

Ron Shuttleworth, *Starting up with Coventry Mummers: the early years from 1966*, Mummers Unconvention, Bath, 2012.

### **Starting up with Coventry Mummers: The early years from 1966.**

There seems to be a lot of ‘me’ in this, but that is how it was. The scripts are largely down to me, as I concocted the first drafts for us to work on. I tried to use all traditional speeches but not necessarily from the same source.

Having been intrigued by the hooden<sup>1</sup> beasts used by Morris dancers I resolved to make one of my own. As a Derbyshire man I decided on a Derby Ram, which is still used by Coventry Mummers today. At this time I was active with the Folk Group of the Camping Club and on August Bank Holiday 1966 I took my ram to a meet (or gathering) where I showed it to Bob Whitlock of Woodside Morris. He knew of the Derby Tup<sup>2</sup> play and could remember enough for some of us to give an impromptu performance. We were due to entertain at a big camping ‘do’ the following weekend and decided to learn and costume the play and to perform it there. My interest was aroused and I did some further research, finally achieving a collated version very similar to the one we use today.

The traditional play is based on the song *The Derby Tup* or Ram. It starts with the verses which describe the various attributes of this huge beast, then a Butcher ‘kills’ the tup and the play finishes with the rest of the song describing the various uses to which its different body parts were put. The problem for me was that all the collected versions of the play were very, very short – so-- how to spin it out? I scratched together every last speech I could find and imported a couple of sequences from traditional Horse plays.<sup>3</sup> One is a ‘reverse auction’ in which the bids diminish, and the other involves the Tup answering questions, and ‘smelling-out’ members of the audience. A calling-on song was also added - an idea we now use in all our plays because it attracts an audience.<sup>4</sup> The whole thing still only runs for ten minutes but has made an effective play. At this time I was associated with a folk sing-around club, and in November when my text was ready I took it and the Tup to a club-night. Getting an encouraging response, we had a meeting which was the start of Coventry Mummers, so it could be said that the Tup was the first member of the side. There were a number of people doing mummers’ plays at this time but they were all groups that existed for some other reason – morris dancers, song clubs and so on, and I suspect that nobody believed you could run a team year-long on mumming alone but luckily we didn’t know this. To make it work we had

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to perform out of season - and were criticised for it - but I believe that we were the first with a fixed membership and weekly meetings. We find that limiting our membership to about thirteen men works best. We are all extremely close and I say that if you cut one of us we all bleed. I think that part of this is down to the fact that we meet in a private room on licenced premises, so that the meetings are also a social gathering and nobody has to leave early to get a drink. We find that a cheap way for a small group to do this is to join a Working Men's club. You each pay a small annual sub and then, as members, get the room for free, although if you are hearty drinkers some pubs won't charge for a room.

So, we had our Tup Play and our early efforts were much encouraged by Coventry Morris who invited us out on a couple of their gigs. By the spring of 1967 we were up and running and looking for another play. A Hero-Combat was the obvious choice and I had done some reading so I took the standard Pace-egg/Yorkshire Chapbook version as typified by the text from Lancaster, and added Jack Finney who is a local character and some of the Doctor's business. The presenter is Betsy Bubb — a combination of the standard Betsy with Beelzebub — and Devil Doubt has been conflated with Room.<sup>5</sup>

We then applied to join the Morris Ring<sup>6</sup> which was not so easy in those days. They only meet once a year and they first had to vote to change their Constitution to admit non-dancing teams. We then had to prove ourselves at two Ring Meetings and were elected as full members the following year. Thus we opened the door for other Mummers. In the early days we got some flak for not being 'traditional' in our costumes, props and attitude to seasonal performance, but I can truly say that because we did this, a lot more people have seen a Mummers' Play than would have done otherwise. My aim has always been to promote the cause of mumming as a serious activity. Nowadays we are probably mainstream or even old hat.

The next year we wanted to further expand the repertory and started on the 'Wooing' or 'Plough' Play with a text knitted up from about five traditional versions. Unlike the St. George play which is very linear in form, collected Wooing texts are more episodic, with the parts appearing in different orders and combinations. As originally collated, we found that the action seemed scrappy and broken. The wooing sequences did not flow and there was no real reason for the fight. Eventually we slightly re-arranged the order of the

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episodes, and added just two linking speeches. The only real changes were making Dame Jane's illegitimate baby the reason for the Farmer's Man to enlist, and making Thrashing Blade the Sergeant's rival for the Lady, but we now have a play which flows well and follows an obvious plot. This is so much more satisfactory for both players and audience that I sometimes dare to wonder if we have not stumbled on the original scenario.

