

## TRADITIONAL DRAMA STUDIES



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## SPANISH HOLY WEEK PROCESSIONS AND THE ENGLISH MYSTERY CYCLES: TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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In some cities in the south of Spain, and particularly in Seville, the complaints of actors and theatre directors are often heard, as their dramatic productions are received rather coolly, as if the inhabitants of this area lacked interest in theatrical activities. Paradoxically, the people of the south have always been characterised by their fondness for traditional open-air performances. In fact, there is no town, no matter how small, which at some time of year does not celebrate some kind of popular festival. Seville itself has a calendar of festivities and spectacles so overloaded that one can say that no month passes without its corresponding celebration. As this is the case, it seems logical to think that the majority of its people prefer to participate spontaneously in public performances than pay admission to a commercial show.

Of all the open-air spectacles which take place in Seville, none has achieved the status of the Holy Week processions, undoubtedly the most important event of the year. Holy Week is also celebrated in many other Spanish cities, but Seville's has surpassed all the rest, not only for the number of people who take part, but also for the quality of the floats and art objects that are displayed. The processions continue to be organised according to criteria that have hardly changed since the sixteenth century, though, of course, the actual mise-en-scene has evolved with the passage of time. The Holy Week celebrations actually last eight days, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, and during that time numerous processions go out into the streets. These consist of long lines of nazarenos (masked penitents) and enormous wooden floats which are called pasos. The floats are moved from underneath by teams of twenty to fifty men, who carry them on their shoulders, as wheels are not used. These men are called costaleros. On the floats, at a height of about two metres above street level, are placed the wooden figures of Jesus, Mary and other characters from the passion. Since the floats are covered with thick material on all four sides, the men who carry them cannot see what is happening around

them, because of which another person, called the capataz, is needed to act as a guide.

Each procession is organised by a fixed religious entity, arbitrarily called either hermandad (fraternity) or cofradía (guild), whose members are governed by rules approved by the ecclesiastical authority. The members of each guild meet throughout the year to carry out the activities indicated by their rules, and to collect the funds necessary for the following year's procession. Each cofradía possesses at least two floats, together with its associated figures.

During Holy Week an average of seven processions goes out every day, not counting the six that go out overnight between Thursday and Good Friday: it has become traditional that the people of Seville stay up all that night, as they would not otherwise be able to see all the processions. In all, there are fifty-six guilds, or fraternities, that take part in the processions, taking a total of 119 floats into the street. The number of nazarenos, or penitents, usually fluctuates between twenty five thousand and thirty thousand every year. A spectator interested in seeing all the processions would have to walk through the city streets non-stop all week, sleeping only a few hours a day and, even then, it would be almost impossible not to miss some floats.

To allow the processions to take place it is necessary to cut off traffic from the city centre, as well as in some of the older districts; because of this, for a few days life recovers the slow rhythm of older times, free from the hurry and stress of modern life. It is at times like these that the theatre historian imagines the setting in which theatrical performances must have taken place in medieval European cities. One dreams of the atmosphere, hubbub and colour that must have characterised the Corpus Christi processions in cities like York, Coventry, Chester, Lincoln, London, Wakefield and so many other places in the British Isles. However, something rather important has been lost in Seville, as not a single dramatic speech has survived.

In England the traditional spectacles of Corpus Christi ended at the end of the sixteenth century, when the authorities banned them for politico-religious reasons. Even so, it is very likely that they would have been lost anyway, as a consequence of Cromwell's domination, or with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, or simply because of

the passing of time, as has happened in so many European cities. In Spain, theatrical or quasi-theatrical performances with medieval roots, especially those related to Corpus Christi and the Passion of Jesus, have survived mainly in areas with a predominantly agricultural economy, although they have also prevailed in some industrial areas where the influence of the Church has been strong. The Catholic Church has always supported any theatrical enterprise that helps to further its own ends; proof of which is the fact that some of these medieval traditions are still kept up with the same enthusiasm in different parts of America, where they were undoubtedly taken by Spanish missionaries in the sixteenth century. At the moment, when a wave of traditionalism and ethnicity is crossing the Iberian peninsula from north to south in a belated reaction to Franco's death, numerous traditions, which only a few years ago were on the verge of extinction, are being revived.

