

ALWAYS-ALREADY LOST: PANTOMIME AND CHILDHOOD NOSTALGIA

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Always-Already Lost: Pantomime and Childhood Nostalgia

Pantomime, as it existed in late-Victorian Britain, was both beloved as a children's holiday tradition and bemoaned for its adult vulgarities. It was celebrated by such English cultural heavyweights as Charles Dickens and John Ruskin and detracted from by the likes of George Bernard Shaw. For Dickens, pantomime was "a mirror of life; nay, more", whereas for Shaw "modern" pantomime had become "a glittering, noisy void" (qtd. in Booth 84). Echoing Dickens, Ruskin in *Fors Clavigera* asks "which is the reality, and which is the pantomime" (Ruskin 164)? The rhetoric used by pantomime lovers and reviewers was never lukewarm, making it a compelling area for cultural dissection. Even across the channel, Charles Baudelaire conjured an intent portrait of English pantomime: "With the pen all this is pale and frozen. How could the pen compete with pantomime? Pantomime is the refinement, the quintessence of comedy; it is the comic element pure, detached, and concentrated" (qtd. in Hanoosh 47). Baudelaire may seem an unlikely detractor of the pen given his emotive and provocative wielding of that instrument—and yet such is the effect of the English art of pantomime that even his words risk becoming "pale and frozen". The views of Dickens, Ruskin, Shaw, and Baudelaire offer a précis of opposing opinions of pantomime in the public and critical eye: pantomime mirrors the movement of modern life, making other art forms stale by comparison— yet the the glittering effect can be over-stimulating, leaving a void. From its inception pantomime, itself derivative of street theatre, was critiqued for succumbing to "modern" influences. Pantomime, as the above quotations reflect, was appraised for its corporeality and its authenticity. The nostalgic longing for an authentic and embodied experience of pantomime is both shared and divisive; pantomime was either praised as lively and pure or devalued as a feeble shadow of its earlier incarnations. Such appraisals are fueled by longing for a different time, whether measured by a

collective clock ticking away John Rich's reign and elaborate harlequinades, or private pasts when the pantomime smelled of potato-cans or "a touch of gas, a soupçon of orange peel, a dash of red fire, and a decided flavour of exploded crackers" (Byron 408). The structure of feeling that dominates pantomime is nostalgia, whether the past is coloured in Arcadian ambers, or the present—and the past on which it was founded—is eyed through a more critical lens.

Because I do not currently own a time machine, I will draw on the cultural reception of pantomime to chart a "structure of feeling". Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature* states: "to complete [artworks'] inherent processes, we have to make them present, in specifically active readings" (Williams 129). Because art-making and interpreting is a "formative process", I draw on the "active readings" of popular and children's culture theorists and the existing scholarly work on pantomime to examine "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs" as surveyed from the contemporaneous literature (Williams 129). Raymond Williams' model of uncovering "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs" has been previously applied to understanding pantomime. Jacky Bratton's discussion of "the pantomime as part of the mid-Victorian structure of feeling" centers on *Punch* magazine commentary (93). She traces the middle-class sentiment expressed in *Punch* as moving from one of nostalgia, to a more complicated mix of nostalgia and revulsion: "in reality they [pantomimes] are felt to be no longer suitable perhaps, especially for children" (96). "No longer" suitable is a sentiment expressed from the beginning to the end of the nineteenth century. Pantomime, as an organic, ever changing form, underwent several revisions largely at the hands of key figures, such as theatre managers and actors, like John Rich (early to mid eighteenth century), Joseph Grimaldi (Regency Era), E.L. Blanchard and Augustus Harris (both

mid to late nineteenth century). Pantomime in the nineteenth century looked different from pantomime in the eighteenth century which was then almost exclusively nonverbal. In the later nineteenth century, the music hall influence and emerging technologies further altered the look of pantomime. Pantomime from its very first arrival in England until today is conceptualized along nostalgic lines. As Bratton puts it, pantomime “is the subject both of distaste and of nostalgia [...] always inferior to its previous manifestations. Its present form is always-already debased; its past alone is worth our regret as part of the world we have — always — just lost” (89). Put most succinctly: “Nostalgia is the ‘theoretical trope of the always/already lost’” (Bratton 91). The trope of the “always/already lost” is expressed by pantomime enthusiasts and detractors alike. The social, political, and affective strands that spanned nineteenth-century pantomime, in conversation with current theorizing on childhood innocence and nostalgia, will seek to make pantomime present in order to “expand the margin of the here and now” (Boym, “The Off-Modern” 40).

