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Playing the fool at winter solstice

By MICHAEL GISICK

Monday, December 23, 2002 -- NORTHAMPTON - About 50 hearty revelers packed the barn on the grounds of [Historic Northampton](#) on Bridge Street Saturday for a Winter solstice show featuring a fool, a saint, a quack and spirited music.

"Welcome Yule!" Lynne Noel, dressed in a multicolored suit of rags and calling herself the fool, declared at the beginning of the two-hour show. "Sing Wassail!"

Noel, of the Amherst traditional performance troupe That Long Tall Sword, sprinkled her freewheeling poetry into a show that included ancient British and Welsh dance and drama and plenty of old carols.

"My head's so big and my wit's so small, I can play the fool as well as you all," Noel said in her bawdy version of the King's English, eliciting grunts of agreement from a crowd ringing the barn's ground floor and packed into the loft.

Another poem, called "Winter Women," highlighted the role of women in a European solstice tradition Noel said appealed to her in style but not always in its substance.

"I was looking for stuff that appealed to a generation that cares about the environment and wants a larger role for women," Noel said.



JERREY ROBERTS
 Morris Dancers from the Wake Robin Morris troupe perform Saturday during "Yuletide Revels," a solstice celebration held at the Historic Northampton Saturday.

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And though she drew some of her material from American-Indian legends, she stayed rooted in ancient English style, her contributions blending seamlessly with the mummer's plays and long sword dances from the isles.

The mummer's play ended with a death bout between St. George and a scimitar-wielding sultan. St. George, wearing rags beneath a Knights of Templar tunic, with its red cross against white, defeated the sultan, only to be slain by a friend during a victory dance.

A quack doctor, in outsized top hat and mustache, was called upon to raise the saint from the dead. Ordering swords assembled into the shape of a star, he proclaimed that he who dies by the sword also lives by the sword. And as the barn doors were thrown open, the clown-like saint arose.

Orchard Street resident Harpo Jaeger, 11, offered his reaction to the play afterward. "I've seen these kinds of plays before, but they had very good costumes this time. A lot of the material was traditional, but they did it in an original way."


Alena Shumway, educational outreach coordinator at Historic Northampton, said she hoped the festivities offered a change from the normal holiday fare. "We were trying to do something in December that didn't have anything to do with Christmas," she said.

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