



## **THE HISTORY OF PANTOMIME**

In the United Kingdom, the word "Pantomime" means a form of entertainment, generally performed during the Christmas season. Most cities and towns throughout the UK have a form of Pantomime at this time of year. The origins of British Pantomime or "Panto" as it is known date back to the middle ages, taking on board the traditions of the Italian "Commedia dell' Arte, the Italian night scenes and British Music hall to produce an intrinsic art form that constantly adapted to survive up to the present day.

Pantomime has been attempted abroad, usually with a small amount of success. Not surprisingly it has proved popular in countries such as Canada, Australia and South Africa- recently a production of "Babes in the wood" ran at the Rainbow Seven Arts Theatre in Harare, Zimbabwe! In America this very British art form has fared less favourably, although in 1868 a production of "Humpty Dumpty" ran for over 1,200 performances at the Olympic Theatre, New York, making it the most successful Pantomime in American history.

### **The Subjects**

Pantomime, as we know it today is a show predominantly aimed at children, based on a popular fairy tale or folk legend. The most popular subjects being "Cinderella", followed by "Aladdin", "Dick Whittington" and "Snow White". Other popular titles are "Jack & the Beanstalk", "Babes in the Wood", ( usually combining the legend of Robin Hood) and "Sleeping Beauty". Rising in popularity is "Peter Pan", although purists would argue that this is not strictly a pantomime, but a children's story, based on J.M Barrie's play. "Peter Pan" first performed at the Duke of York's Theatre, London in 1904 transferred successfully to America shortly afterwards. Today the story has had elements of Pantomime introduced, and is one of the highly popular Christmas shows around the British Isles.

Pantomime has become a thriving business in this country. Large theatres vie with each other for the subjects and "star" names that will attract full houses, and the pantomime can often run for six to eight weeks, providing much needed revenue to box offices up and down the country. Twenty years ago the average run of a pantomime could be from the week before Christmas up until the end of February, but today few theatres can sustain such a length of run. The exceptions recently being the Hippodrome Theatre, Birmingham, Mayflower Theatre, Southampton, and the Grand Theatre, Wolverhampton.

### **The Impresarios**

Pantomime giants, such as E&B productions, present as many as thirty pantomimes in Great Britain, and several others abroad. During its long existence Pantomime has witnessed other panto impresarios, such as Augustus Harris, "Father of modern Pantomime" at the Drury Lane Theatre in the 1870's. Harris, the manager of Drury Lane introduced the first stars of the popular Music Hall into his productions, and created the lavish productions that popularised the genre, forcing managements not just in London, but around the country to ensure that every town had at least one, if not two Pantomimes running every Christmas season.

Francis Laidler took on the mantle "King of Pantomimes" in the 1930's, producing shows at the Alhambra Theatre, Bradford, which were then presented all over the country. The subjects on offer in the 1930's and 1940's included those now fallen from popularity. Titles like "Goody Two Shoes", "Humpty Dumpty" and "Red Riding Hood" have almost completely vanished today., while in recent times Pantomime has seen the gradual disappearance of titles like "Puss in boots", "Mother Goose" and "Robinson Crusoe".

In the 1950's and 1960's the Pantomime crown rested upon the head of Derek Salberg, who created pantomimes from the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham in the style and tradition that made

them justifiably famous, along with producing managements such as Howard and Wyndham, and Emile Littler. In recent times companies such as Triumph and the impresario Paul Elliott have been the guiding force behind provincial pantomimes.

The cost of presenting a modern pantomime could be estimated at anything between £150,000 and over half a million pounds. These productions will be expected to tour for a number of years, and recoup their costs. This however is not an innovation. In 1827 the pantomimes staged at Covent Garden and Drury Lane cost up to £1,000 each.

### **Tradition**

Pantomime has combined many elements of theatre throughout its existence, and by adapting it has survived. The element of "novelty" has always been to the forefront, as has its ability to encompass modern trends and topicality, within its structured framework. People talk about "traditional" pantomime, but to remain popular this form of theatre has had to keep its eye firmly on modern trends, and by weaving these into its format, remains one of the most popular forms of entertainment in this country.

Elements that a pantomime should have, to be described as "Traditional" begin with a strong story line. The fable or fairy tale has to be well told, incorporating the all important elements of good battling against evil, and emerging triumphant. In this respect, the concept varies little from the medieval morality plays, performed on village greens. To this day "tradition" says that the Pantomime villain should be the first to enter, from the "dark side", stage left, followed by his adversary the good fairy from stage right. This echoes the tradition in medieval times when the entrances to heaven and hell were placed on these sides.

### **Commedia Dell'Arte**

The element of song and dance in Pantomime are very important. The influences of the Italian "Commedia dell'Arte" can be seen here. This form of entertainment traveled through Italy to France, where it became very popular. It consisted of a number of stock characters performing comic situations, with a highly visual content. The actors generally improvised their way through a plot involving characters such as Arlecchino, or Harlequin and his true love, Columбина or Columbine.

