

Entertaining in the SCA: a short essay

Feasts are not just about eating, drinking and dancing. Without one other ingredient present at every early event, right up to modern times, they are just noisy parties. You need to have appropriate entertainment for an event to feel right. For many personae to be complete, they need to have cultivated some aspect of the entertaining skills. This specifically includes anyone with a Viking, Saxon or Celtic persona or anyone from a nomad culture. Anyone can entertain, all can do it with training, and some people can do it naturally. The latter are rare and are probably doing something now.

What about the rest of us? Many people say they entertain as they get stage fright. I am one who feels the dread butterflies in the stomach. Stebbins (1992) has shown that over 60% of all entertainers (and he uses the term broadly to include sportsmen and all public speakers), both amateur and professional, get stage fright. It is just a matter of learning to overcome or even work with this. There are many tactics that can be used here. Many just ignore the audience and address the air in front of them. If this works, good, but I have not found this effective. All public speakers have been told to imagine their audience in their underwear. This is supposed to render them less formidable. Given some of our audiences however, this may introduce other distractions. I have found that most people can talk to one person at a time. This is the tactic that I use. I try and make some form of eye contact with one member of the audience. Switch to another, then another. This has the double advantage of making your audience more personally involved with what you are doing and allows you to better gauge how your entertainment is being received.

The next thing to do is to avoid boring your group. Keep things short. While early audiences would sit through a three-hour saga, modern audiences are more in tune with the three-minute video clip. Limit almost anything you do to five to ten minutes, only using the longer time if you are experienced and the audience is receptive. If this means you have to serialise a story, do it. Break it up into chapters and tell one per feast. If you do this right each feast will have more attention paid as they hooked into the story and wait for the next instalment.

Lastly you need to avoid mundanity and breaking of the spell you are weaving. This means avoiding non-period references or 'cute' circumlocutions (eg dragons instead of planes – use the words flying machine instead). Where you are reading out of something, have it concealable or else disguise it as a scroll or a folio, rather than a printed page or a book. If you fumble, do not stop, stammer and apologise, just start the line again or continue. Our audiences tend to be polite and understanding of people who are just starting out. On this point, it is also best if new performers start out practicing at a revel or small bardic circle of friends rather than before the Crown.

Once we have decided that we are going to try something, the question is what. I am using four broad categories of entertainment. These are (in order of difficulty) songs, poems, stories and other items.

Songs fall into four categories: period, non-period (but acceptable), filk and tropes. Period songs are those written and performed with period. They include classics such as 'Greensleeves' or 'Summer is icumen in' (both in WWCK 3) and madrigals. Singing, as a solo activity is relatively hard. It either requires skill or great enthusiasm. I know several persons who have really bad voices but who sing with such gusto and enthusiasm that they carry the audience with them and get them joining in. If you are uncertain about your voice, get together with a group and practice. Four or more people together tend to sound a lot better than the individuals who go into making up the group. Obviously period songs can be suitable for any event (see CA 11, 44 & 45). I state can be because some songs, such as *Sir Walter Pleasuring His Mistress* (CA45), are not suitable if there are children present.

Non-period, but usually acceptable, songs include *Three Jolly Coachmen*, *Three Ravens* (WWCK 3), *The Foxy Song*, either the English or the Welsh version of *Men of Harlech* and number of pieces by Kipling such as *Song of the Men's Side* (WWCK 4). These are songs written or written down after Shakespeare which sound right within a feast or general event. They have become generally accepted for use in most SCA occasions. Here would also include any original songs written today which sound period and use period-styled music and words. *I am only a simple serving girl* (WWCK 5) may fit here *We Give Our Fealty* (WWCK 4) definitely does.

Filk is a piece of song (often humorous) that is written to modern or period music that does not sound medieval. Examples include *A Grazing Mace* (WWCK 1), *Bohemian Rhinohide* (WWCK 5) and *We Wear Chainmail Knickers* (WWCK 1). In most cases these are totally unsuitable for feasts – especially high feasts, but are great for bardic circles, post-event revels and singing in the car on the way to or from events to get you in the mood or maintain it. Filk generally details much of the oral history of the SCA. It tells the stories of our culture.

Troping lies between the period song and filk. It consists of taking a period tune and putting mediievally styled lyrics to it. Examples include *The Pæð-sæccan Song* (WWCK 2&4) or *An Easter Carol* (WWCK 1). Usually I regard these as suitable for performance at any event. If done correctly, they sound right.

Poems can be easily recited at feasts. They can be as short as a cinquain (5 lines) (*Shoes* in WWCK 4) or as long as *James the Lefty Sinister* (WWCK 2). Beginners may want to start on reciting such things as the Shakespearean sonnets or similar. Once you are familiar with this, and know how to recite and how to breathe start writing your own. Might I point out that a poem dedicated to a Lady is always appreciated and Royals tend to like them as well (probably with different results). Resources such as rhyming dictionaries are invaluable here. I use Wood. It also contains details on verse forms, meter and foot. You might also like to look at CA67.

