

CHARACTERS AND THE COTSWOLD MORRIS

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A typical English morris show, and one that is probably now very traditional, occurs at a pub with the visiting group of strangers about equal in numbers to the local crowd. The club practices dances, not shows, so it has given little thought or time to how they intend to perform. More frequently today with pubs mostly eating places rather than social meeting places, the visitors are from two clubs, more to provide the ambience of a crowd, rather than to interact with each other. The performance proceeds by muddling through, "just like last time", with little planning until Bonny Green Garters is reached, but with much rapport with the watchers, although even this is not essential to quite a few teams who go out only for their own pleasure. This relaxed attitude is not so effective in front of a larger audience, who would probably react better to a less primitive approach. A team could respond to the perhaps unfamiliar situation by beginning to organise their troupe into a semblance of an entertainment. One remembers there being debates about whether it is "worth" getting the animal out.

Perhaps everyone knows of the auxiliary roles associated with public performance, which the morris calls "characters", who seem to be less common today in our less interactive circumstances. The older tradition is of little guidance as it combined or eliminated tasks to minimise the number participating in the final collected money share outs. This factor is no longer a consideration for clubs today.

The role and value of the different characters that can be associated with the Cotswold morris is appreciated in a general way but often not properly understood. Part of the confusion lies in the lack of a clear separation in the past of the various tasks that they fulfill. In the best tradition of entertainment these tasks can be combined, but any one "character" can only carry one role at a time, although they can switch from one to another during a performance. Such changes need to be made with care because the audience can easily be confused by the novelty of the morris and then start to ask what it is all meant to mean.

The first point to make is that such characters are an integral part of the show and not part of the dancing. There are four roles that need to be filled in a show, besides those of leading the dance, usually by the "foreman" who is often No.1, and not to be confused with the teacher at practices, and of playing the music to suit the dance. Each role has its own territory and relationship to the overall performance. Any character can be of either sex in modern circumstances now that we have shaken off the dogmatic attitudes developed by the Victorians. Forgive the use of masculine pronouns.

ROLES

A. SOMEONE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE AUDIENCE

This is elsewhere known as the Master of Ceremonies, Ring Master, or Announcer and is to the audience the apparent Producer or Director of the show and should be seen to be in charge, even if actually only acting as a front man for the Squire (the club leader), or the Foreman (the dance leader). To be obviously just relaying messages is unsatisfactory unless it becomes part of the entertainment by cross talk and back chat. They tell everyone, both audience and performers, about what is happening and, importantly, why.

The key is that the activity is sited in the dancers territory and is projected outward towards the audience.

It can be and often is the task of one of the troupe, a dancer or even the musician, and is done between dances. It is eased if the show is not being ad libbed but working to something



prearranged, even if the plan is very flexible. But the task can be done by someone who is specially dressed for the part and not otherwise part of the dancing. For example by the wearing of evening dress or appearing as a Town Crier and thereby meeting another role, (C), mentioned below. It is important that the voice can carry adequately. It can be a problem for a woman's voice because of its possible shrillness, and some training is nearly always desirable.

Proper adaptive control of a show really requires deliberate observation of the crowd and its reactions during the dancing, and not just between dances, so that judgements can be made on when to stop the show, whether to speed it up or to change the programme. The character must be responsive, not scripted. In many ways it is an equivalent to the technique of the stand up comic or pantomime principal in speaking to the audience at large, and dealing with overall impressions rather than individuals in the crowd. Leaving this to the foreman who is dancing and concentrating on the other dancers is hardly effective.

Any announcement has to catch the attention of the listeners. Therefore the speaker has to have an "entrance", to step out of context, if doing something else in between. The speaker has to deal with crowd control, assisted but not supplanted by the fool.

