

Channel Five

Pantomimes are usually associated with Christmas and that is certainly their peak period, but pantos go on being performed long into the New Year, often as late as April or early May. This is one reason why it is still worth stopping to think about the pantomime phenomenon in February.

It is a phenomenon. Pantomime is about the nearest theatre can get to being a mass popular form. Though more people will have watched Cilia's Christmas Eve show on TV than will see her in *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the Birmingham Hippodrome in the whole of its run, still something like the number who watched her on TV will see a pantomime of some sort in the course of the year. And given the formulaic nature of pantomime, this means that it is an experience of live entertainment shared on a mass scale throughout the population, putting it nearly in the same league as football.

There are two sorts of professional pantomime. There are the long running shows in the large commercial theatres, usually involving several spectacular changes of scenery and starring big names from television and pop music — Les Dawson in *Cinderella* at Wolverhampton, John Inman in *Mother Goose* at the Alexandra, Birmingham, Dana as *Snow White* in London. These stars are often backed up by performers who work mainly in clubs and seaside variety. Dames in particular are often drawn from this source — Lambert and Ross as the Ugly Sisters in Wolverhampton, Wyn Calvin as Jack's mother at the Hippodrome, Birmingham and so on. Then there is usually also a sprinkling of speciality acts, jugglers, acrobats, puppeteers, dancers, conjurers, and nearly always a troupe of little girls recruited from local dancing school.

This is the most familiar kind of pantomime, and it is generally the one that purists bemoan. Commentators have spoken of a revival of pantomime this year — but the big pantos of the kind just described are no more nor no less than in previous years. When people speak of a revival, what they mean is productions of pantomimes that come closer, it is supposed, to what pantomimes were like before they degenerated into a string of star turns, speciality acts and vulgar set-pieces. The 'revived' pantomime is the province of the repertory theatres, and the talk of revival has been boosted because the main London rep, the National Theatre, has put on *Cinderella* this year. Rep pantos are often advertised as 'traditional, and these

PANTO PANTO

Richard Dyer



days who says 'traditional' means 'Victorian'. The virtues of the traditional pantomime are thus a clear-cut morality, fidelity to the story and above all a commitment to pantomime as entertainment for children.

It seems to me questionable just how much of a virtue these qualities are. Purists like the clear-cut morality because it gets away from the use of stars like Les Dawson or Danny La Rue who introduce an unsavoury note into the proceedings. Yet the morality of some of the panto stories is itself dubious. Is it so very admirable to base a story, as does *Cinderella*, around female aspirations seen in terms of rejecting people of your own class (Buttons) and relentless mockery of those who don't fit the social norms of attractiveness (the Ugly Sisters)? What is so very wonderful about Dick Whittington's entrepreneurial capitalism based on quasi-imperialist exploit-

ation? Given these kinds of plot line, there is something splendidly corrosive about Les Dawson's relentlessly glum and vulgar presence amid the tatty pretty-pretty of *Cinderella*.

Respect for the story means no interruptions, inconsistencies, incoherencies. The special advantage of pantomime however is that you don't need to bother too much about the story. The fact that most children know the story backwards before they go to a show means that you don't need to worry about the telling of it. This can be a rich source of by-play with the audience. When I saw *Jack and the Beanstalk*, a child in the audience was endlessly shouting out the information that Cilia Black as Jack was just about to impart, interruptions that both tested her professional skill at repartee and improvisation and caught audience and cast in a recognition of the fun of play-acting and story-telling both were engaged in.

Equally the very rigid formulaic nature of pantomime makes it a gift for schools, churches and any other organisations — party branches, trade unions, women's groups, left theatre groups — as an extraordinarily malleable form that can be used to say and include anything without becoming incomprehensible. Any amount of local or political reference can be put in, masses of in-jokes (as long as they're in with the audience and not just the cast) and topical references. This slack, open quality of panto can be an excuse for rehearsing on the audience, the cast merely joking among themselves, the whole thing merely a mess. But at its best — in Droitwich High School's *Little Red Riding Hood*, for instance — it is the occasion for a quite astonishing range of reference, a real richness of association linking familiar school figures (the teachers), the wider community (Droitwich and around) and pop culture (as in the sudden appearance of Batman, Spiderman, Superman et al) all secured in place by the familiarity of the underlying tale.

Panto is about interruption, boisterousness, a sharing in *making* believe. When you boo at the villain, when you go 'aah' about Cinders' rejection of Buttons, when you watch Jack climb the beanstalk by clinging on to a bit of scenery, you both believe and don't believe that its 'real', you knowingly join in that great capacity of the human mind that no-one really seems to understand, that of pretending.

I've been looking so far at the arguments levelled against the big commercial pantos

by the champions of traditional (and respectable) pantomime. For a long time, pantomime has also been despised on the Left (if it's been thought about at all). Analyses of the stories, of the heavy handed kind demonstrated above, have usually been the main objection to pantomime. This seems a pity. Pantomime's love of interruptions, sudden switches of mood, gaps in the story and so on make it, at the level of form, one of the few kinds of grassroots Brechtian theatre that survives. Besides, are the stories so irredeemable for socialist and feminist entertainment?

Two aspects of the stories seem particularly vulnerable to left criticism. One is that all pantos are about acquisitiveness (a cardinal traditional/Victorian virtue), about the desire for and getting of wealth. Socialists have always been unhappy about wealth, because in our society wealth for some invariably means poverty for others. Yet the dream of freedom from want, of luxuriating in the sensuousness that material well-being can bring—there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. Given how many pantoplots rely upon luck and magic as the source of wealth, and that characters like Aladdin

and Jack are very clearly representatives of the people who could be shown sharing their good fortune . . . OK, they aren't usually shown sharing it, they hang on to their wealth for themselves and the chorus of villagers from scene one become flunkies and maids in waiting in the finale. But the point is that this is not necessary, the story could be inflected differently without any loss of spectacle or pleasure.

The second forceful objection to panto focuses on the dame and the principal boy. These seem like the very heartland of sexism. The dame is every grotesque and morbid projection of male ideas about women, the principal boy a lifeless character whose main function is to show her legs to the dads in the audience. This is how they generally are, but not the only way they need be or indeed always are. In the charming *Aladdin* at Redditch, the dame earnest times as close to being a non-sexist dame (while still being very funny) as I've seen. Little of his humour focused on questions of her appearance, the usual obsession of most dame's humour; much of his humour dealt with the problems of being a widow, the difficulties of shopping in Redditch and so on; the fact

that it was a man communicating this about women suggested that what the jokes were about were the social position of women, not their 'nature'; and the audience loved her, as they do most dames — she is a positive figure in popular imagery.

As for the principal boy (who is quite often played by a man now, as in Redditch's rather Blue Peter-ish *Aladdin*), 'he' can be nothing but a pair of fish-net stockings, but again doesn't have to be. The principal boy is the ultimate tomboy, a strong female identification figure for the audience. It is really something to see Cilia as Jack fight and defeat macho Gareth Hunt at the Giant's wicked henchman. We know Jack (or Dick, or Sinbad, or whoever) is a boy and it is boys who do things like that; but we know also that the person up there on stage is a woman and it is she who is being vigorous and splendid and heroic.

As with so much popular culture, the potential is there in panto to be used and developed by socialists and feminists. We need to respect its pleasures, especially its less respectable ones, to get inside them and make them our own. Entertainment is too serious to be left to the Right.