

# THE NEWLY VEILED FACE OF MUMMERING

## Reinventing Tradition and Conserving Culture

BY RYAN DAVIS

THE TWENTY-FIFTH IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES DEVELOPED FROM REGULAR PUBLIC FORUMS SPONSORED BY THE LESLIE HARRIS CENTRE OF REGIONAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT. MEMORIAL PRESENTS FEATURES SPEAKERS FROM MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY WHO ADDRESS ISSUES OF PUBLIC CONCERN IN THE PROVINCE.



The first Mummies Festival was full of surprises. Just the fact that 300 people, dressed in disguise, showed up sober on a drizzly Sunday afternoon for a parade that had never happened before was astounding. Yet mummies came from all across the province, full of energy, bringing accordions, ugly sticks, and an array of creative costumes from the classic lace veil and long johns to the store-bought Halloween mask. There were definitely more bras than one could find in a lingerie store. Now in its third year, the Mummies Festival continues to grow with a dozen events spread throughout the month of December. These were designed as momentum builders leading up to the final Mummies Parade. Workshops, exhibits, a film night and public interviews with mummies, along with a website describing mummering traditions were all intended to

provide the tools with which a general public could attend the parade not as spectators, but as participants.

I was hired in 2009 as the folklife festival coordinator for this Festival, a joint project between the Intangible Cultural Heritage division of the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador and Memorial University's Folklore Department. The Festival planning was thus influenced by the Folklore discipline, guided by principles of cultural conservation and informed by the scholarly work of folklorists sensitive to the issues of cultural brokerage. Further, models like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival were useful for their ethnographic approach to planning and for their populist-based perspective on cultural democracy.

By recognizing culture and environment as an indivisible whole, our approach advocates heritage



work that maintains the sustainability of habitat by seeking to safeguard both tradition-bearers and the required conditions for cultural reproduction. Some heritage endeavours have been rightly criticized for their fragmented approach to cultural representation, removing traditions from their appropriate context only to offer up homogenous versions of culture that diminish their effective use by community members. As folklorist Mary Hufford asserts, “the tendency of heritage planning to authenticate past cultures and environments effectively reduces the power of present-day communities to manage the environments on which their dynamic cultures depend” (13). The Mummers Festival, in contrast, took an integrated approach that encouraged the contemporary uses of tradition by giving a diverse public the opportunity to explore mummering as a relevant tool in the multivocal expression of identity.

One of the primary concerns of the Festival was how to best present a tradition under a new set of conditions. As John Szwed suggests, mummering serves as a ritual of social behaviour in which the act of disguised visiting serves as a renewal and affirmation of social ties (106). Much of what mummering achieves as a private, rural, community ritual, we hoped, would continue in the form of public urban spectacle. The Parade, as it was conceived, would aspire to become a communal staging ground for the transmission and reinvention of the tradition within a diverse urban setting and amongst experienced mummers and initiates alike.

In presenting mummering, we had to consider not only its history, but also how the tradition fits within Newfoundland’s cultural revival - a time that marked significant social and economic change in the province and a shift in the status of mummering from an ordinary act to what Gerald Pocius has described as a powerful identity symbol of cultural revival (57). In 1968, Herbert Halpert and G M Story’s *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore, and History* was first published, representing an early instance of mummering as mediated by outsiders to the tradition. In 1972, a newly formed, St John’s-based theatrical group called *The Mummers Troupe* began performing a mummers play over the twelve days of Christmas. The group became interested in performing indigenous Newfoundland theatre whose aim, according to Pocius, was to raise the ordinary Newfoundlander’s cultural consciousness (61). And in 1983, a band from Fortune Bay named Simani released a song entitled “Any Mummers Allowed In?” Commonly known as “The Mummers Song,” the hit tune became overwhelmingly

popular overnight. “The Mummers Song” encapsulated the events of a typical night of mummering and, according to Pocius, became the popular text for the Newfoundland Christmastime house-visit.

