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The *Mummers Unconvention* in Context

The first *Mummers Unconvention*¹ took place in Bath, England, during November 2011. The event attracted fifteen performance groups from the UK, Spain and North America, and included performances, performance workshops and a symposium. The general perception that the heyday of mumming was around the start of the 20th century may still be true, but there is a considerable resurgence in this kind of performance activity. There are often gaps between the known history of particular mumming performances, the not-so-known histories of the source material, and the fuzzy-geography of the constructed meta-tradition (largely the work of my not so distant academic ancestors) in which performers and audiences can choose to place their action. Indeed the study of mummers' plays, the efforts to plug those information gaps, might be regarded as an enduring popular entertainment in its own right. This was recognised by Mat Levin last year, in an MA dissertation submitted to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta:

There are a great number of stories told about the English folk play tradition known as 'mummers' plays.' These stories told by folklorists, historians, anthropologists, popular fiction writers, mummers and audience members, and lay folk in general, can be considered as part of a body of folk commentary or metafolklore. Within this body of metafolklore, there are, generally speaking, at least five types of narratives told to explain the origins of the tradition...it is possible to trace, if not the origin, then the development of each of the origin stories told about the tradition...through space and time but [also] across lines of scholarship, literary fiction and folk commentary...perhaps scholarship and literature can be considered as part of the body of metafolklore; as constituents rather than objective observers.²

Mumming is the generic term for a range of dramatic activity associated with different times of year in different parts of England. It is a form of theatre where performers and audiences often revisit the same sites and repeat the same performances on particular dates and at particular times each year, eventually becoming an exemplar of what Marvin Carlson has termed "ghosting"

or a “something coming back in the theatre.”³ First references to the type of activity we now recognise by ‘mumming’ come from the late 1700s, with an increasing trend for descriptions of the play from that period until World War 1. As A. E. Green has pointed out, this is the period from which “most of our records of the mumming plays came. And which, by reasonable inference, saw their diffusion and proliferation at least, and possibly their crystallisation into their present form.”⁴

Broadly speaking, the annual mumming season in England begins with the soulcaking plays of the North West in late October, and concludes the following Easter with the pace-egging plays of West Yorkshire. These performances, like the Christmas mumming of central and southern England, the New Year sword plays of the North East, and the January plough and wooing plays of Lincolnshire, depict the killing and coming back to life of a protagonist as a (usually) central motif in a procession of both presentational and representational characters and acts. Particular variants range in overall length from five to twenty or so minutes. Performances are given on the street, in pubs, in car parks, in private homes, schools and village halls, depending on local custom and practice. An overview of the historic, geographic and performative contexts of these plays and performances, as well as detail of contemporary performances, can be accessed at websites hosted by the Traditional Drama Research Group and Master Mummers.⁵

To go back to Levin’s point, what people have made of these performances appears to me at least as interesting as the plays themselves. The surrounding scholarship provided a distorting mirror for a particular history of ideas through much of the 20th century: so, for example, when the eminent theatre historian E K Chambers interpreted mumming as an act of seasonal revitalisation in *The Medieval Stage* and *The English Folk Play*⁶ he provided an authoritative echo of Frazerian scholarship. During the 1950s, folklorist Margaret Dean-Smith noted descriptions in the *Annals of the British School at Athens* which, between 1899 and 1913, had contained descriptions of folk play performances in the Balkans. In a 1958 article (pre-empting the English translation of Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* two years later) she discussed the mummers’ play as enactment of the human life cycle.⁷ In an unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of Florida in 1969 Stephen Malin⁸ - poised somewhere between Margaret Murray and Norman Cohn⁹ - argued for mumming as the remnant of the fertility rituals of a witch cult. The same year Alan Brody published *The English Mummers and their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery*,¹⁰ and two years later E. T. Kirby described mumming as one piece of a jigsaw that suggested a world-wide shamanistic origin for theatre.¹¹ These latter works were survivals themselves, every bit as improbable as the ‘survivals’ they purported to explain. But Levin is right – the stories told for a hundred years are part of the metafolklore of mumming and difficult to separate out (should one wish to) from the popular meaning of contemporary mumming performance.