Thrashing Blade is the obvious one to fight the Sergeant, as his flail is a most effective



**Coventry Thrashing Blade© Ron Shuttleworth**

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weapon against a sword, which can be knocked flying. (I read somewhere that at one time in France it was illegal to carry a flail upon the highway.)

After that it seemed logical to complete the set of 'play types' with a Long Sword play and we now had a morris man in the side who could teach us the dance.<sup>7</sup> The paucity of texts led us to once again use a collation. There is some evidence that at least one traditional sword team played the beheading for effect. With a developing history of 'trick' props, I was determined that the head had to appear to come off — but how? The solution is one of those obvious ideas which anyone could have thought of once they'd seen it done - it's so simple but it took me three months to work it all out.

Not many teams perform all four types of play and we also get serious at Christmas and revive four or five traditional plays that were collected locally. We consider ourselves to be custodians of the traditions and only do them in and around their home areas. We copy costume details where known and adhere closely to the collected script. A couple of add-libs have crept in, but as additions to the business involving the Doctor. I've had some theatrical people sneer at Mummers, but I point out that we could claim to be a Street-Theatre company who have been going for over forty years without public funding. That confounds them. I'm not sure whether this is relevant but I have often pondered the surprising success of our St George play with audiences. I suspect that it is in some part due to the way we have interpreted the script which may be more luck than good management. The hero has four fights. In the first he is beaten by a stronger opponent, the Black Prince. In the second he wins by cheating - he shoots the opponent. In the third fight against Turkish Knight he wins fairly by prowess alone and is magnanimous towards his defeated enemy. The fourth fight, with Hector, is a comic affair in which he is toying with his opponent and makes fun of him as the poor man's weapons fall apart. Thus his stature increases as the action proceeds - very satisfying.

Costume and props have always been very important to the Coventry Mummers. Most of the ideas came from me and most of the hard work was down to my wife who was an accomplished dressmaker. Originally we had no idea how long things would go on for and the first tup play was costumed mainly from cast-offs and jumble-sales. They were soon replaced but it stood us in good stead because we realized that dress-fabrics tend not to look good in this context. Of vital importance was the discovery of see-through

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Terylene fabric for the tup's body which allows all-round vision. I was determined that if we performed out people wouldn't be thinking 'who are that lot tating about over there?' but be standing on tiptoe saying 'what's going on?' To this end I aimed for oversize weapons made of metal— and therefore noisy - and bold, block colours in the costumes. For this reason also we chose to dress 'to part' rather than use the older commonality of dress. I worked on the principle that 'something on his body, something on his head and something in his hand' should be all that was needed to set the part. It is important for



costumes to be one-size-fits-all and for us to be able to kit-up in the street. (I knew one side who's St George wore impressive silver tights but had to find a public toilet to get changed.) In the Hero-Combat play I started with George who "obviously" needed a white surcoat with a red cross. I decided to stick to this maxi-tabard design for the others, using a different colour for each. This gives a nice impression of cohesion.

I tried to get all the props made by members of the team. I worked at Land-Rover, where there were lots of light alloy offcuts and I had access to the machinery for working them, so I made all the weapons. Another of our men worked in a bright-anodising plant where he gave them all a highly polished, non-corroding finish. Other members of the team were, and still are, ruthlessly exploited. Whenever I walk round a shop selling toys, jokes, household utensils and so on I find myself looking round for anything that I can use in a play. St George's helmet is made from a saucepan and a sprout-bag, and that of Turkish Knight from a plastic colander plus the top of a big bottle with a sparking-plug in it. There were no personalised sweat-shirts in those days so there was a need for some sort of standard 'walking-out' kit to identify us when we weren't in costume. I hoped to get the Mummers accepted for membership of the Morris Ring, then the only alternative to DEAFASS— the Dance Earnestly and Forget About Song Society <sup>8</sup> — and I felt that to have a chance we would have to conform to a Morris style of dress and be very smart indeed. The wife of a friend agreed to make our coats. As I remember it they cost £6.50 each - a serious sum – and since I was the only one with any spare cash at all I paid

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everything over £3. (I never got reimbursed for what amounted to about two weeks' pay) Under the coats we decided to wear the standard Morris costume of white shirts and stockings with black breeches. We opted for ribbons on our hats because ribbon-making used to be a major industry in Coventry, and because costumes using ribbons or strips of cloth are very much in the mumming tradition. Ribbons hanging over the face are a traditional means of achieving the mummers' disguise and from this came the idea of spreading them out. Correctly therefore, we wear mummers' hats back-to-front. In the St George play, we had visual continuity deriving from the similar style of the costumes. Here, the idea could be applied to only three characters. We chose the rural smock as the basis with different-coloured yolks, and cut-out decorations as used by some traditional teams.

