

Panto in Scotland

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Pantomime, a peculiarly British traditional Christmas show for the whole family, is part vaudeville, part fairy tale, part homage to the Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition of stylized romantic comedy and clowning. Added to the mix are an element of brash modern showbiz entertainment, a tradition of ritualized-but-riotous audience participation, and a dash of the old midwinter pagan “feast of misrule” when everything was turned topsy-turvy for a day—men became women, paupers became kings. As you can imagine, this wonderful rag-bag of holiday fun can be noisy and glitzy, rude and romantic, subversive and spectacular.

The panto tradition in Scotland is particularly interesting precisely because this kind of show belongs so firmly in its origins to the 19th-century English music hall. Some of the great panto story lines come from classic European fairy tales; the best-known are *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, all with the grand rags-to-riches theme. But they are usually told with a strong English inflection of maypoles and village greens; and some of the stories—notably the famous tale of *Dick Whittington*, the poor boy who became Lord Mayor of London—are famously difficult to transpose to Scotland.

Yet over the years since the 1950s—perhaps because of the growth of a strong professional theater system in Scotland combined with the relative smallness of the Scottish stage community, which allows a strong two-way traffic between “straight” theater and the variety tradition—the Scottish panto scene has become perhaps the liveliest in Britain. Great postwar variety stars including Stanley Baxter, Rikki Fulton, Johnny Beattie, and the late Jimmy Logan took up the business of playing the “Dame,” the classic man-dressed-as-a-woman role at the heart of panto; and now they have passed the tradition on to a younger generation of performers.

At the same time, living Scottish writers are involved in creating new versions of the old panto scripts; and the panto tradition has produced a fascinating spin-off in the shape of a new wave of Christmas plays written specifically for children—many of them by the Scottish playwright Stuart Paterson—which make powerful use of the same tradition of magical story lines and essential audience participation.

Every Christmas, more than twenty professional pantomimes are staged in towns and cities across Scotland, along with dozens of amateur performances in smaller communities; the largest pantos, in Glasgow and Edinburgh, run for a seven-week season from the beginning of December to late January, each playing to a total audience of between 75,000 and 100,000 people. The marriage between Scottish audiences and this unruly art form must be one of the strangest in the history of theater. But it certainly works, creating a vital creative link between the mainstream Scottish stage and the world of popular entertainment, as well as generating huge profits at the box office and a great glow of theatrical fun and warmth in the heart of winter. ■



“Buttons” leads the cast in song during the 2002 production of *Cinderella* at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow. Photo courtesy Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama

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