For a few years during the late 1960s and into the 1970s two parallel worlds seemed to exist in mumming scholarship. In 1971, in the foreword to *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore*, Americo Paredes had noted:

an emphasis upon performance as an organising principle that comprehends within a single conceptual framework artistic act, expressive form, and esthetic response, and that does so in terms of locally defined, culture specific categories and contexts.”¹²

He recognised a profound shift that both reflected and impacted on current ideas about mumming and which saw the development of performance-centred ethnography. Herbert Halpert and Graham Story's work *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*¹³, Roger Abrahams' consideration of West Indian material,¹⁴ Barry Ward's *A Functional Approach to English Folk Drama*¹⁵ and Henry Glassie's *All Silver and no Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming*¹⁶ all considered the richness of performance in people's lives and in the construction of a cultural fabric. In England the impact of this performance orientation was most strongly felt in the Institute for Dialect and Folk Life Studies at the University of Leeds and the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield. Between 1978 and 1985 a series of conferences looking at Traditional Drama was held at the University of Sheffield.¹⁷ Many of the papers celebrated an allegiance with the new 'performance orientation in folkloristics' which sought to engage with issues of context and performance as well as matters of text and provenance.

What came out of these conferences was an evident respect for performers and performance and a series of questions about mumming which have not yet been fully answered. They do not quite match the five 'Levin narratives' referred to above, but there is considerable overlap. Firstly, what is the relationship between the texts of mummers' plays and texts contained in popular chapbooks from the late 18th century? Secondly, what is the relationship between mummers' plays and the 'pantomimes' created by John Rich and others in the early part of the 18th century? Thirdly, 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? Fourthly, what antecedents may lie with localised variants of house visiting associated with performative calendar customs? The symposium held as part of the *Mummers Unconvention* did push all of these questions along, but I also hope that the *Unconvention* overall encouraged a contemporary performance studies approach to mumming. I suggest the first wave of 'performance orientation' enabled a reappraisal of mumming during the 1970s, but that the subsequent thirty years of emergent 'performance studies' had not been properly brought to bear.

While Performance Studies in America were developing by carefully examining the models of performance behaviours and processes useful not only to artists and theatre scholars but to anthropologists, folklorists, play theorists and so on, UK Performance Studies remained largely focussed on the contemporary legacy of a performative *avant garde*. In continental Europe (acknowledging country to country differences) ethnology and anthropology easily embraced the idea of cultural/social performance in which a culture plays out aspects of its world through symbolic performative displays such as folk dance and drama and related ritual behaviour. Although performance studies in

continental Europe maintained the separation between studies of theatre/art performance and national/ritual/folk style performances, the balance between these scholarships is, perhaps, better achieved than in the UK.¹⁸ Despite the work of the 'early adopters' at Leeds, Sheffield and elsewhere, the connection between folklore, anthropology and performance has been slow to gain momentum in the UK.

The outcome for our understanding of mumming has not been helpful. For theatre studies scholars mumming offers neither a clear historical frame nor a definitive contribution to performance style, and those involved in performance studies have largely dismissed mumming by virtue of the commonest expression of *raison d'être* – tradition. Furthermore, I believe the academy has always had difficulty in addressing the amateur, whether as practitioner engagement or scholarly consideration. Mumming doesn't just slip through the nets, it sometimes slips between them. Notwithstanding, Mike Pearson's book *In Comes I: Performance, Landscape and Memory*,¹⁹ and more generally the Arts and Humanities Research Council Landscape and Environment programme, particularly the 2009 Aberystwyth conference *Living Landscapes: Performance, Landscape and Environment* which Pearson convened, have facilitated the teasing out of some interesting ideas.²⁰ The realisations that mumming is site specific and that individual traditions demonstrate mobility between sites; the understanding that site specificity can be matched by calendar specificity, that the intersection of time and place can impact on memory, that repetition can possess durationality, that mumming embraces the spectator and so on, are all contributing to a reappraisal of the form. Indeed, mumming provides a rich arena for the consideration of Diana Taylor's 'archive and repertoire' and the idea of performance as a mechanism for both storing and transmitting knowledge²¹.