Over our forty-five years we have performed in many varied situations both here and occasionally abroad. Most notable were the ten consecutive years from 1977 at the National Theatre when we did their Christmas Foyer Show – a continuous one hour forty minutes - before both the matinee and evening performances. This involved all four plays, with link spots whilst we frantically got changed behind a pillar. We were told that the professional actors liked to watch us because we broke all the rules that had been hammered into them in their first week at RADA – and got away with it. We appeared on ITVs children's show "Magpie" when they broadcast a programme from Warwick Castle. We had to cut the play to ribbons but got a round of applause from the technical crew – which I value above diamonds. In 1984 we were booked by the English Tourist Board to send four men to perform on their stand at a big three-day fair for travel agents in America. You can see that I could go on and on 'ad infinauseam'.

Are you - or anyone you know- performing without Public Liability insurance? The three Morris organisations all insist on it and have a joint policy. If you think it unnecessary, consider the following. In our early years we had a gig at a University Students' bar which had a low ceiling and lots of low square tables. The stage was minute and our Turkish Knight did his vaunt walking along the tables. He accidentally caught someone a glancing blow on the head which needed a couple of stitches. Not too serious you might think – until I got a letter from his solicitor claiming that the blow had caused him to fail his exams. I just sent the papers to the Morris Ring and never heard anything more. Only

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years later did I learn that they had paid him. If damages are awarded, they do not have to be taken equally from everyone in the team. You are held “Jointly and severally liable” and one or more people may be pursued for the full sum. They can clean you out – house, car, and the lot and if there is not enough they go to another and so on. Old claims against the uninsured that might now have some cash are currently being farmed out to lawyers. You might think that it could never happen to you – but your whole side is at risk. A lot of local authorities insist on teams having insurance of up to ten million pounds, which shows the sort of sums that can be involved.<sup>9</sup>

I would also like to draw attention to my collection of mumming material which is now part of the Morris Ring Archive. I started amassing it in the early 1970s and eventually tried to collect everything that had been written on the subject. Rash fool! I now have over 5,800 items plus all the books and booklets. This includes some 180 unpublished works of scholarship ranging from essays to PhD theses. With a few exceptions everything is digitised and I can service e-mail queries with copies of specific items and/or special listings from my database which has some 7,400 entries. If anyone can add to it or point me towards anything I may not have heard of I would be most grateful. I have a space on the “Folk Play Research” website run by the Traditional Drama Research Group and have used my experience to produce three booklets which are available on the Web.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The web site of the Traditional Drama Research Group contains a helpful introduction to matters of play types and character names referred to throughout this paper. Hoodening is a particular English calendar custom but ‘hooden beasts’ refers more broadly to the hooded animal disguises that are a feature of some morris dances and some mummers’ plays. See <http://www.folkplay.info/index.htm> (accessed 21.01.13) and Cawte, E. C. *Ritual animal disguise: A historical and geographical study of animal disguise in the British Isles*, D. S. Brewer for the Folklore Society, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Millington has contributed a detailed consideration of play and character types to the Traditional Drama Research Group website at <http://www.folkplay.info/index.htm> Refer particularly to: <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts.htm#DerbyTup> (accessed 21.01.13)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Millington has contributed a detailed consideration of play and character types to the Traditional Drama Research Group website at <http://www.folkplay.info/index.htm> Refer particularly to: <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts.htm#OldHorse> (accessed 21/01.13)

<sup>4</sup> ‘calling on songs’ are commonly associated with a range of English calendar customs and are sung introductions to dramatis personae, supernumerary characters attaching to dance traditions etc. but, importantly, they are a performative mechanism for attracting audience attention in outdoor venues, public houses and similar performance locations where audience attention is not always forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to play and character types refer to <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts.htm> (accessed 21.01.13)

<sup>6</sup> The Morris Ring is the longest established umbrella organisation for the network of Morris Dancing sides (teams) in the UK. See <http://www.themorrisring.org/> (accessed 21.01.13)

<sup>7</sup> As for note 5, above, refer to <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts.htm>

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<sup>8</sup> A spoof acronym deriving from a perceived earnestness on the part of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) attributed to an unnamed cartoonist from *Southern Rag* magazine, the forerunner of *Folk Roots*.

<sup>9</sup> There may be a good deal of sound advice here regarding risk analysis, but neither the author nor the editor claim legal expertise, nor seek to offer legal advice.

<sup>10</sup> Details are available at <http://www.folkplay.info/Ron/Index.htm> (accessed 21.01.13)