

## One & Other Project

*My name is Verusca Calabria and I'm interviewing Alasdair Macleod on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2010 and it's about 9 am and we are in Euston at the Wellcome Trust building. So Alasdair we are here really to ask you a few more questions about your time on the plinth in retrospect. What I first wanted to ask you, you mentioned that you chose to represent Larp because it's a good indicator of who you are.*

Yes I think that a lot of what I like about myself and what I like to do can be shown in different ways in how ... you know, in the hobby of role playing. I think that my ability to make things up on the fly, to try my hand at lots of different things, my ability to fit into different characters and different personas and also my interest in history and fantasy and that sort of thing, all of this can be represented in lots of different ways but I thought that my hobby was a good way of showing a lot of that and a way of saying kind of who I am.

*So what are the key principles of Larp?*

It comes from previous role play games such as Dungeons and Dragons where people would sit around the table and fight some monsters or whatever. That has its roots, of course, in fantasy literature like Tolkien and so on but inevitably enough some people just thought what would happen if we tried to dress up and act out these things rather than just sit around a table? It can get a bit unrealistic, sitting rolling your dice if you don't know what you are doing, but when you take on a character you actually make a costume, you dress up, you go out with other people doing the same thing into the woods or whatever and actually act that out. It's a very different experience and it can be a lot more immersive. It can be a lot more fun. We try not to take it too seriously but it can be a really fun way of interacting with other people in different ways. The hobby itself is growing quite a lot, it started in the '80s with a few university societies; now there's [siren in the background] different events run - anything from small clubs running to a couple of dozen members up to the biggest events which have about three or four thousand people attending which can be quite an exciting experience just to be a small part in a massive game.

*Thank you for that. So just to bring you back what do you think attracts you to this type of sport or hobby?*

I think it's the ability to do lots of different things and [sirens in the background] try my hand at lots of different parts of it. So, for example, if I can make my own costumes which they'll ask me to mess around with the sewing machine and to design some robes. I've made my own set of chain mails, so I had to learn how to do that. I've looked into different aspects of history in different periods and, of course, I've made up different characters. I've had to sit down and think about what sort of person it's going to be, what their aims and objectives are, so I'm not an expert in any of those things but I like being an amateur in a lot of different subjects and that allows me to do that. I'm not brilliant at any of those but I can try my hand at anything different types of role playing games allow me to do different things and do different parts of it plus it's a fun thing to do it's an exciting way to get outdoors and meet friends. I like the other people that do it, that's how I met most of my friends and my wife and it's a fun thing to do with people at the weekend.

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*Thank you, so you mentioned role playing in the previous interview as well as in this interview, I just wonder what the value is for you through this game, what you have gained from it?*

I've certainly gained a lot of confidence in myself because you don't have to be a deep psychologist to know that when you put on a costume or a mask you do quite literally as well as metaphorically putting on a costume and a mask I can do things as my characters when I'm role playing that I really wouldn't dream of doing in real life, I'm a fairly shy and retiring person in life. I'm not really the sort of person that goes up to strangers and talks to them but if I become Peter the Cossack Warrior from the depths of *Fidelia* then he is a different person and it's quite easy for me to pretend I'm here and to go and talk to people in a way that Alasdair really wouldn't. I know that's just me sort of projecting a different part of my personality but it's a way to breaking down my social anxieties and knowing I can do has just helped me to be able to do more things in real life. I think if I've done things whilst in role playing. I stood up in front of hundreds of people and made up a speech, I've led people charging into battle and I have, I've done all sort of cliché things like that I just wouldn't have had the opportunity to do without something like this to allow me to do it.