When the Corpus Christi processions and their corresponding theatrical versions were lost in Great Britain, exceedingly valuable documents that could have elucidated important problems of scenery and staging were also lost. We do not even know what the English pageants looked like, for no drawing, design or clear description has survived to allow us the opportunity to reconstruct them. However, we do have the texts of four complete cycles: those of York, Chester, Towneley, and Ludus Coventriae, as well as a series of individual works and various fragments. In all, the material that has survived, for the most part written in the fifteenth century, is rich and valuable, as much for those who study theatre as for those who study literature; once and for all we should deny the commonplace that medieval English literature ends with Chaucer, and that the fifteenth century is no more than barren ground.

But in spite of the indubitable value that these texts have for the scholar, the historian of the theatre cannot content himself with simply studying and analysing them. A dramatic text is not written to be read, but to be performed, and in the case of the English pageants there are strong reasons to believe that most were performed some time before they were written down. So it is necessary to continue to attempt to find out about staging practices. Even now, many questions remain

unanswered, such as the dimensions and characteristics of the pageant-cart (the vehicle used in the procession), how it was moved, how the scenery was put in place, and how and when the actors performed. We cannot even give a clear answer as to whether women took part in the performance, or if the actors were mainly amateurs or professionals. We have not even been able to clear up the problem of the exact relationship that existed between the procession and the performance. Were all the pageants part of a procession? Did they set up fixed scaffolds or stages for the best possible staging of the mystery plays? What was the duration of a cycle, and in how many places was it performed?(1) Perhaps one day the solution to some of these difficulties will be found.

Meanwhile, the researcher can only rely on the internal evidence that the rubrics and stage-directions of the texts provide him with, as well as on the external evidence of various medieval documents, especially city records, some of which were printed some time ago by Chambers, and more of which are now being systematically brought to light by the Records of Early English Drama project.(2) But one can also resort to comparative study, to bring together simultaneously what we know of documents from the past, with similar living examples which we find in other countries.

No cycle of biblical works has been discovered in Spain. We cannot even be sure that a complete cycle of the same kind as England's Corpus Christi ever existed. What we are sure of is that theatrical activities were important during the late Middle Ages, especially in relation to Corpus Christi. During this period the country was divided into two kingdoms, that of Castile, which occupied a wide strip of land from north to south, and that of Aragon, situated to the east. We first hear of the Corpus Christi procession in Spain in the kingdom of Aragon, in cities like Barcelona, Vich, Lérida and Valencia, where evidence of the first theatrical performances is also found.(3) Furthermore, the majority of texts that have survived come from this region; almost all of them are related to different parts of the Old and New Testament, albeit that the apocryphal theme of the death and assumption of the Virgin is often repeated. It seems that representations of the Assumption enjoyed great popularity throughout

the peninsula, in spite of the fact that their staging required complicated stage machinery as well as the participation of numerous musicians and singers.

The tremendous popularity that the story of the Assumption enjoyed in the past is vouched for by the famous misteri of Elche, an authentic medieval mystery play which is performed every year on the 14th and 15th of August in the main church of the town, not far from Alicante. The performance, which is sung, like an opera, has its origin in medieval manuscripts which are now lost, the words and music of the songs being largely of arrangements dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is also performed entirely in the language of Valencia,(4) but even a superficial analysis of it reveals important points of comparison with the pageants that the English cycles dedicate to this theme. Stage-directions of this kind: "hic angeli dulciter cantabunt in celo" or "hic ponent corpus in sepulchrum insensantes et cantantes", which appear in Ludus Coventriae,(5) correspond perfectly to Elche's text and staging. It is also particularly significant that the York cycle dedicates no fewer than four different pageants to this story, dividing them into "Death", "Funeral", "Assumption" and "Coronation", which are precisely the parts that make up the spectacle that is performed in Elche. Such is the similarity between the Spanish phenomenon and the English texts, that a comparative study would certainly result in a better understanding of the two.

The golden age of the Corpus Christi feast, and therefore of the associated theatrical performances, did not come to Castile until the fifteenth century. There are documents from 1418 about the Corpus Christi of Toledo, in which carretas (carts), carretones (wagons) and cadahalsos (scaffolds) are mentioned. Later, in documents from 1445, juegos (plays or performances) are mentioned, in which four shepherds were paid for performing.(6) There is no information about the Corpus Christi in Seville until 1454, but it is known that, from the beginning, vehicles took part in the procession. They were called over a period of time rocas (rocks), and later castillos (castles), and eventually carros (carts), and various episodes from the Bible were staged on them.(7) It seems that, at the outset, Seville's processional pageants and those of Toledo were of the "tableau vivant" kind, until they evolved first into

mime and song, and later into actual performances. In Toledo's Corpus Christi, from the end of the fifteenth century, the performances took place at the end of the procession at several points in the city selected beforehand by the authorities. In Seville the first performance was given inside the cathedral, in the transept area, so that the authorities could see it, after which it was performed elsewhere for the general public.

