DAME: I must say, things have not been easy since I lost my dear husband.

AUDIENCE: Aaaaahhhhh!

DAME: No, they've been harder than that!

AUDIENCE: Aaaaaahhhh!

(Lauchlan 2018, 9-10)

A central character of the traditional British pantomime is, in fact, the audience. The extract above, from Iain Lauchlan's *Snow White* produced by Imagine at the Halifax Victoria Theatre (2018), highlights how the writer weaves the audience's role into the very fabric of the dramaturgy, knowing that they will implicitly respond in a certain way, *sans* rehearsal. Whilst the Oxford English Dictionary assigns to the audience the role of 'giving ear' (OED 1989, I: 77), contemporary British pantomime audiences are not merely passive, simply listening to, or watching, the genre. Tracing certain historical antecedents of the genre from its embryonic roots in 1717, this piece posits that the relationship with its audience ensures they are an integral part of advancing the plot (which concludes with the triumph of good over evil); a crucial participant in comedy routines and call-and-responses, and vocally announcing pleasure or displeasure at the arrival of the 'goodies' or 'baddies'. Yet, this interdependency is structured in a way as to let the audience *feel* they are in control, whereas their part is carefully constructed throughout the writing and rehearsal stages. The following discussion is in part a personal response from the standpoint of my experiences as a director of pantomime, as well as an academic one that draws upon both 'ghosting' and cultural materialism. To this end, I set out some of the implications for practitioners navigating this area, drawing on interviews with current practitioners, including Richard Cheshire, Brian Conley and Gary Wilmot.

For readers not conversant with British pantomime, certain elements of the above opening paragraph may seem alien. A genre in itself, and separate to the gestural language of the French form, pantomime is essentially European, being originally influenced by the dance drama (as opposed to logocentric work) of the *Italian Night Scene*s that visited London from France in the early 18th Century and the stock plot structure and characters

from the Italian *commedia dell'arte.* Gerald Frow's *Oh Yes It Is! A History of Pantomime* (1985) includes a comprehensive overview and I encourage readers not familiar with the genre to begin there. Initially using myths and legends, from the late eighteenth century this changed and fairy and folk tales were drawn upon to provide the fabric of the story. This remains the case, with *Cinderella, Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast* popular titles today. At heart, a pantomime is a family entertainment, with a story of good over evil, and heroes on a quest. There are elements of spectacle, magic, song and dance sequences and lavish slapstick routines, with its plot being driven by outrageous and heightened character archetypes, drawn from the Italian tradition. These include the dame (a man dressed as a woman), the principal boy (a woman dressed as a man) and a 'skin' character which is a performer dressed as an animal, such as the cow in *Jack and the Beanstalk.* Alongside these mortals are the immortals, who can be both good and evil. Immortal characters such as the Fairy Godmother help the heroes to defeat any 'baddie' characters.

The audience is going to write it

Director Anne Bogart states that 'the art of rehearsal is the art of repetition' (2001, 45). Yet how can an audience's responses be repeatedly predicted during the writing and rehearsal phases of pantomime in terms of what they might do? The notion of 'ghosting', whereby the 'present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations' (Carlson 2006, 2), supports the idea that the expectations of responses are embedded within the audience from their prior experiences of the form within the United Kingdom. It can be argued that this intergenerational inheritance is essential. Younger audience members inherit responds from their parents and carers via direct repetition and absorb these tropes by osmosis. As experienced pantomime dame Gary Wilmot argues, 'one thing I know to be absolutely true, is that every pantomime audience knows the rules' (Wilmot, e-mail interview , 2 March 2020). These rules are part of the 'tradition of particular kinds of behaviour [...] that appear to be rooted in particular actions or ways of presentation in the past' (Lewcock 2003, 133). An audience's role becomes an integral ingredient of the experience of the pantomime as it 'conform[s] to the expectations of the genre' (Taylor 2009, 126). An audience may not even know that they are complicit in the co-production of

the material, even that their responses shape it, especially the comedy during the first performances. For pantomime performer Brian Conley,

> the audience are going to write it. They are going to decide what's funny or not. You can put something together, but you have to listen to the audience. If it doesn't work on the Saturday of the first week, it's never going to work. Just don't do it! I only have to do something once with an audience to know if it's worth working on, or worth scrapping. The audience will decide, fundamentally (Conley, telephone interview, 3 March 2020).