*You mentioned that you do quite a bit of historical research for your characters so how do you do that?*

Mostly just reading around an area. I try to, we don't go into too much depth, it's not an historical re-enactment so we are rarely actually trying to represent a period precisely. We are not getting the clothes right or anything but it's good, I think, to immerse myself in sort of stories from a period. So, for example, I just mentioned that a character I'm playing is a Cossack warrior, a horse rider. Just reading about the sort of 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian races of warriors, it's just an exciting thing to read about. It's something new to learn, so reading about that on the internet and maybe finding some bit of fiction covering that period and just learning about that sort of thing, it's a way of learning about things. And I like just picking up whenever I can and again that's something, how on earth would I know about the legendary relationship between a Cossack warrior and his horse [chuckles] if I hadn't done that? You know, you don't get that from knitting.

*So you mentioned Wii, I assume that there's some sort of planning going on with your group of friends when you are playing Larp, I'm just wondering how you go about choosing characters together as a group and ensuring that you choose the characters that you like?*

Well each particular game would be organised by a set of people and as I said this can range from a tiny game of just a dozen people involved or much larger events but supposing a typical event might have between fifteen and a hundred people and maybe five or ten people will have organised that game and they would have told all of the players what sort of game this would be. So if it is in a particular system it would be a pseudo medieval period and we would all know what to expect, what sort of characters to expect, and those people are responsible for organising everybody into the kind of character they'd like to play. I said system, a system is a game that

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runs over a long time so the biggest systems have been running for years and have events more than every weekend. They are run by different people but people play the same character in that system, so the biggest system is run by a group called the *Lorien Trust* and they run the largest events in the summer. But you can play the same character at large events and small events run by different people.

*So what would you say was important to you in choosing characters?*

Mostly it revolves around what my other friends are doing. So often me and a few friends will choose to play in a group. So half a dozen of us might choose to play these Cossack warriors. Somebody came up with this idea. That particular group of characters, we are all playing these Cossack warriors from the glorious nation of *Fidelia*, we, the game is set in a sort of colonial period. It's a fantasy period but this character's just discovered a new world full of magic and sorcery and exciting things. So we decided to play these groups of characters and we decided amongst ourselves what sort of people we would play. I came up with a particular concept within that group. I came up with a name and a background and the sort of things he was interested in and then together we talked about what sort of costumes we would wear so we would all wear similar things and that's sort of how we came up with the idea. It varies in different games but usually you talk a lot with various other people, find out what they are doing, how you can sort of fit in with that. It's always a good day to think about some aims and objectives, sort of what you expect to get when your character goes to a particular event. It might be a festival or you might be able to explore things, reasons for the event, you need to know why you are there, what you want to do. It's usually a good idea to build in something that will provide some sort of conflict with other players, something that you want, that they want as well or something you want to stop them doing so in this colonial settling game. We all want to settle in the same pieces of land so there's a lot of arguing, a lot of diplomacy about trying to decide who gets what and so on. And that can be settled in anything just from diplomacy, from talking to people, from persuading them. Some games have an economy so there might be money involved, pretend money or in some games there's combat systems so you might actually sort of fight to get what you want.

*Okay, so tell me more about the character you actually played on the plinth, how did you choose it and why?*

I played three characters over the course of the hour, mostly these were ones I've made up myself from a costume. I already had cobbled together some sort of a bit of a back story I made up, a sort of fantasy world where these people were involved in a war that was going on, I sort of drew them from previous characters that I played in different systems. So I played a human, an elf and a sort of demon character over the course of the hour. The plot I made up was that the demon were attacking the elfin city and the humans were coming to their defence and each of them was given a bit of a monologue to explain what they were doing and why.

And why did I choose them? I chose them to show that different things can be played, that the three different characters that I can quickly switch between. I also wanted to show something of the way in which we use kit, costumes and to show

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different things. One of the key points, it might have been a bit too subtle [chuckles] but my first character, the human character, had a sort of blue uniform and chain mail and a shield strapped back. He talked about the honour and duty he had to do in protecting this elfin city and so on. After I finished him I took off my shield and I started re-painting it because one of the things I again enjoyed is making my own kit making my own stuff taking what I already have and cobble together a new character so on the plinth I got out a pot of paint I repainted my shield drew a big demonic symbol at the front when I came to play the last character he was holding the shield. It was re-using what I've already got; it was a way to show that I can switch between these characters and this new character who is completely different and he was just a sort of terrible demonic figure bent on destroying this elfin city was somebody I could play. He was somebody I could take different things from, so I was trying to show different aspects of that and that we can play completely different things, that many different types of characters are possible to play.