According to documents in the cathedral at Toledo, the plays that were put on most in the period from 1493 to 1510 were those of Adam and Eve, The Harrowing of Hell and The Last Judgement. Moreover, in Toledo, as well as in Seville and other places, not only actors but also statues and dolls appeared. In many cases the people covered their faces with painted masks and on occasions wore crowns or halos when they played the parts of saints or characters from the Bible. Some characters used also to carry an inscription or sign alluding to the character they played, to make identification easier for the spectators. At all times, the decoration of the pageant-carts and the preparation of the performances was the affair of the guilds, which financed the festival and also contracted as many actors as they thought necessary. The participation of women is not documented, although it is not completely improbable.

The Corpus Christi in Seville had its greatest moment of splendour in the first half of the sixteenth century, coinciding with the sudden prosperity of the city when it was officially named "Port of the Indies", following the discovery of America. Artists, writers and craftsmen went to great lengths then for the preparation of the festival, and the Sevillian guilds must have spent fantastic amounts in the production of the pageants and performances. By that time they already took place in the Plaza de San Francisco (St. Francis Square), right in the centre of the city. The names of famous dramatists like Lope de Rueda and of Spanish and foreign artists are linked with the celebrations of this period, from which, however, not one dramatic text has been preserved.

On the eve of the festival, as in York in 1544, the authorities ordered the townspeople to clean and tidy the streets, at the same time asking that they cover the walls with material and coloured cloths to

contribute to the atmosphere of the festival in honour of the Eucharist. On the Thursday of Corpus Christi the various guilds had to be prepared with their corresponding pageants, or carros, in the so-called Corral de los Olmos (very near the cathedral) at half past four in the morning. The exact spot where the York guilds had to meet is not known, but in both cases the procession began at five o'clock in the morning. The guilds marched with their wagons, carrying their standards, banners and emblems, followed by the clergy, authorities and, of course, the sacred host at the end. Once the procession and theatrical festivities were over, the authorities used to invite the participants to a meal served with plenty of good wine.

In the middle of the sixteenth century the guilds of Seville took out not one, but two pageant carts, each of which was given the name medio-carro (half-cart). At the end of the procession, each of the half-carts was placed at the right or left of a permanent tablado (scaffold), which was called plaza (place). With this they obtained a multiple setting, which would solve many problems in the staging. Here we should remember that some medieval spectacles required several settings, as the action developed in very different places. For example, the episode of The Last Judgement, as presented in the cycles of York, Chester and Ludus Coventriae, needs three district areas, namely, heaven, earth and hell. As can be verified, the solution exemplified by the Sevillian half-carts would make the task much easier.

The performers who particularly enjoyed the public's favour, naturally enough, seem to have been the devils, executioners, Herods, pharisees and other evil characters, whose masks with grotesque features really must have attracted attention. The idea of evil as a symbol of sin and death was represented at this time in Spain by an allegory. In Catalonia, it appeared as the dragon which fought with St. George, and in Castile it took the form of an enormous monster with several heads called la Tarasca.

However, in the second half of the sixteenth century the Corpus Christi in Seville began to change. On the one hand, the religious authorities, worried by the rules that came out of the Council of Trent, strove to reform the religious ceremonies, to make them more dignified and to divest them of "profane" elements. At the same time, the

theatrical performances seemed a tremendous opportunity to catechize the people, to indoctrinate them in questions of morality and Catholic theology. It was in this way that the biblical themes moved towards the mystery of the eucharist, and hence the so-called auto sacramental, a type of eucharistic morality, was born, in connection with which, years later, Calderón de la Barca would become famous. The new genre needed more skilful and experienced players at the same time as the dramaturgy became more complicated, so that it soon turned into the kind of spectacle that required professional personnel.

We also have to bear in mind that the guilds withdrew from the preparation of the festivities for the Corpus Christi since, from 1554, the authorities took charge of everything. We must suppose that it was as a result of this situation that the guilds of Seville began to involve themselves more in the festivities of Holy Week, encouraged perhaps by the spirit of Counter Reformation, which bestowed a special value on the Via Crucis (stations of the cross) and on the contemplation of the sufferings of the Passion of Christ.(8) Moreover, another important reason exists which may have helped promote the festival of the Passion: the dates of Holy Week usually coincide with the time when the climate is mildest in Seville, while during the Corpus Christi it is too hot. In this way the city's great spring festival came into being, to the detriment of Corpus Christi, which began to languish in the seventeenth century and is today an event of lesser importance.

