

# What is Pantomime?

In the British theatre, pantomime is a Christmas or New Year entertainment. Like Punch and Judy, Harlequinade and the French tradition of mime, its origins can be traced back to the 16th and 17th century Italian improvised comic drama called the commedia dell'arte.

Growing out of the harlequin spectacle of the 18th century and the burlesque of the 19th, pantomime retained such elements as an actress playing the part of principal boy and an actor playing the dame. Many of the plots were based on folk tales collected and retold by the French writer Charles Perrault. His book 'Mother Goose's Fairy Tales' published in 1697 included classic stories like Puss in Boots, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Red Riding Hood.

As pantomimes used these stories more and more the role of Harlequin diminished until he disappeared. New elements were added to the mix of slapstick and double entendre. Popular songs, topical humour and satire found their way into the script as did audience participation and guest appearances by popular entertainers of the day.

Nowadays, people will try to tell you that panto is for children. Then they'll attempt to emasculate the script, commenting that the baddies are too frightening, witches are unchristian and the jokes are too naughty. Rumour has it that one group even produced, 'Snow White and the Seven Persons of Diminished Stature'! Well, pantomime has never been politically correct and the writers & performers of this years Embassy production entertained us all admirably.

Some of the comedy routines have become traditional. We've no idea who first performed them but they are eagerly awaited by audiences who know them just as well as do the performers. Most professional scripts leave it up to the director and actors to decide which routines to include and on occasion (thank you Stuart) will encourage the audience to join in!

The Pantomime Dame, usually the hero's mother, such as Widow Twankey, was a creation that emerged from the early Music Halls of the Victorian era. Often the Dame's costumes would be used to good comic



effect by parodying the fashions of the day, (Although Geoff Smiths style of dress was certainly comic, pictured right, I'm not sure that it could ever be described as fashionable!)

Lisa O'Brien played the 'breeches' role to great effect and carried on a tradition established for two hundred years. By the middle of the nineteenth century the vogue for ladies to take on the heroic roles of the lead character was beginning, and with the rise of Music Hall it became the rule. Quite simply, the Victorian male, living in a society where even the legs of the parlour piano were covered for modesty's sake, craved the vision of a well turned calf, or shapely ankle. (Now where could I draw a comparison?)



Above: Jules the genie was rather more genial than the picture above suggests.

Below: Some of the cast gather for well earned break in the sun

## Look behind you

Since space is limited, we can't single out individual performances for specific mention, there were just too many. The entire cast and crew of the Aladdin production deserve a great big pat on the back for entertaining us all.

So what is Panto?... Well, Panto has become a tradition which forces us to laugh at ourselves; in the end though, virtue is rewarded, true love conquers evil and everyone lives happily ever after.... It's terrific!

