

The Fairy Gathering – a review

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The fantasy of the fairy world offers escape to a place of light and beauty, of endless food and drink, of laughter and happiness, where we can find those we thought we lost forever... Apart from the endless food and drink bit this pretty much sum up The Fairy Gathering, which was held over a sunny May weekend in the charming South Yorkshire village of Dungworth, situated dramatically in a fiddler's elbow of hills on the edge of Sheffield. This was the 9th Soundpost Singing Weekend, which began in 2011 as a folk music community outreach initiative. Each year there has been a different focus, and this year the theme was: Fairies! The weekend provided a showcase for the inspiring 'Modern Fairies' AHRC-funded research project instigated by feisty folksinger (Dr) Fay Hield based at the University of Sheffield – a year-long multi-modal investigation into the Fairy Tradition with a remit to find new ways to engage modern audiences. In Nick Fury mode, Dr Fay recruited a dozen top creative-critical practitioners – writers, singers, musicians, artists, academics, animators, and amateurs (a kind of 'Folk Superheroes Assemble!') – and there followed a series of research meetings, sharings, and fecund, exploratory, practice-based research 'happenings', in Oxford, Gateshead, Sheffield, and now Dungworth – a free-rolling bardic Brigadoon, or Temporary Autonomous Zone. Unusually, the process was not driven by the expectation of some final 'product', although the resulting 'works-in-progress' have been of an unsurprisingly high standard, culminating in a multi-media residency at The Sage in Gateshead, where the Modern Fairies extravaganza was unveiled in all its glory.

Participants of the Fairy Gathering got to enjoy a flavour of that in the Saturday concert, when half of the Modern Fairies team performed a selection of work in the village school (aptly, the 'Green Hall'). And throughout the weekend those attending the rich programme of talks, workshops, and singalongs, got to hear about the evolution of the project, and hear tantalising samples. It was like walking through 'Goblin Market', and being enticed by calls of 'Come buy! Come buy!' It was impossible to resist, to not be the wayward sibling covered in berry juice. The hub of the Gathering was the village hall. Registration was by a cloutie tree; and many a good connection and conversation took place over a cuppa, and a slice of pizza or cake. The team were helpful and everyone was friendly and approachable. There seemed to be no

hierarchy, no elitism. The famous folkies and authors rubbed shoulders with riff-raff like me. The pervading atmosphere was good-natured, good-humoured, and even slightly irreverent. Clearly there were a few naughty fairies around to stop things getting too serious. Yet there were some lively discussions about the existence and nature of fairies, about ‘fairy loss and the environment’, and about project management, research, and audience engagement. Song, of course, framed it all – the weekend kicked off with a ‘tunes and songs’ session in the Royal (home of the famous ‘Royal Traditions’ monthly singalongs), and continued throughout the next couple of days in different venues and configurations. It was hard not to succumb – to pitch in and have a go. Emboldened by a small ‘over to you’ song session in Padley Farm I did just that – belting out a ballad or two in the pub that evening. Amid such talented company it was a scary thing to do, especially as the pub was rather rowdy (filled with Saturday night boozers) but everyone was so supportive, and it felt good to have a go (whatever it sounded like!). As an experienced storyteller and poet I am used to performing in front of all kinds of audiences, but singing in public was a step outside my comfort zone: a challenge I set myself. But that was the heart of the weekend, and the Modern Fairies project – creative encounters at the edge of one’s practice. Like protagonists in a fairy ballad or tale, the magic happens in the chancy zone of borders and thresholds, when we take a step beyond the fields we know – taking a risk, enticed by the maddening lure of the Fae. We may return utterly changed, or not at all – but we shall be haunted all of our lives if we do not heed the call. The Fairy Rade is abroad, and will we sit and watch them pass by into the goldening twilight?

I for one am glad I followed the wild music into the hills.

It reminded me of an important deeper level to reality (and a lightness of heart, and yesness to life) that is easily lost in the imperative to ‘earn a living’ – a soul connection to the land, to the ancestors, and to subtle dimensions of existence, which may seem ethereal but are an intrinsic part of the Great Re-enchantment which is needed more than ever if we are to avoid becoming *future fairies*, retreating to the ‘Hollow Hills’ of mass extinction and leaving behind an unpeopled and denuded Earth stripped of its bright ecophony of biodiversity.

Now more than ever, we need to keep singing, sharing, and creating community.