Nothing is known of the first cofradías, or guilds, that went out in procession during the Holy Week. Nor is it known for sure if at the beginning the figures of the passion were played by people in costume. What is certain is that it was quickly decided to use only statues, perhaps because, as in all cultures, sculpture inspires more respect, at the same time as it seems a more appropriate way to represent divinity. During the sixteenth century, in several Spanish cities, it was not unusual to see episodes from the Bible performed by puppets. In fact, the word retablo is now used to indicate an altar piece and a puppet theatre at the same time. The beginning of the processions of the Passion also coincided with the golden age of Spanish sculpture in wood. The number of workshops that were established throughout the Iberian peninsula, especially in the south, was such that perhaps it was

easier to obtain a statue than adequately to dress a character for the part he had to play.

The themes which were most repeated on the floats, or pasos, usually originated in the Gospel stories of the Passion, although on occasions, as happened in the English cycles, an apocryphal episode was chosen. From among the apocryphal stories, one in particular, taken from the "gospel" of Nicodemus, began to gain such acceptance that it has remained in Seville's iconography until the present day. It deals with the moment when John comes to tell Mary that they are going to execute her son. To show the way she must go, the apostle points, indicating the trail of blood that Jesus has left all the way along the Via Dolorosa to Calvary. This episode might have come to Holy Week through theatre practice, since it appears in two very significant dramas: Auto de la Pasión (Passion Play) (1486-99) by Alonso del Campo and Las Lamentaciones fechas para la Semana Santa (Holy Week Lament) (1470-80) by Gómez Manrique.(9)

In the new terminology adopted in Holy Week, the carro was called paso or passo, a word which in the sixteenth century came to mean a scene or dramatic episode of short duration. Some historians have tried to relate the word paso to passio, Latin for "passion", but it is more likely that it comes from passus, which means "the movement of the foot when walking"; by implication it can be extended to any moment in the life of a person or community. Lope de Rueda, in fact, called his comic interludes pasos for the same reason.

Each of the scenes represented on a float, or paso, receives the name of misterio (mystery), perhaps through Levantine influence, as even in 1407 the word misteri was used in Valencia as a synonym for a symbol or element of the Passion of Christ.(10) Nowadays, the people of Seville reserve the name misterio for those floats in which several figures appear, distinguishing them from those that have only one sculpture of Jesus or Mary. The design of the floats varies, depending on whether they carry one or more figures. In the former, the effect aimed at is to move the spectator by the pathos of the image. In the latter, importance is given to the narrative content, and the effect is essentially dramatic. In the last few years an unmistakable inclination towards the float with a single figure has been noticeable,

because of which numerous images considered secondary have had to be left out.

Following the realistic style of the Spanish Baroque, the age in which the best images of those that are still taken into the streets were made, the statues are usually dressed in authentic, made-to-measure costumes, as if people of flesh and blood were involved. The female characters have glass tears and sometimes glass eyes, while the figures of Christ are characterised by the numerous wounds and scars. The sculptures are laid out in such a way that they appear to walk on their own, and to reinforce this impression the costaleros who are underneath the float move rhythmically in such a way that sometimes an authentic feeling of movement in the images is produced.

In theory, all the guilds or fraternities are "Catholic" organisations and owe obedience to the ecclesiastical authorities. In practice, they enjoy considerable autonomy, and this sometimes causes friction and conflict between them. This situation is reminiscent of the numerous conflicts among the English guilds in the middle ages, above all over questions of the order of the procession, because of which the York ordo paginarum and other similar documents had to be written. In Seville there is an organisation especially created to settle all these questions called the Concejo General de Confradías (General Council of Guilds), whose mission is to liaise between the different associations as well as between them and the city authorities. There are more than a few problems with the ecclesiastical authorities too, and on occasion some of the clergy have been suspicious of these spectacles, which they believed detracted from the importance of the actual religious services. It is important to remember at this point that even in 1426 the Franciscan preacher William Melton, while acknowledging the religious relevance of the York play, "afirmando quod bonus erat in se et laudabilis valde", suggested to the people of York that it should be performed on the day before Corpus Christi, so as not to interfere with the eucharistic feast.(11)

Not all Seville's cofradías have their origins in a particular profession, although those of the panaderos (bakers), estudiantes (students) and carretería (cartwrights) still exist. A curious fact is that the guild of the negritos (black men) has survived, to which in another

age black slaves or servants who lived in the city must have belonged. Nowadays the cofradía and their procession leave from a church in the district with which they are associated.

