

Pantomime, also called Panto, is a form of theatre that is popular in the United Kingdom and is often produced around Christmas, though there are other times it is produced and it has been becoming popular to have pantomime year round. While most people understand the definition of pantomime to be that of miming where a person doesn't talk and communicates only in actions, this is another definition of pantomime in which it is a theatrical entertainment full of comedy and other outlandish fun. The shows are usually based on a fairy tale, so there is a solid story line, though the shows can differ depending on the company or troupe mounting these plays. Some people say that pantomimes are for children, but they are actually aimed at the entire family. There's lots of comedy, drama, audience participation, and more.



The name of pantomime for this theatrical art form and the word pantomime that means to mime likely come from the same movements in history. Ancient pantomime from Rome was a dance performance from a silent performer known as a pantomimus. The pantomimus was a silent dancer and the outfits worn were made to accentuate the dance movements. Sometimes there was a pantomimus in Comedia dell'Arte. However, rather than being known as a pantomimus, this silent dancer was known as a harlequinade.

It is thought that Victorians are the ones who made sure that pantomime continued from its early days. This is because in the theatre, they got to dress up rather than wear the drab Victorian clothing. This is combined with the characteristics of Christmas mumming where heavily disguised characters perform a play based on the story of St. George and the Dragon.

Pantomimes (pantos) usually have certain types of characters. These characters are a principal girl, a principal boy, a dame, a good fairy, and a villain or a demon. However, pantos may add, subtract, or change characters. The practices of pantomime dames (their costumes can be compared to clowns and to drag queens as they tend to be purposefully colorful and outlandish) usually being played by male identifying actors goes back to Shakespeare and principal boys being played by female identifying actors goes back to the Victorian era. For a long time, it was thought that it was illegal for females to be on stage during Shakespeare's life. There is some research that says that there may have been some females that acted. However, even if they did, it was not common. Thus, males had to play female parts in Shakespeare's plays. Even once females were allowed to act, people realized that it was funny to have males play female roles, especially when exaggerated. The female playing the principal boy (who is usually the hero) goes back to producers realizing that if a girl played a boy in a pantomime, that the usual social rules of the Victorian era that a female had to cover every part of her body with clothing wouldn't apply. A woman being a principal boy meant that the woman could show off a bit of leg or a bit of chest. In order to show off a bit of leg, when the principal boy does something heroic or has a good idea, he slaps his thigh.

The audience participation is a lot of shouting phrases to the actors on the stage. If an actor says, "Oh no, I'm not," the audience shouts back, "Oh, yes you are!" Another important part of audience participation is the ghost gag where a ghost appears behind the actors, but the actors don't realize the ghost is there and the audience has to yell, "It's behind you!" The actors don't tend to realize that the ghost is there even after the audience yells, so the audience has to yell louder. The ghost removes the actors off the stage one by one as each actor doesn't believe the audience yelling, "It's behind you!" This comes from Giuseppe Grimaldi, the father of Joseph Grimaldi who is considered one of the most famous pantomime clowns. It is thought that it was because Giuseppe (who wasn't a very nice person, but was a popular clown), got confused when he got ill as he got older and he would be scared of the grim reaper. To scare him, people on the street would pretend that the grim reaper was behind him and yell, "It's behind you!"

Even though panto is unique to British culture, it is finding its way into more countries. There have been pantos in Southern California, Southeast Texas, Thailand (ramayana) and Andorra for certain. It has probably been performed in more places. The reason that panto endures is that it always adapts with modern culture and ideals to where it can have fun with audiences so the family fun entertainment can stay around.

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