*How was it when you were up there?*

Oh it was terrifying at first. I had sort of planned out the whole thing of what I was going to do and what I was going to say but when I first got up there I quickly got on with getting my first set of kit together. But I stood up with my chain mail and my shield across my back and my sword in hand and I started to try and speak this speech which I sort of almost rehearsed. I hadn't really rehearsed it, I didn't want anything written down, but I knew roughly what I was going to say and I stood up there and I looked out and I very nearly didn't ... just bottled it. I was terrified just looking out and thinking what am I doing here? I'm making a complete prat of myself just dressing up like an idiot in the middle of London and I, just for a few seconds, I just stood there thinking maybe I just sit down. Maybe I just shut up and not do anything else but I just clenched my teeth and got on with it, it was strange doing something like that with nobody else around. Normally in a game if I am going to, say, try and make a hug dramatic speech or if I'm going to shout at somebody for getting them away in a role playing game I'm surrounded by at least a few dozens other people doing the same thing but obviously I was on my own up there which is a bit unusual and a bit difficult but when I got into the swing of it, it was quite liberating. Again I felt like I guess I did feel like a piece of art, I felt like I was separate and I was representing something I was doing, something that people probably didn't understand and which was fine and just doing something outside of the box that might make a difference somehow, I probably got carried away by [inaud].

*How did you find the interaction with the crowd?*

There wasn't much of a crowd, it was quite early in the morning, the 7 o'clock slot, I think, or the 6 o'clock slot, the 7 o'clock slot and most of the people that went past were commuters walking past going to work. I kind of suspect they have seen quite a lot of strange things going on so they looked up at me and sort of tittered a bit, the most vocal member of the crowd was definitely the guy who'd been sleeping on a bench just underneath the plinth and woke up with a can of Stella in his hand. He got my measure pretty quickly and shouted up, is this some sort of world? Something rubbish and then he stared heckling, which is fine, I think that was great it was really good that he felt able to sort of interact and heckle. I mean without getting too deep it

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probably does say the relationship between members of the public and live role playing and that generally they don't understand, they don't know what's going on and if there is any interaction it's usually heckling but we normally sort of do it in private in our own spaces. It's not a spectators' sport but no I didn't mind that at all that somebody was paying attention.

*Actually on the One & Other profile some people made comments about your performance. One person said that many people hold a completely wrong view of Larp so can you tell me more about what this negative perception may be?*

It's perceived as being quite geeky as being a bit of a sport for people who are not very socially competent and I can kind of understand that. Again it comes from the whole Dungeons and Dragons thing where people, it attracts a certain type of person as well. It usually does attract geeky people, people who are into computers and physics and fantasy novels and that sort of thing, it is a bit of a subculture and people do have a negative perception of it in that way. It does sound ridiculous doesn't it, growing up with wizards as grown men, dressing up as wizards and pretending to throw fireballs at each other in a field. I mean that does sound ridiculous and it is but as long as you don't take it too seriously it's good fun so when we do encounter that sort of negative stereotype it's a bit disappointing but you've got to accept that people have negative stereotypes about all sorts of things. But we do look a bit daft sometimes so that's all right.

*And who do you think your time on the plinth playing sort of the Larp way affected the perception [of Larp]?*

Oh probably not at all. I don't think it would have changed anybody's mind about it or anything, it might have introduced a few more people to what it is but I don't think I was trying to change anybody's perception. I wasn't trying to proselytise or anything, I wasn't, you know, evangelising. It was just a demonstration of what I do rather than a description of how fantastic it is, it's up to people to make their own minds up and if they saw a growing man dressing up as a wizard on a plinth then you know again they can form their own opinion about that, I have no idea of whether it changed people's opinion of it. I doubt it and I'm not really bothered.

