

Ron Shuttleworth, Mumming is not acting: What is the difference and why is this important in gaining the public's trust, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

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“We are not London actors, we travel the street.

We are not London actors, we fight for our meat.

We are not London actors who act upon the stage.

But we are just poor ploughboys who work for little wage.

We are not London actors, we've told you so before.

So we will do the best we can and the best can do no more”¹

A few years ago, in conversation with Mat Levitt, an M.A. student at the University of Alberta², I remarked that “mumming is not acting”, an idea that is expressed by many mummers from many diverse backgrounds. I added that I knew it when I saw it but could not explain it. Later he came back at me and asked me to do just that. This forced me to start thinking and since then we have both worked on the idea in an exchange of e-mails and my conclusions have now developed to the point where I feel ready to go public.

At the outset I should point out that I am aware that in theatrical circles there is debate about ‘acting and non-acting’³ and that in ‘modern’ or ‘experimental’ theatre the boundaries between performance and reality are blurred so that the actors are not necessarily portraying any character at all, but merely themselves. However, I must stress that my contention is not in any way concerned with, or critical of, the theories or actions of theatrical people but only with how the general public respond to mummers based on their often subliminal concept of actors and theatrical performance gained mainly or solely through cinema or TV.

So, drawing on forty-seven years with the all-year-round Coventry Mummers⁴, what do I see as the differences? Actors are trying hard to ‘play a part’ – to be someone else. You could praise an actor by telling them they were so convincing. No-one would be convinced by our man’s portrayal of the King of Egypt – he isn’t trying. A mummer just tells you who he is supposed to be, and leaves it at that. I think that people recognised this when, in describing the folk players in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, they called them “Rude Mechanicals”. It may also be the origin of ‘mummer’ as a pejorative for a bad actor.

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Distrust of actors has been around for a while. Athens is said to be the cradle of Theatre and the Ancient Greek word for an actor was *hypocrites*. The great orator Demosthenes ridiculed a rival who had been a successful actor before taking up politics, saying he was a *hypocrites* whose skill at impersonating characters on stage made him an untrustworthy politician.

Then there is the question of costume. Originally it seems that everyone in a team dressed more or less the same – no effort to be convincing there. Later when they began dressing to part, all the combatants often wore red, cast-off soldier's coats, no matter what nationality they were supposed to be. The widespread use of wooden swords also contributes to this as do the female characters in the plays, often played by men with beards. As with some pantomime dames, they dress as women but make no pretence of being female. This somehow allows them to acceptably display crude behaviour which would probably be considered in poor taste if done by a real woman.

In Mumming, you get your lines and make of them what you will. When someone gets a new part they usually copy every aspect of their predecessor's approach, then, as they get into the role, they can change it to suit their personality, there is little or no 'direction'. If it works – keep it in. If not – drop it. We used to have a rather pretty lad who played a camp King of Egypt – “In Come I, the Kink of Egypt”. It was hilarious but it's been tried since – lead balloon.

I once asked a professional actor in the Coventry Mystery plays why he had portrayed a character in a certain way. His reply was “No idea – ask the Director”. That does not happen in Mumming and it highlights another difference between us – it is acceptable to introduce quite radical changes – either deliberately or through error. One of our regular followers once said that they had seen our play umpteen times but that it was different every time. You'd never get away with that at Stratford-upon-Avon but it may indeed be an important factor in the longevity of the team. If every performance had to be identical we would probably have fallen apart years ago.

I believe that many traditional performances included topical references and piss-taking which were omitted by folklorist collectors who knew the basic scenarios and what they expected to hear. They may also have ignored lines thought to be vulgar, or at least edited them out of published accounts. We know that this happened with the Stoneleigh script.⁵

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So, why is 'not acting' important? When the public choose to go to a theatre or cinema they implicitly agree to suspend their belief in reality. However, in real life there are many people who are trying to con them such as politicians, salesmen, estate agents and most advertisers. The public are rightly subliminally suspicious of anything that purports to be other than what it is.

If an actor is unconvincing he may be deemed to have given a bad performance. If we are obviously not acting then 'bad acting' is not a criticism that can be applied to Mumming. Another vital difference between acting and Mumming which should never be lost is that actors perform to the audience but Mummers perform with them. This is manifested at one of our Christmas venues where we have been doing the local play for over thirty five years. Many of the crowd know the play better than we do and enthusiastically chorus the obvious ad-libs. If anyone pauses too long they risk getting a prompt from the audience.

In Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*, book 2, chapter 4, 1878 he writes

"A traditional pastime is to be distinguished from a mere revival in no more striking feature than this, that while in the revival all is excitement and fervour, the survival is carried out with a stolidity and absence of stir which sets one wondering why a thing which is done so perfunctorily should be kept up at all. Like Balaam and other unwilling prophets, the agents seem moved by an inner compulsion to say and do their allotted parts whether they will or no. This unweeting manner of performance is the true ring by which, in this refurbishing age, a fossilized survival may be known from a spurious reproduction."⁶

And later in the last paragraph of his *Preface to The Dynasts* he has:

"In respect of such plays of poesy and dream a practicable compromise may conceivably result, taking the shape of a monotonic delivery of speeches, with dreamy conventional gestures, something in the manner traditionally maintained by the old Christmas mummers, the curiously hypnotizing impressiveness of whose automatic style - that of persons who spoke by no will of their own - may be remembered by all who ever experienced it."⁷

How widespread this was there is probably no way of knowing or indeed how many teams were guided into this style of delivery by a vicar or schoolteacher who had read his Hardy.

