

SECTION 4: ARCHIVING THE MORRIS

FILMING MORRIS AND DANCE CUSTOMS

I have shot several miles of film in 20 years as archival record for style and dance notation. Of the lessons learnt the most important is not being too ambitious. Normally one is dependent on a single opportunity to film with no second take. A later repeat will be too different to allow mixing the shots. The aim is to capture the dance, not clever filming. Unlike professionals one can not be over generous with film. Ron Smedley said the BBC used a shooting to edited ratio for features of up to 14:1. The amateur's task is to minimise waste by making each shot count, to let the subject be the interest and avoid if possible difficult shots and situations. But when filming live events there is no control over the situation and one must be organised to exploit what is available.

Camera

Sound is the most significant feature and very desirable if showing to a non morris audience. There are minor limitations. Shots need to start sooner and last longer and editing is more complex. The only objection is additional cost, of film, camera and projector. Once there was a choice but now it is all Super8. It provides a good picture to project in a small hall. Today's battery powered cameras allow a day's shooting on one set. All have automatic exposure control, perhaps with manual override. "Automatic" means the exposure adjusts fairly slowly to light level changes. It is noticeable when the sun goes in or out, when the subject is bright, like morris in white, and moving so that the bright area fluctuates rapidly. It shows as variation in background, eg road surface illumination. Once committed to filming there is nothing to be done about it. It is best when a little overcast with diffuse illumination not direct sun light. As not much filming is done in bright light an "existing light" XL camera is necessary. Even fast 160ASA film will be inadequate in very low light, despite the adverts, partly because low frame speeds are of no use for the morris. I do find that there's a bit in hand when a camera indicates that there is not quite enough light and I press on.

A zoom lens is essential to give instant frame adjustment. An adequate wide angle capability is 8.5mm focal length or less as anything longer does not get a whole set in. A lens somewhere between 8 and 7 mm is desirable. I have used a 6.5mm but the distortion is very noticeable. The telephoto end is less important, given the short end a ratio of 4:1 does. All other camera features eg fade, various running speeds have limited utility. Through the lens viewfinder and exposure metering gives a sureness to what is filmed - anything less requires more experience and judgement.

Film Stock

Cotswold morris dances last from 2 to 3 mins and 4 or more if clog or sword. A Super 8 cartridge runs 3 mins 40 secs. Cameras of near professional quality exist that can take the Kodak 200 ft cassettes which run for over 14 mins. Tony Barrand advised me that partly exposed films do not travel too well and sometimes jam.

Film is expensive. Kodak's 40/25 ASA stock renders strong colour best and they develop and send back all you think you have shot. Other firms lose a little of the ends in

handling - it matters in minimising the gap in changing film during a dance. For the quantities of film used in archiving use the discount adverts in Amateur Photographer. Kodak make a fast film Ektachrome but the purchase price does not include development and it has to go through a photographer - it is grainy and the colour is not compatible. The best fast film is Agfa 160 whose price includes developing. Agfa 40 equals Kodak on dull days. Dixons and Boots films are acceptable but not competitive unless on special offer. In the spring Boots have done a 3 for the price of 2 offer. Standard advice is not to mix stocks on one edited spool but the differences are no more than the natural variation in lighting during a day. Cheap offers of out of date film should be used quickly but treated normally. Always have fast film available for unexpected poor lighting. The cheapest film is Perutz currently obtainable from Jessop. The 70 gm cartridge falls in the second postal band, is 24p first class. Agfa return films fairly smartly but the others are variable. Kodak can be long in the summer. When one posts several films they seldom come back together.

Titles and Records

Titles on the films are nice but an adequate record book is essential. It should contain (a) cartridge number (b) film type (c) when (d) where (e) who is filmed and why (f) what done and how much is all, most, key bits or fragments. Also any lessons about lighting, viewpoint or other problems. I write these things on the film's box for later recording when preparing films for posting. Record by cassette as they are used and then index the edited spools. It does not take long to forget. Brief dance notations based on the film will help the use of the archive. As the only one knowing what happened before, between and after the film aim to note what was missed.

Filming Techniques

Filters: A UV filter reduces the blue cast and protects the lens. The lens cap should be kept on also, except while running film. Clean the lens surface only with proper tissues. A wide angle lens hood helps in bright conditions but carrying cases do not allow for it. Other filters of value are for early morning and evening when the light is very yellow, sepia for fun and polarizing for better skies.

Steadiness: It is essential to learn to hold and point steadily, not to shake. Never move around during a shot. A tripod is unhelpful as it needs room, is immobile and too obvious and intrusive and can not be used to see over or through a crowd. For surer short shots hold one's breath. Do not follow the action too closely but watch the frame, keeping centered on the action and noticing shake or waving.

Field of View: Avoid a border between the team and the frame, fill the frame with action. What is off frame seldom matters.

Angles: Look for angles from above, upper window, steps, walls, for a clearer view. End on to the set is best when a crowd forces one to be close. A three quarter view across one of the diagonal corners is a good compromise. Beware of musicians, characters and still photographers standing in your view. Passing vehicles spoil shots across roads. Panning is not usually successful except to follow a particular dancer. Try and keep the face in centre of view finder. Power zooming is unnecessary.

Filming Morris 3.

A quick manual change is usually better. Slow motion helps study of steps but like fast motion the effect is comic. There may be a need for slow motion studies of good dancers just to analyse and understand what is good dancing but this is very specialist.

Lighting: Artificial sources are usual for taking lettered titles but otherwise they are intrusive and floods do not illuminate a set sized area. Inside halls ambient lighting may be enough for fast film with all the available lights on. Remember to use the artificial light setting and to change back afterwards. Outdoor evening displays are usually adequately lit. One seldom has a choice of natural lighting direction/^{but} one tries to have the sun behind the camera. Shooting towards the sun is clever but can go wrong. Shooting into shadow needs more exposure for the detail. It is best to film in conditions without sharp shadows even though the colour will be less intense. Because of the variation of natural lighting during the day I find it best to splice in chronological order.

What to Film

- a) a few complete dances including forming up, once to self and leaving. Make these normal structure dances.
- b) choruses or special figures of as much as possible to cover the repertoire. Film complete movements, 4 or 8 bar sequences with a little before and after. Random bits of sequences are almost a waste as they tell very little about style or dances.
- c) remember to take close ups of costume and implements.
- d) crowd reactions, fooling (often forgotten) especially to use ends of film. It is desirable to start a full dance with a new film. One can take cartridges out and use the end later the same day. Remember exposed length gauges will start again from zero. If one organises what to do with the odds and ends it is possible to change cartridges in 5 secs so as to lose only 4 bars or so of dance. A helper for cold or wet days is an advantage.

Avoid artificial situations. A team out especially for filming will only keep up the spirit for a few dances. Aim for live, on street performances with audience feed back.

Video

The major disadvantage is capital cost. Domestic quality cameras have limitations on field of view, colour register and bulk, but are improving. The advantage is half an hour on a set of batteries so that one can record everything including what happens between dances. Hours of video need hours to view and editing is essential. The forthcoming 8mm format may be a breakthrough, when the auxiliary equipments mature.

Conclusion

Film is a good archival material. It captures much that can not be written down easily. I find that 20 mins catches most of any team's repertoire and the discipline of the limited opportunity is acceptable. It is at the great gatherings of teams that the desire for almost continuous recording occurs. It is surprising how little cooperative activity happens on such occasions when it seems so obvious.

Ref: The Home Movie Makers Handbook, edit C Wordsworth
pub Lutterworth Press 1979

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