Facing up to a dancing debate
An article by Katy Spicer

English Dance and Song
Winter 2016

EDS, the magazine of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, is the world’s oldest magazine for folk music and dance. First published in 1936, EDS is essential reading for anyone with a passion for folk arts.

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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 mummer’s play performance. It is 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 Bedlam’s.

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 started as part of elaborate and exotic costumes at masques, courtly entertainment and pageants in the 17th century. Later, criminals (such as poachers) would sometimes black-up as a form of camouflage. The Black Act of 1722 made this practice punishable by death and was not repealed until 1823.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 century6.

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 Jurius writes of morris dancing and European morris 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 fawn some considerable distance from a distant country and brought with them a strange type of recreation”. It is likely that his definition was based on literary analysis rather than on direct observation, but it is likely that blacking-up was to appear ‘exotic and foreign’ (i.e. appropriating the darker skin of ‘Moors’), and not for purposes of hiding one’s identity.

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 17th century. Later, criminals (such as poachers) would sometimes black-up as a form of camouflage. The Black Act of 1722 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 century. 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 Jurius writes of morris dancing and European morris 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”. It is likely that his definition was based on literary analysis rather than on direct observation, but it is likely that blacking-up was to appear ‘exotic and foreign’ (i.e. appropriating the darker skin of ‘Moors’), and not for purposes of hiding one’s identity.

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 Bedlam’s 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 Llanrhaeadr – 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.

References