

***Afterpieces:
A miscellany of well-considered trifles***

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Look Out Behind You?

Pantomime seems distinctive – possibly unique – in its eerie ability to graft its memories and their secondary re-workings onto individual mappings of the human lifespan. For its fans, their pleasurable pantomime memories colour their unique pasts and childhoods, their communal and local identifications, structuring their internal epochal clocks. To discuss panto is to elide history and mortality, past and present, Christmas Past and Christmas Yet to Come. It is expected to provide security against time’s mutability, hence the centuries-old lament that panto today is not as good as it used to be. But unlike the mediated texts of film or television, which also carry pleasurable freights of individual historical memories, panto was and remains an evolving and syncretic live performance practice operating comfortably in the context of global entertainment industries. In the snowbound British winter of 2010, the satirical dandy duo, the West End Whingers, set forth to sample their favourite holiday fare. A Qdos production of *Dick Whittington* at the Birmingham Hippodrome with the 77-year-old camp soap icon Joan Collins plus Nigel Havers and Julian Clary (“There’s eight inches outside!”) satisfied their fandom dreams. Yet it earned their qualified critical approval due to ‘the absence of a slosh scene, a principal boy, a song-sheet (although there was a singalong) and sweet throwing’.¹ Correspondents of the blog are quick to defend the show (‘I took a pensioner, a pre-teen and an old queen. We all had a wonderful time’, protests ‘mattyd’ [sic]). Others joined in the lament for lost excellences or defended the integrity of their own local pantos. Sweets are indeed being lobbed into the gallery in fine traditional style via tennis racquet, reports Ian Shuttleworth of the Christmas shows in Hammersmith and Hackney, so the Whingers should just get out more.²

In Britain, where the form persists most strongly, Christmas panto today flourishes in myriad local sites.³ As Martina Lipton demonstrates, UK pantomime production companies have evolved since the 1980s into a multi-million-pound entertainment enterprise through ‘re-inventing their product, promoting it to specific target audiences, and attracting sponsorship....utilizing capitalist corporate practices of branding, including the strategic use of celebrity and the British theatre star system’.⁴ Sports stars, pop idols, reality television and soap identities or topically newsworthy animals comprise the celebrity line-

ups, while panto's inclusive media 'savviness' and outreach is evident in the websites cited in this article. In a new collection edited by Jim Davis on pantomime in the Victorian age,⁵ Millie Taylor further analyses the economic forces currently driving the balance of loss and innovation. Rising production costs reduce band and cast numbers, and paucity of backstage staff accounts for the demise of the Whingers' beloved (but messy) sloshes. To compensate for non-theatre trained actors, the sound from the stage is amplified such that, while the patrons may scream as loudly as they like, the persistence of actual stage-audience 'interaction' is now a moot point. While the praetorians of Health and Safety frown on sweet-throwing at kiddies, spectacle has gained technologically from black light scenes, film sequences (3D included) and computerised lighting equipment. Like Lipton, Taylor sees much of British panto as a live but vital wing of commercial popular entertainment, and as such integrally grafted onto celebrity media culture, specifically television with its soap heroes and heroines.⁶

Lipton points also to the persistence of alternate local traditions, such as the great Dame Berwick Kaler, who flourishes at York's Theatre Royal. 'PLEASE NOTE DESPITE THE BAD WEATHER ALL SHOWS ARE SCHEDULED TO GO AHEAD AS USUAL', declares the web booking site for his own fifth *Jack and the Beanstalk*, featuring Martian aliens.⁷ Kaler has built up community rapport carefully over decades through year-long outreach and by ostentatiously not featuring minor pop celebrities. York is certainly not alone in privileging what it represents as theatre tradition above transient media starlets. The Hackney Empire's *Jack and the Beanstalk* vaunts 'Clive Rowe, the only Olivier Award nominated pantomime dame', plus water pistol fights, custard pies, a multi-ethnic cast and a break-dancing Cow. In this they are being self-consciously 'local', just as the Britannia before it held to its distinctive panto practices over six decades.⁸ Practitioners' strategies for slaying or laying the media giant are thus calculated locally, enticing broad 'family' audiences away from the telly to tackle the perils of the cold streets.

