



WINTER FESTIVAL AND THE PANTOMIME

‘Oh yes, he is!’ – ‘Oh no, he’s not!’

The panto and the school play are established traditions and are a great part of the traditional winter festival.

‘The experience of being in the audience when a play or an opera is being performed is not simply passive. Children need to go to the theatre as much as they need to run about in the fresh air.’

Philip Pullman, writer

IDEAS TO EXPLORE WITH YOUR CLASS

THE PANTOMIME



When Abbi and her friends are trying to decide what they will do for the winter concert, they conjure up an image long associated with the pantomime, that of the horse or donkey formed by two people, one at the head and one at the rear end. It is easy to see the possibilities for humour when the two people are in costume and unable to see clearly where they are going or where other characters or objects have been placed on the stage.

The Greeks are thought to have introduced pantomimes after they had such success with their tragedies, which were presented at a major spring festival. They held a separate competition for comedy, which took place at a smaller winter festival, and these comedies were heavily dependent for content on jokes about local politicians and events of the day.

Pantomime, with songs and simple action, was also very popular in ancient Rome.

In England and Ireland, pantomimes have usually been loosely based on traditional folk and/or fairy tales such as 'Puss in Boots', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Dick Whittington and His Cat', and during the nineteenth century pantomimes adapting such stories were hugely popular. As with all fairy tales, there is usually an element of magic, the protagonist must conquer a difficult problem, and, in the end, good overcomes evil. Although pantomimes are now often thought of as purely children's theatre – with their elaborate scenery, music and dancing, slapstick humour where the jokes are often based on physical tricks, and grand scenes – they are still very much part of the traditions and rituals of our winter festival.

TRADITIONS OF THE PANTO

- Ask the children if they have ever been to a pantomime and, if so, what was it called, and if they enjoyed it. Encourage those who have been to a pantomime to say what they liked most/least and to consider how it differs from other theatre they may have seen. The teacher may need to remind children of some of the following more obvious conventions of the panto, before encouraging the children to research the less obvious ones:

1. The leading male character (the 'principal boy') is

usually played by a young woman dressed in male clothing.

2. The 'dame' or older leading female character, often the hero's mother, is often played by a man dressed in female clothing.
3. The audience is always encouraged to participate, by booing the villain and cheering the young leading characters or sympathising with the dame. The audience is also encouraged to call out phrases like 'He's behind you' or 'Oh no, it isn't/Oh yes, it is' and to join in a song near the end of the performance.

RESEARCH WORK: DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

- A variety of pantomime flyers from different theatres could be collected and examined. This might have to be done over a series of weeks, and the children could be encouraged to write letters to the various theatres asking for samples – they could also practise finding the full names and addresses of the theatres by using telephone directories and/or a search engine.
- In groups, the children could examine the text and images on the flyers: What pantomime is the flyer advertising? Who are the main characters shown on the flyer? What can you tell about the show from the flyer? How long does the show run for? How much does it cost to buy a ticket? Based on the information on a particular flyer, would you like to see this panto? Why, or why not? Responses could be recorded and presented in a graph or flipchart page, or simply in an exercise book.
- Ask the children, in groups or individually, to design a flyer for a favourite pantomime, reminding them that they need to make sure they include all the information a person would need if they wished to book tickets. They would also have to choose carefully the character or characters they wished to include on the flyer, and think about the fonts used for the title and other type. Access to computers would greatly enhance the children's understanding of the importance of design and fonts.