

## **An exploration of the extent to which British pantomime might make a social or cultural intervention in the wider world.**

On first inspection, pantomime appears to provide an archetypal example of mainstream British theatre. The assimilation of a previously popular culture into the heart of the establishment with the sole purpose of economic success through the use of entertainment, pantomime appears to offer none of the ingredients of what could be described as radical or alternative theatre.

And yet, particularly in terms of poetics, its roots in popular culture still exist. Pantomime as we know it now may not bear any resemblance to its origins within popular culture in the middle ages and the influence of Commedia Del'Arte, but a study of its past reveals a heritage of carnivalesque, mimicry and, latterly, music hall are still evident today. And, in terms of fundamentals, as a genre there are clear resemblances to Brecht's epic theatre.

One of the features of Brecht was that, for the most part, he chose to work within the mainstream theatre establishment, despite remaining critical of its output, political leanings and impact on its audience. As John McGrath put it when discussing Brecht and Erwin Piscator

"The point is that both worked within a hierarchical commercial theatre structure and did so by choice...both Brecht and Piscator, in spite of professions to the contrary and occasional unsuccessful attempts to change things, were committed to working within the Berlin smart bourgeois theatre, albeit as 'oppositional forces'"

Peter Brooker captures the essence of Brecht's view of "bourgeois theatre" neatly:

"Just as, in one way, Brecht sees the theatre as a cultural institution which absorbs and neutralises innovative work so as to produce the merchandise of an evenings entertainment as befits a capitalist society, so at another level the drama of illusion is seen to reinforce the ideology necessary to this society."

Or perhaps Brecht felt that the battle for social change was best fought from within, rather than outside of the establishment. Whatever his motives, this positioning within the mainstream theatre bears a resemblance to pantomime's place in relation to the rest of UK theatre. And although there is no suggestion that pantomime has placed itself in this context in order to more effectively bring about social change, it does offer the opportunity or potential for the genre to work from the inside of the establishment, should it wish to make an intervention.

Mark Ravenhill's pantomime, *Dick Whittington and his Cat*, shown at the Barbican in December 2006, is an example of a relatively radical playwright using the genre of pantomime within the mainstream theatre business to poke fun at the ruling classes. For example in Act two, in spite of it being a 14th century period piece, the current queen is shown being squirted mercilessly with water by the three shopkeepers. Ravenhill's production, whilst being squarely aimed at family entertainment and remaining true to the traditions of the genre, was sharp, caustic and satirical.

However, in terms of the potential it offers to subvert, the overwhelming evidence is that pantomime is placed within the mainstream theatre family, albeit as a distant "mad cousin" because it makes money. As a result the scale of the pantomime business has grown enormously. This from Nick Awde writing in *The Stage*:

"It is perhaps impossible to estimate the number of shows each season". *The Stage* alone has nearly 350 professional productions listed here for 2006/7, whilst the total of amateur and school productions is many times that."

Awde goes on to describe the financial dependency that the theatre has on pantomime:

"Panto has also helped save venues from complete or partial closure, including some end of pier theatres facing slumps in their summer shows. The knock-on effect is clear as producers and venues plough profits not only into the next Christmas show but also into the rest of the year's regional theatre programming"

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Having established that the prime motivation for the vast majority of pantomimes is financial, it might seem unusual to explore the potential of the genre in relation to a social and cultural intervention, and the prospect of a comparison with the intentions for theatre of the professed Marxist playmaker, Brecht, would appear to border on the ridiculous. However it was our work in the module on Brecht and the epic theatre that stimulated me to consider the potential of pantomime as a theatre for change, particularly in terms of its poetics, and it is these I would like to explore first.

It is worth documenting at the outset that it is not my thesis to suggest pantomime is a form of epic theatre. Brecht's succinct description of epic theatre, as translated by John Willett, requires only cursory analysis to confirm that pantomime falls well short of his ambitions for the genre:

"The essential point of epic theatre is that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things".

It is at the component level of epic theatre that certain similarities arise with pantomime. By breaking down some of the elements of epic theatre, as Brecht has done in numerous documents, it is my contention that there are a number of ingredients already in place within pantomime, such that the genre could be deployed relatively straightforwardly to make an intervention, if its makers so desired. It is not my concern here to argue for or against the motivations of pantomime makers, past or present, merely to identify elements of the genre that are congruent with the praxis of epic theatre, as defined by Brecht.