Other stock characters were the over protective father, Pantaloon, who refused to allow the heroic Harlequin to seek his daughter's affections. In various versions Pantaloon has a servant, Pulchinello, later to be known as Clown, and a soldier, an unsuitable suitor who seeks the hand of Columbine. Comic chases and tricks were employed to full effect. Although the character of "Pulchinello" has vanished from the Pantomime today, he still exists in this country as "Mr. Punch", the anti-heroic puppet, who along with his wife Judy can still be seen in seaside towns and parks entertaining children today.

### **Italian Night Scenes**

The difficulty with Commedia dell'Arte transferring from France to Great Britain was that, in the main, the actors did not speak English. The scenes from their continental shows had now to be mimed, and more emphasis was put on to singing and dancing. These shows evolved into what were known as "Italian Night Scenes", and became highly popular in this country, particularly at Drury Lane. The comic chases and "business" that emerged from these productions eventually became known as "Slapstick", still a very important element in modern Pantomimes.

### **Slapstick**

"Slapstick" takes its name from a device used in these early entertainments, and most especially from "Harlequinades", scenes that were later to develop from the "Night Scenes". Harlequin was considered to be a magical creation. He carried with him a sword, made of wood which alternated between being a weapon and a magic wand. This sword or bat had a hinged flap, which created a very loud "slapping" noise when used, generally to give a more theatrical effect when used to slap fellow actors. To this day a pantomime comic will insist on using the talents of a drummer in the orchestra pit to "point" his comic stage business of slaps, falls or trips.

The slapstick may also have had a secondary purpose. Harlequin, in these semi improvised scenes would be in control of the situation. He would know when the scenery should be changed, and it is believed he would "Clap" his slapstick to indicate that this should happen, in the form of an audible cue. This may well be the basis of the theatrical superstition that one should never clap backstage, for fear of bad luck, Since bringing heavy scenery down upon your head could be bad luck indeed!

### **Harlequinade**

By the early eighteenth century, the first use of the word "Pantomime" emerges. A "ballet-pantomime" was created, "The loves of Mars and Venus" in 1717, followed by "Harlequin Sorcerer", produced by John Rich, who under his stage name "Lun" played Harlequin. Rich was responsible for creating the first "Harlequinade".

Harlequinades were produced all year round at his Lincoln Inn Fields Theatre, and these became so popular that David Garrick at Drury Lane felt obliged to mount his own pantomime, the difference being that his Harlequin spoke the lines, with less emphasis on mime. By 1773 the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane presented the first pantomime story that has a direct descendant today, "Jack the Giant Killer". The Harlequinades continued to be played as short pieces put on after the main drama of the evening was concluded, as a sort of antidote to the tragedy.

With time these Harlequinades grew longer, and by 1781 with the creation of "Robinson Crusoe", the characters of Clown, Harlequin and Pantaloon were firmly established in their desert Island environment. "Aladdin and his wonderful Lamp" followed in 1788, followed by "Babes in the wood" and finally in 1804 "Cinderella" was created on stage.

### **Enter Grimaldi**

The most famous of the pantomime clowns was Joseph Grimaldi, who made his first appearance in 1800, and such was his eminence that to this day clowns are called "Joeys" in his memory. His influence on these early pantomimes was immense. The public clamoured to see his performances at Sadlers Wells and Drury Lane, and left the Theatre singing the comic choruses of the songs he introduced. Pantomime had its first real star, and by this time the elements of comedy songs and slapstick were firmly rooted, as they have remained to this present day.

Grimaldi also pioneered the next important element that a "Traditional" pantomime should have, the art of cross dressing- the Pantomime Dame. Amongst his roles were Queen Rondabellyana in "Harlequin and the red dwarf", and Dame Cecily Suet in "Harlequin Whittington". The Theatrical tradition of men playing women can be traced back to the early days of theatre, when it was deemed not appropriate for women to enter the theatrical profession. Boys played all the female roles in Shakespeare's plays, and even during the Restoration, when actresses were established on the stage, often middle aged actors played the roles of older or comedic ladies, since the new breed of actress either did not possess the years, or the inclination to play such unglamorous roles.

### **Enter The Dame**

The Pantomime Dame, usually the hero's mother, such as Widow Twankey in "Aladdin" or "Dame Trott" in Jack and the Beanstalk was a creation that emerged from the early Music Halls of the Victorian era. The public warmed to seeing their favourite comedian playing the role of Jack's mother, or the King's cook and bottlewasher. Often the Dame's costumes would be used to good comic effect by parodying the fashions of the day, in much the same way as the modern Dame or Ugly Sister does at the moment.

