

Abstracts

2013 Unconvention

Introduction.

Peter Harrop: The Ways we look at Mumming

This paper will consider the 'traditional' questions asked of mumming and consider how contemporary ethnographic methods and interpretations might stand in relation to those questions. 1) What antecedents may lie with localised variants of house visiting and performative calendar customs? 2) What is the relationship between the texts of mummers' plays and texts contained in popular chapbooks from the late 18th century? 3) What is the relationship between mummers' plays and the 'pantomimes' created by John Rich and others in the early part of the 18th century as well as other popular theatre forms such as commedia dell' arte? 4) Is it possible to trace a multiple historical dissemination of mumming both around Britain and following migrations and trade routes to Newfoundland, the Caribbean and further afield? 5) What is unique about mumming as a performance form and to what extent might it serve as exemplar of located performance? 6) Why does mumming continue to function as a popular meaning making activity? Finally and seventhly - since the three Mumming Unconventions have sought to bring together mummers and scholars of mumming to share their insights into this enduring performance form - what new understandings might we be generating?

Panel 1.

Paul Smith and J. D. A. Widdowson: Traditional Drama in Newfoundland: Text, Context, and Performance

The traditional custom of Christmas mumming has survived in Newfoundland for longer than in most parts of the English-speaking world. While the house visiting traditions at the Christmas season have been the subject of substantial research, the much rarer custom of the mummers' performance of traditional plays has been surprisingly neglected. This paper introduces a major study which aims to identify, transcribe, annotate, and make available the unique texts and performances of mummers' plays recorded in the province between 1964 and 1969, and deposited in the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive. The tape recordings include full, partial, and fragmentary texts, together with details of context, costume, performance, and the role of these plays within the community.

Lynn Lunde: Mummers, Janneys, Naluyuks: 'one of these is not alike'

Masked and costumed figures carrying sticks, moving in groups through communities at night, banging on doors, gaining entrance to homes – unidentifiable figures known for erratic, unconventional and often violent behaviour, the mummers, janneys and naluyuks of Newfoundland and Labrador move through the physical and social landscape of communities during the mid-winter period. Although each of the events appears to contain elements from northern European traditions, 'one of these is not alike'. Mummers and janneys coincide with an English/Irish mumming heritage brought to Newfoundland by European fishers; the naluyuks are 'native' to northern Labrador and are the embodiment of an Inuit belief system and world-view ruptured by the relentless onslaught of the Moravian church. The apparent similarities between these events mask the profound differences. Archaeological evidence, historical records, ethnographic material, and first-hand accounts support the position that naluyuks are not of the north European cultural base, but are of the Inuit culture of northern Labrador.

Panel 2

Paul Smith: Reverend George Low and the Sword Dance in Shetland.

In 1831, as part of the notes to the revised edition of his novel *The Pirate*, Sir Walter Scott included an account of the sword dance from the island of Papa Stour, Shetland, which he had obtained from Dr. James Scott who noted that it was “written about the year 1788” (Walter Scott 1831: 271). This dance is often viewed as an isolated Scottish example of an English circular sword dance. In 1774 and 1778 Thomas Pennant, the naturalist and travel writer, provided the Reverend George Low (1747-1795) financial assistance to tour Orkney and Shetland and record the natural history and culture. Pennant also offered to assist with publishing Low’s *Tour in the Islands of Orkney & Shetland 1774 & 1778* but, upon receiving it, he extracted the material for use in one of his own books. Prior to Low’s death much of his *Tour...*, and other manuscripts, were used without acknowledgment by Pennant and others. Upon Low’s death his manuscripts went mostly to George Paton, but were later dispersed when Paton died in 1807. It was not until 1879 that Joseph Anderson produced a very heavily edited edition of the *Tour...* which omitted several key passages dealing with cultural traditions (Low 1879). Using Low’s manuscript of the *Tour...*, this paper examines his notes on Shetland dances and in particular an account of a sword dance being performed on the Shetland mainland, which indicates that the Papa Stour dance was potentially part of a wider dance tradition.

Threase Finnegan: Unspoken Cultural Knowledge: Understanding the Endurance of Mumming in Northern Ireland, through Performance Ethnography.

