



SUPERSTITIONS AND TRADITION

Pantomime and the Theatre itself is the stronghold for superstitions, and tradition. As an art form that is 'handed down' from one performer to another, it is rife with traditions and superstitions, the origins of which have sometimes been long forgotten. Acting itself, a precarious occupation, tends to make the artist cautious and reliant very heavily on 'Good Luck'.

In Pantomime it is tradition that the Fairy always enters from the Right (Stage Right) and the Demon from the Left (Stage Left). It has been said that, in older theatres, the stage trap through which the Demon rose was generally located on the left side of the stage, but the tradition of Left as the 'Sinister' side and Right as the 'Good' side can be found in other superstitions.

When we throw salt over our shoulder (in the devil's face) it is on the left. When your left palm itches, it is a sign of impending poverty, and the right for wealth. The left ear itching indicates that someone is speaking ill of you, and the opposite applies to your right ear. In the Da Vinci portrait of 'The Last Supper' it is Judas Iscariot who is seated to the left of Jesus. Traditionally, when speaking, the Pantomime Fairy should transfer her wand from her right hand to her left, to protect her heart from the Demon King.

In a Pantomime the last lines said in the finale, traditionally in rhyming couplets should never be spoken in rehearsal, but for the first time on the opening night. Several artists have got so used to NOT saying them, that they have 'dried', that is, forgotten to utter them in performance!

The last people to appear onstage in a Pantomime 'walk down' or finale are traditionally the Principal Boy and Girl, who 'walk down' to take their bow after the star of the show, as the Pantomime is, after all, generally about them, and they are usually just married at the end of the show. Pantomimes also have to have 'The Songsheet', a long tradition of community singing, usually led by the principal comedian involving children coming onto the stage, and much chocolate being given out.



In the days of the Harlequinade, Harlequin wore a traditional costume of brightly coloured silk diamond shapes. The colours were of great significance. Yellow was for Jealousy, Red for Anger, Blue for his faithfulness to Columbine, and Black for his power of invisibility. When Harlequin was striking a particular attitude, or pose, he would point to the colour on his costume, so that the audience knew his mood, or his

transition into invisibility.

Green has always been regarded as an unlucky colour on stage. This can cause problems if the Pantomime happens to be 'Robin Hood', and his Merry Men are in Lincoln Green! Actors often say to each other, 'See you on the green', meaning the stage itself, which may hark back to the days of Melodrama. During these productions it was traditional to cover the floor with a dark green stage cloth. Others think this expression comes from the early players who performed on the village green. At one time, ballet dancers would refuse to wear Blue costumes, unless some silver were added.



Flowers have always been at the centre of superstition. It is very unlucky to have real flowers on stage, unless handed up to the leading lady at the curtain call. Possibly this is practical, as the wilting blooms under hot light could fall on the floor, causing someone to slip, and financially would prove expensive to replace on the set. Strangely though, tripping over in the wings, or on your first entrance is regarded as very 'lucky'.

Actors fear the fates. Perhaps they fear appearing to be too confident, and therefore no actor will wish another one 'Good Luck' before they go on stage. In fact, the opposite - 'Break a leg', as if to reverse the luck! Whistling in a dressing room is a bad omen. The person caught doing this is made to leave the room, turn around three times, knock and re-enter, usually uttering a curse. Clapping in the wings (or whistling, for that matter) is regarded as very unlucky. There is a practical reason for this superstition, in the days of Harlequin, the actor would clap his 'Slapstick' loudly, to indicate to the stage crew it was time to change the scenery. In the days before electronic communication, a clap would alert the Flyman it was time to bring the scenery in, so clapping was the sole right of the stage manager.

Actors move into their dressing rooms, and many will hang a mascot on the wall, a good luck charm, often in the form of a cuddly toy to bring them luck. Famous actors have handed down their stage props - canes, watches, rings to the younger actor they believe one day might replace them in popularity.

Above all, Theatres like to boast that they have a resident ghost. It may be a mysterious 'Grey Lady', or an actor searching for his love one, but the common expression for pay day is 'What time does the ghost walk?'. This too has a practical reason, for actors feared outsiders knowing they might have money on them backstage, left unattended while they performed, so it became a code word only they knew, to establish the time of pay call.

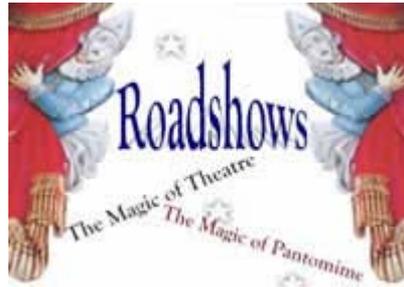


Pantomime traditions are as old as pantomime, and indeed some of the 'Chestnuts' written into scripts can be hundred of years old. A Ghost scene on stage involves children voluntarily calling out 'It's Behind You!' without knowing where they learned the expression from. The traditional 'Oh, yes it is!'

is always gustily followed by the children shouting, 'Oh, no it isn't' just as their Great Grandparents did before them.



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