Are you heading to the pantomime this Christmas season? Caroline Roope lifts the curtain on this traditional form of great British entertainment.
The writer and caricaturist Max Beerbohm called pantomime “the only art-form invented by the British”. However, pantomime actually originated as an import from the street theatre of Italy and France. The *commedia dell’arte* were improvised performances featuring a cast of mischievous figures – Harlequin, Pantaloon, Scaramouche, Pierrot and Columbine. The pantomime characters we recognise today all have their roots in this band of misfits. By the early 18th century these performances had reached British shores, and the characters of the *commedia* were appearing on the London stages where they mimed classical stories to music, accompanied by slapstick, magic tricks and comedy brawls. One of the most notable early Harlequins was John Rich, who in 1717 joined with Drury Lane dancing-master John Weaver to produce the first ‘Harlequinades’.

**Classless Appeal**

In the 18th century theatres were the main source of entertainment and patronised by thousands of people, from aristocrats to lowly apprentices. The 1737 Theatre Licensing Act restricted the use of dialogue in performance to two theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, but the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act abolished this monopoly and the Harlequinades were given linguistic freedom. Soon the rhyming couplets, puns and topical comments – devices that we recognise in panto today –

*The Pantomime of Harlequin* Hogarth, performed in Drury Lane at Christmas, c1851
were all deployed, to the delight of audiences. The Act allowed for the growth of many large suburban theatres, with some of the music hall venues taking the opportunity to become legitimate theatres. By creating established venues for dramatic performance, every town and city with a theatre was vying for audiences. The Illustrated London News remarked about a performance in 1849: “The audience was respectable as well as numerous, and the evening passed off without the slightest disturbance. It was composed of the class who could afford to be wise as well as merry.” This wasn’t always the story, however, as the Penny Illustrated Paper observed in January 1862: “The throng was further augmented by an army of those shabby nondescripts... it is beyond the power of the pen to enumerate in sequence due the exploits of the gallery; how many pots of porterware consumed – how many oranges were chucked into the pit – how many fights were begun...”

Harlequinades began to incorporate traditional English folk stories like Dick Whittington and Robin Hood. Folk tales and stage in Convent Garden as early as 1788, although it wasn’t until 1813 that the story entered the regular repertoire.

The Golden Age
The use of song and satire allowed the growth of ‘extravaganza’, a parody where a well-known piece of theatre would be adapted into a broad comic play, incorporating dance, fantastical scenery, sets and costumes. The golden age of panto had begun.

In the early part of the 19th century the character of the Clown begun to appear alongside the Harlequin as a foil for his magic and tricks. When Mother Goose was performed to great critical acclaim in 1807, with Joseph Grimaldi’s ‘Clown’ taking centre stage, the audiences were thrilled by his anarchic antics. He embodied a fantasy world where authority and political repression were challenged. Grimaldi was hailed as a pantomime star, and we can attribute certain slapstick elements of panto today to the comedic devices he himself used. The Dame role also originated with Grimaldi, a character that took root as the 19th century progressed. In performance terms the Dame was an unexpected star, with her haggard appearance, eccentric costume and downtrodden persona. From the

Joseph Grimaldi 1778–1837
The life of the greatest star in pantomime’s history was full of dramatic contrasts

Born in Holborn as the illegitimate son of an immigrant, Grimaldi came from a great theatrical dynasty that could be traced back to his great grandfather. His father was a ballet master, and his mother a dancer. With such a pedigree, it was little wonder that his first stage appearance was at the age of two, appearing as fairies, gnomes and dwarves. In 1812 Grimaldi played the part of Queen Ronabellyana in Harlequin and the Red Dwarf, which has been hailed as the birth of the pantomime Dame. Despite his on-stage clown persona, Grimaldi’s life was marked by sadness, including the death of his first wife in childbirth. Grimaldi was a Regency celebrity and renowned as the ‘King of the Clowns’. Since 1946, clowns have gathered annually in London to attend a memorial service for him. In 1967 permission was given for those attending to do so in full clown regalia. As Grimaldi’s first biographer, Charles Dickens, remarked, “the genuine droll, the grimacing, filching, irresistible clown, left the stage with Grimaldi, and though often heard of, has never been seen since”.

The Babes in the Wood, here staged c1875, began as a 16th-century broadside ballad
late 1860s music hall performers began to be cast in pantomimes, bringing their own star quality and devoted followers with them. One particular former music hall star, Dan Leno, brought empathy to the role and the character was reimagined as a working-class mother facing problems such as loneliness, poverty and unemployment in a world of chaos and mishaps.