Performance Ethnography rests on the idea that bodies harbour knowledge about culture, and that performance allows for the exchange of that knowledge across bodies” (Jones 2006: 339)

Some forms of cultural knowledge are unspoken, and remain between the members of a particular community. One way to acquire this cultural knowledge is through the process of performance ethnography. As Joni L. Jones states in the article (2006: 339) ‘Performance and Ethnography, Performing Ethnography, Performance Ethnography’, cultural knowledge can be passed on and understood through performance. This paper will explore how performance ethnography can be used to attain cultural knowledge of how and why the ‘traditional’ mumming performance is changed to suit a particular community’s social needs. The presentation will draw on ethnographic fieldwork which was conducted with the Aughakillymaude mummers from County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland, between May 2012 and May 2013. Firstly, it will give an ethnographic account of what may be seen as a ‘traditional’ mumming performance, using what Clifford Geertz has termed (1973) ‘thick description’. We will then give an ethnographic account of what may be termed as a ‘non-traditional’ mumming performance- a mummers ‘guard of honour’. Critics of this ‘non-traditional’ type of performance by the Aughakillymaude mummers have deemed it as ‘not genuine Irish’. Through the ethnographic descriptions mentioned above, we will learn that while the traditional mumming performance has indeed been adapted by the community to suit their own social needs there still remains, in the ‘non-traditional’ performance, the traits which make the Aughakillymaude mummers unique and have helped them endure through time: a strong sense of comradeship, tangible community spirit and the fortification of social relationships. Therefore, we will see that through performance ethnography, an understanding of unspoken cultural knowledge can be acquired.

Panel 3

Ron Shuttleworth: Mumming is not acting: What is it and why is this important? Gaining the Public's Trust.

In the mind of the public, an actor is trying to convince them that he is other than himself. When they view a theatrical production they are prepared to be 'fooled'. There are many other people in life who are trying to do the same thing – politicians, salesmen etc. – and these people are rightly viewed with suspicion. The fact that mummers are patently *not* acting may help to explain why, when we invade public space, we are often accorded far more sympathetic attention than we probably deserve. In aiming for more convincing characterisation is this sympathetic attention something we would be in danger of losing?

Olly Crick: Too Much Knowledge? Experience in show creation for rural touring with the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company.

"Our aim is make theatre for the present with the Angels and Demons of the past" Carlo Boso

Creating all age group touring shows specifically for rural community venues should be simple enough for a professional: create a good show, any good show and include in it the usual ingredients to make it so. However, creating a show with the property of being able to make each performance seem venue specific (treating each audience as special), whilst trying to add deeper resonances in terms of place, culture, theme and way of life, as well as keeping the performance at least theoretically universal (and hence audience friendly in a big way) we ran into the problem of choice. What elements from folk drama, music, local lore and geography are suitable show ingredients that do not patronise and are good enough to get one invited back?

There were two paths through this conundrum. The first being theatrical expertise in devising shows, and the second being finding a method of making the best possible educated guesses as to form and content. To answer the second, which is the main thrust of my paper, the frame of reference needed to be widened rather than narrowed. The frames started to include models of theatre from the past, especially Greek Comedy and the Commedia dell'arte. Add to this Mummer's plays; Mystery plays; Local Saints' Plays; local legends; Faery Stories; Historical, quasi-historical and mythical figures; Early Christian and Pre-Christian ceremonies. The list could go on, but our search's parameters were not archaeological, but contemporary. This paper is concerned with the search for dramatically entertaining folk memes that can be used both to connect and to entertain: To bring to our audience "the merrie Englande that never was".

Endpieces

Cressida Pryor: The Winchcombe Mummers Journey to 2013

In 2005 Cressida unearthed an ageing hundred year old booklet in her grandparent's archive describing the Hitchin Mayer tradition. Two characters leapt from these moth eaten pages and rampaged through the dignified home county's market town streets: Mad Moll and Old Tom. Having more recently moved to the Cotswold town of Winchcombe Cressida has engaged with the Winchcombe Mummers.

Ian Gilchrist: The Widcombe Mummers - Creating a Tradition

The Widcombe Mummers were founded in 2005 following 2 sightings by me of the Marshfield Paper Boys. One had been at their traditional performance spot on Boxing Day, and the other had been after a mid-summer encounter at the English Country Music event in 2005, where I also attended a talk by Doc Rowe. I went home thinking this would be good to do in Widcombe, my part of Bath. We did our first performance on New Year's Day in 2006 to great acclaim, which led to one of the participants saying to me afterwards, 'Well done, Ian, you have created a tradition!' We have performed every year on New Year's Day since then, varying the script to incorporate some topical local talking point, and varying the music and songs. In addition to this continuing and strengthening tradition we have also been incorporated into other peoples' celebrations and traditions.

Andrew Jackson: The Penny Plain Theatre - From Street Theatre to Mumming.

Hardcastle's Mighty Excelsior Theatre Company is a fictitious company of itinerant Victorian travelling actors. In our personas as members of this troupe, we seek to present Yorkshire legends and traditions to a street audience in an amusing way. Our Christmas entertainment is a medley of old carols, dances, and comedy centred round the mummer's play from Bellerby. It is in the hero-combat tradition and includes a rapper dance. 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.