

Stage: 'Christmas Revels' for Solstice

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Summit fever seems to have broken out even in "The Christmas Revels," an annual rite whose communal merriment this year lasts through tomorrow night at Symphony Space, Broadway and 95th Street.

Thursday's opening proclaimed a Slavic theme, mostly Russian. The brainchild of John Langstaff, the event's artistic director, the "Revels" program focuses on the ancient folk roots of winter solstice and Christmas celebrations.

This year's emphasis on Eastern European wintertime traditions, directed by Carol Duveneck and produced by Steve Howe, offered a clever twist. It wasn't too surprising to see the show's usual British morris men, with bells on their legs, dancing in star formation with two men offering a mix of a Balkan kolo and a thigh-slapping Hungarian dance. Liberties can always be taken in the name of universality.

Last year's "Revels" turned to France and the connection between the British or Celtic rites of the "Revels" with French sources was easily made. But how could one now link the annual singing of "Dona Nobis Pacem" with the music of the Eastern Church, whose richness is so different? The answer was not to sing "Dona Nobis Pacem" in Latin but in Russian. Prompted by the program notes and translations, this is exactly what the audience did.

The "Revels" wears its amateurism on its sleeve, the very virtue that draws inveterate addicts to its participatory jollity. Some of the performers are invited guests, professionals in their field. But the freshness of the program often comes from the children, playing the games or singing the songs of the particular tradition at hand, and from the chorus members who dress up in funny costumes once a year and obviously have a good time.

Since pagan rituals are at the heart of all solstice celebrations that mark the "death" of the old year and the "birth" of the new year, even rural cultures that might seem to have little in common might find a shared root. This is what the English folklorists led by Cecil Sharp found out when they saw Rumanian folk dancers in the early part of the century. Much to their surprise, the Rumanian stamping dances to make the crops grow were very similar to old British dances in the countryside.

The Eastern European flavor was facilitated by the current vogue for Balkan folk dancing in this country. The chain dances of Yugoslavia were thus linked to the Russian variant, or khorovod.

Filled with pines, firs and birch trees, a Russian favorite, the stage was magically filled with adults and children in English dances that melded into a round dance extolling the birch's healing power. Lauren Brody and Carol Freeman, singers known as Zhenska Pesna, offered a fine example of the nasal and antiphonal sound characteristic of Bulgarian women's folk songs. The Russian-language principals were Sasha Polinoff, nuanced and fine in his balalaika solos, and Gary Nova, a versatile and sensitive tenor who sang, recited an appropriate wintry verse from Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" and played the prince in Charles DePuy's version of this year's mummer's play.

The highlight was Susan Cooper's dramatization of "The Twelve Months," a story by Samuel Marshak, a wonderful Soviet children's writer. Abra Sophie Brown caught beautifully the mix of goodness and spunk of a child sent out by her wicked stepmother to pick flowers in winter. The tale offered a pretext for a male chorus to sing a haunting piece of 17th-century liturgical music, but the men were also "months" who wittily arranged for flowers to sprout on stage and on cue.

Other children from the Bank Street School were a delight in the Russian question-and-answer song-and-dance game "Proso," as they were when they encountered a Russian "bear" who did his own little dance. The burden of the dancing was carried by Stephen Kotansky, a one-man kolo, aided at times by Joseph Kaloyanides Graziosi and the young brother-sister team, Ildiko Magyar and Kalman Magyar Jr. as the Magyar Fiddlers. Hector Bezanis played the gaida, or bagpipe, with the Balkan Brothers Village Ensemble also on hand.

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