

Gavin Skinner, *The Brunel play*, Mummers Unconvention, Bath, 2011.

## The Brunel play

Some of you may have been lucky enough to see the play at the unplugged concert on the opening night of the 2011 Bath Mummers Unconvention or at our previous performances in Bristol in 2009, or at this year's Bristol Folk Festival where it was performed on stage at the Colston Hall. There was another chance to see it on the Saturday of the Unconvention, when we took it out on to the streets of Bath.

Figure One: The Brunel Play unplugged. Photo: [www.folkfestivalphotos.co.uk](http://www.folkfestivalphotos.co.uk)



I'm going to be looking into some of the questions I've been asking myself about the play since the inception of the project about 3 years ago; and how the answers to those questions informed the development of the play, looking at aspects of the performance, production and the philosophy.

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Bristol's Rag Morris used to have more of a tradition of performing self-penned plays, though the last major production had been 1993, a year before I started dancing regularly with Rag. This play about the legendary Bristolian giants, Vincent and Goram, had been penned by Marc Vyvan-Jones with help from Roland & Linda Clare. These two giants had a test of strength to win the hand of the fair Princess Sabrina, and to prove his worth; Vincent carved out the Avon Gorge with a pickaxe. The script for this play included the character of Brunel-zebub, as the devil with the frying pan who was raising funds to build a bridge to span St Vincent's Rocks.

So while I was thinking about writing a mummers' play, and who should be in it; using the script of the Vincent and Goram play as a template for creating a local story about a Bristolian hero; 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.

But would Brunel make a suitable candidate for inclusion in a mummers' play, which would attract an audience in Bristol? Well as I started thinking about the characteristics needed for our mummers' play hero, and reading a few books about Brunel for research, he seemed to tick a lot of the boxes.

1) Was he a hero in the tradition of St George or Robin Hood?

Yes he was; he came from a class of men who have been referred to as "heroic engineers", such as Thomas Telford or George and Robert Stephenson who personified the fight against the greatest technical challenges of the day. A contemporary editor of the Railway Times described him as an "Engineering Knight Errant", and went on to say he was; "always on the lookout for magic caves to be penetrated and enchanted rivers to be crossed, never so happy as when engaged 'regardless of cost' in conquering some, to ordinary mortals, impossibility"<sup>1</sup>. This was when Brunel was developing his atmospheric railway, so the writer wasn't being entirely complimentary. But such a character seemed ideal for a mummers' play.

2) A defining moment of any mummers' play is a fight. Did our hero get into fights?

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Yes he did. He was in Bristol during the Queen Square riots of 1831; he was sworn in as a special constable and arrested a looter. Twenty years later he instigated his own riot at Mickleton Tunnel, commanding an army of 3000 navvies in a dispute with a company of contractors who had failed to complete their work on time and on budget. He was also a risk-taker and rather accident-prone, and these accidents provided an opportunity for our Doctor character to revive him with his pills and potions.

3) It would be good to tell a story about a local hero; which he is. Although he never had a permanent address there, Brunel had a strong association with the City of Bristol. Many of his major projects were connected with the city; his designs for the Clifton Suspension Bridge were first submitted at the age of 23; the original terminus for the Great Western Railway was in Bristol and two of his great steamships were built and launched into the Bristol Harbour.

4) It would also help if the character was famous, and Brunel certainly is. He's a fascinating and complex individual whose story encapsulates both the successes and failures of the Victorian age. In 2002 he was voted number 2 in the BBC's poll of Greatest Britons, second only to Winston Churchill. And his name pops up all the time in the most unlikely places. This summer, Bristol Zoo organised an Art Trail of model gorillas around the city, which were then auctioned off for charity. The gorilla that raised the most money was called Gorisambard; the final bid being more than twice as much as the nearest rival, a whopping £23,000. I'd suggest it was the most sought-after gorilla simply because of its connection with the city's favourite local hero.

So, Brunel ticked all four of these boxes, and having chosen the star of the show, I started to think about how to write the script. There were two clear choices; write a simple hero-combat play with Brunel as a character in name alone, with a few jokes about cigars and railways; or to build the play around one or two historical events from Isambard's life.