There are few surprises within the structure and style of the pantomime as produced. Pantomimes that remove elements such as dames or traditional routines begin to move towards being a Christmas family production and move out of the genre of pantomime. Arriving at rehearsals, experienced pantomime directors and actors understand what the audience will offer and will 'work, then, not only within the frame of pre-show publicity [but also of] the audience expectations that [is created] long before any rehearsal exploration can take place' (Knowles 2004, 31). For pantomime director, writer and actor Richard Cheshire, 'more so than for any other theatre production, the audience play[s] a major factor in almost every decision made when devising and creating a contemporary pantomime' (Cheshire, e-mail interview, 31 March 2020) and rehearsal for pantomime constantly places its audience at the heart of the creative decisions, aiming to predict their reactions.

As Pickering notes in the *Encyclopaedia of Pantomime*, as early as 'the Grimaldi era [audiences were] equally willing to join in with the songs they knew' (1993, 14). The roots of today's popular songsheet (whereby the audience join in with a song and enter into a competition with each other) are to be found in 'Hot Codlins' from 1819, sung by clown Joey Grimaldi, which 'told the story of those London streets that Grimaldi knew so well, of the old woman who sold baked apples in them […] the drum would bang [at the end of the number] and the audience would roar "gin"' (Frow 1985, 75). The audiences expected to hear 'Hot Codlins', and knew the responses they were to give; they would 'also supply "naughty" words' (Lewcock 2003, 144) to one of the verses. These are the rules that audiences and performers observe, 'rules that, as far as I know, have never been written down, but both actor and audience completely understand and exploit' (Wilmot, e-mail

interview, 3 March 2020). All this is pre-constructed and, as Dan Rebellato states, theatre professionals clearly do not

> repeat the silly but persistent idea that theatre is entirely created in the minds of the audience. The theatre artists shape, for the most part, the performance object and these decisions are crucially important; however, the audience determines its significance, meaning, affect, resonance, understanding, reach, function, ambiguity, playfulness, profundity and power (Rebellato 2013, 14).

The response required from audiences from Grimaldi to the present, is woven into the dramaturgy. Audiences implicitly understand that their role is integral in the making of meaning and significant enough to enable the continuation of the plot, as well as contributing to the defining of characters, such as the 'baddies' who are verbally 'booed'. A large-scale commercial pantomime is often rehearsed within two weeks, yet these conditions of production are not overly restrictive for an experienced practitioner. Performers understand their own personal stock type (dame, comic, principal boy/girl, villain, guide or immortal) and bring embodied knowledge of these characterisations to rehearsals. The creative team and the actors create a skeleton framework for much of the comedy throughout rehearsals, knowing that the audience will shape and mould the specific elements during the first few performances:

> You can rehearse it as much as you want, but until you are out there you need to adapt and turn things around quickly; you're only playing for five weeks and you can't let something marinate (Conley, telephone interview, 3 March 2020).

Characters do not need to be birthed or created anew by actors, given the substantial history that informs the modern pantomime; the audience simply expect their dame to be a dame; they are not necessarily coming to see one actor's unique interpretation of the dame role.

'Ghostings' and Expectations

Parents and carers bring their children to the performance and implicitly teach pantomime's responses. Just as the pantomime's tradition sits within an oral passing down of folk tales,

the audience's responses are transmitted from generation to generation within the framework of *ghosting,* since the pantomime 'presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context' (Carlson 2006, 7). The similarity of the costumes and sets, as well as actors returning playing the same type of role (albeit one with a different name), determines an audience's responses. 'This year I'm …' says performer Jonathan Wilkes, before announcing his character's name during the opening spot for the Regent Theatre pantomime in Stoke-on-Trent, where he has played comic since 2005. The audience *expects* his dialectal catchphrase 'Ay up, me ducks', as well as his front-footed comic delivery. There's little difference in his playing of Buttons in *Cinderella* one year, or Jingles the Jester in *Snow White* the next, physically, vocally, or in terms of tempo or rhythm; yet neither should there be. As a director I rarely interfere with an experienced pantomime performer's characterisation as they have honed this over many years. The stock characters of pantomime (traced back to the archetypes of both the medieval mystery plays and *commedia*) take precedence over any character idiosyncrasies, and the performer's relationship to their audience is paramount:

> For me, the most enjoyable part of performing in a pantomime is the relationship between the actor and the audience. I never think of them as a thousand people and so talk to them as if they are one person, with a personality (Wilmot e-mail interview, 2 March 2020).

Audiences are aware of the boundaries of the pantomime experience and Wilmot knows that as he steps out onto the London Palladium stage to perform, there is a lack of tolerance if the pantomime structure does not contain certain elements. I have argued elsewhere that:

i.   There is always a quest or a journey for the hero;

ii. There is a rite of passage for the hero, and a fundamental change following the defeat of the 'other';

iii. The 'other' is always defeated, and the hero is always victorious (good always triumphs over evil);

iv. There is an acceptance by the ordinary world community of the changes in the hero following these defeats (Marsden 2020, 7).

Just as this monomythic fairy tale structure of the pantomime story is expected, so too are the ways in which the audience is involved. In the rehearsal stage, the role of the audience in these elements are discussed and plotted with, in my experience, the director or stage manager filling in the audience's responses vocally and physically! As well as the 'songsheet' discussed above, these elements include:

Booing the 'baddies' and cheering the 'goodies'. The immortal fairy characters often set up the conventions in a prologue, inviting audiences to transgress the usual theatrical rules by vocally cheering for the heroes and booing and hissing the villains who attempt to thwart the hero's quest. The actor must genuinely hear and connect with their audience's responses and not trample over these; hence certain writers add the audience's expected responses into their script, to internally direct the actors to find the give-and-take rhythm of these moments. This scripting allows for the performer to aim for a 'true and honest interrelation' (Wilmot e-mail interview 2 March 2020) between actor and audience. The script for *Aladdin* by Eric Potts constructs this as follows*:*

> ABANAZAR: Oh, don't you just love me?
>
> AUDIENCE: No!
>
> ABANAZAR: Oh, yes you do!
>
> AUDIENCE: Oh, no we don't!
>
> (Potts 2017, 45)

'Behind you' routines. The audience vocally shouts out 'it's behind you' to warn the pantomime heroes of any obstacles, such as a magically sentient suit of armour, statue or portrait, which may move at a moment's notice. The traditional 'ghost gag' is perhaps the most well-known example, whereby the audience warns the dame, comic and hero of the presence of any ghosts. The nature of these routines, like most comedy, follows the tricolon rule, 'from the Greek meaning "in three parts" [which] can … provide a structural device for a whole scene or even an entire play' (Taylor and Wilson 2015, 172). This rule of three in the 'behind you routine' usually follows the following format: the ghost scares off the first character; the ghost scares away the second character, and finally the ghost is scared off by the alarming appearance of the dame (the man dressed as a woman). From experience,

audiences (the majority of whom know and expect this ending), fill the auditorium with laughter at this anticipated punchline.

Call and response. A typical example is where an actor cries 'Oh, no it isn't' and the audience reply 'Oh, yes it is'. These interactions, similar to the 'ghost gag' above, are expected within the production, whereby the 'sequence in a particular production [is ghosted] by memories of a sequence in other productions' (Carlson 2006, 110), triggering an audience's response.