One other task is the "collection" speech. This can be full of blarney, like a fairground barker, being economical with the truth. Issues can be the "Buying of the Luck of the Morris", "Improving the Weather" or even gaining "Fertility". By contrast one should never tell the tale to reporters because it reflects back badly on the public image of all the morris. It is important to be able to recognise when to be genuine.

There are two subsidiary tasks.

B. SOMEONE ACCESSIBLE BY THE AUDIENCE

There is a task to answer questions, to chat on a one-on-one basis and to keep the inquisitive and troublesome out of the way of the show and team organisers. It is best performed by someone identifiably not a dancer. It continues all the time from first arrival at a dance spot until final departure.

This Activity is sited in the audience and is projected outward towards the audience.

It can be combined with distributing lucky morris cake or handouts and with the collecting of money unobtrusively. Who the money is for should be made quite clear. Cake bearers were common in the Wychwood Forest area, but are infrequent with the morris in recent years. Is this another Health and Safety issue? Traditionally this is a steady task that does not draw attention to itself. In passing out the cake, the bearer has a cake tin and a small knife and doles out very small pieces, and these are given not sold. The cake is usually a rich fruit one, but once upon a time they actually sold little cakes which were mincemeat enclosed in pastry or bread. One should not be free with printed handouts, they cost money, they litter the country side, and should be aimed at genuine enquiries and photographers who might send copies for the scrapbook. It is difficult to combine this task with that of ragman, yet another job mentioned below.

I was once much taken with a team who had a small child tow through the audience a pull-along animal-toy on wheels with a slot in the top for collecting coins.

Collecting boxes have a long history and the money aspect was a major factor for most of the known traditional sides. Making sure that monies could not be removed secretly was important for them and soldered lids or padlocks were once not uncommon.

C. SOMEONE TO LOOK AT

A "beautiful" as the Basques put it.



The role is to be noticed and be admired. Traditional parts have been King, Queen, Lord, Lady, Witch, and Soldier and these often appeared as pairs. The team can accentuate their position by making them the centre of apparent attention. But this class of character also includes many Tourney Hobby Horses and other fairly immobile animals, as it is an inactive role with no major part in the dancing unless it is specially choreographed. They are usually too cumbersome, heavy, ornate, inexperienced or old, to be allowed in the dance area during the dances. A strong carrier, as at Combe Martin, Minehead or Padstow, can make such a large object the centre of the activity. There are a number of places where the animal became the sole centre of attention with the loss of any supporting activities.

The activity is walking or sitting between the dance area and the audience and is projected outward towards the audience.

The character is basically to be taken seriously, and does not have to indulge in horse play. They may be approachable and therefore able to meet role (B) above, but this would be uneasy for the character if their dress is grand. It can be a role for the inexperienced and is often what the novice morris fool is reduced to! Sam Bennett of Ilmington used to insist that his hobby horse had a particular part in the dance and had the animal dance down the set under the linked handkerchiefs in his "Maid of the Mill". However the hobby horse was not traditional in the Cotswolds before Darcy Ferrars introduced one at Bidford in 1886, and it was copied later by Chipping Campden.

The modern morris accretes local customs like the mumming play, the Ooser Bull and the Salisbury Hob Nob Hobby. Although it is putting them into a new context, it is surely better than them being lost for ever.

D. SOMEONE TO CREATE FUN

The fool can be the key role, and traditionally and currently often the only one manned. I believe that the character represents the audience in dealing with the dancers. The audience is not the primary objective of his attention. It is a continuous activity which includes recognising when not to be visible. If the fool is asked to be announcer, jig dancer or money collector, the role changes and so must the behaviour. Mixing in these other tasks dilutes the impact of the clown at their true activity. A fool can in addition have particular personal entertainment skills to exploit that have nothing to do with the morris.

The territory is actually everywhere, but projected from the audience inward towards the dancing. He is their representative, doing what they would not dare.