Before this project began, I wasn't quite as obsessed about Brunel as perhaps I am now. But as I read more and more, it became clearer to me that to do the story justice and to honour the man's memory it would be better to stick to the historical fact than the

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hysterical fiction. Because with Brunel, the truth was often stranger than fiction; and because his story was so full of incident and intrigue, I wouldn't structure the play around just one historical event; it would be based around nine.

In 2006, a series of cultural events and exhibitions to celebrate the bicentenary of Isambard's birth was organised by the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership under the banner of Brunel 200. As part of this, the ss Great Britain hosted an exhibition at the nearby Maritime Centre entitled, "The 9 lives of I.K.Brunel". This exhibition looked at Brunel's life and career by highlighting nine occasions when he was in mortal danger, from a flood in the Thames Tunnel he was helping his father, engineer Marc Brunel, to build; to a fall into the engine room of his first great steamship, the Great Western, following a fire. Incidents such as these occurred throughout his life; if you read any stories or books that mention Brunel even in passing; you'll often find one of more of these events gets mentioned, almost as a defining moment, the disasters complementing the triumphs. Brunel's life story has created a kind of historical mythology of its own; and it's that mythology which we tried to capture in this play, by concentrating simply on these triumphs and disasters.

The nine lives structure lent itself perfectly to that of a mummers' play, or rather nine short mummers' plays, and that's how the script developed; each with a brief introduction to set the scene, a challenge, incident or accident to provide the dramatic peak or turning point, represented by some visual gag or dramatic reconstruction, which would then be quickly resolved; where necessary with a little something from the Doctor's bag to get the man back on his feet, all ready for the next disaster.

The character of Brunel was surrounded by a cast of 6 other characters, all loosely based on mummers' play archetypes, which would be called upon to represent some aspect of his personality or an influence on the story. These included Brunelzebub, Bold Slasher, Little Johnny Jack, and Old Father Thames, who represents the rivers associated with Brunel's projects, which he spent so much time bridging, tunneling underneath or launching ships into; and Doctor Foster, down from Gloucester, who stands in for all the

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physicians who treated Brunel after his accidents and through his ill-health; one of whom was actually called Doctor Morris.

What I wanted to do was create a kind of performance both drew from the mummers' play tradition, and was also a play about Brunel. So to visualise the relationship between these sets of ideas, I drew a Venn diagram. What we ended up with was a hybrid of two plays - a mummers play biography - and finding out where and how these two parts intersected was the challenge of writing the script. Turning this around, it was also apparent that this play could potentially attract two audiences; an audience of Brunel fans, and audience of Mummers' Play fans. To be honest, if I wanted to write and perform in a stand-alone piece of Brunel-themed street theatre which wasn't within the mummers' play tradition I probably would have found it a rather more complicated process. It was a useful way to introduce and establish the project in just a few words, both to Rag Morris and to the venues and other organisations that were to help with the staging of the production.

This mummers' play, in common with many other such plays, was designed to be performed at a specific moment in space and time. So let's look into where and when the play was first performed.

Isambard Kingdom Brunel lived from 1806 to 1859. He died at the age of 53 after a stroke brought on by health problems, which would have been exacerbated by stress and his habit of smoking copious numbers of fine cigars every day. Now my script was developed a couple of years after the Brunel 200 celebrations, so was too late for that, but there was an opportunity to coincide with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brunel's death, which would fall on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2009. The date also offered an opportunity to collaborate with another event for the historically inclined; Bristol's Doors Open Day, which fell on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September that year. We wanted to take the play out to the locations most closely associated with Brunel's story in Bristol, and many of these were either open especially for Doors Open Day or were close to other such venues. So with the kind cooperation of the organisers, we were heavily promoted in the Doors Open Day programme for that year.

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I made a map for our programme leaflet to show some Brunel-related sites in Bristol. The venues we took the play to included the Clifton Suspension Bridge, the Underfall Yard, the ss Great Britain, Queen Square and the Temple Meads passenger shed – Brunel’s old railway terminus.

One further performance was scheduled for the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup> of September next to the Explore-At-Bristol science centre where I was working, which was followed by a free Science Café discussion entitled, “When Engineers were Heroes”. This took place on the actual 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Brunel’s death; and was, as far as I know, the only significant cultural event to mark this occasion.

We’ve now performed the play at various venues in Bristol, including the M-Shed, near the site of the dockyard where the Great Western Steamship was built, where we performed in April this year before heading to the Colston Hall.