What has been most interesting about the *Mummers Unconvention* was the bringing together of a number of groups who don't usually get the opportunity to put across a point of view, or even discuss a perspective with one another. Groups of mummers attended who had never seen another group perform, but we are not talking some fantastical 'first contact' here. I had dinner one night with a group from Somerset who had read Alan Brody's book, enjoyed the idea of an ancient rite – one of their company was interested in Wicca - obtained a text which they liked – via the web - from a village in Cumbria, and performed each year as part of a revived wassailing tradition in the rural village to which they had retired. Conversely, the Marshfield Mummers – The Old Time Paper Boys – are widely acknowledged and regarded as a traditional team but they are fully aware that their tradition was reconstituted under the influence of the folklorist Violet Alford in 1934.²² Even accepting the de-contextualisation of these performances in the urban centre of Bath, whether on the street, in pubs or halls, or on stage, it was fascinating to be able to consider performance styles 'back to back', and to see their distinctive qualities highlighted precisely as a consequence of performances being given in the same location, under similar conditions. The idea of 'tradition' as distinct from 'revival' is an important distinction for some performers and for some academics, and for some who are both. But this is an idea that requires a profound interdisciplinary unpacking.

The wilder expositions on mumming have largely been written at some distance from actual performances, and have tended to focus on either text or action as imagined from the reading of text. Neither perspective has always understood the performance conditions – in the broadest sense – prevailing in particular places. Once we are past those stumbling blocks a range of fascinating discussions emerge, and some were presented at the *Unconvention*.

Peter Millington and Caspar James, for example, noted a recent UNESCO Cultural Heritage Award in the Dominican Republic for the performance by Los Gulayos of a composite mummers' play published in 1884 by the Ecclesfield-based Victorian children's author Juliana Horatia Ewing.²³ Lynn Lunde reported on 19th-century mumming in Newfoundland as a venue for the exercise of personal rancour and social control.²⁴ Graham Clarke described his involvement with an extant tradition in Derbyshire where there is "no advertising, we burst in, perform, collect, and disappear (after a beer)".²⁵ Mike Pearson, in perhaps the most overt exposition of Performance Studies "considered the significance of space, time, pattern and detail; the application of rules, strategies and dynamics; the use of objects; the various integrations and separations of text and action; and the presence of different modes of performing. All within a particular architectural setting..."²⁶

Mumming sustains itself as a shifting manifestation of popular entertainment, keeping one step ahead of the scholarship and refusing to be nailed down: it is celebratory, reflective, entertaining and odd. The *Mummers Unconvention* was an interesting way forward for those who care for the form and want to contribute to the meta-folklore of this meta-tradition. Plans are in place for future events.²⁷

¹ *The Mummers Unconvention* <http://mummersunconvention.wordpress.com/> including full details of the symposium and a photographic record. Accessed 22.01.2012.

² Mat. J. Levin, "The Laughing Storyteller: Metafolklore about the origins of Mummers." (MA diss., University of Alberta, 2011.) Abstract.

³ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 2.

⁴ Anthony Green "Popular Drama and the Mummers' Play" in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, ed. David Bradby et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 139 – 166.

⁵ <http://www.folkplay.info/> accessed 22.01.2012 and <http://www.mastermummers.org/> accessed 22.01.2012. Both sites contain extensive information and links on English Folk Drama. See also, Harrop, P. "The Antrobus Soulcakery – a consideration of site, mobility and time as components of traditional performance", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, special edition on *Site Specificity and Mobility*, (forthcoming 2012).

⁶ Edmund Kerchever Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903) and *The English Folk Play*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933.)

⁷ Margaret Dean-Smith "The Life Cycle or Folk Play: some conclusions following the examination of the Ordish papers and other sources", *Folklore* LXIX, 4 (1958). Dean-Smith references volumes VI; XI; XVI; XIX; and XXVI of the *Annual of the British School at Athens*.