If we start by examining the alienation effect, *verfremdungseffekt*, John Willett could have been describing pantomime when he described Brecht's philosophy on it:

"Almost from the outset of his career as a writer his instinct was to shatter illusion and stop the reader or spectator from getting swept away by the story, characters, the actors who represented them on stage, and/or the naturalistic devices with which the stage set out to make their representation truly life-like."

Leaving aside the question of why Brecht had this intention, for we have already established that pantomime is not motivated by the same political influences; my argument is that Pantomime's poetics and form are likely to encourage the same response from an audience. The audience is never expected to believe in the story, or that the man dressed as the dame is a woman, or that the outsized props are realistic. These are devices that alienate the audience, albeit perhaps unwittingly, from any empathic tendencies.

As a further example, Brecht's epic theatre uses gestic music as a device for separating episodic strands and to bring variety. Where as Aristotelian or dramatic theatre, such as most musicals, use music to add to the cathartic effect, in epic theatre it is used to break up the action, much as it does in pantomime. As Brecht notes:

"So called cheap music, particularly that of the cabaret and the operetta, has for some time been a sort of gestic music"

Where the comparison ends is in the content of the music, with Brecht using music to accentuate the contradictions his characters face, in contrast to pantomime which uses music far more frivolously.

There are numerous other examples of pantomime's similarity with components of epic theatre, for instance the absence of the fourth wall, the use of an opening monologue; however the comparison breaks down at a political level, and in particular when considering criticality. Whereas Brecht required his company to become critically engaged in the subject of their play, and to grapple with the same contradictions being presented to the audience, a pantomime company appears almost solely concerned with attracting customers and giving them a good time. How much do pantomime casts understand about the history of their form and what it represents? 'Good' enters from right but does the fairy herself know why? Mark Ravenhill explores this to an extent in *Dick Whittington and his Cat*, for example in his characterisation of 'evil', King Rat, as a much more human, three-dimensional figure; but this is an exception.

The poetics of pantomime are quite neatly described by Millie Taylor, in summarising her article for *New Theatre Quarterly* in 2005, writes:

"Finally, an image is presented of a stage that is fun, anarchic, sometimes hard work (references to the number of performances), and in which the performers are spontaneous and witty, but also just ordinary people like the audience members. Revealing the world of performance draws the audience into this world – the world of pantoland is also a construct, a fiction, but it provides an experience of involvement in the illusion through which the real performer is revealed."

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The notion of audience, totally aware of the fictional construct, held at a distance from the narrative but drawn into an active involvement into the chaotic proceedings chimes well with Brecht's intentions for epic theatre. If this offers hope for pantomime in the future as a vehicle for social change, however, tradition and particularly content seem to be forces pulling in the opposite direction.

Of the 350 professional pantomimes put on the stage this season, over 10% tell the story of Cinderella and a similar number feature Aladdin. Whilst both of these tales provide the opportunity for socio-political commentary – clashes of class, child neglect and misrule – re-telling of these stories seem hamstrung by the conventions and traditions of the genre. Certainly if the Nuffield Theatre production of *The Story of Cinderella* is representative, and I would suggest it is, then no effort is made to use the narrative to raise any questions of a wider social, political or cultural nature.

The Nuffield production of Cinderella was, in my opinion, a classic example of pantomime as nothing more than a money-making cathartic diversion. The script was superficial, the jokes puerile, the cast threadbare and the set predictable. The fifty or so 5-year old children in the audience appeared to enjoy it, but it was devoid of creativity and its sole purpose seemed to be financial. As far as the content went, the production made no attempt to localise or make topical the script, leaving this audience member feeling like I had attended an infant school birthday party.

The majority of pantomime productions are either written or amended for specific local audiences and their topical issues. From Ravenhill at the Barbican discussing congestion charging to my local drama group making jokes about the village pubs, pantomime has shown the potential to create meaning for specific audiences. And yet at the same time it has almost always failed to tackle issues at more than the superficial level. As David Mayer puts it when writing about Victorian pantomime:

“Like popular entertainment today, pantomime easily and confidently documented the everyday trivia of its milieu, but when confronted with more complex issues it became tentative and hesitant.”