Today mummers appear in a variety of ways. Paul Smith’s list of marketed mummers in “Remembering the Past: The Marketing of Tradition in Newfoundland” is shockingly long. They show up in paintings, illustrations, photos, t-shirts and commercial prints; they take the form of Christmas ornaments, sculptures, and dressed dolls; they grace the sides of coffee mugs, beer bottles, and wine bags; in feature films, documentaries, radio commercials, and television features. While mummering continues as a Christmastime house-visiting tradition, it has also become a type of performance for summertime Come Home Year celebrations, and mummers-for-hire dance around banquet halls at conventions for visitors to the province. We can now add the Mummers Festival to this list as the latest reincarnation of the mummering tradition.

As a symbol of regional identity, these mediated forms of mummering respond to the threat of losing a precious way of life due to modernizing forces. Mummering has continually been thought of as under threat. It is common to hear talk of mummering either dying out or making a comeback. Local newspaper articles with titles such as “Mummers Keep Tradition Alive,” and “Janneying Revived,” (Pocius 75) along with a recent Facebook group named “MUMMERING AIN’T DEAD” reflect this sentiment. This, along with other expressions of our culture, are supposedly “under threat.” How different culture brokers attempt to “save culture” will be important to the current discussion.

Our approach to these issues of representation is based largely in theories of cultural conservation, a perspective described by Mary Hufford as “grounded in subjective assumptions about how nature and society fit together”(4). This perspective views habitat and culture as an indivisible whole, acknowledging that traditions are intimately tied to the people who use them and the conditions for their use. This ecological approach places value on culture as pluralistic, dynamic, adaptable, and mobile. Preserving and safeguarding culture does not suggest the protection of traditions from globalizing forces, but rather, supports the conditions necessary for cultural reproduction.

Newfoundland and Labrador has touristic appeal for its supposed old-world ways, situated on the edge of a continent and perceived to be isolated from the homogenizing forces of globalization. Within this climate, culture brokers (especially those in the tourism industry) often harness the threat of globalization as a rhetorical



argument for the periodization of local culture. The result is often a snow-globe representation of traditional culture fragmented from the current reality - one that essentializes and diminishes our robust cultural identity. However, globalization is a process much more complex and involves the intermingling of local and global forces to create new forms of hybrid culture. Mumming need not only be a reflection of nostalgia. Rather, like in the case of "The Mummers Song", it can provide people with the cultural resources for expressing their regional identity in the face of change.

Since I began this job, I have been approached continually by groups looking for mummers to perform at conferences, office parties, and luncheons. "What do you want them to do?" I would typically ask. Usually they want step-dancing, singing, musically-apt mummers to move around in a foolish manner. While there is clearly a legitimate demand for the "professional mummer," it provides only a narrow understanding of the tradition. The professional mummer need not lift their veil in the conference hall. No one needs to know the person under that mask. They just need to sing, dance, act silly, and leave. Our "criteria of authenticity" involved looking closely at which and how many attributes of the house-visiting tradition carry over into these new forms.

As a social practice, one of the most important attributes of mumming is the relationship among mummers and between mummers and their hosts. This reflects a particular bias and a reluctance to see the tradition take a path away from this vital attribute. While the Mummers Festival did invite mummers to perform, it was more so on the mummers' terms. As in the house-visiting tradition, mummers at the Parade did not have to be musical virtuosos or highly skilled physical comedians and dancers. Mummers could lift their veils and we got to hear their voices. A great deal of interest in mumming from outsiders to the tradition places a disproportionate amount of attention on the mummer dressed in disguise. However, in the house-visiting tradition, the mummers remove their masks; they become real people, friends, and family. The social element involves knowing people in the room and most of the social interactions - the partying, the dancing, chatting, smoking, eating, and drinking - happens when the mummers are unmasked. The Mummers Festival was conceived to set a new course in the world

## **Mumming need not only be a reflection of nostalgia.**

of commodified culture - to facilitate an embodied experience that moves beyond the surface form and taps into the deeper social elements of this custom.

