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THE MAGIC OF PANTOMIME

PANTOMIME CHORUS AND JUVENILES

PANTOMIME CHORUS

Seldom featured, and yet indispensable, Pantomime could not survive without its chorus of dancers, and indeed its troupes of juveniles or “Babes” as they are known.



Today, for reasons of economy, the average chorus in a provincial pantomime can number anything between six or eight dancers. Some productions can boast as many as ten or twelve, but that is the exception. Some have as few as two or four professional dancers, supplemented by more adult juveniles.

In former years a Pantomime in Victorian times could and frequently did, boast of a chorus of thirty, or even in some cases fifty. Certainly in more recent times a chorus could number perhaps twelve or eighteen dancers, as well as a singing chorus of six joined by the troupes of Babes on stage. In Victorian times, the child dancers often came from the poorest backgrounds, and were often the families’ sole bread-winners...

“The extra is still very young and probably undernourished. Her pay is at present very little- very little indeed- perhaps a shilling a night.: and for this she has to trot backwards and forwards upon her thin legs, between her home and the theatre, sometimes four times a day....” ALBERT SMITH *The Natural History of the Ballet Girl* (1847)

“The Older corps de ballet members didn’t fare much better. They work very hard, and get very little sleep... they catch the notion of any particular step of figure with singular facility: especially those to whom the honour of a place in the front rank is assigned.....” ALBERT SMITH. (1847)

With the demise of the British Summer season, there is very little available work for the chorus dancer today. Often Pantomime is followed by work abroad, or on Cruise liners (who still present “Production” shows on board in their theatres) or in Holiday camps where the tradition of variety still exists. Thankfully there has been an increase in the number of West End and touring Musicals lately, and being a part of chorus today can include covering roles onstage, “Swing” – covering other dancers, and often having to be able to sing, dance, act AND play a musical instrument, but not necessarily at the same time!

THE TILLER GIRLS



John Tiller, founder of the “Tiller Girl Troupes”, the most famous chorus ensemble in Great Britain, was born in Lancashire in the 1870’s. A successful business man, he was to find himself virtually penniless by the time he was thirty. He turned to his love of theatre for his next venture. Visiting the Manchester Theatres he had noticed that the chorus, however beautiful spoiled the effect of the numbers through a lack of discipline. He hit upon the idea of drilling a chorus into performing numbers in the way that a first rate *corps de ballet* might.

He began by rehearsing four dancers, presenting them in 1890 as “The Four Sunbeams” at the King’s Manchester. Together with his wife, Jennie he opened the Tiller School in Manchester. Children were auditioned and taught in a residential school, by Tiller and some professional dance teachers he had trained in his methods.

By the turn of the Century Tiller’s reputation was growing fast. Almost every major musical-comedy was turning to him for chorus girls, and when in 1912 the first Royal Command Variety Performance took place at the Palace Theatre, London, The “Palace Girls” came from John Tiller’s school.



The Tiller schools spread from London to Paris and New York. By the 1920’s lines of Tiller Girls were performing throughout Europe and in America. It was during a visit to the States in 1926 that John Tiller died. Mrs Tiller kept the school running until the mid 1930’s, until her death. The Tiller schools were inherited by Doris Alloway, Barbara Aitken and R.J.Smith, It would take about three months to turn a competent dancer into a Tiller Girl.

Pantomime, in particular continued to require annual infusions of Tiller Girls, recruited locally to join established Tillers in Pantomimes throughout the country. There would be six weeks of "Panto Classes" during which new girls would be put through their paces, learning to tap, and “Getting their Kicks up” When rehearsals started, the girls allotted to one particular pantomime would be divided into "boy-girls" (the taller girls) and "girl-girls" (the shorter ones). The Tillers were the background of many a provincial pantomime, but there was competition by the 1950’s. Summer seasons were a staple for the lines of Tillers, and of course, they were the highlight of Sunday Evening Television in “Sunday Night at the London Palladium”, England’s top Variety Theatre, where the Tillers performed on a regular basis in Variety shows throughout the year.

In 1973 the Tiller school was taken over by the impresario Robert Luff, with Barbara Aitken remaining as director and choreographer. The troupe has very

recently made headlines once again when the showman Duggie Chapman acquired the name "Tiller Girls" for his line up of leggy dancing girls at the Winter Gardens, Blackpool, where they perform routines in a show headlined by the Doyen of British Dames, Danny La Rue.

