

Oh, Panto, I Love You

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Pantomime is probably Britain's only truly indigenous theatre form. Its roots may be international but the annual Christmas grafting of vaudeville performances on to a fairy tale base, within a framework of fairly rigorous traditions, is uniquely British. I think that I only fully became aware of this when, some years ago, I lay on the stage floor of the Palace Theatre in Devizes as a dead rat. The scene was Morocco and I had just been killed by Dick Whittington's cat. After general rejoicing the male dame with a gag line from a TV cat-food commercial made a comedy exit with the cat, an acrobatic actor in a skin who, on Highgate Hill at the climax of Act One, had performed tricks with a genuine Alsatian dog. The female principal boy then stepped forward with the Emperor of Morocco and his daughter to sing a medley of Scottish songs with no further excuse than the memorable couplet:

And now with faces wreathed in smiles,
We'll take the road unto the Isles.

I just don't seem to be able to get the Christmas spirit this year my mother would announce without fail on or about the 5th of December in every, but every year. She would then rectify her problem with a flurry of cake mixing, pudding bashing, present agonising and tree selection. My Christmas spirit problem has always been simpler – unless I am involved in a pantomime, my only Christmas spirit is the kind that comes out of a bottle.

In my first twenty five years in theatre, I have only missed doing pantomime at five Christmases: but I have compensated to some extent in the remaining twenty Christmases by doing thirty eight pantos. The word *doing* covers stage managing, lighting, some directing . . . and even (with a lack of talent that I have been hitherto at some pains to keep hidden under a bushel) *acting*.

No, I have never been the back legs of a pantomime horse. Nor indeed the front legs neither. But I *have* been sundry sheriffs, robbers, brokers men, major domos and demons. Mostly in forgotten theatres. There is great satisfaction to be gained from leaping about in front cloth as a Demon King (blue floats and a green lime) and shouting down a Saturday night hissing full-house. Although the edge can be taken off one's ego if the Principal Boy (played, of course, by a she-of-the-splendid-thighs) is heard to whisper in the wings 'Oooh, isn't he cuddly!'

Playing King Rat was only part of the package that the management of Dick Whittington received in return for their weekly outlay of £18. I was also the Company Stage Manager, the Deputy Stage

Manager, ASM, electrician, carpenter, prop man . . . and the £18 was not for my services alone: it was a joint salary to be shared with my (pregnant) wife who was the wardrobe mistress. I was a member of Equity at the time, but I did not object to the contract (bashed out before my very eyes on a piece of flimsy copy paper by the impressario in person utilising a minimum of fingers): the salary was, after all, above the going rate for panto and above most of the Equity minima where any minima existed.* But I learned a great deal about the craft of stage management – if you are the only touring stage manager and are on stage as an actor at the climax of the transformation scene, you have to learn fast to survive Monday nights. And that panto tour of the west country included conventional hemp flying, tumble flying and rolled flying – all in theatres which were devoted to film, apart from the annual weeks of panto and the local operatic society.

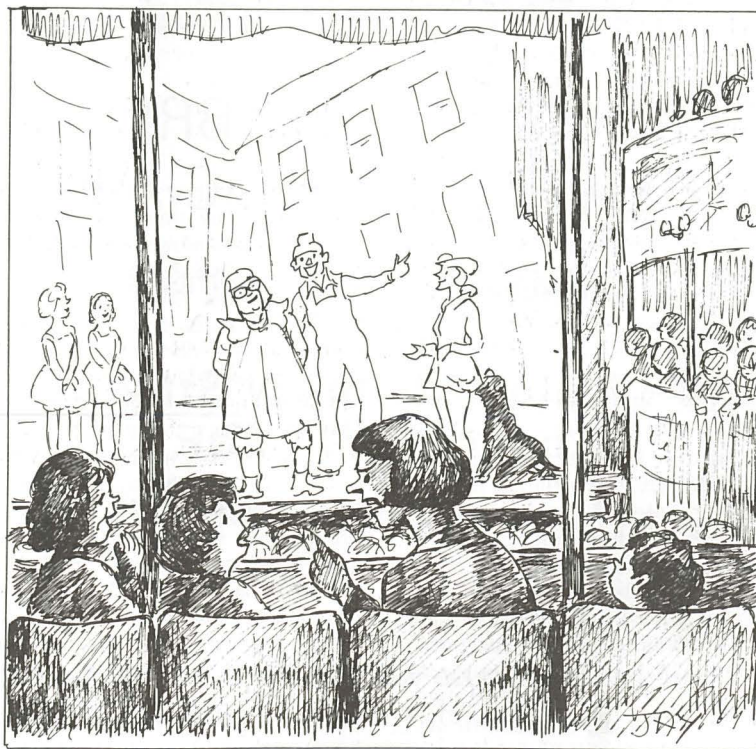
My pantomime debut was at the Grand Theatre, Luton. Like so many children, pantomime was my first ever theatrical experience and I have been addicted to it ever since, apart from a couple of years

** At an earlier point in my career I had worked for a management who, in a moment of alcoholic optimism, stamped a rep company's insurance cards with heavily franked Brooke-Bond Dividend Tea Stamps.*

when I was between child and adult appreciation of its peculiar traditions. So strong was my determination to include pantomime in my first year's experience of theatre that I turned down the opportunity of remaining at the tiny Watergate Theatre for *Cranks*, thus missing the experience of working with John Cranko and John Piper and subsequently transferring to the West End. (I caught up with Cranko and Piper a year or so later in the English Opera Group, but it was to be a full decade before I finally got a toehold in the West End). So, donating the remains of my faithful old yellow pullover to be incorporated in a Piper scenic collage, I signed on as ASM and Sheriff in *Mother Goose* for two weeks in Luton, followed by a week at the Royal County in Bedford.

The role of sheriff did not make excessive demands upon my acting talents. As the door to *Mother Goose's* cottage was constructed of somewhat sagging canvas, my knocking upon it had to be supplemented by a barely synchronised contribution from the orchestra pit. After repeated knocking and improvised interruptions from within on the theme of 'I'm not in' (Oh yes she is, oh no I'm not, oh yes she is), *Mother Goose* opened the door. 'I've come for the rent,' I announced dramatically. 'The Rent?' 'Spent!' she replied, slamming the door. More knocking. Door opens. Custard pie. I exit with paper plate sticking to my face. If there was any more dialogue to the part, I certainly do not recall it. But I clearly remember joining on the end of the front line for the first scene finale, and totally failing to synchronise my feet to the very basic choreography that accompanied the singing of *Today has been a lovely day*.

There were other early experiences like



"Well, Dick Whittington's really a girl and the cook's a man, and the cat's somebody dressed up, and Idle Jack's idle just because they are. And if you ask any more silly questions I'll take you home!"