

SECTION 5: CHARACTERS AND THE MORRIS

CHARACTERS AND THE MORRIS

The role and value of the characters associated with the morris is often not understood. Part of the confusion is in the lack of a clear separation of the tasks they fulfil. In the best traditions of entertainment these tasks can be combined but any one character can only carry one rôle at a time although they can switch from one to another during a performance. The first point to make is that a character is part of a show and not part of the dance.

There are four roles to be filled in a show besides that of leading the dance.

A. Communication with the Audience

The Master of Ceremonies, Ring Master, Announcer is the Producer or Director and is seen to be in charge, even if only a front man. They tell everyone what it is and what is happening. It can be and often is the task of one of the troupe, a dancer or musician, and is done between dances. The activity is sited in the dancers territory and is outward to the audience.

The task can be done by someone who is specially dressed and not otherwise part of the dancing. For example wearing evening dress or as a town crier and thereby meeting another role mentioned later. Control of a show really requires observation of the crowd and its response during the dancing and not just in between dances so that judgements can be made on when to stop the show, whether to speed it up or change the programme. The character must be responsive not scripted - in many ways it is equivalent to a stand up comic in speaking to the audience at large and dealing with overall impressions rather than individuals in the crowd. There are two subsidiary tasks,

B. Someone Accessible to by the Audience

There is a task to answer questions, to chat in a one-on-one basis and keep the inquisitive and troublesome out of the way of the organiser. It is best done by someone identifiably not a dancer. It continues all the time from arrival at a spot to departure. The activity is sited in the audience and is outward to the audience.

It can be combined with distributing lucky morris cake or handouts and collecting money unobtrusively. Traditionally this is a steady task that does not draw attention to itself. In giving out cake the bearer has a cake tin and a small knife and gives very small pieces and these are given not sold.

The tradition combined or eliminated tasks to minimise the number participating in the final share outs. This is no longer a consideration. It is difficult to combine this task with ragman.

C. Someone to Look At - a "beautiful" as the Basques put it.

The role is to be noticed and admired. It is an inactive role with no part in the dancing unless especially choreographed. Traditional roles are King, Queen, Lord, Lady, Witch, Soldier, Tourney Hobby Horse and other animals. They are usually too

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cumbersome, ornate or inexperienced/old to be allowed in the dance area during the dance. The activity is walking or sitting between the dance area and the audience and is outward to the audience.

The character is basically serious not clowning. They may be approachable and therefore able to meet role B but this would be uneasy for the character if the dress is grand. It is a role for the inexperienced and is often what the inexperienced morris fool is reduced to.

D. The Clown.

This can be the key role, and often the only one manned. The character represents the audience in dealing with the dancers. Its territory is every where but from the audience inward to the dancing. It is a continuous activity including recognising when not to be visible. When the clown 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 in their true activity.

The costume can be almost anything from the old fashioned country smock, which could make him a "beautiful" or imply a country "bumpkin", mock dress such as academic with student cap and gown, mock medieval, fantastic or idiotic or circus like. The circus has established many types of clown and clown behaviour which are part of our cultural heritage/experience and now acceptable to an audience.

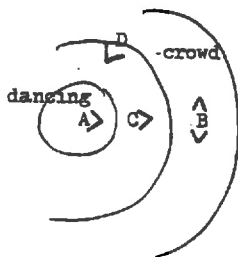
The fool is not part of the dance troupe and unease should exist when he is around. Remember the clown does not represent the dancers in dealing with the crowd. Although as part of the show they have many subsidiary roles such as covering, ie stepping in, for accidents, directing traffic around the dance spot, collecting money in difficult conditions, off of buses etc, distracting if something goes awry.

The clown can not actually be foolish or thoughtless or reckless. Also if the clown is active it is unfair for the dancers to call on the clown for activity between their dances to give them a rest without prior arrangement.

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

There is an invisible role, that of the ragman who looks after the baggage and the inactives during a dance. Someone has to decide where to put things, whether near the music for safety or elsewhere. They should also control where the spare dancers stand, which should not be in the line of sight of the audience.

The stick hobby animal that gyrates or eats money etc is a variety of clown bound by the same rules.



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