- ⁸ Stephen Malin, "Character Origins in the English Folk Play." (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1968.)
- ⁹ The notion of a pan-European witch cult was first raised by Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult of Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921.) This work, by a formerly respected Egyptologist, was subjected to sustained criticism from publication onward for eccentricity and selective quotation. The work was finally and thoroughly dismantled in Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An enquiry inspired by the great witch hunt* (London: Paladin, 1976.) Malin had built his argument from Murray.
- ¹⁰ Alan Brody, *The English Mummers and their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.)
- ¹¹ ET Kirby, "The Origin of the Mummers Play" *Journal of American Folklore* 184 (1971): 275 – 288. This was later re-worked as a chapter in ET Kirby, *Ur-Drama: The Origins of Theatre* (New York: New York University Press, 1975.)
- ¹² Americo Paredes, "Foreword to Towards New Perspectives in Folklore" in *Journal of American Folklore* 84, (1971): iii, later published as Paredes, A. and Bauman, R. eds. *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, (Austin: American Folklore Society, 1972.)
- ¹³ Herbert Halpert and Graham Story eds. *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.)
- ¹⁴ Roger D. Abrahams "'Pull out your purse and pay': A St. George Mumming from the British West Indies", *Folklore*, 79, 3 (1968): 176 –201 and "British West Indian Folk Drama and the 'Life Cycle' Problem," *Folklore*, 81, 4 (1970): 241 – 265.
- ¹⁵ Barry Ward. "A Functional Approach to English Folk Drama" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1972.)
- ¹⁶ Henry Glassie. *All Silver and no Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming*, (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1975.)
- ¹⁷ The conferences are fully documented at http://www.folkplay.info/TD_Confs.htm 22.01.2012.
- ¹⁸ I am grateful to my colleague Dunja Njaradi, postdoctoral fellow in Performing Arts at the University of Chester, for the wording of this paragraph which formed part of a joint call for papers for the forthcoming conference *Contemporary Ethnography, Contemporary Performance*, University of Chester, July 13th/14th, 2012.
- ¹⁹ Mike Pearson, *In Comes I: Performance, Landscape, Memory* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2006.)
- ²⁰ <http://www.landscape.ac.uk/landscape/index.aspx> accessed 22.01.2012 gives an overview of the project but refer particularly to the listings of papers for the Living Landscape Conference at Aberystwyth in June 2009. Selected papers were subsequently published as Stephen Daniels, Mike Pearson, Heike Roms eds. "Special Edition: Fieldworks," *Performance Research* 15, 4 (2010).
- ²¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 17.
- ²² For a full discussion see Simon Lichmann "The Gardener's Story and What Came Next: A Contextual Analysis of the Marshfield Paper Boys' Mumming Play" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1981), and "The Gardener's Story: The Metafolklore of a Mumming Tradition," *Folklore*, 93, 1 (1982): 105 – 111.
- ²³ Peter Millington and Caspar James "Mummies and Masquerades: English and Caribbean Connections", (paper presented at the symposium of the Bath *International Mummers Unconvention*, Burdall's Yard, Bath Spa University, November 14th 2011).
- ²⁴ Lynn Lunde "Illegal acts in disguise: Mumming as a component of collective social action in 19th century Newfoundland", (paper presented at the symposium of the Bath *International Mummers Unconvention*, Burdall's Yard, Bath Spa University, November 14th 2011.)
- ²⁵ Graham Clarke "Guisering today on the Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border," (paper presented at the symposium of the Bath *International Mummers Unconvention*, Burdall's Yard, Bath Spa University, November 14th 2011.)
- ²⁶ Mike Pearson "The Marshfield Paper Boys", (paper presented at the symposium of the Bath *International Mummers Unconvention*, Burdall's Yard, Bath Spa University, November 14th 2011.)
- ²⁷ Papers from the symposium held as part of the *Unconvention* are currently being edited for publication by Peter Harrop and Dunja Njaradi. Details will be forthcoming on the *Unconvention* website in due course, <http://mummersunconvention.wordpress.com/>.