**Stars On Stage**  
Music hall performers were often given their own ‘star turn’, much to the delight of audiences. Lottie Collins’s *Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay* was performed as the ‘show-stopper’ at the Grand Theatre’s 1891 production of *Dick Whittington*. The Theatre Royal in Drury Lane brought Leno and ‘Queen of the Music Hall’ Marie Lloyd together in pantomimes between 1891 and 1893. Stars such as Vesta Tilley, a renowned male impersonator, brought with them the music hall convention of gender-switching and crossdressing.

Up until the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 pantomimes were not specifically a Christmas entertainment, nor were they aimed at children. Victoria’s marriage in 1840 encouraged a fashion for family life, and Christmas was transformed into the children’s festival that we recognise today. The romance of Christmas was promoted through the introduction of Christmas cards, decorations and trees, as well as by writers such as Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll. Playwrights tapped into this phenomenon, creating magical fairy stories for a family audience of all classes, and the traditional Christmas pantomime was born.

It was not uncommon for children from the poorer classes and institutions to benefit from the philanthropy of others via a visit to the pantomime as a Christmas treat. The *London Daily News* reported in an article headlined ‘Poor Children at the Pantomime’ in 1882 that “most of the little folk were in the ordinary clothing of poor people’s children,” yet “it may be safely said that never yet did a pantomime company play to an audience more willing to be pleased.”

The 87-second British Pathé short *Children Queuing for the Pantomime* (1923) shows a similar charitable experience, with children waving banners declaring “Through the kindness of the public”; you can watch this film for free online at bit.ly/queue-panto.

**Entertaining The Children**  
Children were often given their own ‘juvenile nights’ – the *Brighton Gazette* in 1858 declared: “Mr Nye Chart has announced a juvenile night for tomorrow (Friday), when doubtless the house will be well-attended by a genuine pantomime audience, groups of merry, laughing, happy children.” The expansion of the railways as the century progressed made travel easier, bringing vast new audiences into towns and cities. The *Daily Mail* in 1897 stated: “Hundreds of thousands spent their holiday in the company of sweet Cinderellas, pretty Red Riding Hoods, diverting Babes in the Wood and droll ‘robbers’, ‘uncles’ and other denizens of pantomime-land.”

Audience participation has played a large part in pantomime’s enduring popularity. The art form’s absurdity depends on the audience enjoying the knowledge that all is not what it seems – that the Dame isn’t really a woman, and the Principal Boy is a woman in tights. This complicity extends to the expectation that the audience will intermittently shout, sing and comment on the action. These traditions have their roots in Grimaldi’s performances of the early 19th century, where audiences were encouraged to join in with his hit song *Hot Codlins* (apples). They would shout “Gin!” at the end, only for Grimaldi to reply reproachfully, “Oh! For shame.” The more...
raucous performances given by the music hall stars also encouraged a more boisterous response from the audience, who were accustomed to a certain level of repartee. The exchange “Oh no he isn’t” / “Oh yes he is” has become synonymous with panto, although it is unclear where the tradition started.

Royal Sing-Song

Even members of the Royal Family have participated. A Birmingham Daily Gazette article from January 1934 tells of the young Princess Elizabeth “leading 3000 children and grown-ups in singing ‘Oh, we all went up the mountain’ at the Lyceum’s production of Queen of Hearts”. The predictability of pantomime and what is expected of its audience is one of the reasons that it has endured.

The transition to a format that a modern-day audience would recognise was completed in the years following the First World War, and by the mid-1940s many of the characteristic features of Victorian pantomime had evolved into the performance style we see today. The art form’s ability to draw strength from its traditions as well as incorporate elements of the here and now have ensured its longevity. What else in society could be so unashamedly eccentric, garish, chaotic and absurd, yet still retain our ongoing affection?

The story of Ali Baba has been a popular pantomime subject since the 19th century.

Resources

Take your research further

Archives

British Library
a 96 Euston Road, London
NW1 2DB
t 0330 333 1144
w bl.uk/catalogues/evanion
Its Evanion Collection focuses on Victorian entertainment.

University of Kent
a Special Collections,
Templeman Library,
University of Kent,
Canterbury CT2 7NU
t 01227 827138
w bit.ly/kent-drummond
View the David Drummond Pantomime Collection here.

Books

A History of Pantomime
by Maureen Hughes
Pen & Sword History, 2013
Read a comprehensive background to pantomime.

Pantomime: A Story in Pictures
by Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson
Peter Davies, 1973
This book covers the history of pantomime until the 1950s.

Museum

Victoria and Albert Museum
a Cromwell Road, London
SW7 2RL
t 020 7942 2000
w vam.ac.uk
V&A collections include musical theatre and pantomime.

Websites

British Newspaper Archive
w britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk
The BNA holds digital records of millions of newspaper pages, including pantomime reviews.

The Victorian Web
w victorianweb.org
This online encyclopaedia includes music and theatre.