In his critique of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Robert Cantwell writes, "The idea of 'cultural conservation,'... suggests that it has become the duty of

public policy to do what culture would otherwise do quite naturally and inevitably for itself, which is to transmit and reproduce itself. 'Cultural conservation' denotes a competition within official culture for control of the cultural environment" (149). This perspective thus challenges who controls Newfoundland culture, questions for whom culture is mediated, and reflects an interest in how folklore can be used to combat forms of essentialized identity. As Roger Abrahams suggests, cultural conservation is "a reaction against the excesses of centralized power," (81) and thus becomes a strategy for defending traditional, marginal ways of life. From an outside perspective, mumming may appear quaint, funny, or fascinating, but from a vernacular point of view mumming is an important mode of expression. This is a conscious move away from mumming as a static, fetishized object for consumption and is an attempt to shift value toward mumming as a social symbolic tool for the grassroots expression of community values. And as communities face new challenges, so too will their traditions adapt to meet these new conditions.

One goal of folklorists in public sector work is "to extend the reach of traditional cultures through collaborative recontextualization into varied appropriate forms of representation... Such representations should assist traditional communities in recreating their own metaphors." (Spitzer 82). Thus the shape of the Mummers Festival is partly a response to the competing, one-dimensional, commodified depictions of mumming. This is not to say there is no room for the commodified mummer within the tradition. Any interpretation fuels the importance of mumming. The Mummers Festival aims to create an open and even playing field for the expression of tradition - one that welcomes all versions: the old, the new, the hybrid, the stereotypical and the downright bizarre. Festivals much like this one can serve as the grounds on which debate, dialogue, contestation, and affirmation takes place. The key however is that it is communally constructed, involving the mixing and intermingling of both experienced mummers and newcomers.

While I believe the Mummers Festival has been a success, its virtue should not be measured solely by the happenings within the festival frame. If folklife festivals are to succeed under the rubric of cultural conservation, culture brokers must look beyond that frame and ask whether or not they contribute anything to the sustainability of culture. The Mummers Festival should not strive to become the be-all and end-all of mummering, but instead should serve to fuel the use of tradition beyond its boundaries. It is perhaps too early to gauge what kind of ripple effect has occurred since the Festival, but it will be important to do this research. In Colliers, a Conception Bay town in which we conducted fieldwork, a group of eight attended the Parade and later reported that they had not seen so many mummers out for the Christmas season in years. And at least one new hobby-horse made its way into homes in Ferryland. The long-term implications of taking a primarily rural, private, small-community-based house-visiting tradition and placing it on an urban, public, diverse festival stage are to be determined and should be assessed. If the Festival does not aid in the sustainability of mummering as a dynamic social tool for community use, then we must reconsider whether to do this at all. **NQ**

**Ryan Davis** holds an MA in Folklore from Memorial University with a focused interest in festival, ritual, cultural tourism, and public sector folklore. He is the founding festival coordinator for the Mummers Festival.

#### REFERENCES

- Abrahams, Roger. 1994. "Powerful Promises of Regeneration or Living Well with History." *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*, ed. Mary Hufford, 78-96. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Cantwell, Robert. "Culture, Ideology and Magic in the Festival of American Folklife." *Journal of American Folklore*, (1991): 148-63.
- Hufford, Mary. 1994. "Rethinking the Cultural Mission." *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*, ed. Mary Hufford, 1-14. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Pocius, Gerald. "The Mummers Song in Newfoundland: Intellectuals, Revivalists and Cultural Nativism." *Newfoundland Studies*. 4.1 (1988): 57-85.
- Smith, Paul. 2007. "Remembering the Past: The Marketing of Tradition in Newfoundland." *Masks and Mummung in the Nordic Area*, ed. Terry Gunnell, 755-811. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.
- Spitzer, Nicholas. 1992. "Cultural Conversation: Metaphors and Methods in Public Folklore." *Public Folklore*, eds. Robert Baron and Nicholas R. Spitzer, 78-103. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Szwed, John F. 1969. "The Mask of Friendship: Mumming as a Ritual of Social Relations." *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*, eds. Herbert Halpert and G M Story, 104-18. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

