

## Ilmington Mummers

In this year of high drama, when the works of William Shakespeare are popping up all over the place, we might care to recall the humble compost heap from which the great dramatic tradition in England grew.

Long before permanent theatres like the Globe and the Cockpit began to crowd into London's South Bank, a theatrical tradition was alive and well in England's countryside. The little plays performed in its streets did not concern themselves with great matters of state; they were closer to Punch & Judy than to Romeo & Juliet.

They were an opportunity for dressing up, making a bit of money, and served to welcome in the greatest of England's folk festivals, the time we call Christmas.

The cast who performed these plays were known as Mummers, a name that may have medieval German origins, though other names such as guysers and tipteerers are also used. The village green was the obvious place to play, but the doorsteps of the gentry always brought in more cash, and here the Mummers jostled for position, alongside the Wassailers and the carol singers. As the mumming song from Rugby puts it:

The roads are very dirty, my shoes are very thin,  
I have a little pocket here to put a penny in.

Mumming plays were once common in the villages of Middle England. They were true folk drama, passed on orally down the generations and played out by a local cast. Oral transmission has meant that much of the text of the plays became garbled and nonsensical, but that only enhanced the knock-about humour of the performances.

It was really only in the 19th Century - the period of the first English folk revival - that the mummers' plays began to be copied down and printed. The Warwickshire historian, Mary Dormer Harris, collected the Stoneleigh mummers' play as late as 1925 from an elderly gent who had performed in it many years earlier.

The other individual we have to thank for gathering up these scattered pieces is the Oxford don, Reginald Tiddy, who began to record the mumming plays of his native Cotswolds shortly before the First World War. The war claimed his life, and Tiddy's collection of plays was published posthumously by friends. He uncovered mummers' plays from the Warwickshire villages of Ilmington, Great Wolford, Weston-sub-Edge and Pillerton, as well as others across the border in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

The great period of collecting was undoubtedly the end of the 19th Century, when plays from Rugby (1899) and Penkridge in Staffordshire (1899) were first set down.

I have in front of me the plays from Ilmington and from Newbold-on-Avon, the latter reprinted in Roy Palmer's *Folklore of Warwickshire*.

There is much in common across all of the mummers' plays. Saint George almost always features, along with a character who represents Christmas. In the Cotswolds George is sometimes replaced by Robin Hood. There is always a fight, and a casualty, before a quack doctor arrives to bring the victim back to life.

Fear not, I have a little bottle by my side:  
It is hocus slocum aliquid spam...

Or as the Ilmington doctor puts it:

I can cure a magpie of toothache.  
How can you do that ?  
Lay his body on a stool and cut his head off.

And the play always ends with a triumphant song, usually as off-the-wall as the play itself. The whole performance can easily be over in less than half an hour.

In spite of its comic twist, the notion of resurrecting St George probably had its origins in a much older (and serious) folk ritual, as a way of returning life to the earth in the dead of winter. In all the variations of mumming plays across the country, the doctor is always present, seemingly the most important character in the story.

As time passed, of course, the play became detached from its ancient intent, the ritual language became meaningless, and the subject matter had more to do with fun than fertility.

The Ilmington mummers' play, in particular, appears to take pleasure in its nonsense, and the text is full of comic contradictions.

I saw a pigsty, tied to an elder bush,  
A house built of pancakes, thatched with apple dumplings.  
I knocked at the maiden and out came the door,  
And asked if I could eat a crust and ale,  
And drink a glass of bread and cheese;  
I said "no thank you" and I meant "if you please".

If folk drama was principally about turning the real world upside down - if only for a day - then the Ilmington mummers did the job perfectly.

The accretions of time turned those old dramas in unexpected directions. So, in the Ilmington play St George became King George instead. And however the resurrectionist began life, by the 19th Century he had become a quack doctor, a common figure of fun in village communities. The Rugeley doctor proclaims (with the same mixture of cod Latin and comic upsides-down):

I have another bottle in my inside outside jacket waistcoat pocket,  
Containing heathercome, smethercome, oakum, Spain,  
Which brings dead men to life again.

Throw together Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night's Dream and A Winter's Tale and something of the mummers' plays survive. They didn't go to grammar school, you see.