

The Mummers and the Paupers

Andrea and Dave Spalding

*In comes I, old Father Christmas, welcome be or welcome not.
And I hope old Christmas never shall be forgot.*

It was around 1975 that we got involved in presenting mummers' plays in the Edmonton area of Alberta. We had immigrated to Canada from England in 1967, where for a number of years we had been involved in the folk revival; performing, managing folk clubs, participating in revivals of traditional drama, and other related activities. We had been based in Sheffield, in South Yorkshire, and been part of a loosely linked group of performers which ran a number of clubs in the region, performed in others, and undertook some rather small scale research.

Dave was born in Sheffield, but saw no traditional drama in childhood. Andrea was born in Manchester and remembers fragments of verse from *Mischief Night* (November 4th) that can now be seen as fragments of the play once performed on that occasion. She also remembers the related custom of the garment factory girls, who celebrated an impending marriage of one of their number by sewing strips of rags on her coat on her last day at work, so she had to go home on the bus in this mummer-like costume. However, we saw only one version of the mummers' play, performed at a folk festival by a Lancashire youth group, wearing costumes of old clothes sewn with rags.

One of our Sheffield associates was Paul Smith, who has since gone on to become an academic folklorist (now we believe at the University of Sheffield). Paul and his then wife Georgina were singing together and were active in reviving a traditional play known locally as "T'owd Tup" (the old tup, or ram). This play was clearly related to the well known song "The Derby Tup (Ram)," which was sung as part of the play. It included a number of characters in common with the St. George plays, including "our 'owd lass" (a "Betsy," or man dressed as a woman), Beelzebub ("Over my shoulder I carries a club"), and Little Devil Doubt ("If you don't give us money I'll sweep you all out"). Others such as "Rolling Tolling Tippling Tom, play the devil and many a one," the Butcher and his brother, and the Boy wi' t'basin whose job was taking up the collection at the end, were unique to the tup play. In our versions the tup itself was played by Georgina, despite opposition from some of the team who felt that only men should be in the play. We saw and accompanied the troupe on numerous occasions, and when other players were unavailable, Dave was drafted to play Tom.

At the time Dave was Deputy Director at Sheffield City Museum, and although formally the museum's naturalist took the opportunity to link the museum with some of his folklore work. This included (with Paul and another singer, Frank Sutton) researching and publishing a local song collection, and (also with much assistance from Paul) presenting an exhibit that featured local drama, games,

songs, and other folklore.

Research showed that Sheffield was placed in an interesting region in regard to traditional drama, for three traditions met in the area, one of which was the "Tup" play. Another usually played to the southeast was called the plough play, presented by the young men, who took around a plough and if not presented with a suitable gift after the performance would plough up your front lawn. The third tradition, the mummers' or St. George play, was only documented in a book by local folklorist Sidney Oldall Addy, presenting the folklore of a fictional village. Although this was demonstrably the village of Norton (by this time a suburb of Sheffield where Dave had lived for his first 8 years), there was no source given for the complete play text included in the book. Dave was intrigued therefore when the exhibit was being physically constructed, to hear an elderly member of the staff at the top of a ladder with a hammer and nails reciting quietly to himself, "In comes I, St. George, a man of courage bold," and other words from the play. It turned out that the staff member was locally born, had taken part in the play when a boy—and had not thought that Dave might be interested to know this.

This led to an interest in the St. George plays, which was followed up by wide reading. (Ironically, the first substantially study of the plays in England appeared in the year we left for Canada, and we have still not managed to obtain a copy.) The plays are typically performed by a group of men in disguise during the winter season, at All Souls (Halloween), Christmas, or Easter (Pace Egging). The play typically begins with an introduction in which one character enters the room and demands space to perform the play ("Make room, make room I say, so I may bring my gallant men this way"). In the second part, several characters enter (a clown, St. George, Oliver Cromwell), introducing themselves with boastful and warlike speeches ("I'll cut him and hew as small as any fly, and what will he do then to make his mince pie?"), then they fight and are killed. There is no formal role for the non-speaking "Betsy," except for a passing reference to the "King of Egypt's daughter." In the third part a doctor is sought ("Is there a doctor to be found, to cure these men all bleeding on the ground?"). He enters, boastful of his prowess and medicines ("I carry a little bottle by side, which is called the hocus pocum drops"), dickers over an appropriate fee, and then proceeds to revive the bodies ("A drop on his head, and a drop on his heart, and he rises up to do his part"). Lastly a varied series of characters (Little Devil Doubt, Beelzebub) having little to do with the rest of the play enter with brief introductory verses and (traditionally) collect money from the audience ("Ladies and gentlemen,

give us while we sing").

