

The Penny Plain Theatre – from street theatre to mumming.

Penny Plain Theatre has come to mumming via the theatrical route. We come from a picturesque Yorkshire Dales village called Grassington and were founded in 2004 by Andrew Jackson and Mark Bamforth. They are a semi-professional theatre group performing as a run down and seedy Victorian travelling theatre. They perform a variety of shows at festivals, private functions, and for various stately homes, English Heritage and the National Trust. While we perform hour-long plays from our travelling outdoor stage, we also enact a Christmas entertainment and its summer equivalent based on traditional folk material. We formed in 2004 to present plays performed from our travelling theatre which we built ourselves, and perform in the guise of Hardcastle's Mighty Excelsior Theatre Company, a troupe of down and out itinerant Victorian actors, based on historical research. Our self-imposed brief was to bring some of the legends and tales of Yorkshire to life by presenting them in a fast-paced farcical manner with the troupe getting everything wrong. This in turn led us into the realms of folk drama, as two of us have a passion for folk music and dance.

We then devised a half hour entertainment, performed without the theatre, which incorporated a mummers play as the centrepiece of a medley of folk carols and dances, still performed in the guise of Hardcastle's troupe. We have performed two or three versions of the mummers' play, all from our locality, but have settled on the Bellerby play, as it has the most complete dramatic form.

Now this is where we might come in for some opprobrium, as we have done some editing to the original text as recorded by Maud Karpeles in 1926 having been last performed in the village in 1879, and included in Alex Helm's collection. The original was quite lengthy, and as far as I could see, had been rather patched together with additions from neighbouring traditions. We had to restrict our performance down to half an hour, and, in order to include the other elements of the performance, the mummers play had to be restricted to 12 minutes. Here, I'm afraid; we are following the Victorian tradition of bowdlerising material with little reverence to its historical origins, but in my defence would say that I took a lot of time over editing out the portions of the text which seemed repetitive and borrowed.

The play itself follows the pattern of most North Yorkshire plays. It is in the hero-combat tradition, and based around a rapper dance. In this case, there is a fight between Hector and "the king", but they get interrupted, and instead, a female sacrificial victim is brought in and

Andrew Jackson, *The Penny Plain Theatre - from street theatre to mumming*, Mummies Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

killed. As usual, she is revived by the doctor, and there the play ends, apart from presenting Jack the horse to the audience to beg money off them (and this has been grafted in, sorry.)

I'm sure I don't need to explain rappers to this audience, and they are often described as swords, but the dances make much use of their flexibility, which a sword could never possess, and we favour the explanation that the rappers were tools in themselves, probably strips of flexible steel used to scrape the sweat and dust from pit ponies. That there was an industrial rather than a rural origin to these plays is supported by the lines "Our lady she comes in, she looks so pale and wan, she's got a long beard on, just like a collier's man." In other words, whoever was playing the part of Bess, the sacrificial female victim, was likely to be a bearded miner.

I have delved a little way into other local plays, and was delighted to find fragments of a Grassington play, that being our home village, and even more delighted when I found a much fuller text in a library in Melbourne, Australia. The play had been noted down in one of the last years of its performance around 1820 in a neighbouring village by the local surgeon, who had subsequently emigrated to Australia, taking his notebooks with him. Unfortunately the text is rather short, and not very satisfying from a dramaturgical point of view, so we have only performed it on one occasion. I still have the text, and if anyone is interested, would be glad to hand it on.

From our perspective as street entertainers, our aim is to do just that – entertain. We still perform in the guise of the ever-incompetent Hardcastle's Mighty Excelsior Theatre Company, and seek to make it memorable, rather than ritual. Some of us are passionate about keeping these traditions alive, even if we do stray from the straight and narrow. The songs, dances and drama still have life in them, and to see an audience absorbed and laughing means that we have succeeded in our aim, to show that the traditional still connects with something buried in us all.

Though we use comedy as our tool, we are serious about keeping the traditions alive, and do so by making the performances memorable and by distributing leaflets to our audience to enlighten them about what they are watching. We have achieved a strong following in our county.