



Mary Neal Learning Day. 29th April 2008. Sadlers Wells Theatre

Mary Neal (1860 -1944) was social philanthropist, suffragette and radical arts practitioner and a spirit behind the English Folk revival of the early 20th Century.

Lucy Neal gathered together academics, radio producers, arts administrators, singers, dancers, educators to explore and investigate the Mary Neal story. The day, structured by Lucy Neal and Ally Walsh, involved talking, researching, singing and dancing, argument and laughter.

This is my personal response to the day. All of its characters are real, and some of the words are direct quotes, as I remember them from the day. However what you read below is an invention. I may represent people incorrectly and leave out the most important areas of investigation. It is really only an attempt to reflect the spirit of the day.

Someone finds a cardboard box in an attic. Out of the box emerge many stories.

Lucy Neal is fascinated by her great, great aunt. She has discovered that they both share an interest in empowering others through art. Committed to the community that is London, their home, they also understand the importance of links to other communities both here and internationally.

Since opening the box Lucy has travelled (virtually) back to the turn of the century to a Kings Cross of horses, hay, ice, immigrants, slums and the River Fleet. She has walked the streets of Somerstown to find locations long since disappeared. She has traced her aunt's footsteps to Bampton and to Thaxted and heard and watched the Morris, visiting an England she has never experienced before. She has found an affinity with folk art. She has read, looked at pictures and imagined. She has wondered about her heritage and what makes her who she is. She cannot stop here. Soon she will journey to America to talk to someone whose mother knew her great great aunt. She wants to know more, she wants to make connections, she wants to honour her aunt's memory and she wants to explore her own Englishness. She needs to do something with the contents of the box. Like her aunt before her she is a collaborator, so she wants to involve others.

Mary Neal had a vision. She could see that the young women with the needles and the scrubbing brushes, who inhabited those streets that Lucy wandered, needed their spirits lifted. She wanted to improve their lives and open their minds to a better world. She wanted to give them some hope. She founded the Esperance Club and taught them to dance. They danced for the nobility, they danced in the countryside, they danced in America. They learned how to dance and to teach how to dance, and that the horizon is wider when you leave Somerstown.

Mary also had a collaborator. Cecil Sharp (he is not in a box but has a whole House bearing his name) a man she respected and who shared her passion for folk and her desire for change. But passion, always personal, can sow the seeds of conflict. What began as a detail became a fundamental difference. Cecil wanted to preserve the art, to record and catalogue. Mary wanted to conserve it, she wanted it to live. He thought her work 'hoydenish' and she found him a pedant.

When Florrie Warren joined the Esperance Club (dragged along by one of my girlfriends - glad to avoid the chores and to get away from Pa's glare) she could never have imagined how much it would change her life (it's a giggle and people clap you). Some years later she travelled to America (I'd seen pictures in magazines, even cut some out to keep in a scrap book) to teach Morris. She was no longer a disenfranchised woman with little hope, but an accomplished young woman with talent and skills to offer abroad (teaching dance is easy, everyone wants to learn) and a few guineas in her pocket besides (Mary always sees us right). After working with Mary Neal on a lecture tour, she might have started the journey home proud and confident, had she not left her heart with a handsome (and he's wealthy) young American man. (He was always watching me and telling me how well I danced and one time he held my hand and whispered in my ear.) Just before the ship set sail he jumped on board and asked for her hand in marriage (He went down on one knee all romantic,

silly sod – I nearly died of shame)....she hardly had time to say yes before he dragged her ashore never to return to England, but rooted firmly in her Englishness. (He fell in love with my dancing – so nothing is going to stop me – even if I have to teach a whole troupe of well-to-do Americans!)

An archivist has been given the box. She puts on her plastic gloves and her reading glasses. She needs to take the evidence within and represent it. She needs to edit it and sort it and order it to reveal the stories within. As she carefully and methodically sifts through the papers, the photos, the statistics, the letters and the books she begins to see the stories unfold. Some catch her attention, others don't. She tries to be objective, simply to represent - but maybe she sees the name Blanche Payling over and over and begins to fall in love with her, or perhaps the conditions the women lived in appal her and she wants to show others what went on, or maybe the story of the 'bugs' makes her laugh. There are, no doubt, stories in the box which she has not seen yet. Whose are they and who will find them?