** The above information is from "The Natural History of The Chorus Girl" by Derek & Julia Parker. 1975. Ebenezer Baylis & Son, Ltd, the Trinity Press. ISBN 0 7153 7076 6*

JUVENILES

Juveniles, or "Babes" have featured in Pantomime since its Victorian days. Children enjoy seeing other children of their own age actually IN a Pantomime, and for adults there is always the "Ahh!" factor, as the smallest Babe enters dressed as a fairy, or a sea urchin!

Juveniles are strictly governed in the Theatre. There are rules and regulations to protect their working hours, and indeed their safety backstage. Until recently all juveniles picked to appear in a panto had to be licensed by the local authority, and provide a medical certificate. Schools have to be approached to give permission for the children to miss certain lessons during matinee days. As a rule there are usually two, sometimes three sets of Juveniles in each pantomime. The troupes (sometimes troupe A or Troupe B.. sometimes "The Red Team" and "The Blue Team") alternate performances. Some troupes do two shows one day, then a day off (returning to school) others do a matinee, and the other troupe arrive for the evening. Sometimes the juveniles do one week on, one week off.

Backstage the children are chaperoned. As a rule they generally are supplied by the dancing school responsible for providing the young dancers. Most theatres tend to use one particular local dancing school, others may hold auditions from all the local dancing schools. All around the country these schools double or triple cast the juveniles, begin learning the music and routines, and often are taught the routines by the choreographer prior to joining the actors in rehearsal. In the 1950's the prestigious Aida Foster agency and school might provide the children in the West End. Today you will see the Babette Langford troupes in London Pantomimes (Babette herself looking after the organisation of two troupes in each of perhaps five pantomimes. Bonnie Langford's Mum is still devoting her time to making stars of the future)

In Birmingham you might see children from the Birmingham Stage school, in Darlington the Tiffany School of dance and the Joanne Banks dancers, in Cardiff the Olive Guppy school, and hundreds of other dancing schools are involved in pantomimes throughout the country. Perhaps the most famous troupe in the country belongs to Bradford, "The Sunbeams".

FRANCIS LAIDLER'S SUNBEAMS

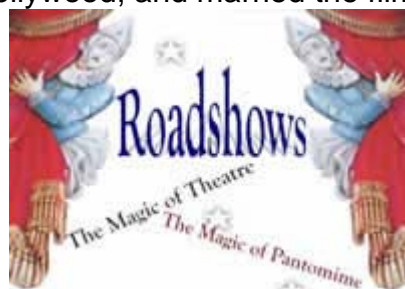
Amongst the most famous juvenile dancing troupes are "The Sunbeams", the youthful chorus who grace the Alhambra Theatre Bradford's pantomimes each year.

The tradition of “The Sunbeams” dates from the 1914-1918 World War, when Francis Laidler, the impresario, selected his first team of juveniles for “Robin Hood”, at the Prince’s Theatre Bradford in 1917. He wanted to create “a ray of human sunshine to the darkness of the war years”.

In 1930 Francis Laidler switched his pantomime productions to the Alhambra Theatre, Bradford, opening with “Mother Goose”. With him he brought the Sunbeam troupes, and instigated a tradition that exists in the Alhambra to this day. Some of the Sunbeams” still hold reunions at the Victoria Hotel nearby, where Laidler lived for thirty years. In the foyer of the theatre stands a plaque, unveiled by Val Parnell the impresario, and Norman Evans, the famous pantomime Dame in 1956. It is “A tribute to the King of Pantomime, Francis Laidler, a philanthropist who loved to make children happy”.

In Laidler’s day, to be a Sunbeam the girls had to be at least twelve years old, in perfect health, and with evidence of six months of regular school attendance to be considered. If the Sunbeams were to appear in Pantomime away from home (amongst other venues Laidler presented panto at the Theatre Royal, Leeds) a large house was rented, and the girls were installed under the auspices of a house-mother, and her assistant.

As well as accommodation and food there was a pocket money allowance, and Laidler ensured a weekly sum was to be placed into the post office savings account of each girl. The Sunbeams were naturally chaperoned at all times, and wore uniforms denoting their status. Among the girls who graced the stage of the Alhambra during this period many were to go on to careers in the adult chorus. One, Mary O’Hare was to become a star in pantomime at Bradford, another Mamie Souter became a variety star, while Pat Paterson became an actress in Hollywood, and married the film star Charles Boyer.



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