

'PANTO'MONIUM

By Lindsay E. Crain

It's the day after Christmas, and all the fun and excitement has passed. For Americans there is nothing left but sales and New Year's Eve. But in Britain the fun is just kicking off, and it will last until the end of January. Boxing Day marks a new season of the pandemonium that is British pantomime. They call it 'panto,' and as one Brit says, "You can't understand the British if you don't know panto. It's a nationwide formative experience."¹ Panto is tradition. It began in the 18th century, and though it has evolved quite a bit, it is still where parents take their children after the holidays, and where childless adults find nieces and nephews to accompany in order to excuse their attendance. So what on earth is this thing called panto that Americans have been missing out on? It is madcap, nonsensical fun, complete with stock characters, stock subjects, and stock dialogue, all made eternally new with its slapstick comedy and inventive topical humour.

Modern-day pantomime is an amalgamation of entertainments. Its direct parentage is the Harlequinade of John Rich (a.k.a. John Lun), and the music hall comedians that later came onto the scene with Clown and Harlequin. Since then it has grown to encompass all that it found any use for. As stated in Pantomime: A Story in Pictures:

It takes its name from classical times and changes the meaning, its characters from Italian comedy and changes their names, its stories from continental fairy tales and mixes historical figures, then adds every conceivable trick and resource of the theatre, opera, ballet, music hall, and musical comedy.²

As panto evolved over the centuries, and elements were added while others were lost, every generation since Rich's day has predicted its inevitable death. Yet it continually flourishes because, throughout all its changes, it has always maintained the same spirit of fun and tradition. One writer, early in the 20th century, suggested some rules for ideal pantomime. So long as these aspects remain on the stage, there will be panto. A. E. Wilson quotes the unnamed writer:

There must be songs, there must be a ballet; there should be some sufficient reproduction of a fairy-tale to be recognisable by the children; there should be scope for the impossible, the

*absurd and the grotesque and there should be a full stage and plenty of spectacle. [...] Above all, the drollery should be droll and the fun should be funny.*³

This is the most inclusive definition of panto, and all have become standard elements in modern panto.

Panto thrives on familiarity. The panto repertoire rarely strays too far from well-known traditional fairy-tales. Some of the most popular subjects are *Cinderella*, *Dick Whittington*, *The Babes in the Wood*, *Aladdin*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. But whatever tale is selected for production, the same characters, under different names, are present in each story.

First there is the principal girl and principal boy, who began as Harlequin and Columbine in the Harlequinade. One is usually the title character while the other is the love interest – the hero and heroine. But in panto there is sometimes a twist. Though it occurs less and less these days, in the Victorian pantomime the principal boy was played by a girl. She was not made to look masculine; she wore tights and a form-fitting tunic, to show off her legs as an outlet for the proper Victorians. In modern panto the part often goes to a television or film actor with an audience draw, but in the outer provinces, the tradition still manifests itself.

Very important in fairy tales, and consequently vital in all panto, is the battle between the “goodies” and the “baddies.” The principals are indeed among the goodies, but lest they not be powerful enough, there is always a fairy to take up their cause, like Fairy Snowdrops or Fairy Bowbells. Her counterpart, the villain or Demon, takes many names. He has been Goblin Grim and Demon Despair;⁴ he is King Rat in *Dick Whittington* and the Giant of the famed beanstalk (or the Giant’s henchman to make the scale more workable). To emphasise the element of Good versus Evil, it is traditional for the Fairy to enter from the right, or good side of the stage, and the Villain to enter from the left, or bad side. This is a superstition that harkens back to medieval plays. Every panto introduces these characters in a similar way:

On a mysteriously darkened stage with pale green spotlight to pick out the evil character, the Witch or Demon King, proclaiming his or her wicked designs against the Principal Boy or Principal Girl, and the timely entry of the Fairy Queen

*who, to our delight, proposes to defend the hero and heroine against all such evil plans.*⁵

In a 2003 script for *Jack and the Beanstalk* by Timothy Foers, the villain is Shiverspine, the Giant's henchman. After the curtain rises and the villagers perform a musical number, Shiverspine enters with a "BANG!" and picks a child out of the audience to be a slave for the Giant. Immediately Fairy Snowdrops enters with a tinkling of bells. She cries out to Shiverspine, who is now offstage with the child, "No you don't you evil man, set free that innocent child." When Shiverspine claims she doesn't scare him, she says, "Ha, I'll soon see to that." Then, according to the stage directions, there is a "flash and bang as child re-appears with bag of sweets."⁶ Though varied from the account above, the basic action is the same. It has simply been spiced up for a bit of excitement.

