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Editorial

In a recent review of Jim Davis's edited collection of essays about Victorian pantomime I remarked that I saw the volume as a call to arms, challenging scholars to investigate the manifestations of pantomime in countries other than the United Kingdom. The essays "provoked me to raise questions about continuities of transmission, about relationships between pantomime performances and nostalgic reminiscences about the 'mother country' and 'home,' about...the connections between the pantomime repertoire and the communities of which it was – and perhaps continues to be – an integral part."¹ Millie Taylor and others have pointed to the continuing success of pantomime particularly in suburban London theatres and in British provincial centres. In part, this continuance can be attributed to the genre's protean nature and its capacity to incorporate matters of local concern and relevance. Certainly the Victorian paradigms—fantastic staging, elaborate realisations of stories drawn from folk memory, the Brothers Grimm or children's nursery rhymes—remain enduring ones. Equally enduring has been pantomime's connection with celebratory holidays like Christmas when children and their parents could be attracted to a family occasion. Yet this forms only part of the story and doesn't quite explain the continuing existence of pantomime, for example, in countries like the United States or Australia where waves of Middle European and Mediterranean immigrants from the end of the 19th century might suggest the cultural irrelevance of this British genre. Perhaps the term 'pantomime' itself may have acquired different levels of meaning.

Simon Sladen's "brief excursion" in this issue brings some more ammunition to activate the call to arms. He identifies the processes of "adaptation, interpretation and localisation" which have resulted in the invention of new traditions with a cultural elasticity that turns pantomime into a "genre impossible to define." Perhaps the most significant changes also involve the multicultural and multilingual casting of contemporary pantomimes which informs its contemporary practices at the Hackney Empire and Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith in London, but equally in South Africa, California, Canada, Singapore and Jamaica. Sladen points to the huge influence that the Disney studios have had on the choice of subject matter as well as performance values of British pantomime: from their *Peter Pan* to *Aladdin* and the *Pirates of the*

Caribbean. However, the same can be said of the influence upon pantomime practices globally as Sladen's examples demonstrate. Finally, he makes a plea for more audience research: who are the audiences participating in this global phenomenon? What are their responses within the cultural contexts in which pantomime is currently being performed?

Sladen begins his excursion by referring to the work of Janice Honeyman, the distinguished South African director, whose *Jack and the Beanstalk* this year at the Joburg Theatre will mark her 23rd production of a pantomime. It is her 2007 production of *Peter Pan* that grounds the discussion of pantomime in South Africa offered by Tamara Bezuidenhout and Marié-Heleen Coetzee. J. M. Barrie's play was not intended as a pantomime. Yet its first performance on 27 December 1904 at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, was strategically placed to challenge the pantomime offerings by other West End theatres. Moreover, the form of the production included many typical pantomime elements: the performance of the "principal boy" (Peter Pan) by a girl, oversized animals (the crocodile), pirates and fairies, and above all, children in the cast, as cases in point. That *Peter Pan* should have been appropriated by contemporary producers is then hardly surprising. The discussion, however, of the 2007 production raises a number of key issues inflected by the cultural sensitivities of post-apartheid South Africa. That 19th century pantomimes essentially reflected national and imperial values is well-known, nowhere more so than in the elaborate Drury Lane versions at the end of the century. To us they may appear to have been jingoistic and intensely conservative despite the occasional satire that might crop up within that context. There's little to suggest a "counter-hegemonic" position taken up by those productions. The authors refer to the indebtedness of pantomime to the *commedia dell'arte*. However, by the end of the 19th century, it together with the Harlequinade (at least in mainstream adult productions) were probably distant memories. Yet the potential for a degree of subversiveness might indeed exist in modern versions. Whether this is realised in the pantomimes of Jamaica, Singapore or in those at the Hackney Empire remains to be investigated. Another consideration is that pantomime seems to retain its appeal to families and is therefore targeted by productions accordingly. Whether this affects the choice of subject matter and production decisions also needs further investigation. In any case, the authors here feel a degree of discomfort with what they take to be the presence of vestiges of a colonialist past and the pervasive influence of 'Disneyfication' in Honeyman's version of *Peter Pan*. Again it would be valuable to know who are the audiences that attend the Joburg Theatre for its annual pantomimes: their racial and gender makeup, socio-economic status and ages.

Neither *Peter Pan* nor *The Children's Pinafore* which forms the basis of Gillian Arrighi's discussion, were intended as pantomimes. Her title, however, alludes to D'Oyly Carte's decision to mount a version of *HMS Pinafore* entirely made up of children in December 1879 to coincide with the Christmas holiday season and thus very much in competition with the West End pantomimes. Indeed, Carte stole a march on his competitors by opening on 16 December before the commencement of the accepted pantomime season. Arrighi points to

the fact that reviewers of *The Children's Pinafore* were reminded of the children's pantomimes mounted at London's Adelphi theatre in 1877-8 thus further aligning the production with its pantomime connections. A key connection of course was the utilisation of children's companies, a phenomenon that contributed to their almost viral spread in North America and Australasia. The article refers to *Pinafore* companies in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Melbourne, Sydney and beyond and suggests that the children's companies signalled "the emergence of children as a class of consumers, and the economic implications arising from trends that were, in turn, driven by the motors of modernity. Critical reception of these productions in different countries reveals that these shows challenged expectations of what children could achieve creatively."

The *Pinafore* article refers to a children's pantomime, *Little Goody Two Shoes*, produced at the Adelphi theatre in 1877. A glimpse of children in the cast can be found in Jim Davis's richly illustrated account of what pantomimes looked like, filtered through the imagination and perception of illustrators who documented pantomimes for the popular magazines and journals from the 1850s onwards. This discussion brings us back to where it all started. Davis argues "that the illustrated journals and periodicals through annually publishing illustrations of pantomime scenes and a series of generic representations of rehearsal preparations and pantomime audiences, ranging from broad caricature to social realism,...certainly contributed not only to the ways in which Victorian audiences perceived the genre but also to the ways in which we attempt to understand and reconstitute this most visual of theatrical forms today." That there was a demand for such illustrations reiterates the form's immense popularity and the desire of readers to penetrate the mysteries hidden from view in the spectacle of the final productions. The illustrations enabled readers to participate albeit vicariously and to claim a degree of ownership through a recognition of what they and their children had enjoyed.

To return briefly to where I started. That there is much to do in the area of pantomime research especially in terms of the form's ongoing presence today, remains a given. The genre's globality raises many questions related to transmission and appropriation. It is to be hoped that scholars in the area of popular entertainments will take up the challenge.

¹ Review of *Victorian Pantomime: a collection of critical essays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) in *Australasian Drama Studies*, 58 (April 2011): at 250.