As part of the development of the performance, we had to decide what the characters had to wear. I’ve heard people say that Brunel’s top hat and tailcoat costume was unusual; that he wore a taller hat than everyone else because he was worried about his diminutive stature. But the evidence clearly shows that this was not the case; your well-dressed man about town would often wear something of this kind. In contemporary photographs taken when Brunel attended the disastrous launch of his Leviathan steamship, he’s surrounded by men all wearing long coats and tall hats. So the characters on our play all wear the same basic outfit to replicate this look. This is similar to what the Doctor wears in many mummers’ plays, which makes a lot of sense, as the tradition of performing mummers’ plays was being established around this period and this is what many professional men would have worn at the time.

As Brunel ended his career while photography was still in its infancy, there are only around a half dozen photographs of him, and they are all brilliant. So for our first public performance, at 10am on Saturday 12 September 2009, at the Clifton Suspension Bridge Lookout point, I think we approximated the look of those old photos rather well.

Figure Two: Clifton Suspension Bridge Performance: Photo: Simon Chapman



We're all wearing essentially the same costume, with just a few props – a taller hat, a cloak, painted faces – to distinguish between the different characters. But why have the two bad guys got blue faces? There is of course a good reason for this. Brunel kept diaries and wrote letters throughout his life, many of which are now in the safekeeping of the Brunel Institute, run jointly by the ss Great Britain and the University of Bristol Library's special collections archive.

One of these documents is Brunel's secret diary. On one page, written in 1828, when he was just 22, a few months after the Thames Tunnel accident which caused the tunnel to be closed up, he uses various unusual phrases. When write about his hopes and dreams,

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he'd describe "castles in the air"; if things weren't going so well for him, he'd sometimes say he was feeling "blue devilish". At one point he says:

It makes me rather blue devilish to think of it and since I am very prone to build airy castles I will now build a few blue ones which I am afraid are likely to prove less airy and more real<sup>2</sup>.

Now in those days these blue devils were a kind of common slang for depression and unhappiness; in later years the word "devils" would be dropped and people would simply say they had "the blues". And Brunel suffered a lot from the blues and from self-doubt. Although his indefatigable spirit would enable him to put that to one side and dream up a new project that was even more groundbreaking than the last, even if it flew in the face of conventional wisdom, or even of common sense. As his colleague and friend Daniel Gooch said of him after his death; "great things are not done by those who sit down and count the cost of every thought and act."

So perhaps Doctor Foster represents that indefatigable spirit; or at least, perhaps he had some of that spirit in his bag of medicine, mixed in with the laudanum. And he needed that because death hangs around the story of Brunel like a cloud, represented by Brunelzebub and his little black account book, recording the collateral damage which resulted from Brunel's great construction projects, as many of the accounts of his life do, as if these engineering works were an equivalent to a military campaign.

I like to think that during his later life that when Brunel designed the mobile field hospitals used during the Crimean war, it was almost as an attempt to add some figures to the opposite side of the balance sheet, by saving a few lives to compensate for those which had been lost. And they certainly did save lives; the death rate in the Brunel-designed hospital (Renkioi) was 3%, compared to 42% in one of the hospitals it replaced (Scutari). But of course we didn't need that counterbalance in our mummers' play, because, as in countless other mummers' plays, the Doctor is there to bring the dead man back to life again, to stick nine fingers up in the air at death and to say, today, in our world, on this stage, our hero does not die. And that is the story we attempted to tell; a

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story of challenges faced and met and conquered, a story of depression and death; of disaster and triumph; the story of that indefatigable spirit and of a remarkable man.

And at the end of the play, after the character of Old Leviathan arrives like an angel of doom to relate the tragic story of the Great Eastern steamship, Brunel lies on his deathbed, his life flashing before him, as if this performer and great engineer were imagining his own life story being acted out in the form of a mummers' play; and so the play concludes, but Brunel Lives! And the seven characters become six dancers and one musician and together they perform a Morris dance, and the spirit of his Great Leviathan can finally take the Ghost of Brunel on a voyage that never took place; a voyage to South Australia.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Dow, 'Editorial Comment', *The Railway Times*, c1945.

<sup>2</sup> Personal diary kept by Isambard Kingdom Brunel (the locked diary): October 1827 - August 1832. Bristol University Library: Isambard Kingdom Brunel Archive. Ref.No. DM1306/2/1/folio23.