The Ugly Sisters were first seen played by women in Rossini's opera, "La Cenerentola" in London, but were swiftly transformed into men playing the roles in 1860, at the Royal Strand Theatre, London. The Ugly Sisters differ from the Dame in that they have to tread the thin tightrope between being hugely comic characters, and yet still remain the villains of the piece. This author, having trod that tightrope for twenty years is all too aware of having to keep the balance between comedy, which to achieve needs a degree of warmth and sympathy from the audience, and then being able

to turn on the villainy when bullying the unfortunate Cinderella. The Panto Dame, on the other hand should exude warmth and comedy, even pathos, but is never required to do any "dirty Deeds". The exception to this being the Dame role of "Mother Goose".

### **Dan Leno**

Mother Goose was created again at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in 1902. The role was created for Dan Leno, one of the most popular comedians of the day. He had already achieved fame through playing Dame roles in Pantomime, into which he injected the stage business and comic songs that had made him the idol of the Music Halls. The Role of "Mother Goose" gave Leno the opportunity to play the comic old lady who, through friendship with the goose "Priscilla" achieves wealth. However, money cannot buy beauty, and tempted by the Demon King, the Dame is persuaded to sell Priscilla to the Demon in exchange for Youth and beauty. The scene where the Dame rejects the goose is what makes it unique. The Dame, having been warm and loveable, is now seen to be cruel and selfish. The task for the actor concerned is to regain not just Priscilla, but the forgiveness of the audience by the end of the pantomime.

Dan Leno became the biggest star in an era that was to draw many stars from Music Hall in Great Britain, and establish the trend that remains today of using well known personalities to "Top the Bill" in Pantomimes. Garrick in the Eighteenth century had contributed to the lavish and spectacular elements that can be found in modern day pantomime, and Augustus Harris continued to build on this concept during the 16 years he produced the Drury Lane spectacular pantomimes. He teamed up Dan Leno with Herbert Campbell in 1888, and created a comic partnership that had no rival.

### **The Principal Boy**

The other element of "Traditional" pantomime is on the decline today, namely the "Principal boy" role, played by a girl. Women had for a long time played the "breeches role" in theatre, as far back as the early 1800's. By the middle of the nineteenth century the vogue for ladies to take on the heroic roles of "Jack" or "Dick Whittington" or "Aladdin" was beginning, and with the rise of Music Hall it became the rule. Quite simply, the Victorian male, living in a society where even the legs of the parlour piano were covered for modesty's sake, craved the vision of a well turned calf, or shapely ankle.

Whilst ladies were corseted, crinolined or bustled on the street, artistic license allowed ladies upon the stage to wear costumes that revealed shapely legs in tights on condition that they were playing a male role!

The "Principal Boy" held sway in Pantomime through the first and second world wars, creating stars like Dorothy Ward, one of the stalwarts of British Pantomime, and Evelyn Laye, Hy Hazel, Noel Gorden, and Pat Kirkwood. By the 1950's the emergence of men playing the role began with Norman Wisdom, and the influx of "pop" stars such as (Sir) Cliff Richard and Marty Wilde, a trend that has waned as ladies once again returned to the role, such notables as Barbara Windsor, Cilla Black and Anita Harris taking the reins<sup>4</sup>. Today the trend seems to be reversing in favour of men playing the parts, but, as has been mentioned, Pantomime constantly adapts in favour of "The flavour of the day", and we may well see the Pantomime Hero return to the safe keeping of those glamorous ladies yet again.

### **The Chorus & Juveniles**

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.

Famous troupes include The Tiller Girls and The Sunbeams.

## The Future

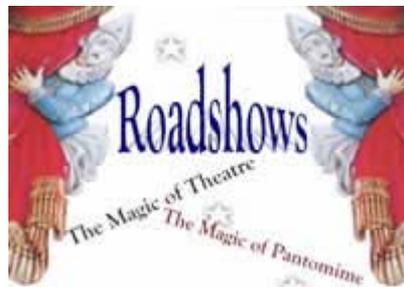
*"Pantomimes are not what they were"*

*"Pantomime is no longer what it used to be. They have had their day"*

*"Pantomime seems at present to hold its own, I do not see how it can continue to do so"*

The above quotes might be mistaken for recent press cuttings. In fact they date from 1831, 1846 and 1882 respectively.

"Traditional" pantomime does exist. It still breaks box office records all over the country. If it remained "Traditional" in the sense that it never changed, it would long have passed into theatrical lore. It remains an intrinsic jewel in our crown, and it has to carry with it an important task. A visit to a pantomime may be a child's first experience of live theatre. If that experience is magical enough, it can leave a lasting impression. In a world where children are surrounded by computer games and videos, DVD's and the all pervasive influences of television, a visit to a pantomime could be a catalyst. The audience of the future- not just Pantomime, but live theatre could be fostered by the experience of sitting in a darkened auditorium, not a couch in front of a flickering screen, and watching the magic of Pantomime. The tradition will continue, children will shout "Oh yes it is!" as loudly as ever, and, when the actor in the white sheet waves his arms behind our hero and goes "Whoo" Whooo!", children of all ages will still cry out "Its-behind-you!"



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