

Afterpieces: A miscellany of well-considered trifles

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The globality of pantomime: a brief excursion

In David Pickering's *Encyclopedia of Pantomime*, he notes that "in most countries outside the UK the word [pantomime] is taken to mean the sort of mime entertainment of which such performers as Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau have proved master exponents."¹ For this reason 'British' is often used as a prefix to avoid confusion with the silent art-form, but although the majority of professional pantomimes are staged in the British Isles each year, myriad productions also take place throughout the world with their own well established traditions and practices. This year, writer and director Janice Honeyman, for example, celebrates her 23rd pantomime season in South Africa, where *Jack and the Beanstalk* is to be staged at the Joburg Theatre Complex, Johannesburg starring Desmond Dube as Dame Dora Dimpledumpling and Louise Saint-Claire as Fairy Fenella Fynbos. The Joburg Theatre Complex's pantomimes are seen by over 80,000 people a year² and comprise some of the world's largest pantomime casts with 2009's award winning *Pinocchio* employing 60 performers and featuring 25 members of the South African Ballet Theatre.³ Pantomime is not, therefore, as 'uniquely British' as it might seem.

As Veronica Kelly argued in a previous 'Afterpiece' of this journal, maybe "there is no such thing as 'Pantomime'; merely individual productions in specific regions and nations, towns or suburbs and theatres."⁴ The possibility for adaptation, interpretation and localisation makes the form an attractive genre to work with, allowing practitioners to invent traditions and put their own mark on the genre in order to create a unique experience for their public.

194 years after the publication of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* by the Brothers Grimm, a book fundamental to the development of the genre, the first ever German-speaking pantomime was staged at the Stadttheater Passau.⁵ 2006's *Der gestiefelte Kater* (*Puss in Boots*) featured a German speaking cast, musical numbers such as 'What's New Pussycat?' sung in English and a wide

range of characters, including one from American sci-fi series *Star Trek*. The pantomime's roots were, of course, British, but the piece was eclectic, drawing inspiration from a variety of sources, traditions and styles. Pantomime's conventions and narrative frame allow for great creativity and although everyone has their own opinion as to what constitutes 'traditional' pantomime, the genre is impossible to define due to its diverse set of conventions practised in a variety of combinations.

The creation of a new pantomime 'tradition,' and arguably the genre itself, results from the merging of cultures and practices and has led to pantomimes with strong local identities being produced in South Africa, Jamaica, Singapore and North America.⁶ An annual event since 1941, the Little Theatre Movement of Jamaica's pantomime now constitutes a significant aspect of the theatre's yearly programme.⁷ Like the pantomimes of England in the 19th Century, it still opens on Boxing Day, but in no way does it resemble its Victorian progenitors. As the Little Theatre Movement's website reveals, in Jamaican pantomime "European folklore has given way to lusty tales of the Caribbean."⁸ Pantomimes presented at the Kingston theatre include *Jack and the Macca Tree*, *Banana Boy* and *River Mumma and the Golden Table*, with the spider trickster Anansi, a central character of West African and Caribbean folklore, appearing in titles such as *Anansi and Goat Head Soap*, *Anansi and Beeny Bud*, *Rockstone Anansi* and *Anansi and the Magic Mirror*. As Ruth Minott Egglestone explains, "over the years his [Anansi's] role has become an essential part of the Jamaican pantomime experience"⁹ with the character's integration and centrality constituting both a blending of cultures and a celebration of community, not dissimilar to London's multicultural pantomimes at the Hackney Empire, Theatre Royal Stratford East, and Lyric Hammersmith which reflect the cultural diversity of their respective London boroughs.

This process of appropriation is often reflected in pantomime titles. In Singapore, *Cinderel-LAH!* and *Jack and the Bean-sprout!* demonstrate how theatre company W!ld Rice has interpreted, adopted and adapted the British form in order to create their own localised pantomime traditions. Stock pantomime conventions are often playfully employed by the company, with 2011's *Aladdin* cast containing two cross-dressed roles in Darius Tan's Dame Widow Wong Kee and Karen Tan's Villain Abba-k'adab-rah; both characters Singaporean equivalents to their British counterparts Widow Twankey and Abanazar.¹⁰ Similar to many other non-UK pantomimes, W!ld Rice freely interpret the stock fairytale narratives and pantomime conventions and stage their productions in English, one of Singapore's four official languages. Indeed most of the countries in which pantomime is presented today have encountered British rule and thus inherited some of Britain's cultural practices, but although Victorian pantomime is often thought of as a solely British pastime, productions were, of course, also staged in the United States of America and Australia, where the form is still practiced today.¹¹

