

"Dancers display bizarre but traditional style"

Dance groups pay visit to Women's Art Showcase

By PETER KELLEY
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON

The Women's Art Showcase was moving along nicely in the Skagit Valley College cafeteria, with quiet manners and muffled conversation

Then the Morris dancers showed up. In charged the men, about two dozen of them, puffing and windblown, their faces painted black, blue and yellow, their hair dyed or under elaborately feathered hats. They wore suit coats festooned with ribbons and flowers, or entire costumes of tatters and plumes.

They looked like hallucinogenic chimney sweeps, like images from a fever dream where Charles Dickens meets Dr. Seuss and they dance the hootchy-kootchy.

Then came the women, about a dozen, in flowing skirts and flowers, ribbons and bells. Bells everywhere.

The men took the center of the cafeteria as art lovers pulled back in hesitation. They launched into a dance of controlled abandon, smashing foot long sticks on the floor and in midair, stomping, twirling and chanting. Costumed players accompanied them on concertina, banjo and a plump-sounding tuba.

"There was a little fella arid he grew no bigga so they put him in a wild west show!" they grunted. [continued top of next column]

"He tumbled through a winda and he broke his little finga and he couldn't play the old ban-JO! Too-ra-loo-ra-li. Oh, he couldn't play the old ban-JO." Other lyrics were more bawdy.

As the women dancers took stage for their own shuffles arid kicks Saturday, dancers Norman Stanfield of Vancouver, B.C., and Bob Greco of Seattte - who organized the tour - explained the chaos.

Morris dancing, Greco said, dates back hundreds of years to England, especially along that country's border with Wales.

"It was already old by the 1400 ?s," Greco said.

He said the gathering at the college comprised three "sides," or dancing groups. the Vancouver Morris Men; the Mossy Back Morris Men of Seattle; and the Tiddley Cove Morris Dancers, the women, also from Seattle [ed. note-correctly it's Vancouver, B.C.].

Stanfield said Morris dancing was a way to solicit coins from passersby along the streets or in pubs, for coal miners in the hard winters between jobs. Back then, there were no female Morris dancers, he said, but times have changed.

Despite the jubilance of these dances, [continued below picture in left column]



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald
The Mossy Back Morris Men whoop, grunt, stomp and smash sticks in choreographed unison at Skagit Valley College Saturday.

Stanfield said, Morris dancing was viewed - by dancer and audience- as somewhat shameful, the clowning of the desperately poor.

The black faces don't have the meaning they might in American culture, where minstrel shows were once immensely popular. These faces represent the dust of the coal mines, or more generally, the filth of a working class life.

"Instead of blue collar, it's black face," Stanfield said. "It's very much like that."

Greco, who with his wife is soon to move to Skagit County, said the dancers have been here before, hoofing and whooping in the tulip fields last spring. And they'll be back.

"It's ritual, not social. It was vaguely disreputable and threatening, so the disguises are important,"

More stomping, twirling, chanting and kicking ensued, and then the Morris dancers packed up and went their way.

From the college, in the rain, they went to the Skagit River Brewery for lunch and revelry, then the Mt. Glen Retirement Community, and then to La Conner.

After the dancers' breezy departure, the artists resumed discussing their work with interested shoppers and browsers.

In between numbers, Tiddley Cove Morris dancers June Harman and Miriam Arnall talked about the dancing and how they got involved.

"I came to it by accident. I emigrated from England to Canada. Back in England, you normally move out of a pub when the dancers move in," Arnall said, chuckling.

Harman agreed that Morris' origins are not wholly pure.

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The Women's Art Showcase is SVC's annual event to celebrate northwest women artists, particularly those from the Skagit Valley. The featured artist was Anne Martin McCool, whose paintings were also embossed onto cards and T-shirts.

A host of other artists and craftswomen were present. On display were dreamlike watercolors by Karn Kenaston - who lives in Seattle but paints local scenes - and Esther McLatchy, and extravagant handmade felt hats by Shannon Good of Mount Vernon.