

## CHARACTERS AND THE COTSWOLD MORRIS

A typical English morris show, and one that is probably 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. The performance proceeds by muddling through, "just like last time", with little planning till 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 will respond to the perhaps unfamiliar situation by beginning to organise their troupe into a semblance of an entertainment. One remembers the debates on whether it is "worth" getting the animal out. Everyone knows of the auxiliary roles associated with public performance, which the morris calls "characters". The older tradition combined or eliminated tasks to minimise the number participating in the final 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 of the various tasks they fulfil. 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. The changes need to be made with care because the audience can easily be confused and start to ask what it is all meant to mean.

The first point to make is that such characters are 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, or "foreman", and of playing the music. Each role has its own territory and relationship to the overall performance.

### A. SOMEONE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE AUDIENCE

This is elsewhere the Master of Ceremonies, Ring Master, or Announcer and is 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 why.

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. 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 shrillness.

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.

Any announcement has to catch the attention of the listeners. Therefore the speaker has to have an "entrance", to step out of context. 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 on all the morris.

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 till departure.

**The 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. 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 they sold little cakes which were mincemeat enclosed in pastry or bread. One should not be free with prited 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, mentioned below.

I was 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 coins.

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

Lord, Lady, Witch, and Soldier and these often appear in 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 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 a large object the centre of the activity.

**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 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 is 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 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 in a new context, it is 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 everywhere, but projected from the audience inward towards the dancing.**

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 (Sampton). 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 fool is not part of the dance troupe, 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 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 in some way. The oldest tradition of folk fools includes a licence to speak freely without fear of reprisal.

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 during a show so that all feel a personal contact.

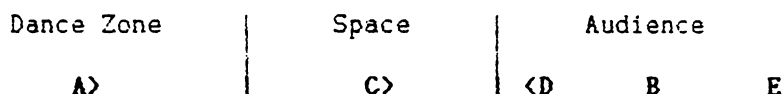
A pet grouse is that if the clown is active, it is unfair for the dancers to call on the clown for activity between their set dances to give them a rest without prior arrangement.

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 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**



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 above analysis assumes a large open space surrounded by watchers.

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 these roles. It is also a solution to the

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occasions, rare, when there are too many dancers available to allow everyone to get enough dancing.

### FINALLY

The foreman, who is prompt calling the moves, for convenience is often number one in the set, where attention can centre, 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. If the set is arranged by height it might even be sensible to lead from the taller dancers at the back who can see what is happening throughout the dance.