One particular favourite character is the fool, or the "impudent precocious youth."⁷ He is cheeky and lovable, not very bright, and occasionally he vainly fancies the heroine. One such fool is Buttons of *Cinderella*. Buttons is as much a part of the panto *Cinderella* as the mice are to Disney's version of the tale. He is referred to as "the severely-put-upon lackey, who shares with Cinderella the household work [...] and adores his ill-used fellow servant."⁸ He is the one who counsels Cinderella and has her try on the slipper. Though the name Buttons is only used for *Cinderella*, the character is present in all pantos. Whether he is called Idle Jack, or Muddles, or "sometimes Billy Buttons, more often Jack Pickles or Peter, he is the same person."⁹ In the Foers panto he is Jack's brother, Billy Pond, and he asks the audience to call him Pondy: "I know what, every time I come on and say 'Hi kids' will you lot shout 'hi Pondy'?"¹⁰ When they do, he squirts them with a water pistol. The "cheeky chappie" character has an answer for everything. In a production of *Snow White*, he has a comical exchange with the queen:

"Tell me, Muddles, have you seen my niece?" ... "No, I can't, your dress is too long." "You are a good friend of Snow White's, are you not?" "Righto." "You would do anything for her?" ... "Righto." "Why do you keep saying 'Righto'?" "Because you're standing on me right toe." "Idiot, how dare you!" ... "Sorry, love." "Don't call me love. Just, Kneel!" "Sorry, Neil."¹¹

Whoever he is in a given panto, you can bet he is the one who caters to the kids. He is there to make them laugh, whether through puns, comebacks, or slapstick.

Now we come to the most interesting character of all, the Dame. American Tom Congdon describes the Dame in his own words, and those of his British friend:

The dame is a man dressed outlandishly – and unsuccessfully – as a middle-aged woman. “She’s not a transvestite,” Gerald stressed, “not a man able to pass as a woman. She’s a bloke doing a fairly bad job of passing as a woman.” If despite her knobby knees and hairy limbs she fools you, she’s failed.¹²

Female impersonation is a joke that seems to be as old as time itself. It is a joke that television sitcoms regularly fall back on. It is just funny every time; and the less successful the impersonation, the funnier. The Dame provides a lot of the adult humour. “She acts as a sort of zany and libidinous mother figure, helps supply the adults in the audience with what the immortal Monty Python’s Flying Circus used to call ‘the naughty bits.’”¹³ For example: “Dame: I went shopping this morning. I was pushed and shoved and shoved and pushed! (Mischievous wink to audience) I’m going back again tomorrow.”¹⁴ The Dame was one of the roles taken by music hall comedians in the past, and today they still write a lot of their own bits. Often there will be two Dames – the two Ugly Sisters in Cinderella, for example. The pair of actors will often be eternal partners – a package deal. One popular pair of professional Dames is Nigel Ellacott and Peter Robbins. Ellacott says:

It’s called ‘act as known’ – we have all our own bits of business and we work them into the script. Peter’s the fat silly one, I’m the thin evil one, and as soon as they see us the kids know exactly what they’re going to get.¹⁵

Whether there be one or two, Dames are essential to modern panto. There is a Dame present in all of the stories. She is the cook in *Dick Whittington*, occasionally called Cicely Suet; she is Aladdin’s mother, Widow Twankey (who gets her name from a favourite Chinese tea); she is Jack’s mother in *Jack in the Beanstalk*, perhaps called Dame Trot, Dame Durden, or in Foers’ version, Dame Fruity. Her name may change, but she is still the Dame.

However wonderfully entertaining these characters may be, there is one that is absolutely vital to a panto: the audience. Says Danny LaRue, a Dame of the 70s,

“More than any other, a pantomime audience is part of the show. The make-believe starts with them.”¹⁶ A primary feature of panto is audience participation. Traditional bits are carried out by the actors to which the audience has traditional responses. There is the ghost routine:

*“Shall I go into the Cave of Doom?” Aladdin asked the audience disingenuously. Audience: “No!” A ghost appeared. The audience desperately tried to warn Aladdin, but he kept turning the wrong way and missing it. “Where is it?” he cried out. “BEHIND YOU!” shrieked the crowd.*¹⁷

Then there is the more involved repartee of contradiction. Whenever a character says, “Oh no there isn’t!” the audience responds with, “Oh yes there is!” This can go back and forth as long as the character on stage perpetuates it. Sometimes the character will perform a wonderful reversal:

QUEEN: Oh no there isn’t!
AUDIENCE: OH YES THERE IS!
QUEEN (*stamping foot*): There isn’t! There isn’t! There isn’t!
AUDIENCE: THERE IS! THERE IS! THERE IS!
QUEEN (*craftily reversing*): There is! There is! There is!
AUDIENCE (*pretending to be duped*): THERE ISN’T! THERE ISN’T! THERE ISN’T!
QUEEN (*with malevolent satisfaction*): Gotcha!¹⁸

The audience participates in dialogue, it sings along with the characters, it warns the hero of impending danger and is often involved in the plot. In Foers’ *Jack*, the Princess (the principal girl) is captured by Shiverspine and taken to the Giant’s castle. In a moment to herself, in the Dungeon of Doom, she finds instructions to an oven. Recognizing the potential importance of the paper, she asks the audience if they will look after it. They say, “Yes,” and she walks out to the audience and gives the paper to a child. Later, when Jack and Pondy arrive to look for the Princess, Pondy retrieves the instructions from the audience. Then the instructions are carried out (consisting of three questions which the audience answers), and the oven opens revealing the Princess inside.