The People's Light and Theatre Company of Malvern, has contributed to Pennsylvania's own pantomime tradition, for example, and dates from 2004 when it presented *Sleeping Beauty*: "a comic panto in the British style." In 2005

Jack and the Beanstalk was advertised as “an American Panto,” a definition which by 2011’s *Treasure Island* had evolved into “A Musical Panto,” fusing the American genre of Musical Theatre with that of British pantomime.¹² Similar to the pantomimes of Wild Rice, the People’s Light and Theatre Company also often commission an original score and script to give their production a strong brand identity and their community a sense of ownership over the cultural product.¹³

In Canada, Toronto’s pantomimes follow a similar evolutionary course to their international counterparts; after being home to British pantomime, impresario Paul Elliott exported productions for seven seasons during the 1980s.¹⁴ Today, Elliott’s pantomimes have been replaced by Canadian Ross Petty’s, which the Canadian *National Post* describes as a “logical development of the British prototype.”¹⁵ Having appeared in and co-produced Elliott’s pantomimes, thus serving a quasi-pantomime apprenticeship, 2012 will mark Petty’s 17th year of staging pantomimes in Toronto of which four have received TV Specials on the CTV Television Network.¹⁶ Petty’s pantomimes, much like those of his fellow non-British practitioners, are freer in their interpretation of the stock pantomime narratives, conventions, characters and set pieces, unrestricted by centuries of traditions and practices and established audience expectations of the genre.

Of all the many theatre companies specialising in pantomime across the world, British producers Qdos Entertainment Ltd, for whom Elliott now works, is the largest, producing 24 pantomimes during the 2012 season and hiring sets and costumes to those in Johannesburg, North Hollywood and Pasadena.¹⁷ The company’s global reach also extends to China as in 2010 Qdos toured a 90 minute bilingual version of their 2006 *Aladdin* to Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. Regarding whether pantomime would be understood in a country with little knowledge of the genre, executive producer Jon Conway commented, “I believe the whole world shares the same sense of humour,”¹⁸ which is highly debatable, but slapstick and visual humour can, in many ways, transcend language, with a certain universality present in pantomime’s fantastical narratives. So, if contemporary culture is an infinite web of connections, exchanges and cross-communication across geographical boundaries, how have pantomimes in Britain been affected as a result?

The American Walt Disney Company exerts one of the biggest influences on modern British pantomime. As Jack Zipes states, “it is impossible not to give him [Walt Disney] credit for revolutionising the fairy tale through the technology of the cinema and book publishing industry.”¹⁹ For many young children, the Walt Disney re-telling of popular narratives are accepted as the definitive versions and it is, perhaps, no coincidence that after *Peter Pan* was released on VHS in 1990, pantomime versions of the title significantly increased. No pantomime version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* can be traced pre- the Walt Disney film of 1937,²⁰ and in recent years the pantomime title *Robinson Crusoe* has benefited greatly from Disney’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise²¹ with Captain Jack Sparrow-esque King Rats and Captain Hooks now appearing in many productions of *Dick Whittington* and *Peter Pan*.

In addition to contributing to the range of titles in producers' portfolios, Walt Disney's animated films have also influenced certain titles' content. Disney's 1991 film version of *Aladdin*, for example, introduced the character name Princess Jasmine to pantomime and it would be difficult to deny that Robin Williams's Genie of the film had not influenced the blue skinned immortals of New World Productions' *Aladdins*, the naming of pantomime company Blue Genie Productions or the design of the blue puppet Genie of the Mayflower, in Southampton's *Aladdin* last seen in 2010.²²

Pantomime has always embraced the contemporary and popular and indeed one way to chart its evolutionary course may be via the types of entertainment which have directly influenced it during a certain period, such as pantomime's music hall era. Contemporary pantomime in Britain currently takes its lead from television and film, not only by way of characters, plots, cultural allusions and performers, but also in terms of technology with 3D sequences now extremely popular. After the large influx of Australian soap stars "becoming as traditional as turkey and crackers"²³ during the late 1980s and 1990s,²⁴ post-millennial British pantomime now features Hollywood names as diverse as award winning film actor Mickey Rooney and *Baywatch* and *Knight Rider* star David Hasselhoff. Founded in 2005, producers First Family Entertainment pride themselves on being the "first production company to entice artists from across the Atlantic to appear in this great British tradition,"²⁵ but in fact this casting practice can be traced to 1987 when *Star Trek's* George Takei appeared in *Aladdin* at the Hexagon, Reading.²⁶ International celebrities offer audiences the opportunity to indulge in celebrity culture, with the performers' nationality making them appear as exotic and rare Others amongst their fellow British co-stars. Non-British celebrities are an exciting and enticing prospect for producers, theatres and audiences alike, but with short rehearsal periods of less than two weeks, little time is available for tuition in pantomime's conventions and how to react, engage with and control a vocal audience. As Carla Bonner, who played Stephanie Scully in *Neighbours*, commented, "Australians can't even fathom what pantomime is all about!"²⁷ That these performers have mostly worked in television and film further complicates the theatrical equation and so producers have found clever ways to integrate them into the narrative to achieve the best possible impact, such as Pamela Anderson's end of Act One reveal as Ms. Genie of the Lamp seen at the Liverpool Empire in 2010. With recent roles played by American performers including Genie, Baron Hardup and Captain Hook, it comes as no surprise that the comedic characters of Dame and Comic, whose role it is to establish a shared community and encourage interaction between the cast and audience, are absent from this list owing to the skill required in managing audience participation and executing some of pantomime's most complicated slapstick sequences.