There are two types of stories, period and non-period. Period ones can be read out. This tends to bore the audience unless we are very good at imbuing them with life or unless you have a hardy crew of improvisers miming the action as you go. Taking this course tends to make the most serious tale into a comic one, but has to be commended for its prime purpose of entertaining the audience.

Generally, if you wish to seriously entertain it is easier to read and thoroughly understand the tale and then paraphrase it in you own words. You can write notes to yourself to remind yourself of plot highlights and your delivery will be more natural and less stilted. Good sources for these include the Norse Sagas, Boccacio (1972), *Tales of the Monks* (Komroff 1928), *1001 Nights* (Burton's original translation of this may still be the best) or the more period tales from the Fairy books of Andrew Lang (Pink, Blue, Brown et al).

Non-period stories are those made up by yourself or others that fit within the genre. Stories can be made up by anyone. The easiest way to do this is to tell what is referred to in the SCA as a 'no shit' story. It is a tale of something that has actually happened to the narrator or that they witnessed. It will generally be humorous and often embarrassing to one or more people. These are usually more suited to a campfire than to a serious feast, but often occur at Camel Feasts. If a person is very experienced these can be couched in the language of the period or even made into poems or songs.

For a more period feel, read up on a particular time and just tell the stories that they liked. Books like Baring-Gould (1894) will help you understand the tales that are told in period. Once you have read these, make up your own variations. If you need help in understanding the narrative structure you are working with, authors like Lüthi (1976), Naddaff (1991) and Tolkien are very useful (as well as being entertaining themselves). Once you have an idea on this, start doing things like asking the audience for 5 (or 7) items and make up a tale about these. This is a lazy person's way of story telling. You just have to plug the items into a framework and you have a tale. It takes me, usually, about 10 minutes to write one of these stories.

Not quite a story, but still effective as a form of entertainment, is the use of riddles to entertain. Most people can remember the few lines of a riddle, or can recite them from a concealed note. The Exeter Book () contains a large number of Anglo-Saxon riddles. While this is a rare game nowadays, most SCA people are at least marginally familiar with the form through their exposure to *The Hobbit*.

The last category of entertainment requires the most skill and / or preparation. It is everything else. It includes (but is certainly not limited to): plays, juggling, music, tumbling, belly dancing and puppetry. Music is the most commonly seen of these and, if you can play an instrument, there are many books around to give you the melody. For a start, you can ask your local dance instructor. If you really want to be appreciated in the SCA, learn some dance tunes so that those who do not trip over their own feet can dance to live music.

There are many people around to teach the arts of juggling, tumbling and belly dancing both within and outside the SCA. Period puppetry is harder to find, but we can help put you in touch with some people here.

Plays are great for people who feel they have little talent. A group of you get together; select a script and practice for a long time. They require a lot of preparation for a one-off event, but are well worth it if you do them right. Generally they require so many resources from within the group that you can only put them on when you are expecting a significant attendance from outside. Plays fall roughly into the categories of period normal plays (includes Shakespeare), miracle plays and made up plays. The normal period plays are usually too long to be done at an SCA event, but you can often do a scene and act it out. This may be best done as a modified narration with a group of actors who are hamming up the activity (Master Dafydd was responsible for a hilarious rendition of a scene from one of Shakespeare's comedies one year). Miracle plays (CA9) are done by some groups in the USA. These have always been very well received, but are best done before a large

audience (think Rowany Festival). Made up plays include both the almost burlesque of *Mistress Seamchecker Explains It All At You* and the more period-styled pieces of Anton de Estoc. These are always well received and definitely repay the effort you will put into them, but require, as does all theatre, a dedicated group to carry them out.

I hope that I have given you some indications of how you can improve your SCA experience by entertaining. If you are still nervous about the idea, any practicing bard will be delighted to help you further, or to point you towards someone who can (the idea of me teaching a juggler should reduce anyone to fits of laughter).

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Compleat Anachronist 11 *Traditional Ballads* available from the Stock Clerk

Compleat Anachronist 44 *The Troubadours* available from the Stock Clerk

Compleat Anachronist 45 *Medieval and Renaissance Choral Music* available from the Stock Clerk

Compleat Anachronist 67 *Ars Poetica Societatus* available from the Stock Clerk

Komroff, Manuel (editor) (1928) *Tales of the Monks: from the Gesta Romanum* Tudor Publishing Company, New York

Lüthi, Max (1976) *Once Upon a Time: On the nature of fairy tales* (translated by Lee Chadeayne & Paul Gottwald) Indiana University Press, Bloomington, ISBN 0 253 20203 5

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Tolkien, J. R. R. () *Tree and Leaf*:

‘We Wear Chain Mail Knickers – an Ynys Fawr Songbook’ (WWCK) (vol 1-6)

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