Ravenhill satirised congestion charging and free newspapers in London, issues of populist tabloid rants, likely to chime with audiences, rather than explore more profound social issues. For example, the play showed a suspicious outsider (Whittington) arriving in the City of London with a bag on his back and being met with a hostile response from the locals. In the wake of the recent suicide bombings in the capital, this would have made for interesting discourse on the way Londoners now feel about “others”, particularly Muslims, as they come across them in the city.

One of the few exceptions to this trend to document the trivial was seen at the Alhambra theatre, Glasgow in 1960 when three pantomimes were written around the character of Jamie. Pantomime form was combined with, unusually, original and non-traditional narrative. Norman Robbins, writing about it in 2002 noted:

“It contained barbed references to the doings of local councillors and politicians that in today's politically correct times would probably provoke law suits, not to mention several jokes concerning Japan's attack on Imperialist Russia's Baltic Fleet”

One of the features of the Alhambra pantomimes of was the involvement of the local community, both in terms of the content of the play and also the making of it. The process of making a pantomime, particularly an amateur one can be likened, in my opinion, to the making of a community play as described by Ann Jellicoe.

“In other words community plays are a community forming process. Thus theatre is created through community”

Last year I directed and produced a pantomime within my local village community in Broughton. Using a version of *Robinson Crusoe* written by a member of the community, Tony Lydeard, our cast numbered 55, with a similar number working off-stage. Costumes were farmed out to locals to be made, apart from the grass skirts which cast members made themselves with baling twine, and the set was built by the village kitchen maker. We rehearsed and prepared for three months together before putting on four shows to a combined total of 500 people, of which 90% were from the community.

I say this not for self promotion, and certainly there was little in the way of radical theatre on display, but merely to emphasise the way a pantomime can strengthen a community. In a village of 900 people, facing many of the issues of modern rural life such as commuter saturation, threatened closure of services and breakdown of traditional community structures, the annual pantomime project can provide a meaningful cultural intervention. As Jellicoe puts it:

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“The Dorchester Community Plays Association (note the plural) was formed to continue the work. As always the case felt a greatly increased warmth and friendliness towards other people. ‘Any day I go down South Street and say hello to six people I didn’t know before.’ Another put it even more precisely. ‘We greet each other in a different way’ she said, ‘We touch each other’”

In conclusion, there is no doubt that pantomime is principally about making money, and its prosperity within the capitalist system is testimony to this. An ambassador for the genre might argue that it is this financial success that enables theatres to put on more radical plays, but this remains a question for further analysis rather than a contention here.

However, it is my thesis that pantomime has a good deal of potential, from a point of view of its popular appeal, poetics and form, to utilise Brechtian notions of theatre for social transformation. The fact that it does not fulfil this potential in any way other than the most superficial should be, in my opinion a cause for both despair and hope. Despair at the economic straitjacket in which it is held and hope that, as a genre that has always evolved, it will move in this direction in the future. It is my suggestion that if a playwright is looking for the platform of an unlikely genre that offers all the ingredients for theatre capable of social or cultural intervention, then pantomime would be an interesting choice.

The content of pantomimes seems to offer the least evidence of any signs of intervention. Outside of satire, arguably done purely to raise a laugh, it is the adherence to aged Aristotelian stories which does not allow for deeper issue exploration. Any genre that allows lovers to marry across the class divide, outsiders to be boiled in pots and the ruling elite to be routinely assaulted has potential. However, the fixation with happily ever after and its cathartic overtones prevent, in my opinion, a more dialectical enquiry.

The most obvious signs of social or cultural intervention within pantomime today are, as with much popular culture in the past, at the grass roots level in the thousands of shows put on in village halls around the country. At a time when rural life faces a variety of threats I know from personal experience that the process of making a pantomime can help to bond and strengthen community in the way Ann Jellicoe described.

In conclusion, pantomime appears to offer all the ingredients for a form of theatre that could stimulate a cultural or social intervention. The anarchic nature, unconventional form, poetics and particularly the audience involvement suggest a genre well suited to radical theatre. And yet at the same time the genre remains for the most part a pillar of the establishment, a money-making machine prepared to jump on any populist bandwagon to sell more tickets. Is pantomime the most blatant example of the assimilation of a potentially dangerous popular culture into the mainstream, in order to preserve the status quo? Or could the ingredients of the genre, including its unlikely congruence with Brechtian theatre and the spirit of Jellicoe’s community plays, offer a potential vehicle for cultural and social change?

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