But just as American and Australian stars, as well as their music, have been embraced by British pantomime, so too have other cultures. In 2011, designer Cleo Pettitt and writer Andrew Pollard set *Jack in the Beanstalk* in an American inspired funfair, whilst in the same year Tara Arts commissioned Hardeep Singh Kohli to write *Bollywood Cinderella*, described by the company as "the much loved Christmas classic, now spiced up with Indian colours, smells and

sounds!”²⁸ Contemporary pantomime in Britain, therefore, reflects Britain’s multicultural population and embraces the intercultural dialogue of global entertainment industries.

Throughout this excursion I have attempted to provide an overview of pantomime’s global reach and outline how the genre in the UK has evolved as a result of non-British influences. That pantomime can only be found in Britain and is ‘British to the core’ is a myth and ignores the wealth of practices and traditions found across the world and enjoyed by a variety of audiences each year. Pantomime may well be a British invention, but contemporary pantomime’s cultural heritage and reach is truly international and the productions and practices mentioned here are only a small proportion of those in existence. In addition to the many professional pantomimes staged each year, an even greater number are produced by amateur dramatic societies and schools in countries as diverse as the Turks and Caicos Islands, Malta, France and Indonesia. With recent scholarship such as Jim Davis’s edited collection of essays *Victorian Pantomime* (2010), Jill A. Sullivan’s *The Politics of the Pantomime: Regional Identity in the Theatre 1860-1900* (2011) and the Universities of Birmingham and Lancaster’s ‘The Cultural Politics of English Pantomime 1837-1901’ research project (2010-2012) focussing on Victorian pantomime, there is now great opportunity to consider how Empire has impacted the genre’s cultural journey. Also worthy of note is pantomime’s status as an export product with companies such as LHK Productions producing shows in Dubai, Qatar and Lebanon.²⁹ How important is pantomime’s ‘British’ identity to these productions and how do non-British audience communities respond, react to and interpret pantomime, possibly unaware of the genre’s conventions and audience call and response features? These questions, along with many more, await further exploration and research in order to qualify pantomime’s significance in relation to Britain’s cultural heritage and to situate its position within the global entertainment industry.³⁰

¹ David Pickering, *Encyclopedia of Pantomime* (Andover: Gale Research International, 1993), 149-150.

² Claire Pacariz, “Honeyman’s explosive panto at Joburg Theatre,” *Artslink*, August 20, 2010, http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=25345 (accessed July 1, 2012).

³ *South Africa Explored Blog*, November 2, 2009, “Pinocchio Pantomime in Johannesburg from 4 November,” <http://blog.sa-venues.com/provinces/gauteng/pinocchio-pantomime/> (accessed July 1, 2012).

⁴ Veronica Kelly, “Look Out Behind You?” *Popular Entertainment Studies* 2.1 (2011): 144, <https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/article/viewFile/49/33> (accessed July 1, 2012).

⁵ Footage from the production, along with an interview with director Sebastian von Kerssenbrock can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKFRts05dde> (accessed July 1, 2012).

⁶ For more information on pantomime in South Africa, see: Marie Kruger, “Pantomime in South Africa: The British tradition and the local flavour,” *South African Theatre Journal* 17:1 (2003): 129-152.

⁷ More information on the Little Theatre Movement, their history and pantomimes can be found at: <http://www.ltmpantomime.com/index.html> (accessed July 1, 2012).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ruth Minott Egglestone, "A philosophy of survival. Anancyism in Jamaican Pantomime," (paper presented at The Society for Caribbean Studies Conference held at The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK, July 2-4, 2001).

¹⁰ For more information on Wild Rice and their pantomimes, see: <http://www.wildrice.com.sg/> (accessed July 1, 2012).