Panto is an audience pleaser. It lives to make people laugh, by whatever means it can. As Wilson says, “All is acceptable in panto.”¹⁹ The most popular, and traditional, types of panto humour are the pun, slapstick, and topical jokes. The exchange between Muddles and the queen is one prime example of the use of

puns. In a script for *Aladdin* by Derek Dwyer and Merlin Price, the Widow Twankey says to her son, Washee, "Well, I've got such a lot of work to do, I've got a little behind." Washee looks behind her, and replies, "I wouldn't say that."²⁰ In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Billit, a bill collector, suggests the "Corridor of Spookiness" is haunted. Dame Fruity says, "Don't say that, my knees turn to jelly." Spendit, Billit's partner, then asks, "What flavour?"²¹

The slapstick may come in many forms, and is not always written in the script. Yet there are standard bits that can prevail:

*In real panto, for example, you'll have intervals of pure nonsense. In the midst of a love scene, two comics will come in and do a sloppy wallpapering skit, with paste flying in every direction. It has nothing to do with anything, but it's side-splitting.*²²

Anything that makes a mess is a valid bit of slapstick for panto. Whether it be wallpaper paste, broken eggs, flour, pails of water, or even a pie in the face, the audience will eat it up. In *Aladdin*, Wishee and Washee, cheeky brothers, are asked by Widow Twankey to starch some clothes. But all goes hysterically wrong:

(They put a pile of clothes in the tub, and pick up packet marked starch. They squabble over who is going to pour it, and end up ripping the packet and pouring it all in the tub.)

WISHEE: Now look what you've done. We'd better see what it's done to the washing.

WASHEE: Hey, here's Mr. Hi Pong's best shirt. *(Takes out large cardboard, stiff shirt shape.)* I bet that'll give him a stiff neck.

WISHEE: Let's see what else went in there. *(They take out various garments in shape of cardboard cut-outs - play with these ad lib.)* Hey, this is fun.²³

Any occasion that contains the slightest possibility of the absurd or spectacular, is fair game for panto. Panto is also the place where you will find things like, "Tap dancing cows and giant hydraulic beanstalks,"²⁴ or the two-man horse suit of old clichés. It's all part of the spectacle.

Apart from puns, panto jokes rely heavily on current events. Topical humour is one way that panto can stay fresh and keep up with changing times, while sustaining its traditional form. An article entitled "Raucous, Vulgar, and Electric," states:

*What seems to make pantomime effective is its subtle mix of the traditional and the topical, its ability to create a fairy-tale atmosphere with space for the everyday. If properly done [...] the two worlds do not conflict but conjure up a gleeful dramatic dimension where anything is possible.*²⁵

These jokes have endless possibilities. They crop up in all places imaginable, from one Ugly Stepsister commenting to the other, who is trying on the glass slipper, "You couldn't get your foot into the Crystal Palace,"²⁶ to references to Brittany Spears. In a version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* by Dwyer and Price, Ted E. Baron intends to evict Dame Edna Trot, who cannot pay her rent, so that he can build a bypass on the property. To help him "hexpedite the development of this desirable and much sought-after property," he hires two men, who "are the essence of tact, diplomacy and gentility." But, lo and behold, who should appear but ... the Terminator. And he is not alone. He is soon joined by Terminator 2. Only, to pump up the fun, T2 is "dressed in a shocking pink terminator outfit with frills and a handbag."²⁷ The imaginative jokes and fresh writing make an old situation new again, without losing any of the audience's favourite bits.

These are some of the workings of British pantomime. To say nothing of the spectacular sets and dazzling effects, the big musical numbers (sometimes with borrowed popular songs), the chorus or the ballet, the comedy of panto is a draw that will never fail to succeed. For:

*It engenders a kind of instant community which is impossible to find in the sleek, processed entertainment that is today's standard metropolitan fare. In its shameless vitality, its exhortation to react, pantomime offers a salutary corrective to the passivity of television culture.*²⁸

Pantomime has so much to offer an audience that cannot be found in a television set. Furthermore, though it holds on to stock elements, it never grows stale, because jokes are constantly rewritten, added to, or developed in different ways. All pantos contain the same aspects, yet no two are alike, even within the same production.

So, in the end, what is pantomime? “Sufficient to say that the phrase ‘a proper pantomime’ means colloquially a state of utter confusion!²⁹ The Brits enjoy such confusion every Christmas, while many Americans miss out. But hope is not lost. Small groups around the country are bringing this experience to life and as word of mouth spreads we can all be happily confused with holiday ‘panto’ monium.

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