions of motive, character and

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timing. One after another the figures enter, identifying themselves and their purpose in a short text: ‘In comes I, Old Father Christmas.’ Each then ushers in the next: ‘If King William is in the room, let him step this way.’ At the conclusion there is *quête* of subsidiary characters: Saucy Jack – ‘Wife and family at me back’; Tenpenny Nit – ‘With my big head and my little wit’; Old Father Beelzebub – ‘A little of your Christmas ale, would make us boys dance and sing. A little of your money in our pockets, would be a jolly fine thing.’ And finally, an enigmatic song in three verses accompanied by a shuffling, circular dance.

‘In comes I’ is at once an assertion, a declaration of intent, an existential affirmation, a transitive action, an identification, an *entrée*, a stage direction... Early entrances constitute *inciting incidents*, irrevocable changes of consequence and their trajectories; they advance the story, such as it is. But the figures of the *quête* – freed from any function within the narrative – have an autonomous and ambiguous presence: their existence, their function and the effect they create are conflated.

We might then regard the performance as a game plan; as immutable sequence; as a series of imperatives for action.

Detail

It’s in the detail that innovation occurs, sometimes through accidents of speech or loss of memory, more often through conscious additions: changes are both momentary and glacial in Marshfield. The late Tenpenny Nit wore a helmet so that he could strike himself on the head to show that it is indeed made of iron; it is locally agreed that his build and demeanour fitted the part.

The present Father Christmas already knew his part when he took it, though he is conscious that he uses different hand movements and reactions and emphasises different words, without changing the text. But he can hear his own father’s voice as he does it; his aged father avers that he could step back in if required. After archaeologist John Barrett,

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they write into existence the presence of ancestors. There is ‘The possibility of a meaning which seems to originate beyond their own world of everyday experience’⁹.

The application of rules

The Mummers retain a strong sense of their own stylistic conventions, rarely resorting to overly pantomimic gestures. They do not seek audience approbation through their performance expertise, and opportunities to monitor response and to alter the dramatic engagement accordingly are few, given the short duration of the play and the limited visual and auditory capacity of the costumed performers. The disciplinary requirements of tradition and sanction – how texts should be spoken, that the face should be covered – give direction and purpose to the activity.

Strategies

In the talk-through just prior to the event – when texts but not actions are rehearsed – the need for strength of voice is stressed, even if this involves shouting and hoarseness; increasing quietness is deemed a potential reason for retirement. Wind is regarded as problematic as it ‘takes’ the voice and makes hearing and cueing difficult: cold, clear mornings, when the voice ‘travels’, are generally favoured. There is also an admonition not to rush.

Individual performers admit to having strategies of survival: walking round the circle once will get one to the end of his text; watching for the dance steps may be more effective than listening for the song. If one forgets his lines, he can rest assured that they will emerge from another of the shrouded figures. The performance in the Market Place enables them to remember their performance in front of the largest crowd: ‘But as soon as I open my mouth it just comes out...apart from once last year.’

Dynamics

The overall dramatic trajectory is inexorable: figures must enter when they are announced and must in turn announce their fellow; but each entry is a kind of dynamic revivification.

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The performance tends towards a climax: of fight and revival, with a long epilogue. But within performances there are subtly different modulations of speed, exertion, energy expenditure: as the hour progresses, as performers become more or less enthusiastic, as material conditions – of spatial availability for instance – differ.

Objects

Objects here – wooden swords, club, money-pan have an enhanced even arbitrary value, beyond their material worth. They stimulate action: they enable the activity to operate and help advance the drama. They establish identities and actions are organised around them.

Several of the costumes – such as those of Father Christmas, Saucy Jack, and Old Man Beelzebub – are original, dating to 1930, with paper that is sewn on and that must be regularly renewed: it is possible to find on them dated fragments of newspaper of different ages, literally to read their past. One costume was made by the village carpenter, the paper affixed with wood glue: even today it is impossible to pierce it with a needle. They are extremely durable – surviving adverse weather – though they do require recurrent renovation. Each costume is maintained by the individual performer and there is a recurrent concern that some performers are not taking enough care to cover their faces. Although their community knows each individual by voice and demeanour, they maintain the illusion of disguise.

Modes of performance

So, a group of men – now rendered ‘other’ – visit their fellow inhabitants and spread the effect of their work through the village. This we might regard as task-based activity: it’s what they do – feel obliged to do – on Boxing Day.

They are engaged in acts of declamation, addressed neither directly to their colleagues nor to specific sections of the crowd. Some stress the potential distractions of performing in the circle – the danger of looking at the crowd, of recognising friends and relations – as

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the mind might wander and they might miss the cue, forget to come in; memories of mistakes linger in the collective memory.

Several deny that they are a person quote ‘to stand up and perform’, insisting it is just what they do on Boxing Day. Some admit to nervousness. ‘But once you’re actually there doing it, it’s totally different, once you’re all dressed up and you see everybody else dressed up’ says Saucy Jack.

Each performer must ensure a continuum of presence, which, whilst it may be informal, must not jeopardise the overall tenor of the occasion; this requires decorum. They watch each other; they do not engage in irrelevant acts. They exercise self-restraint – in words and actions – for the communal good of the performance. Then, they enter and perform: the resources of the performer are assembled and committed in a single impulsive moment, with ‘In comes I.’ Each is solely responsible for the delivery of his text; and in his few lines – with extreme brevity – he must establish his identity, his history, his prowess and his purpose and then introduce and cue his colleague before exiting. Yet he performs with only a limited range of gestures to emphasise moments in the text, and without the audience empathy that might result from facial expression and the intricacies of character and narrative development that dramatic interplay might presume. I quote the late Tenpenny Nit, Bernie Fishlock:

In drama you try to assess how good your performance was and whether the audience appreciate it but I don’t think we’re quite the same when we perform our play in the streets. We’re not really that worried. You know, we want the audience to be able to hear it and enjoy it but it’s more important to us to get it right rather than get it right for the audience. It’s a difficult feeling to explain but we’re doing it for ourselves as much as we’re doing it for anyone else whereas if you’re in a play or something you want to try and perhaps get into the character more and portray it whereas I feel that I know my character is supposed to be hard man or whatever and I try to portray that a little bit but whether Father Beelzebub is trying to get himself psyched up to be the devil or King William is psyching himself up to be royalty is another matter isn’t it.

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The thing is it's nothing major really is it? You just go in the circle, say your lines and get out again and that's it. But to actually do it, that's something else.

Perform or else...

Notes:

¹ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or else: from discipline to performance*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

² Alan Brody, *The English Mummers and their plays: traces of ancient mystery*. Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1971.

³ Ibid., p.14.

⁴ Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*, London: Faber, 1962.

⁵ Ibid., p.23.

⁶ Southern, 1962, p.42.

⁷ Eddie Cass, and Steve Roud, *Room, Room, Ladies and Gentlemen: An Introduction to the English Mummers' Play*. London: English Folk Song and Dance Society, 2002. pp. 41-4.

⁸ Mike Pearson, 'Marshfield Mummers: The Old Time Paper Boys' in: J. Kelleher and N. Ridout, (eds), *Contemporary Theatre in Europe*. London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 136-48.

⁹ John C. Barrett, Towards an archaeology of ritual. In: P. Garwood, A. Fitzpatrick and L. McInnes, eds. *Sacred and Profane*. Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1991. p.5.