In Seville the floats are prepared inside the churches, while in Malaga and other cities the enormous size of the floats forces the fraternities to take different measures, and the floats are prepared in the street inside sheds set up for the occasion. In Easter Week the floats return to the store of the casa de hermandad, an institution which can be likened to the guild-houses of York where the pageants of the Corpus Christi were kept. All of Seville's fraternities are obliged to take an official route which includes the central streets and cathedral, through which all the processions must pass.

According to tradition, the first float always carries the figure of Jesus, and the second that of the Virgin. A band of trumpets and drums usually goes along beside the first float, perhaps because of the ancient Spanish custom of accompanying the condemned man to the scaffold to the sound of drums con cajas destempladas (with loosened drum-heads). In fact many towns throughout Spain still celebrate the so-called tamborrada, which consists of playing a drum uninterruptedly from midday on Thursday until midday on Good Friday in remembrance of the Passion. The float with the Virgin is usually accompanied by a more-or-less conventional brass band, which plays music specially composed for Holy Week, called marchas. In general, the contrast between the first and second float is emphasized: the latter is usually covered by a canopy called a palio, as a symbol of majesty. Every float is illuminated by numerous candles, and they are literally covered in flowers.

It is well known that in the pageants of the English cycles the staging was not limited to the pageant-carts, but extended to the street. A stage-direction from Coventry reads: "Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the streets also."(12) We also know that in Valencia's Corpus Christi in 1517 some actors moved on the floats and others performed from the ground.(13) In Seville the custom of accompanying on foot is continued, as some fraternities parade men dressed as Romans, and also women who represent the three Marys or Veronica. An old custom of Puentegeñil, a town situated some 100

kilometres from Seville, is really striking: figures from the Old and New Testaments are paraded in chronological order, followed by the allegories of the Church's doctrine. All of them, the women as well as the men, are played by males, who usually have their faces covered by a painted mask. Some of them display an inscription with the character's name, which gives an idea of the antiquity of this tradition.

It is natural that so many links exist between the medieval theatre and the Holy Week processions, since the latter originate in the former. To all the previously mentioned details we should add that many images have moveable arms, so that their gestures can be changed as if they were real puppets. So, in Coria del Río and in Marchena, towns close to Seville, there are singular sculptures of Jesus with the cross on his back which give a blessing by means of a hidden mechanism. And in Alcalá de Guadaíra every year several ceremonies are performed which simulate the crucifixion and death of Jesus, for which they use images as well as people in costume. In many more Spanish cities on the afternoon of Good Friday a complete ritual of deposition is carried out, by means of an articulated image. Moreover, there are many towns in Catalonia which have a dramatic version of the Passion, which the townspeople themselves put on.

In recent times Seville has been losing most of the allegories which used to parade in Holy Week. However, the famous float which represents El triunfo de la Cruz (the Triumph of the Cross), undoubtedly an arrangement which has a medieval inspiration, has remained. On the globe of the world a skeleton with a scythe appears, and at the back, on the cross, there are two cloths, one white and the other black, with the inscription "Mors moritem superavit". At the feet of the skeleton we find Satan in the form of a dragon, clutching an apple in his mouth. The theme of death must have been much more popular in Holy Week in the past, as in some towns in Catalonia skeletons still dance on the night of Good Friday, undoubtedly in remembrance of the ancient "dances of death". Other allegorical characters who still figure in processions are the three "theological" virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity, which are represented by three young women who carry the traditional emblems.

However, it is almost exclusively men who take part in the Holy Week processions, in spite of many recent protests. Today, in the south of Spain the rules of the guilds do not allow women to play an active part in the parades. The men who accompany the floats in the processions are dressed in long tunics and have their heads and faces covered by a kind of hat that inevitably recalls the costume of the American Ku-Klux Klan. According to some historians the origin of this apparel has to be sought for in the habit of the flagelantes, or flagellants, who travelled across Europe in the fourteenth century and arrived in Spain through San Vicente Ferrer at the end of it.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the processions are, above all, a spectacle, and that a public audience which enters into the spirit of things is required. Perhaps the key to the success of these spectacles is precisely their ability to reach the spectators. Anyone who has seen the passing of the fraternities through the street will know that the people of Seville do not remain aloof to what they see, but react in various ways -- with shouts, applause, tears and, above all, through song. There is a special song for these occasions called saeta, which is half prayer and half the singer's wish to console and soothe Jesus and Mary in their suffering. The saeta is theoretically a popular and spontaneous form of expression, but on the night of Good Friday Spain's best professional singers make arrangements to be in Seville to compete in the art of this form of song.

