The Origins and Traditions of the British Pantomime

In Denmark, we mostly associate Pantomime with the classic, wordless performances of Harlequin, Columbine and Pierrot in Tivoli. If you are invited to a Christmas Pantomime in England, do go but don't expect a similar experience. The English pantomime is a unique theatre genre that only really exists in the United Kingdom. It is extremely popular and every year theatres are completely sold out to an audience of all ages, backgrounds and tastes.

Traditionally, adults take their children to the "Panto" as a Christmas treat but often the adults have the most fun. The mad knockabout comedy of the pantomime, where people are hit but not hurt, where authority is constantly flouted and where fun is poked at everything from past to present, has had a great influence on the well known British "crazy" humour of for instance Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The Pantomime is as English as Fish 'n' Chips and pints of lukewarm beer - and Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without it.

The Origins of the British Pantomime

The most important source of British Pantomime is Commedia dell' Arte, a theatre genre originating in renaissance Italy. Troupes of travelling players working from a basic plot or scenario improvised comedy routines, dialogue and "business". Every company had its own principal player who would introduce his own special routine into every plot. Many famous characters emerged from Commedia dell' Arte such as Harlequin, Columbine and Pierrot.

The use of stock characters and story lines as well as slapstick comedy are essential elements of British Pantomime that go back to Commedia dell 'Arte. So does the emphasis on singing and dancing; originally an effective way for the continental actors to reach their English speaking audience when Commedia dell' Arte crossed the Channel.

The name "Pantomime" was first introduced by John Rich in the 18th century and the genre's status as national cult theatre came in the 19th century with the brilliant comedy "business" of the famous clown Joseph Grimaldi.

An important aspect of pantomime is its ability to adapt, innovate and develop as trends and fashions change. Thus, modern British Pantomime owes a lot to more modern sources of inspiration such as the Music Hall, variety stage and television.

Traditional Elements of the Modern Pantomime

All Pantomimes take as their plot or basic story line a fairy tale, folk tale or fable. This story line has to be well told and incorporate the all-important element of good battling against evil and defeating it in the end. Favourite tales are *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, *Dick Whittington* (the story of the Lord Mayor of London), *Snow White*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Babes in the Wood (Hansel and Gretel* - often combined with *Robin Hood*) and *Sleeping Beauty*. Once a pantomime writer has chosen his story line he has to include into his manuscript as many as possible of the following traditional pantomime elements:

The Principal Boy
Traditionally, the principal boy was always a girl. Now, the trend changes between girls and famous male actors or pop stars playing the part. The traditional idea of a girl playing the boy came from the Music Hall and since the girls dressed in shorts and boots, it was very popular with the male audience in Victorian times when even piano legs were covered. Today the principal boy needs long legs, a good singing voice and a strong comedy talent for those clown and slapstick scenes with the Dame.

The Principal Girl
The principal girl is the pretty romantic heroine - singing, dancing and in love. She is often saved by the principal boy and she always marries him in the end.

The Dame
The Dame is always a man! Traditionally, Dames were music hall performers but now they are usually well known comedians. The Dame is never feminine in any way but she always tries to be. She is quite obviously a man in drag with costumes that are outrageously crazy and sometimes parody the fashions of the day. She is, with very few exceptions, a goodie full of warmth and comedy and always looking for a husband. Essentially, the Dame is a clown.

The Villain
The villain is always nasty, mean and horrible beyond belief. He is rude - particularly to the audience who boo him at any given opportunity. He sometimes sees the error of his ways and agrees to be good in the end. Sometimes his punishment is to marry the Dame. He is an essential character that the audience love to hate.

The Immortals
There should be a good and/or bad fairy. They usually appear in a puff of smoke, speak in verse and keep the story going with their various magic skills. The fairies take sides in the plot and sometimes rival each other using the humans as pawns. They appear in green and pink spotlights respectively.

The Double Act or Comedy Characters

To increase the fun, the pantomime often has two comedy characters that provide additional clowning. They are often the villain's stupid assistants, two policemen, two robbers etc.

There is also one comedy character with whom the audience is supposed to identify, like the unnoticed admirer, Buttons, in Cinderella, a sad clown resembling the Charlie Chaplin character who is the most sympathetic in the pantomime.

The Pantomime Animal

Every pantomime has its animal, the larger ones being represented by two people inside an animal costume. This allows for a lot of comedy "business" where the two pairs of legs get mixed up or even stay in perfect timing for a graceful dance.

The Slapstick Scene

There is always one scene in the pantomime that has nothing at all to do with the plot but all to do with laughs. Usually it gets these the easiest way possible - throwing custard pies, splashing water etc. Whatever the scene may be, the keyword is slapstick not subtlety.

The Song Sheet

The song sheet is yet another element of the pantomime's indispensable audience participation. The audience sing along to some very well known or very silly song. Other elements of audience participation are the "hissing and booing" of the villain, the cheering of the hero and the various shouts of "Oh yes he did" and "Oh no he didn't" throughout the play.

The Transformation Scene

In the big well-equipped theatres, the transformation scene allows the designer or director to create a visual feast for the audience. It often takes place just before the interval, for instance, when Jack is about to climb the beanstalk, the whole scenery begins to move and Jack seems to climb higher and higher into the sky towards the strange kingdom if the giant. The audience are meant to just sit back and be amazed.

For more information about British Pantomime (and a guide to shows around Britain this year) try these links:

- http://www.its-behind-you.com/
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantomime
- http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/bates002.html
- http://www.bigpantoguide.co.uk/links.php