The mystery I am trying to explain is why the public are so tolerant when we invade their space, often uninvited, and who will return repeatedly to see the same show again and again. A good example of this is when each Boxing Day morning Coventry Mummers descend on a small hamlet that has no shop or pub but where there is no house worth less than half a million quid. Quite early in the morning when many people would be in their pyjamas eating

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breakfast we raise a racket ringing a large hand-bell along the street and instead of setting the dogs on us, they all turn out warmly dressed and offer us whisky, with sausage rolls and mince pies obviously prepared in advance.

Mummers are not pretending to be something they are not and there is very little suspension of belief involved in a mummers' play performance, and so it provides an experience quite different to that of formal stage theatre. Doing this, we get more trust but fewer Oscars.

Other classes of entertainer may also benefit from this trust which they achieve by adopting an 'unbelievable' appearance. These include clowns, some fools and animals from the Morris, pantomime Dames and maybe the Commedia dell'Arte performers.

"Unbelievability" can also be achieved by blatant overacting although, if used by Mummers, it should be employed very, very sparingly.

I am not suggesting that modern revival mummers should adopt the Hardy approach. The teams that he saw were probably from, and performing to, a relatively small and unsophisticated community. We have to be aware of changing times and audiences. But I think we need to adapt sensitively and always try to stay in touch with our roots. By roots I do not just mean our communities but, most importantly, the roots of the activity we claim to represent.

Two years ago at this event someone stated that his team felt that they had to introduce changes every year in order to keep the public's interest. This is plainly untrue as we have shown at Stoneleigh and other places where the annual performances alter little from year to year with only rare changes in personnel or costume or the occasional ad lib.

It is all too easy to get carried away and try for more 'characterisation' and 'realism' but if we cross the line we could jeopardise that vital link with the public. This is not helped by the fact that Mumming sometimes attracts people who seem to have theatrical aspirations – whether as actors or playwrights. In Coventry we have had occasional new members who have come to us with previous experience in amateur dramatics. This was apparent in their performance and had to be knocked out of them – "Stop that, you're acting"

There is a successful team in Halifax calling themselves Bradshaw Mummers but whose website comes nearer the truth, describing them as a Street Theatre group⁸. Most of their

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plays include a death and a cure but are concerned with a wide variety of mainly historical themes. These are very entertaining – but are they Mumming?

So, what conclusions, if any, are to be made from this attempt to look at a previously unconsidered facet of Mumming? Firstly, it can be a lot simpler than some people seem to think. You do not need new scenarios – the old ones are tried and tested over time and still resonate with your audiences. If you choose to dress to part, you only need a simple and basic indication - no one cares if your medieval knight is wearing trainers and a wristwatch.

This leaves you free to concentrate on the things which really matter. Prime among these is to be heard and understood, and unintelligible inaudibility displays an arrogant contempt for your audience to which they will hopefully respond by ignoring you. Volume and projection are vital, especially when performing outdoors. Avoid competition with bouncy castles and or P.A.

Then, know your part. Do not attempt ad-libbing or other business until you can do the basics on autopilot. A new starter with a traditional team probably already knew the entire play backwards. A man with the Antrobus Soulcafers said that when he was a lad, he and his brother used to play 'soulcafers' in their garage.

If you do go wrong or dry up, try to keep going or, if that is not possible, share it with the audience and call for a prompt. Nothing transmits to them faster than embarrassment. Once, when we were doing a Foyer Show at the National Theatre, our new man came on with "In Come I, Little Devil Doubt – Oh shit, I've forgotten my lines" - big laugh - perfect!

Another important thing is to restrict comedy parts to a minimum – you need straight men. If everyone is trying to be funny, the humour drains away and it degenerates into tattling-about.

As for scripts, it is perfectly acceptable and probably traditional to introduce local characters or sub-plots, but try not to let them take over. Likewise comments on contemporary situations or events, but these should be dropped when they cease to be relevant. There are collected scripts which have lines which obviously meant something once but are now totally obscure.

I am not saying that we should adopt the wooden just-going-through-the-motions approach described by Hardy. Our parts need characterisation applied with conviction and emotion. The baddies should be villainous, the hero, heroic and the Doctor a serious quack and seller of patent medicines, but there needs to be an underlying tongue-in-cheek understanding with

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the audience that we do not expect them to take us too seriously. I was tempted to add that fights should be aggressive, but this is not always so as is shown by examples from the tradition where they are more like formal dance routines but which work well.

It would have been nice to draw this to a well-defined conclusion, but frankly the whole idea was so amorphous and the process of getting something coherent onto paper so slippery that a neat finish was beyond me. Like those ploughboys, I have done the best I can and all that I can hope for is that by drawing your attention to it I may have given you something to think about which will increase your understanding of the subject, your interest in which is shown by your presence here today.

¹ Song used in several traditional Plough plays as discussed by Chambers, E.K. in *The English Folk Play*, Oxford, 1933, p.103.

² See Levitt, M. J. *The Laughing Storyteller: Metafolklore about the Origins of Mummers' Plays*, Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Alberta, 2011.

³ For a fuller discussion see, for example, <https://realtheatre.wordpress.com/2012/11/05/acting-and-non-acting-part-1/> accessed 29/12/2015.

⁴ See <http://www.coventrymummers.org.uk/> accessed 29/12/2015.

⁵ Tim Chatham delivered a paper at the 2014 Mummers Unconvention titled *Stoneleigh Mummers Play 1975 to 2014: Revival or Creation of a Tradition?* In his abstract he noted the Stoneleigh Mummers Play had been published in 1925 by local historian Mary Dormer Harris and reference was made to variant texts.

⁶ Hardy, T. *Return of the Native*, book 2, chapter 4, 1878.

⁷ Hardy, T. *Preface to The Dynasts*, 1903.

⁸ See http://www.bradshawmummers.com/Bradford_Boar.php accessed 29/12/2015.