¹¹ For the past two years Lythgoe Family Productions has produced pantomimes in California and Los Angeles, with Pantomonium Productions using the form since 2004 to introduce disadvantaged New York communities to the theatre. The Piccolo Theatre in Evanston, Illinois, has presented pantomimes since 2002 and recent professional pantomimes in Australia include Victorian Opera's *Cinderella* at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne (January 2012) and Carole Ann and Terry Gill's regular children's pantomimes at The Tivoli Restaurant Theatre, now at St. John's Church, Malvern East, Melbourne.

¹² More information on the work of the People's Light and Theatre Company, including details of their pantomimes, can be found here: <http://peopleslight.org/> (accessed July 1, 2012).

¹³ See Martina Lipton, "Celebrity versus Tradition: Branding in Modern British Pantomime," *New Theatre Quarterly* 23:2 (May 2007): 136.

¹⁴ Unknown, "Panto King Elliott lines up his Atlantic Challenge," *The Stage*, September 25, 1986: 4.

¹⁵ Unknown, "Mum's not the word with theatre genie's pantomimes," *National Post*, no date. See: <http://www.nationalpost.com/story.html?id=b5a16d2d-0ebe-4279-8848-a13eabf03447&p=2> (accessed July 1, 2012).

¹⁶ Footage from the pantomimes, as well as information about Ross Petty Productions can be found here: <http://www.rosspetty.com/> (accessed July 1, 2012).

¹⁷ For more information of Qdos Entertainment Ltd's pantomimes, see: <http://www.qdosentertainmentpantomimes.co.uk/> (accessed July 1, 2012).

¹⁸ Yue Hongyan, "Aladdin's 3D Adventure in China," *Global Times*, May 20, 2010, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/life/entertainment/2010-05/533875.html> (accessed July 1, 2012).

¹⁹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 193.

²⁰ My research suggests commercial pantomime productions of the title date to 1951. The release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* on VHS in 1994 helped increase its popularity, and along with *Peter Pan* the two titles now account for 22% of the UK pantomime season (survey of 174 productions to be staged in 2012).

²¹ The suffix 'and the Caribbean pirates' has been used by Qdos, First Family Entertainment and Janice Honeyman for their productions of *Robinson Crusoe*.

²² An image of the genie can be found in Simon Sladen, review of *Aladdin - A Wish Come True*, by Michael Rose Ltd, Chris Moreno and The Mayflower, Southampton. *British Theatre Guide*, 2010, <http://www.britishtheatreinfo.com/reviews/aladdinmayflower-rev> (accessed July 1, 2012).

²³ Katy Lewis, "When good neighbours become panto stars!", *BBC Three Counties*, September 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/threecounties/theatre/2003/12/carla_bonner_interview.shtml (accessed July 1, 2012).

²⁴ A list of *Neighbours* cast members appearing in pantomime since 1988 can be found here: <http://perfectblend.net/reference/pantoarchive.htm> (accessed July 1, 2012).

²⁵ First Family Entertainment homepage, <http://www.ffe-uk.com/> (accessed July 1, 2012).

²⁶ American Linda Lou Allen appeared as Aladdin at the Leicester Concert Hall in 1981. Her UK presence at the time was significant due to appearances in UK television series *Star Games* (1980) and *Punch Lines!* (1981), as well as comedy-short *Him and His Magic* (1980). Although she pre-dates Takei's pantomime casting, her integrated presence on British television meant that she did not possess the same sense of 'Otherness' as her fellow Americans in US made films and series.

²⁷ Katy Lewis, "When good neighbours become panto stars!", *BBC Three Counties*, September 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/threecounties/theatre/2003/12/carla_bonner_interview.shtml (accessed July 1, 2012).

²⁸ For more information on *Bollywood Cinderella* and Tara Arts' 2012 pantomime *Dick Whittington goes Bollywood*, see <http://tara-arts.com/show-archive/bollywood-cinderella-2011> and <http://tara-arts.com/whats-on/dick-whittington-goes-bollywood> (accessed August 1, 2012).

²⁹ Catherine Jones, "Liverpool's newly-named Epstein theatre is to stage panto this Christmas," *Liverpool Echo*, February 20, 2012, http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/liverpool-news/local-news//tm_headline=liverpool-8217-s-newly-named-epstein-theatre-is-to-stage-panto-this-christmas&method=full&objectid=30363586&siteid=50061-name_page.html (accessed August 1, 2012).

³⁰ The author would like to thank pantomime performer Tweedy the Clown and producer Paul Holman of Paul Holman Associates for their valuable discussions in the preparation of this article.