

# Oh no it isn't, oh yes it is!

**Pantomime season is here, with costumes, songs and jokes galore. Where did it all begin?**

This Christmas, you might be lucky enough to be going to a pantomime. The dramatic storylines, bright scenery and costumes, along with lots of singing and dancing, mean that pantomimes are loved by people of all ages. There are well-known jokes and if you've been to a pantomime before, you'll be expecting them. You will probably also get to join in with the rest of the audience, shouting, "It's behind you!" or, "Oh no, it isn't!" We now think of pantomime as a traditional part of Christmas, and going to the pantomime during the festive season is the first time many of us experience the pleasure and excitement of watching a live performance. However, did you know that pantomime actually originated in Europe, hundreds of years ago?

## Once upon a time...



The story of pantomime can be traced back to the 16th century in Italy and France, when small groups of travelling actors performed improvised dramas in marketplaces and fairgrounds. An improvised drama is one that has not been written by a writer but is made up by the actors as they go along. The actors were able to do this because the stories and characters in them were often familiar, although the performers could make up the characters' words and actions. Both the audience and actors would expect the characters to behave in certain often funny ways and the dramas to have particular endings. Groups of actors brought these dramas to England around 1650 and soon, similar comic characters were appearing in English plays. These became the first pantomimes.

During the Victorian era, pantomimes usually opened on Boxing Day and they have been associated with the Christmas period ever since.

**HA, HA!**  
There is a joke that features in the pantomime at the Lyric Theatre every year. The Dame says, "Drumroll, please", and a drum rolls onto the stage.

Ian McKellen as a pantomime dame.



## Fairy tales

Many pantomimes are based on famous fairy tales, such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Cinderella* or *Aladdin*. In pantomimes, good usually triumphs over evil. The world can often seem topsy-turvy at the beginning of a pantomime, but by the end of the story, the good people are usually rewarded and the bad people are punished.



A poster of *Cinderella* from 1875 (left) and a production of *Aladdin* from 1950.



## Q&A with Joel Horwood

The writer Joel Horwood has created a new pantomime version of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, currently showing at the Lyric theatre in Hammersmith, London. He tells us why he loves pantomime so much.



**When did you first see a pantomime?**  
My first pantomime was when I was very little. It was in the local sports centre, in the hall. I remember the sense of craziness, the feeling that for as long as the show was going on, anything could happen.

**What do you think makes a good pantomime?**  
The story has to be clear. I feel like it gives everyone something to cling onto as the silliness really takes off.

**Why do you think people enjoy them?**  
A good panto is all about the audience who watches it. Pantomimes are an interactive experience. If you shout out, then the actors should be able to react to what you do or say.

**Do you have a favourite moment in *Jack and the Beanstalk*?**  
In the original story, I love the part where the goodies are sneaking around and trying not to wake the Giant. The audience watching could give them away at any moment.

**Does making a good pantomime involve lots of different people?**  
Absolutely, it's not just the writer and actors. The designers – who decide on the set and costume, light and sound – play a part in bringing the world and comedy to life, and the directors shape the audience experience.



Fleshcreep from *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

## The characters

In early pantomimes, there was usually a mischievous character called Harlequin who wore a mask; his accomplice the clown Pierrot; and the love interest, Columbine. Today, there are often lots of different characters but these generally include young lovers, a villain and sometimes two people dressed up as a horse. One character who really stands out is the pantomime dame. This is usually a man dressed up as a woman in a bright wig and clown-like make-up. The lead character in a pantomime is often a woman dressed as a man. For example, Faith Omole is playing Jack in *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the Lyric theatre, Hammersmith.

## The greatest clown of all



Joseph Grimaldi

Joseph Grimaldi was a very popular English entertainer in the early 19th century, who would play the clown in pantomimes. The kind of make-up he wore – a painted white face with pink cheeks, curved eyebrows and a bright red mouth – is still used in pantomimes today. Grimaldi's catchphrases were, "Here we are again!" and "Shall I?" – to which his audience would roar, "Yes!" Today, clowns are sometimes called Joeys, after him.



Faith Omole as Jack.