

## Background Information about Pantos

Pantomime (panto) plays are a very popular Christmas-season entertainment in Great Britain and, to a limited extent, elsewhere in the world. Thoroughly modern, panto has roots in commedia del'Arte theater (Italy) and Mummers plays. The plays tend to be (very) loosely based on fairy tales and children stories, and are of a rather slap-stick nature.

Some typical features of panto plays:

- A side kick or "chorus" figure: a secondary character on stage who speaks to the audience, encouraging them to shout and clap or comically commenting on the action. In Cinderella that character is Buttons, her father's (Baron Hardup) servant and her friend. In Aladdin it is Wishee Washee, the hero's brother.
- A comedy animal: Many pantos feature a comic animal played by two actors in one costume. In Jack and the Beanstalk, Jack's cow is a Panto cow. If the plot of a story doesn't have a place for an animal, you can be sure that the panto writers will shoehorn one in.
- Lots of audience participation: When you go to a panto in Britain, you can't help but be drawn in to the traditional shouting and carrying on. Villains are hissed, misfortunes are bemoaned and several key lines - "Oh yes it is!" - "Oh no it isn't!" and "He's behind you!" are shouted out by one and all at the appropriate moments.
- Contemporary references and bawdy jokes: Pantos are family shows but there is usually enough innuendo of the nudge-nudge wink-wink variety to keep the grownups happy. Political and social satire are fair game, too.
- The Panto Dame: Often played by a man in drag, the panto dame is a comic, and camp, female character. She's usually an older woman but in Cinderella, the Ugly Sisters are panto dames. In Aladdin (at more than 200 years old, one of Britain's oldest panto stories) it's Aladdin's mother, a poor laundress known as The Widow Twankey. Popular comedians and occasional famous leading actors with a sense of fun often do a winter turn as a panto dame.
- In some pantos, a male juvenile lead may be played by a young woman.
- There may be a silly chase scene.
- A transformation scene: Most pantos have a moment when the set designers bring out their most magical special effects - twinkly lights, disappearing characters, clouds of smoke. Every story has its traditional transformation scene - Cinderella's emergence in her ball gown with her coach and footmen, Aladdin's discovery of the genii in the cave of jewels.