

## An Introduction to Mumming

*"The mummer's play does not attempt the detailed imitation of reality;  
it is an imagistic theatre whose effect lies in holding real and unreal worlds  
in a precarious balance."*

**Antrobus**

Mumming was and still is a dramatic and social activity that has become part of the dramatic tradition within England with ritual aspects of Mumming having affected social and perhaps even political situations through its display and interaction with other areas. Some of the Mumming plays are also known to have been performed in Northern Ireland. A Mumming play is part of cognitive mapping, through highly enjoyable role-play, which identifies a particular community, and who and what goes into making that community. All pieces of Mumming inherently ask and exhibit these three points in the tradition; are we or are we not of the same community; are you with us or against us; and are you an insider or an outsider? Once you accept these points as part of the Mumming approach to play, the sense of community becomes clearer.

Traditionally a Mumming 'troupe' was all male, and comprised of local men who would blacken their faces with soot, rehearsing in secret passing on quite often the story lines from father-to-son following the oral tradition. If we trace back Mumming's family tree it can be traced with reasonable confidence back to the male groups called the 'Abbeys of Misrule' (France) which were a known but not a generally accepted part of the Christian church in and post-medieval times providing illustration through action of the scriptures. Many of the feast days associated with the presentation of Mumming plays were celebrated by the Christian Church with elaborate services, mass sometimes in French but more usually in Latin. The celebration would include for some occasions a ritualised 'acting out' of the scripture for the congregation to understand. Acting not in the sense that we understand but simple stylised gestures in short mimes.

It seems likely that, whilst the church not only provided a spiritual foundation for daily life and the coming together of people in one place, the ritualistic actions, patterns, code of speech and moralistic dramatic action used in Mumming plays can be easily identified with this form of worship, although the exact Christian associations may be misleading as Pagan rituals were also popular during the same period, together with the development of patterned and line social dances. It is acceptable to surmise that events within the church 'spilled out' into the community life and as views regarding worship and the powers of the church altered so too the growth of Mumming climbed.

We know that the plays seem to have evolved in some way from a ceremony connected with the spring festivals which celebrated the passing of winter and the resurrection or birth of spring, but they are also associated with Christmas and other Christian and Pagan festivals. Ritualistic in the sense that the Mumming's have been repeated in a certain display form with particular characters as part of a wider festival celebration e.g. Whitsun or May Day Bank Holiday.

Everyone within society must fulfil roles in a commonality of purpose, even for the communitas to survive, the apparently unstructured society and the organisation of Mumming pieces is a perfect example of this, having grown from smaller communities encouraging all to participate either as 'actor' or audience as the troupe perambulates through the area. Both are equal, there is no hierarchy here and no anticipated audience response.

There has always been a need to constantly consolidate and define society and community in order for it to survive. Mumming is a communal tradition that serves just this purpose. It is not just an entertainment although the participants and the friendly horseplay that normally results can be very amusing, when people meet on equal terms which have been negotiated with no one person automatically in charge, thereby developing the community. The group performing the Mumming pieces have a commonality of purpose to celebrate a certain feast date, event or festival and do not stage the pieces to exercise any control over the community but to display a form of social

control through the oral tradition of storytelling which are fundamentally moralistic.

There are no scripts with detailed management notes and character descriptions although there is some documentation of pieces from the late 18-century early 19- century detailing parts of plays which provides a language, formulae and structure (similar to how we are all fully aware of the typical scenario for a Pantomime piece). Instead the characters involved are 'types' or notables drawn from history who appear to conquer evil with good achieving success in a given confrontation. The issues or content in Mumming plays are more important than those who have come up with the lines in the sense that there is no one author. The 'script' is a symbolic discourse on key issues prevalent in the communities mind which can be allied to existing story lines, for example 'St. George and the Dragon'.

The group of people presenting the Mumming play come together voluntarily and work together to stage an outdoor perambulatory piece that today usually accompanies a traditional Morris display. The 'Sweep' character often found in Mumming plays would traditionally provide a prologue to clear the performance area and the epilogue to collect a reward for the troupe's efforts in money or kind. The function of the troupe perambulating to places that are known to all is not to be overlooked or considered as just a dramatic convention. Although the Mumpers are disguised as 'strangers' the audience will, of course, know who they are but this processional form allows all to mix whilst providing a dramatic distancing which allows the dramatic and ritualised intention to be read more clearly. The style of presentation is a real mix of many popular acting forms. One example is the 'Soulcaking Play' which is performed at Halloween and involves six characters who work to support / play off one another:

'Letter-in' - Functional / Narrator: Brechtian.

'King George' - Naive boyish persona (clashes with Black Prince).

'Black Prince' - Melodramatic.

'Doctor' - Exaggerated, stylised gestures: Commedia del Arte.

"Dairy" - Similar to King George.

'Horse and Handler' - Similar to rough edged Mediaeval Mysteries types.

The functional storyteller role allows the troupe to transport the audience to any location, time, and event transforming the space the audience inhabit. The celebration of human nature is central and all-embracing within Mumming. The characters were/are often named only by an acting name and not the ordinary name to make the transformation complete. The rituals enacted bring the community together for a short period but are repeated (to a certain extent recreated) each year in order to remind and as stated earlier in this introduction, to re-address the emotional, social, spiritual and even political needs of the community. The plays take place to make something happen in the short term which is not the purpose of theatre - to 'recreate'. Often Mumming plays are mistaken for part of theatre but this has a long term outcome normally. Theatre does not necessarily have a short term outcome but Mumming rituals had a function to reaffirm, to mark matters of great immediate importance.

The Mumming cognitive community 'mapping' event has a different meaning for the participants and the spectators beyond the underlying seriousness of the narrative. Some Mumming troupes have been thought to have competed against one another evidenced in the recording of 'scuffles' that broke out at some Mumming festivals. A community would have a personal way of developing the display, as all traditions cannot be said to be universal. Each would bring a unique angle to interpreting a common character as each community is made up of different families and even perhaps customs but the central theme would remain roughly the same. Modern similar didactic forms of theatre can be seen in Drama in Education and Theatre in Education which can provide new insights into a situation, the participants or a subject matter through observation of conflict which may or may not be resolved. These forms also have an immediate effect but serve a different purpose having a secondary effect also. Their roots can be associated with Mumming in the devising of scripts and the presentation of this in appropriate forms to alter people's perception

with a clear purpose.

Finally, we will never know the original reason why Mumming Plays began, just as we can never be confident enough to know the full truth or original "purpose" of any tradition, but we can say that each play is a micro study of the player and audience relationship and of information assimilated within a small place perhaps originally over a short period of time.

Today Mumming plays can be seen at some but not all of the major folk festivals, and are enjoyable for the whole family to watch