*How about you personally, how did it affect you going on the plinth?*

It's given me something else that I know I can do, something else that I know I've done. It's an opportunity I didn't pass up, it's something I grasped and did to the best of my abilities which always makes me feel warm and glowing inside that I did something. It's an easy way to feel superior, I suppose. To look at, to think that of all the other people that didn't do it and I did, I did do that, I didn't bottle it. I didn't duck out as soon as I got the email and I didn't quit on the day. I didn't do something sort of boring and dull. I didn't sit there and read a book, not that there's anything wrong with that that's absolutely great but I did sort of grasp it and you know that gives me a bit of self-confidence and it makes me feel a bit better about myself and something to talk about at parties as well, you know, something I've done that not many people have done, yeah.

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*What impact do you think it had on your friends and family?*

Most of them knew what I was like so they knew I was into that sort of thing, I hope they were a bit impressed that I did it, that I didn't shy away from it and that I'm willing to stand up for what I do even if it does make me look a bit daft. I think they were quite impressed, quite pleased to see me there, and my mum was quite excited to see me, I was on the end of the week review show for about twelve seconds and that made my mum's day to see me on the Sky Arts, and my other friends in the role playing community aspect some of them were quite happy to see me up there some of them sort of rolled their eyes at me making an exhibition but mostly it's been quite positive. They were pleased to see somebody doing something up there exciting that they could relate to, yeah.

*Now just to talk about the online environment because of course the project was being followed online by all sorts of people. Would you say that the online audience affected what you've done or what you might have left out?*

I was, yes definitely, I was quite aware of the online audience. I was following it quite closely on Twitter beforehand and I made sure to include it to Twitter and link it in my banner that I draped across the plinth and I got a few tweets from *tweeters* I suppose they were following me and they were watching. I was, I'm quite an evangelist for new technology and for things like twitter and using the web in different ways so I was aware that it was going to be showing on the web for a long time afterwards as well as watched live on the web. But also the video was held there for a while and I wanted that to be, I was pleased that was a big part of it, I wanted to be part of something that was interactive, not just interactive at the time but interactive afterwards as well, that people could keep dipping in and see this. It was, it made the whole art piece, the One & Other experience, it was technically a very transient piece of art and that people were there just for an hour and the whole project only lasted for 100 days. So it was technically quite a transient thing but in a way it also got this immortality in other ways, it wasn't just the people taking part, it was all the people watching, all the people twitting and commenting afterwards that I mentioned. The guy with the can of Stella who was heckling me, he was part of the whole project so were the people sending twits to me I was up there with my phone I was responding to these twits as they were being sent out being a part of that thing made it a sort of much bigger art project really it sort of extended the whole thing. Maybe I'm getting a bit too grand but I think that was quite important to me that that was happening.

*You also had a webpage up, which I printed out, which you noticed I've got here, was there anyway to know of how many people visited your link or any way which they could comment or get back to you?*

There is actually, I've not checked in a long time. There was a link that I wrote up on the banner but I can check how many people followed the link. I've not done it in several months, I'm afraid. There are a number of people that did it at the time, dozens or maybe a hundred, I think, within a few days but I don't know how many people have done it since then.

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*Have you had any communications with people you met online about your performance?*

Not really, no I swapped a few tweets but nothing significant.