Davis's anthology on pantomime in Victorian Britain contextualises these varied practices by setting forth their historical precedents, exploring the foundational relevance of that age's pantomime practices to the form's 20th-century evolution. And in the disciplinary context of 19th-century studies, he makes an important case that pantomime imagery radically structured its collective cultural imagery and enunciation, quite to the same extent that melodrama has been identified by Elaine Hadley as doing. Davis summarises that pantomime practices and its generic vocabulary was vital in 'enabling its audiences to negotiate with a wide range of issues thrown up by social and political changes'.⁹ Since pantomime was probably the Hollywood and the Bollywood of its time, we would expect wide cultural familiarity with concepts of the harlequinade, transformation scene, green fire and suchlike, just as today we speak using cinematic metaphors of bad guys, space opera, close-ups or fades. Davis's claim gives an explicit cue for future directions in the study of the historically-sited and multiple significances of pantomime: one which recognises but takes us beyond the sticky delights of nostalgia. As we shall see, his collection suggests many others.

'Victorian' panto itself exhibits roughly three 'golden ages', each in its turn deplored for its outrageous embrace of popular entertainment forms and stars, only to be retrospectively haloed in epochal nostalgia. The pre-Victorian Regency pantomime, studied in 1969 by David Mayer,¹⁰ is the main period to date receiving concentrated scholarly focus. It shows the performer-driven nature of popular forms as the great Clown Joseph Grimaldi ousted the Harlequin figure from centrality and ensured the domination of the mute slapstick chases and gags of the harlequinade. The passing of the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 gave panto a voice, which it gleefully mis/used in puns, word-play and sometimes richly topical libretti. Mid-century practice was characterised by writers such as Planché, Blanchard and H. J. Byron, who accommodated the spectacular fantastic forms of burlesque and extravaganza, thus saturating the public sphere with scenic loveliness and shapely Fairies, providing the kind of utopian worlds about which Ruskin and Lewis Carroll could enthuse or moralise. Jeffrey Richards, Richard Foulkes and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman take us through this *féerique* cultural landscape, whose cultural authority was supported in multiple art-forms and by influential media discourse.¹¹ Then in the 1870s and 1880s came the music hall invasion, entrepreneured by such as Augustus Harris at Drury Lane, who artfully cherry-picked the great East End performers and further ramped up the glamour and spectacle. He hitched his theatre to national and imperial projects (in his *Jack and the Beanstalk* of 1899 the hero fells a Giant Blunderboer), despite misgivings from those who thought that papas should not expose their young to leggy modern vulgarity, or to the naughty knowingness of the likes of Marie Lloyd.¹²

Maybe, as the fans of the 2010 British shows seems to accept, there is no such thing as 'Pantomime'; merely individual productions in specific regions and nations, towns or suburbs, and theatres. Jo Robinson's study of mid-century production in Nottingham shows how the form is best studied in its interlocked relationships with its locale and in the context of the other entertainment choices available and familiar to its patrons. In fact, the big-picture insights are derived when pantomime is examined, not even in individual productions, but more minutely through individual performances of these productions. Robinson does this with the Nottingham's New Theatre Royal's *The House That Jack Built* in 1865. Mapping performance, she asserts, can be both geographical and metaphorical.¹³ Jill. A. Sullivan also takes her spotlight to the mid-century 'provinces', noting Birmingham panto's firm bond with the Liberal Party and with its local champion, Joseph Chamberlain. She notes the ability of the 'provinces' to work the tyranny of distance and thus flout that other Chamberlain who censured live performance: a freedom of which the Australian colonies notably took fine advantage.¹⁴ Australian studies of 19th-century Melbourne and Sydney pantomimes written by W. M. Akhurst and Garnet Walch have also yielded good results through such fine-grained examination of individual productions in their city-specific and venue-specific settings and historical moments.¹⁵

This kind of deep textual mining and performance restoration suggests a potential cross-cultural comparative project, one that the study of pantomimes

as significant records of popular memory and its cultural articulations might now develop more systematically. Since some topical events of each year have commonality world-wide, synchronic studies of annual productions in different national and regional sites are capable of mapping the local articulations and fortunes of international popular entertainment through the choices of performance modes and the selection of what news – regionally and temporally – is or was considered fair panto game. In 1873, for example, British milk contamination and the Tichborne trial turn up for their different purposes in Nottingham and Hanley shows (as per Ann Featherstone’s account), and likewise in the Melbourne pantomime *Australia Felix*. At least, these are the topicalities that the *Era*’s correspondents chose to notice about the British cities’ productions, for their own purposes of metropolitan admonition.¹⁶ Nor, finally, should we forget that contemporary panto’s characteristic and problematic permeability to mediation has its own complex and exciting material history. David Mayer’s essay on nineteenth-century British and European performers and stage practices in the physical, comic and fantastic genres, which are found recorded in international archives of early film, invites scholars of performance to further investigate this rich lode of evidence for pantomime scholarship yet to come.¹⁷