In (a picture of) Kings Cross a nobleman in a top hat is lighting a fire. One of the tall slum buildings is being demolished and the people whose homes will burn have come to watch. But who made the giant paper mache bugs and vermin, suspended on long poles so that they look as if they are flying? Did someone wealthy commission this work? Did the people who had shared their homes with the cockroaches, the rats and the flies spend months preparing their own symbols for the demolition? Or was there a Mary Neal or a Lucy Neal involved here too? Someone who wanted to make the moments in people's lives more significant, who knew creativity could bring people together and ritual could ease the passages of life.

There are songs of love and of passion, of work and of play. There is the musician who sings these songs who finds some conflict in the fact that his "profession is others' hobby". Talented, he has explored many kinds of music but keeps coming back to folk music because it is "common sense". His music tells a story. It archives the past and brings it into the here and now. It can send shivers down your spine, or make you cry or bring you together in joyous union. He's unhappy with the archivist, and the 'happy-clappy' Victorian Gentlemen who patronised the art and wrote the manuscripts. He's concerned by talk of 'common people' whilst knowing that socio-economics is at the heart of the art. He is intrigued by who leads - the musician or the dancer. When he watches a young refugee dance he knows how to join him.

In 1907 Punch is dancing with three men and three women - Esperance girls – boisterous and wild, full of joy. Are they passionate and free – dancing to allow the culture to adapt and evolve? Or are they immoral and undisciplined - bringing folk dance into disrepute? Indeed should young women be dancing the Morris with men or at all? Punch doesn't care. He is not bothered that he has sparked a bitter quarrel between two old friends. His job is to expose and tease – and anyway he's enjoying the dancing!

Playing the accordion is a young theatre maker who loves to dance. She never brings the folk art into her work as a theatre maker. It means too much to her. It is too emotional. It is her family, her friends, a good night out. She knows all about it - about all the things which interest the folk 'virgins' who are firing questions at her - about the gender politics, about the history, about the dance and the music - but she does not get involved in the politics - she just lives the dance.

There is the story of a Ghanaian man who beckons someone to him. Who, moving very slowly with elastic limbs, walks and trips and hurts his leg. Who asks for help but does not seem to get it. And there is the story of the young choreographer who told this story. Who wants to merge folk traditions to find a universal language. Raised in a folk tradition of his own, he suspects that English folk has something to teach him. He knows that dance is a language accessible to all.

A young man from Guinea knows how to dance. No one taught him but he knows. When we wander the room as if it is the world, he wants to return to Africa more than anything else. He's interested in African politics and maybe back there he can make a difference. He is a member of the arts project Phakama where he often expresses himself through dance and drama. He says he loves it because there he can talk about issues he cannot discuss elsewhere. There he can express himself without talking.



At the heart of all these stories there is the Spirit of the dance, and the Spirit of the song. The Morris, like any good story, has a structure. One which we, a hoydenish bunch of experts and novices, muddled through at the end of our day. But what is at the centre of that story? What defines the Spirit?

Must folk art be functional? Does it need a reason to be? Outcomes? Or is it simply an expression of universal human emotions?

Who owns it: - The purists? The historians? The working classes? The artists? Men? Women? The English? Everyone?

Is it a hobby; a living; a tradition; a duty?

Does any of this matter when you close your eyes and listen to that ballad? Is there anything more to say?

In the open, airy studio at Sadlers Wells - inspired by the talk, the music, the dance - I began to think of my own story: the story of the daughter of a pioneering teacher who died when she was 16. A woman who, moving to London, has spent her life enabling and empowering others - disenfranchised young people, school kids, students – through art. Who thought about what *she* wanted too late but ended up adopting two lovely children who needed her – and discovered that they were in fact exactly what she wanted. Who has always had a vocation to enable others - despite wanting to do more for herself, to be the centre of her art and her life

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Lucy Richardson
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