

## Oh No It Isn't: A History of Pantomime by Pete Allen 13 November 2021

From the back-end of a Pantomime Cow to a professional Theatre Director, Pete Allen has a wealth of theatrical experience. Here are a few highlights from his whistle-stop tour of Pantomime from its origins in ancient Greece up to the modern day. It was well illustrated with posters albeit they tested my ability to recognise faces or remember names. However, the variety of costumes gave a good indication of pantomime characters.

In ancient times popular entertainment was based on (erotic?) stories communicated by means of dance, movement and song and probably masks. Hence performances were relatively independent of language, making it suitable for troupes travelling all parts of the Roman Empire.

Skip now to the Middle Ages in England where mystery plays were enjoyed, along with dancing either round the maypole or, more daringly, while masked. Meanwhile in Italy the 'Commedia dell'arte' or 'Comedy of the Profession' emerged. These comedies all followed the same sort of pattern usually with three types of character, the good, the wicked and the innamorato. Most noticeably the slapstick became a permanent feature where an actor could slap someone with the stick making a resounding noise while the victim felt little pain! An Italian character called Pulcinella later evolved as the English puppet Mr. Punch who arrived in this country with his wife and slapstick in 1662.



Harlequin with his slapstick

An important character was Harlequin who could be described as a comic servant. He was easily recognised by his chequered costume and slapstick. The name Harlequin had first appeared in 1262 and later became a stock character in French Passion plays. He eventually arrived in London in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and gave rise to the Harlequinade, very popular comic acts which followed after the main programme. Harlequin and Clown were the main characters getting into all sorts of predicaments. This was the birth of Pantomime as we know it today. Grimaldi, a famous Clown became the first ever pantomime Dame. He encouraged audience interaction with his, 'Shall I?' and his well-known 'Here we are again!'



Joseph Grimaldi as CLOWN with his own design face make-up

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fairy stories and Grimms Tales started being used as themes for many pantomimes. One notable innovation came in 'Jack and the Beanstalk' when a girl played the part of the principle boy for the first time. On entry, she deliberately slapped her thigh to draw attention to her shapely leg and well-turned ankle! Strictly speaking 'Peter Pan' is not a pantomime. I think it is because there is no character for a Dame.



Jack and the Beanstalk with girl as principle boy

Gradually, to maintain the popularity of Pantomime it became the habit to engage celebrities and stars in the cast such as Cliff Richards. But musicals, such as My Fair Lady etc., took over causing the professional pantomimes to retreat to the provinces.

However, it is the amateur pantomimes that continue to flourish in village halls everywhere every winter, usually Christmas. In Australia it's July.