Audience stooge. A stooge is an audience member which may become the object of the dame's affections, or even, as with Imagine Theatre's pantomimes, be brought onstage to unwittingly become part of a routine. These are not rehearsed in advance and are part of the anarchic nature of the genre. The example below is between the dame and comic in *Beauty and the Beast* and takes place during the slosh scene. A slosh scene is one 'in which much fun is had with shaving-foam pies, reams of wallpaper, wallpaper paste, pastry and other ammunition and props, […] hark[ing] back to the early knockabout comedy routines of the Harlequinade' (Pickering 1993, 187). It illustrates how 'Dave' (the scripted name for the stooge) becomes embroiled in this action:

> *[The dame and comic] look at each other, and then both turn their heads towards where the last guy that the dame collared is sitting.*
>
> BOTH: Dave!
>
> DAME: Up you come! I told you I'd be coming back to you …
>
> *As Dave comes up on to the stage, Simon [the comic] moves the table into position.*
>
> DAME: Oh Dave… You haven't changed a bit since I saw you last …
>
> *Simon steps in, in full songsheet mode.*
>
> SIMON: Hello Dave … How old are you? Who did you come with? And what do you want Santa to bring you?
>
> *Depending on time, there may be a couple of real questions asked – especially if Dave has been nominated* (Brenton 2019, 23).

A slosh routine is expected by a Halifax Victoria Theatre audience, where this was produced in 2019 by Imagine Theatre, as the venue builds on a tradition of these routines. The direct onstage involvement of an audience member is, however, unexpected and this routine simply could not work without its stooge. Writer Will Brenton has structured the routine (again using the tricolon rule) so as to lead the audience into the belief that the stooge will be covered with slosh. This expectation is then subverted, with the comic receiving a dousing from the enormous bucket of slosh instead. Whilst this is anarchic, it is always 'carefully controlled' (Taylor 2009, 123) by the script and the actors, even given the presence of the audience member and any other potential variables. Marrying the notion of Taylor's licenced transgression (2009, 133) with the nature of the live event and the potential for anarchy inherent in the presence of an onstage stooge, creates a frisson of energy as well as an element of danger, which in turn generates the comedy. The audience member has been volunteered and thus, finding themselves unexpectedly in the limelight, with the involuntary nature of their involvement, married to their apparent fear and 'lack of elasticity […], is the reason of the […] people's laughter' (Bergson 2019, 8). Philosopher Henri Bergson's theory of comedy supports how the stooge creates laughter; their involvement is 'accidental' (Bergson 2019, 8) and is 'therefore funny' (Bergson 2019, 58). Little of this can actually be rehearsed, but it can be constructed, mapped out between directors and performers on the rehearsal room floor and anticipated. The comedy eventually manifests itself with the addition of a stooge and the expectation of anarchy is thus eventually delivered both to (and with) the audience. The conditions of reception of a pantomime are also conditioned by the 'publicity materials relating to a particular show […] [which] can shape response in quite direct and obvious ways' (Knowles 2004, 91). The audience *know* that they can be a character within this genre when they are booking a ticket: they expect to transgress the usual rules of theatrical ritual, and be a character within the action.

An expected interdependency

Lauchlan states that the actors must 'fulfil the expectation of the audience and connect with them' (2020, 244). In the context of pantomime, these expectations are anticipated throughout the rehearsal period and 'ghosted' by the historical and cultural antecedents of

the genre. Rehearsal rooms therefore keep the audience at the heart of each decision that is made, as director and actors construct the conditions for when the production meets with its final character, the audience. For Cheshire, it is during both the writing and the rehearsal stages that the audience is considered to how they will play their eventual part:

> The imaginary audience are paramount in my mind, and influence which comedy routines, slapstick, songs, topical jokes and local references are to be included. They influence the structure and content of the story; the time spent in full scenes and 'frontcloths'; when and where to incorporate special effects, moments of magic and scenographic 'wow' factors; and most importantly, when to embed those wonderful, priceless moments of audience participation, which when handled well by the performers, can lead to joyous and unforgettable moments of 'licenced anarchy' which for me are at the heart and core of a successful production. (Cheshire, e-mail interview, 31 March 2020).

Experienced pantomime creatives and casts understand what *ghosted* notions the audience may have, and how they expect – and long – to be included. Neophyte pantomime practitioners subvert the genre at their peril. That is not to say that it cannot bend, but not to understand its conventions, particularly when considering the audience's role, can mean that a pantomime is not necessarily produced. The expected interdependency would be considerably weakened as a result.

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