From the foregoing discussion, it can be deduced that seeing a Holy Week procession in Seville or in other Spanish cities, is an unusual experience in these days of computers and star-wars. For this reason, it is more necessary than ever for scholars from England and other countries who are trying to reconstruct the medieval mystery plays archaeologically to take a look, at least briefly, at places where these traditions have been maintained in spite of the passing of time.

## NOTES

1. Some of the difficulties involved in those questions are already assumed and explained by Alan H. Nelson, The Medieval English State: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
2. See E.H. Chambers, The Mediaeval Stage, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), esp. II, pp. 229-462, and Records of Early English Drama (Toronto, in progress).
3. The first records of Corpus Christi processions in Spain are the following: Barcelona, 1322; Vich, 1330; Lérida, 1340; Valencia, 1355; Palma de Mallorca, 1371. In Castile, the first processions to be recorded are those of Toledo, 1418, and Seville, 1454.
4. A bilingual edition (Spanish and Valencian) of the text, with full stage-directions, was published by the "Patronato Nacional del Misterio de Elche" in 1974.
5. K.S. Block, ed., Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie Called Corpus Christi (London: Early English Text Society, 1922), pp. 367 and 370.
6. See Carmen Torroja and Marif Rivas, Teatro en Toledo en el siglo XV: "Auto de la Pasión" de Alonso del Campo (Madrid: 1977).
7. See Vicente Lleó Cañal, arte y espectáculo: la fiesta del Corpus Christi en Sevilla en los siglos XVI y XVII (Sevilla: 1975).
8. The devotion of the Via Crucis or "Stations of the Cross" was introduced in the south of Spain by Alvaro de Córdoba in 1420, on his return from the Holy Land. See José Sánchez Herrero et al. Las Cofradías de Sevilla: historia, antropología, arte (Sevilla: 1985).
9. See Ronald E. Surtz, ed., Teatro medieval castellano (Madrid: 1983), esp. pp. 69-71 and 89-90. The apocryphal meeting of John and Mary appears in both plays in a very similar manner.
10. See N.D. Shergold, A History of the Spanish Stage from Medieval Times until the end of the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 54-55.
11. See Chambers, II, pp. 400-401.
12. Hardin Craig, ed., Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays (London: Early English Text Society, 1957), p. 27.
13. See Shergold, p. 73.

## PUTTING ACROSS THE MESSAGE: SOME ACTING METHODS OF THE FOLK THEATRE IN RUSSIA \*

Elizabeth Warner

Mumming in Russia took place normally between Christmas Eve and 6th January. A band of young men would turn up at the house of one of the wealthier peasants with a formal request for permission to show their play:

Will you let us in, Sir,  
 Into your new Parlour?  
 Into your new parlour,  
 To meet our host there,  
 To speak our play.  
 If there is wine in the house  
 We will try it  
 We will try it,

And make sure it has not gone sour.

The players are led into the main room of the house, where a space is cleared for them and someone is sent to fetch a couple of chairs, which will form the only scenery. The two chairs are quickly lashed together to form the "throne", upon which the main character Tsar Maksimilian will remain seated for most of the action, as the central focus of the play. The players then arrange themselves in a rough semicircle on either side of the throne and the play, Tsar Maksimilian, the most complex and best-known in the Russian folk repertoire begins.

Among the first things to strike anyone unfamiliar with the conventions of this theatre would be the costumes. All the characters involved in the "serious" section of the play, the Tsar, his son Adolf, the ambassador, the royal champion Anika and the series of foreign combatants who come to challenge him (King Mamai of the Golden Horde, the Black Arab and the Zmejulan or Dragon Warrior) are dressed in real or imitation military uniforms. The following description of Tsar Maksimilian's appearance is typical:

He wears a military uniform jacket with epaulettes; his trousers bear the stripe of a general; across his chest he has a blue sash. He also has a crown of gilded metal, a sabre and medals made out of gold paper. (1)