*Thank you, now moving to your personal life story you mentioned on your One & Other profile that you are a Republican*

Oh yes I suppose so yes, as far as well, getting rid of the monarchy. I think that a monarchy is a terrible way to run a country, a terrible way to choose a head of state. That was one of the things I considered doing on the plinth. I went through a number of things that I stand for and I know that a number of people made personal protests or personal points and I thought of maybe going up on there and doing a rant against the monarchy and waving some placards or something. I like to discuss politics with friends and family and the fact that we, as a 21<sup>st</sup> century nation, still have a head of state that's just an accident of birth it's inherently sexist and inherently anti, it's got a religious bias and all of our civil services are sworn to serve the crown and I just think that's a terrible way to choose a head of state. I know there's other ways which are either better or worse I think that but I think that having some form of head of state that isn't decided by birth that's what would be a much better idea. But Britain has got itself into this mind set that somehow having a Royal family as the head of the state is a fantastic idea and that was one of the things I could go on for a long time but that was one of the things I considered doing but I passed that up because I didn't do that on the plinth because I didn't want to sound too serious. I'm not really that serious sort of person.

*And you also mentioned that you are a pacifist?*

Yes I was brought up as a Quaker, my mum is quite a, my family has got a strong Quaker history. I sort of drifted away from the society of friends now but I still hold quite strong pacifist views. I don't believe in the basic principle just being that violence is never right and can never be justified and I feel quite strongly about that and it's also a way in terms of how we relate to our armed forces about how we resolve things personally you know between people. Yeah again that was something again I could have made a strong point on, again it would have sounded a bit serious; that might sound a bit hypocritical given what I did actually do on the plinth, stand up and wave an axe and swear destruction on a group of, an elfin city. I hope it's clear that there's quite a strong difference between me and the people, the characters I was playing.

*Just to go back on the plinth, did you get any media attention either before or after your time on the plinth?*

No I didn't, I didn't seek any out and I didn't get any afterwards I just wanted to, I know some people did but I just wanted it to be about what I did at the time and nothing else.

*And how do you look back on the experience as a whole?*

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Something that was really exciting and something that I was really pleased to be able to take part in, something I did that was different and that was a bit special and not many other people can say they do. And that I did my best to show who I was and what I do in the grand scheme of things and to take part in something that I thought as soon as I heard about it was a really exciting art project and a really good thing to do.

*Have you watched yourself back on video?*

Once or twice I find I cringe when I see myself up there, I hate watching myself. I'd originally intended to go through it and do a complete transcript of everything I said when I was up there but I just flinched when I saw myself doing it, not that I'm ashamed of it or anything but no, I've not watched the whole thing from start to finish, I've made a DVD of it, I've got that stored away somewhere safe so I've got it somewhere in case I want it but knowing that it exists is good enough for me.

*Thank you. So how has it been to be interviewed today?*

It's been very good, an exciting thing, it's nice to be able to talk about it, it's been such a long time since it happened so it's good to try and remember all the things I did really, yeah good to remember it.

*And what's happening in your life right now?*

Right now, well, it's been a busy week, I've been on holiday with my two kids last week. I took them to the lake district which was fantastic doing a bit of walking in the hills, my little three year old boy he can't walk very far but we manage to persuade him to walk a couple of miles around the forests and lakes which was nice and I'm down here in London at the moment. I'm nipping off to a conference on biomedical imaging at the moment so I'm doing some quite interesting things with my work learning about, hopefully I'll learn about something about different ways of using computers to find things with microbiological samples [sirens in the background]. That's what I do for a living so hopefully I'll learn something today and I'm actually off to a live role playing event this weekend, a different game, this is a new one that I've not played before. It's called Steam Punk which is sort of Victorian sci-fi sort of thing and I'm playing an Egyptian archaeologist in this game so I've been busy all this week trying to find all the kit I need for this Victorian archaeologist and getting ready to go to Portsmouth to play for the week end.

*And what will this archaeologist be doing?*

There's an archaeological dig going on they've just, the event is centring around some people who have, were in an airship flying sort of an air balloon that crashed near this archaeological site and they've arrived just in time to see us uncover an Egyptian sarcophagus we are going to open it on a Saturday night and I'm sure nothing will go wrong at all. I've got a horrible feeling that something terrible is going to crawl out of this box and terrorise us all for the rest of the weekend but to be honest I don't know.





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*Thank you very much, I hope you have fun.*

Thank you yeah I certainly hope so.

**END OF RECORDING**