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Facing up to a dancing debate

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Facing up to a dancing debate

In the light of public debate over the rights and wrongs of blackface morris, EFDSS' Chief Executive and Artistic Director Katy Spicer looks at the history of 'blacking-up' and its current status.

So what is 'blacking-up'?

'Blacking-up' is a practice occasionally found within morris dance (particularly the border morris style which uses sticks and tattered coats), molly dance, and mummers' play performance. It's the practice of painting one's face (and sometimes hands) with black paint, burnt cork, or boot polish. Whilst the Britannia Coconut Dancers have an unbroken tradition dating back to the 19th century, blackface in contemporary morris dance was revived in the 1970s by border morris sides, the most influential being The Shropshire Bedlams¹.

Why is it done?

The sides that black-up now do so because they believe it's a traditional part of morris and mummers' play costume and wish to continue this tradition. A common belief (suggested by Dave Jones² and held by many contemporary performers) is that blacking-up is related to disguise. For example, historically, those performing morris, molly or mummers' plays did not want their employers to recognise them because they were, in today's terms, 'busking'. Sometimes performers state that blacking-up shows a dance's connection to coal miners or chimney sweeps who worked in the area. Contemporary performers therefore do not see the origins of the dance as having any racist connotations and certainly do not intend to be offensive.

The evidence

It's difficult to know the exact origins of blacking-up. Blackface was sometimes applied as part of elaborate and exotic costumes at masques, courtly entertainment and pageants in the 16th century. Later, criminals (such as poachers) would sometimes black-up as a form of camouflage. The Black Act of 1723 made this practice punishable by death and was not repealed until 1823. This Act would likely have had an impact on the practice of blacking-up in entertainment throughout the 18th century³.

In early references to morris dance there are very few mentions of morris sides or dancers blacking their faces. In a Latin dictionary published in 1743, Franz Junius writes of morris dancing and European morescas (dances): "They generally smear their faces with soot and wear a foreign style of dress to take part in such spectacles so as to appear to be Moors, or so that people think they have flown some considerable distance from a distant country and brought with them a strange type of recreation"⁴. It is likely that his definition was based on literary analysis rather than on direct observation, but if morris dancers were blacking-up at this time, we see that the intent, as with other uses of blacking-up in entertainment, was to appear 'exotic' and 'foreign' (i.e. appropriating the darker skin of 'Moors'), and not for purposes of hiding one's identity.

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References to morris sides or other customary practitioners blacking-up tend to proliferate from mid- to late-19th century. Because of this, and the use of certain instruments and tunes (see Broseley morris tune⁵), many scholars link the addition of blackface in morris dancers' costume to the influence of blackface minstrelsy⁶. Thomas D Rice's highly popular blackface minstrelsy character, Jim Crow, rose to fame in the 1830s and popularised blackface minstrelsy more generally throughout the 19th century. Minstrel shows and minstrel street performers were extremely popular and found a place in music hall, variety shows, carnivals and parades and were often adopted at a local level in village entertainment. Blackface minstrelsy continued as 'entertainment' until the 1970s with shows such as The Black and White Minstrel Show aired on BBC television. This stereotypical portrayal of black people is obviously now offensive to modern tastes, and so is no longer practised generally.

The practice today

A survey undertaken in 2014 identified approximately a third of border and molly sides performing with black faces, the other two-thirds were choosing in equal numbers to use colours and patterns, or no face paint (source: Jack Worth, www.morriscensus.uk, 2014).

Those dancers who continue to black-up are usually unaware of the influence from blackface minstrelsy, and so wish to continue the tradition. Regardless of the origin of blackface in morris or the intent of the dancers today, the fact is that blackface minstrelsy existed and was based clearly on racial stereotypes in the context of enslavement. Folk dancing does not take place in a cultural vacuum and to ignore the modern cultural context can be seen as offensive. Some sides explain to their audience the origins of blackface as disguise, while other sides have now chosen to perform with other colours of face paint or patterns which are more socially acceptable. The Shropshire Bedlams recently opted to forego their black face paint in favour of eye masks.

A big part of morris dance is about entertaining audiences and, over time, has evolved to stay relevant and entertaining – hence the wonderful diversity of dance forms and customs that we have in England today. Most dance sides do not present morris dancing as a consciously authentic historical reconstruction, but as contemporary entertainment, and so are moving away from black faces to ensure their performance is relevant, entertaining and inclusive in the 21st century.

Complaints about performances by blackface teams have led to three festivals – Shrewsbury, Moseley and Lunar – to review their policy on engaging such teams for their festivals. EFDSS reviewed its policy some four years ago and while we acknowledge the history of the form, we have made a decision to no longer engage blackface morris sides for EFDSS events, education projects or any other activities in order to ensure that we remain an inclusive organisation.

For articles demonstrating the links between blackface in morris dance and the popularity of blackface minstrelsy, see *Ashman, 1988; Buckland, 1990; Dommett, 2012; Metcalfe, 2013; Palmer, 2004; and Schofield, 2005.*

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