

What is a Pantomime?



At Christmas time in Great Britain people go to the theatre to see a special kind of play called a pantomime. The theme is usually a well known fairy story such as Cinderella, Mother Goose or Jack and the Beanstalk. The show always includes music, singing, dancing and jokes. The show often has a very traditional format which includes the following elements:

The Principal Boy

The principal boy is usually played by a female although the role is that of a boy hero. The female playing the principal boy usually dresses in a short tunic accompanied by knee-high leather boots and tights. This tradition has grown out of times when ladies were required to wear ankle length dresses in the street but on stage could show off their legs.

The Principal Girl

The principal girl is nearly always played by the prettiest female in the cast. She is usually called on to sing a solo and always ends up 'living happily ever after' with the principal boy.

The Dame

The pantomime dame, usually the hero's mother such as 'Dame Trott' in Jack and the Beanstalk, was a creation that emerged from the early music halls of the Victorian era. This part is traditionally played by a man dressed as an older, unattractive, fairly common woman, all qualities which she believes she is the exact opposite of. She befriends the two principals early in the story and often ends up 'living happily ever after' either with the principal girl's kindly old widowed father, uncle or guardian. The dame frequently changes her costume which are often very outrageous in looks. The dame's entrances during the show are frequently more extravagant and exaggerated than any other character.

Baddies, Animals and Slapstick

The fairy queen and demon king appear in all pantos although alternative names may be used. They represent good and evil with good always winning over evil at the end of the day. Every memorable pantomime contains a comic horse or other animal played by two actors covered with an animal skin. Slapstick usually involves a comic chase and a fight with custard pies or something equally as messy.

The Chorus

The element of song and dance in Pantomime is extremely important so every show has its chorus of singers and dancers often involving young people and children.

The Plot

The pantomime usually starts in a sea port or a market-place where chorus members wander about singing until the main characters arrive to introduce themselves, some suffering undeserved poverty and others enjoying equally undeserved riches. As the pantomime goes on, the heroes or heroines win their way to riches, weddings and living happily ever after.

Audience Participation

The audience are actively encouraged to boo the villain whenever he enters, argue with the dame and warn the principal boy when the villain is behind him, by shouting out, "He's behind you!"

The Future

A visit to a pantomime may be a child's first experience of live theatre. If that experience is magical enough it can leave a lasting impression and help the tradition to continue.

What is a Pantomime?

Section A

Choose the best word or group of words to fit the passage and put a ring around your choice.

A pantomime is a special kind of play performed at Christmas. It is usually based on a

- 1 **true** **fictional** **fairy** **adventure**

story such as Cinderella. The principal boy is usually played by a

- 2 **child.** **boy.** **girl.** **dog.**

The principal girl has to sing a

- 3 **song.** **nursery rhyme.** **solo.** **karaoke.**

The dame is usually a man dressed as a

- 4 **camel** **horse** **woman** **man**

and is usually the hero's mother. Good and evil are represented by the fairy

- 5 **queen** **godmother** **king** **grandmother**

and the demon king. The audience are encouraged to boo the

- 6 **dame** **king** **horse** **villain**

whenever he enters and warn the principal if "He's behind you!"

Section B

- 1 When do people in Great Britain go to see pantomimes?

- 2 Who acts the role of the 'boy hero'?

- 3 What does the dame traditionally look like?

- 4 The dame's costume is described as 'outrageous in looks'. What does this mean?

- 5 Who always wins the battle between good and evil in a pantomime?

- 6 What does the term 'slapstick' refer to?

- 7 What do the phrases 'undeserved poverty' and 'undeserved riches' mean?

- 8 How are audiences encouraged to be part of the pantomime?

- 9 What do you understand by the term 'live theatre'?

Section C

What is a film? Write a short explanation describing exactly what a film is, for someone from a distant country who has never seen one before.