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Mythcon XII Report

Abstract
Report of Mythcon XII by David Bratman with photographs by Bonnie Callaghan
PICTURES FROM MYTHECON XII

Front of the Procession with Don Studebaker as Master of Ceremonies.

(From right to left) Paul Edwin Zimmer, Arwen GoodKnight, Diana Paxson, Glen GoodKnight, and Joe Christopher.

At the Opening Session, Paul Edwin Zimmer is standing. Joe Christopher on the right and Elizabeth Pope on the left.

Scene from "The Feast of the Fisher King" written by Diana Paxson. Kelson on the right as Perceval and Don Studebaker on the left as the Fisher King.
Three years ago, when Mythcon X was being planned, the committee considered Mills College, a small women's college in Oakland, as a possible site. Logistics forced Mythcon X to San Jose, but we were determined that such a beautiful place, so evocative of Faerie, could not remain unvisited by a Mythcon for long. And so Mythcon XII was born. I've watched it grow from a gleam in the eye of Diana Paxson (the chair of the conference) to the reality of possibly the best Mythcon I've ever attended, a true Festival in this East Bay Faerie.

The setting is what one noticed first. Mills is an enclave of trees, grass, a creek, an occasional covey of quails, and attractive buildings, hidden from the world. The heart of the convention was the Revehall, a room built as an Anglo-Saxon mead hall in many tones of wood. The major programs and competitions were held in the Revehall; the creek was employed for films, papers, panels, and the art show and dealers' room. The dormitories and dining commons (for members staying on campus) had the misfortune of being located up a steep hillside, but this did not prevent people from roaming about on dusk and dawn. And few intrepid souls even drove their cars up the walkways.

Over the course of Friday afternoon and evening, August 7th, the people -- the second and most important element of a Mythcon -- began arriving, receiving their badges and program books from registrar Bonnie Rauscher. It was a small gathering, but a warm one. Most of the members were locals or from elsewhere on the West Coast, but there were some from as far away as Alberta and Michigan, plus one guest from an unusual locale -- Tisa Ho, who teaches English at Hong Kong University.

During the evening, Paul Edwin Zimmer, red-bearded, kilted, and possessed of a magnificent voice, began presiding over the first Bardic Revel of the conference. The Revels -- we couldn't call them by the usual name of Bardic Circles, because the participants were frequently scattered about the room in more of a tessoract -- were the most continuous and continually variegated of Mythcon XII's programming events. There were Revels in the Revehall of an evening, on the lawn in the afternoon, and in the dorm lounges deep into the night. The songs and poems presented ranged from light and funny to serious and deeply moving, depending on the participants and their mood. The Guest-of-Honor Joe Christopher read from a pamphlet of poetry he's recently published, and presented members with copies.

Saturday morning, after breakfast, the convention held the traditional Procession, from the dining commons to the Revehall, to hear the opening ceremonies and the first Guest of Honor speech, by Elizabeth Pope. Miss Pope gave a fascinating and well-received talk on myth and fairy tales, the relationship between them, and how one can be turned into the other. There followed during the next two days a variety of papers and panels. I did not attend them all -- there was too much going on for anyone to see everything -- but those I did attend were all well-presented and highly thought-provoking. They included Joe Christopher's Guest of Honor speech, rounding out the conference on Monday morning, on the role and symbolism of fairies in Lewis' early poetry; a panel on the new explosion in fantasy publishing, which produced, as panels will, unexpected but lively discussions, particularly one on the danger to the freedom of reading of the Moral Majority onslaught; Howard Davis' talk on the patterns of world-creation in Tolkien's "Ainulindale"; and a paper by Tisa Ho, which turned into an earnest discussion of how fantasy stories are embodied in the words they're made of.

The Art Show (a "Garden of Bright Images") and the Dealers' Room (the "Goblin Market") opened late Saturday morning. The dealers, under the coordination of Clint Bigglestone, featured books, games, magazines (there was a vast run of past Society publications), and miniature sculptures. The Art Show, organized by Edith Crowe, had a variety of paint-ings, drawings, stained glass, and other works. At the auction on Sunday afternoon, presided over by Glen Goodnight, the most sales seemed to go to airbrush-wielder Bonnie Goodnight and calligrapher Patty Gould. The book auction which followed, with the tradition of bidding at ten-cent increments on minor items, was at a minimum this year (which was just as well for the books).

Mythcon this year featured several major events that brought most of the membership together. The opening and closing ceremonies were in this category, as was, to a lesser extent, the auction. There were several others as well, highlighted events:

The Masquerade was held in the Revehall on Saturday evening. Marion Zimmer Bradley, dubbing it a Mythquerade, introduced the fifteen contestants, which would be an unusually large percentage of the membership anywhere but a Mythcon. Among the prize winners were Adrienne Martine-Barnes as a masked dancing witch from Japanese mythology, Dolores Espinosa as the Wicked Witch of the West with a broken clockwork umbrella, Steve Caddis as an officer in the Cirith Ungol shock troops (he received the Second Annual Red Eye Award for best orc of show), and Kelson, who closed the competition as Prospero with grey robe, staff, and a few well-chosen lines from Shakespeare: "These our revels now are ended."

Sunday afternoon at 5 was the convention Feast, at tables on the lawn near Revehall. The originally-planned meal could not be prepared, owing to the illness this summer of the Feast Coordinator, Adrienne Martine-Barnes, so a caterer was hired. While the food was not the most mythopoeic possible, it was appetizing, imaginative, and plentiful, and the Feast, like the Mills dorm meals, was basically a success. That evening occurred what I consider to be the true highlight of the convention: a masque, titled "The Feast of the Fisher King," concerning Sir Percival and his search for the Holy Grail. It was written by Diana Paxson in fine rolling verse, and well-acted by a cast featuring Jon DeCles, Kelson as Arthur, and Chris Meechan as a very wizened Sir Galahad. The Procession of the Grail, which formed the climax of the show, was one of the most moving events I've ever seen on stage.

There were many more things than all this which remain in my memory of this most excellent Mythcon.

The film program, run each evening by Pat Witham, featuring DARE OURSELVES AND ALL THE LITTLE PEOPLE, the 1935 production of A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, and a videotape of a very odd British film, a spooky modern-dress retelling of the ballad "Tam Lin".

The "Finrod Fledgling Marching Band" (David Williams on pipes and timewhistle and Eric Rauscher on bodhran-drums), which made its appearance during the Procession, at the Feast, and periodically elsewhere.

...And much more that I did not see. One aspect of which I saw only a little was the fine and thoughtful work by the committee which went into making this Mythcon smoothly-run and full of rich mythopoeic atmosphere: the composing of the beautifully embellished, 28 page program book; the rides to get people to and from the airport in time; the help of security and gofers; and much else.

The conference was not entirely perfect, of course. There were glitches, inevitably, and some of us who did not get enough sleep had bouts of unexpected inartiness. But overall, I had a joyous and magical weekend, and I think everyone else did too, even the committee, exhausted as they were by the end. And for that we have to thank each other: for the company and the conversation, intelligent and merry. I'm eagerly awaiting next year's already.