Although these dramas were only sketchily documented before the nineteenth century, their wide distribution shows antiquity, and what is superficially nonsense of course contains abundant material fascinating to the folklorist, particularly the central death and resurrection drama apparently symbolic of the reviving year. This central element of the play is held in common with many ancient religions, including those featuring Osiris, Attis, Tammuz and Jesus. Some variants of the play include the tup (many ancient gods wore ram's horns), a bull (an animal once sacred to Mithras), or a horse, such as the Hoden Horse of Doncaster, east of Sheffield. The horse was formerly sacred to Odin, and Dave's grandfather would spit over his little finger when he saw a white horse—a practice apparently of great antiquity. The play is linked to complex patterns of traditional drama and dance across Europe and into other countries. In different traditions, different aspects of ritual may be stressed, such as visiting in disguise (Newfoundland janneying), ritual sword dances in which a symbolic human sacrifice takes place (sword dance at Grenoside, another village near Sheffield where Dave once lived), or processions in costume (Philadelphia mummers' procession, Mardi Gras).

After our move to Edmonton, we did not at first perform much. The first flush of the Canadian folksong was past, our English heritage did not seem of much relevance to Alberta audiences, and we were much involved with other responsibilities such as a new and demanding job and our growing family. However, as the children grew, Andrea started a series of jobs that led to some of our present career activities. One of these was with a new institution, the Stony Plain Multicultural Centre. This unusual organization combined some of the features of a museum, a library and archives, and an educational program. Occupying an old school, and supported by various federal and provincial grants in the warm cultural climate of the seventies, the centre developed a lively program, and now plays an important part in the life of its region. Andrea was (among other things) developing educational programs, including public events featuring the different cultural communities of the region. While it was not difficult to find Ukrainian dance troupes and Scandinavian choirs, there was a marked gap in presenting the traditions of England.

A common view among both English- and Canadian-born was that there was no English folk culture, to which our half serious response was to talk of forming an *English are Ethnic Too Society*. Accordingly, we considered a local revival of a mummers' play, if we could find scripts and a suitable cast. We eventually found a name for the key role Andrea performs in our family and circle of friends in the folklorist's concept of the *ritual master*, the person who takes charge of occasions and ceremonies.

Andrea reviewed a number of possible scripts and located several English and a Newfoundland version. We had not yet visited Newfoundland, and did not feel comfortable using a script from that area, but selected a script from East Harptree, Somerset, in the Hardy country of

southwest England which resembled the Newfoundland play and also included many of the couplets she remembered. We were then living in Spruce Grove, between Edmonton and Stony Plain, which has grown from a hamlet to a city during the years we have been in touch with it. There were lots of English people in our community, but of course they came from different regions of England, and apart from ourselves had no background in folklore; indeed like most English people contemporary to or older than us, they were totally out of touch with any English folk culture at all beyond their local dialects. Experimentally we brought together a group of friends to try over the play. Most were English, but the group included one Canadian, who was married to an English friend and involved in folk dance.

We soon found that apart from ourselves, none of the group were aware of the plays, had never seen one performed, and had no idea what they were about. However, they took to the play like ducks to water, and in no time were prancing around the room with makeshift swords, reciting the dialogue seriously and performing comic (and frequently bawdy and topical) improvisations around it like veterans. Some of the improvisations became part of the play, such as offers to pay the doctor by Chargex, a brief belly dance by the "Betsy," and metrifaction jokes. In acknowledgement of the male mummers' tradition, we had only invited men as performers, though Andrea produced and other wives helped with costumes.

Casting was soon sorted out. For instance, Dave was Father Christmas and led the cast in playing the penny whistle and singing "Here we come a wassailing." Our tall Canadian was St. George (with the words on the back of his garbage can shield in case he forgot them); a teacher/law student was the Turkish Knight, and a building contractor was our "Betsy." As a delightful "in" joke for the local community, the doctor in the play was played by our local doctor (giving rise to some improvised wisecracks about unethical advertising). Costumes were various, but involved suitable clothes adapted or borrowed for each character sewn over with strips of cloth. Later costumes, under the pressure of performance and travel, became simplified. Masks and disguises were not worn. A few props were devised, including wooden swords, garbage can lids for shields, and a fake weight labelled with a different number of pounds on each side and punning on the references to the English use of pounds as currency.