¹ *West End Whingers*, <http://westendwhingers.wordpress.com/2010/12/21/review-dick-whittington-with-joan-collins-birmingham-hippodrome/>. Accessed 4 January 2011.

² *West End Whingers*, <http://westendwhingers.wordpress.com/2010/12/13/review-potted-panto-vaudeville-theatre/>. Accessed 4 January 2011.

³ See e.g. *eParenting Big Panto Guide* (<http://www.bigpantoguide.co.uk/index.php>) for lists of UK shows by locality. Church and town halls and suburban theatres dominate the London venues, whereas in regional towns and cities the Theatre Royal or a village hall are the usual spaces. Accessed 4 January 2011.

⁴ Martina Lipton, “Celebrity versus Tradition: ‘Branding’ in Modern British Pantomime”, *New Theatre Quarterly* 23:2 (May 2007): 136.

⁵ Jim Davis, ed., *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), hereinafter referred to as *VP*.

⁶ Millie Taylor, “Continuity and Transformation in Twentieth-Century Pantomime” (*VP*, 185-200).

⁷ *York Theatre Royal*,

(<http://www.yorktheatreroyal.co.uk/cgi/events/events.cgi?t=template&a=630>).

Accessed 4 January 2011. Contrary to the lament of scholars, a young audience member interviewed in the site’s podcast ‘Panto Audience Reaction’ declares that over her six years of attendance the pantos get better every year.

⁸ See Janice Norwood, “Harlequin Encore: Sixty Years of the Britannia Pantomime” (*VP*, 70-84).

⁹ “Introduction: Victorian Pantomime”, *VP*, 16; Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalised Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ David Mayer, *Harlequin in his Element: The English Pantomime 1806-1836* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

¹¹ Jeffrey Richards, "E. L. Blanchard and 'The Golden Age of Pantomime'" (*VP*, 21-40); Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, "'Arcadias of Pantomime': Ruskin, Pantomime, and *The Illustrated London News*" (*VP*, 41-53); Richard Foulkes, "Lewis Carroll, E.L. Blanchard and Frank Green" (*VP*, 54-69).

¹² Caroline Radcliffe's "Dan Leno: Dame of Drury Lane", is a fine study of this enigmatic performer, and Jim Davis gives an account of Harris's Boer War panto spectacles in "'Only an Undisciplined [Nation] Would Have Done It': Drury Lane Pantomime in the Late Nineteenth Century" (*VP*, 100-117).

¹³ Jo Robinson, "Mapping the Place of Pantomime in a Victorian Town" (*VP*, 137-54).

¹⁴ Jill A. Sullivan, "'Local and Political Hits': Allusion and Collusion in the Local Pantomime" (*VP*, 155-69).

¹⁵ Richard Fotheringham compares two related texts: Akhurst's 1869 Melbourne pantomime *The House That Jack Built; or, Harlequin Progress, and the Love's Laughs, Laments and Labours of Jack Melbourne and Little Victoria*, and its anonymous Sydney version of 1871 titled *The House That Jack Built; or, Harlequin Jack Sydney, Little Australia & the Gnome of the Golden Mine, and the Australian Fernery in the Golden Conservatory, the Home of Diamantina*. See his *Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage 1834-1899* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006). See also my annotated edition *Australia Felix: or, Harlequin Laughing Jackass and the Magic Bat* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988): an 1873 Melbourne pantomime by Garnet Walch crafted round the visit of cricketers W. G. Grace and his All-England Eleven.

¹⁶ Ann Featherstone, "'Holding up the Mirror': Readership and Authorship in the *Era's* Pantomime Reviews from the 1870s" (*VP*, 174-175).

¹⁷ "Victorian Pantomime on Twentieth-century Film" (*VP*, 201-15).