The costume can be almost anything from the old fashioned country smock (Longborough, Headington) which could make him a "beautiful", or imply a country "bumpkin", mock dress such as academic with student cap and gown (Adderbury), pseudo medieval, fantastic or idiotic or circus like (Bampton). The circus has established many types of clown and clown behaviour which are now part of our cultural heritage and experience and which are now quite acceptable to any audience. The modern animals of the mischievous kind such as the Westminster Unicorn are clowns rather than beautifuls.

The fool is not part of the dance troupe, is often competing for attention, and unease should exist in the dancers when he is around. The attempt is to be complementary in the show, but the lead is almost entirely with the fool. Remember that the clown does not represent the dancers in dealing with the crowd. Any assault on the audience is being part of his independent role. Although as supporting the show they can have many subsidiary roles such as covering, ie stepping in the set as replacements for accidents, collecting money in difficult conditions, eg off of buses, providing a distraction if something goes awry, and even directing traffic around the dance spot.

The clown can not in actuality be foolish or thoughtless or reckless. However the interaction with members of the crowd or of the team comes from directing the clowning at someone, so



it becomes "at the expense of", meaning it interferes with someone in some way. The oldest tradition of folk fools includes a licence to speak freely without fear of reprisal, but it not likely that a magistrate or judge would accept the excuse.

The technique of a good fool is not to seek to amuse generally, ie as a stand up comic, but to be as the traditional circus clown and work on the audience one by one, one to one, during a show so that all feel a moment of personal contact.

A pet grouse is that if the clown is active, it is unfair for the dancers to call on the clown for activity between their set dances just to give them a rest without prior arrangement.

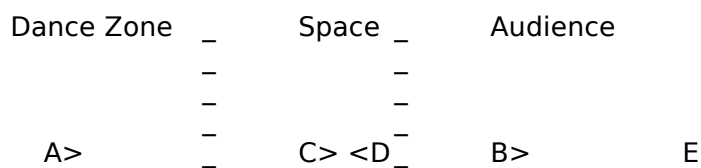
The stick hobby animal, derived from the Kentish Hooden Horse, that gyrates or eats money etc is a variety of clown bound by the same rules. The version that is walked around to meet the crowd is essentially a static character as (C), even if it eats money.

E. SOMEONE TO LOOK AFTER THINGS

There is an invisible role, that of the "ragman" who looks after the baggage, implements and the inactives during a dance. Someone has to decide where to put things down, either near the music for safety or elsewhere where they can be watched. They should also, like a steward or marshal, control where the spare dancers stand, which should not be in the sight lines of the audience. It can be akin to the stage manager and properties man role in a theatre.

TERRITORIES

This analysis assumes a large open space surrounded by watchers



i.e. role A lies within the dance zone, role C in the space between the dancers and the audience, acting "outwards" as part of the performance as opposed to D who is "part" of the audience looking "in". B is in the audience, answering questions and interacting with them. E is wherever E needs to be, but definitely not between any member of the audience and the performance!

The importance of the characters and their roles depends on the crowd size, and the dancing position relative to the audience, which influences the audience's expectations of the performance. It is an experience that a large crowd can largely ignore the morris, probably because the morris has taken the wrong line in establishing contact with them.

The choice of the persons to perform the characters is often difficult. Each role benefits from experience which implies some continuity in it. Giving them to inexperienced dancers seems counter productive. One way of overcoming the club problem of giving experienced dancers challenges without over extending the club repertoire of difficult dances is to expect them to take on these roles. It is also a solution to the occasions, hopefully rare, when there are too many dancers available to allow everyone to get enough dancing.

FINALLY

The foreman, who is the prompter calling the moves, and for convenience is often number one in the set, is where attention can centre, is close to the music and visible to the whole set at the start of the dance. The role is the control of the dancers during the dance. However when the set contains 8 dancers it may be more practical to lead from one of the middle places



where it may be easier to be heard. If the set is arranged by height it might even be sensible to lead from the taller dancers who can more easily see what is happening throughout the dance.