The play was duly performed at the Multicultural Centre and proved to be in demand. An interesting response was from the representatives of other ethnic groups involved in the centre, such as Ukrainians and Germans, who were delighted to find that the English really were ethnic, like them. We performed with essentially the same cast over several years, in a number of venues. With the help of a couple of cases of beer, the group even plucked up the courage to perform for cable TV. We used the play in a couple of school workshops (and in due course recruited one of the teachers to our cast). In general, the cast changed little over the years, though at one point we were delighted when an English-born East Indian volunteered as the Turk-

ish Knight, complete with an authentic turban. Fortunately, we were not asked to play in any Legions!

The group took over the play as their own and nick-named the troupe "The Mummies and the Paupers," parodying the name of the well-known band of the period. At one point, we wrote collectively a complete parody version of the play (in which well-known Canadian politicians were the principal characters) and performed it a few times in tandem with the "real" play. ("In comes I, René Levesque, I am the emperor of Québec; where's Trudeau, I give 'im heck.")

Our three daughters had grown up with music and with the play, and lines would often be quoted in family contexts. When we presented a family Christmas show at the Chinook Theatre in 1983, it was natural to have the children perform with us and include a "cut down" version of the play. Although other versions were by now available, the one we had been performing was now "traditional" with us, and no other play was considered. With four females and one male as participants, it was distinctly non-traditional. The script became less bawdy, and some roles had to be doubled and others dropped. However, apart from that it was played fairly straight. While in rehearsal, we presented the play to our singer's circle, at its traditional Hanukkah celebration—an interesting multicultural juxtaposition.

While the initial intention was presenting a tradition from our own heritage before coming to Canada, we became aware of the presence of traditional versions of the play in North America, including Kentucky, Boston, and Newfoundland. Kevin Major had published a composite Newfoundland version of the play in 1974 from performances by the Mummer's Troup Theatre Company. Edith Fowke published a St. John's version in 1976, which intriguingly includes as an animal character, "the Wren, the king of all birds," thus linking the play to the British St. Stephen's day wren hunt and its associated songs. This tradition has survived most strongly in Ireland, where the wren boys sometimes perform the play (Armstrong 1958). Edith has also briefly drawn attention to similar customs, some from different European traditions, practised in other

parts of Maritime Canada (Fowke 1988).

However, it was not until we attended the wonderful Canadian Folk Music Society conference in Newfoundland in 1982 that we came across the book-length study of mumming in Newfoundland (Halpert and Story 1969). In the serendipitous way so many things have happened in our lives, we visited a corner café that chanced to be the artistic hangout of St. John's and ran into an actor/director, Chris Brooks, whom Andrea had previously met at a drama conference in Saskatoon. His troupe had revived traditional versions of the play in St. John's, and we were invited to his small village south of the city to see his traditional hobby horses. The transformation of Chris and Andrea into eerie horse figures rampaging up and down a country road clacking their wooden jaws was enough to take one back to the primitive beginnings of the play.

Now we have moved to Pender Island, BC; we have not performed the play for some years. But it is still alive in our minds and would fit well into the west coast revival and reinvention of ritual, so perhaps it is time to revive our mummies' play workshop.

We borrow from Doc McConnell, an Appalachian storyteller, the idea that he is a revivalist but that his daughter Hannah has learned her traditional culture in the traditional way at home; the same is substantially true of our family. We have talked to all three of our daughters about what the play means to them after a decade in which they have all left home to make their own lives. All quoted their own—and often other characters'—words immediately, referred to the excitement of sitting on the kitchen counter while the early troupe rehearsed, and vividly remembered their part in performance. Penny (the only daughter resident on Pender Island and the next generation Ritual Master in our family) still has the complete book of scripts and songs from our 1983 performance, would play it again at the drop of a hat, and immediately started suggesting possible participants. Perhaps old Christmas is not yet forgot. Anyone want to play St. George?

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Andrea and Dave Spalding are known to many audiences, particularly in western Canada, under their nom de gig, Brandywine.