Nostalgia, like its relative melancholia, was once considered a treatable malady. It was characterized by homesickness and physical symptoms which sometimes proved fatal. Treatment might include a psychological therapy (change of scenery) or a physical antidote (the universal remedy, bloodletting, was commonly prescribed). Uplifting the spirits through “varied amusements” which avoid “allusions which may suggest the subject of the patients’ misery” was restorative, but in extreme cases the return home was advocated (Copland 901). Clinical nostalgia may have at times been confounded with physical ailments such as tuberculosis or meningitis, but there was nonetheless an emphasis on its psychological origins. The suffering nostalgic pines for “those emotions which the scenes of early life and early attachments suggest” (Copland 900). While the ultimate cure for nostalgia was believed to be the return home, it was

understood that yearning for a real place was intimately tied to aching for an unattainable time—ones' youth. Nostalgia was no longer seen as a medical condition at the end of the nineteenth century, but the maladaptive connotations of the term linger. Nostalgia reveals one's "lack of adaptation to the new society" characterized by "[losing] touch with the present" (Starobinski 101; Boym 3). While nostalgia can be symptomatic of feeling out of step with the modern clock which is characterized in the nineteenth century by "the impersonal language of numbers: railroad schedules, the bottom line of industrial progress" (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* 9), nostalgia can help ease the transition to a fast-paced schedule by "sanctioning soothing and utopian images of the past [which help one] adapt both to rapid social change and to changes in individual life histories" (Tannock 459). Contemporary research suggests nostalgia can have several positive functions including improving mood, enhancing relationships, and providing existential meaning (Routledge 1-12).

Svetlana Boym distinguishes the more deceptive "restorative" nostalgia from the more liberating "reflective" mode. Restorative nostalgia seeks a return to the idealized home whereas reflective nostalgia imagines the past as it might have been. Restorative nostalgia "does not think of itself as nostalgia, but as truth and tradition" whereas reflective nostalgia "does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (Boym xviii). Restorative nostalgia mourns an imagined past; reflective nostalgia daydreams, vacillating between temporalities. Past and future possibilities are embraced in the reflective mode. Seeking solace and meaning in the past, the reflective nostalgic "may lay the foundations for a radical critique of the modern as a departure from authenticity" (Turner 154). For Boym, "creative rethinking of nostalgia [is] not merely an artistic device but a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming" (xvii). Nostalgia as a critical tool requires one to bridge "disjunctions of

temporality” out of which “the generalized desire for origin” is usually born (Stewart 23; 24). If instead of searching for pure origins and dividing between pre- and postlapsarian timelines, the nostalgic tarries to “explore sideshadows and back alleys” (Boym xvii), then meaningful reflection is possible.

Nostalgia relies on abstraction; the material signifier being irretrievable, one must rely on the signified. Prospective nostalgia also abstracts but in the forward-direction. Likewise, pantomime operates via abstraction; it is “a kind of pure comedy, the comic abstracted and brought to life, a perfect illustration of the comic in its highest form” (Hanoosh 47). As with nostalgic remembrance, the abstraction becomes more poignant than the signifier; “The unreality of the pantomime paradoxically ensures an immediacy, color, and life. Reality is thus a product of the grotesque and caricatural” (47). Pantomime becomes a “mirror of life, nay more” (Dickens, “Pantomime of Life” 291). Pure abstraction is perhaps better known on the fin de siècle stage in association with such names as Maurice Maeterlinck or Anton Chekov. Yet Symbolism has much in common with pantomime. “The ideal is to *suggest* the object” writes Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé in Jules Huret’s journalistic inquiry into psychology and literature (59). In poetry, painting, and theatre symbolists encourage the engagement of the senses, employing innovations such as free verse, a preference for dream states, and suggestion. Symbolist theatre in particular utilized many techniques that could have been found decades earlier in pantomime productions including “puppets, shadows, reflections, and sculptures to represent archetypal characters” (Charnow 107). Embracing symbolic modes of fantasy, imagination, and gesture on stage, pantomime would often take fairy tale and folklore as its source material, along with more “naturalist” texts with concerns around morality and social conditions (the favoured pantomime character Robinson Crusoe comes to mind here). Theatre

historian Sally Charnow describes the “interplay between naturalism and symbolism [as] dynamic and complex” in modern theatre (89). As Charnow demonstrates, the hybridity of symbolism and naturalism on the fin de siècle stage deemphasized plot and heightened “emotion, contradiction, complexity” (89). Pantomime was already exploring hybridity of forms and embracing contradiction well before the fin de siècle. Pantomime’s penchant for caricature “renders the comic element pure” just as symbolist writing and theatre aim to express primordial emotions and ideas.

Beginning a discussion on pantomime—unequivocally English theatre with a predilection for satire and cross-dressing—with a novelist, art critic, and several Frenchmen may seem an odd choice. But, much like the paper that follows, pantomime is a mongrel form which evolved from a multitude of transatlantic influences. Pantomime did not begin in the sanctified space of the theatre but in Venetian public spectacle, only arriving in the Commonwealth late in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries pantomime underwent several transmutations, culminating by the turn of the century in a complete enmeshment with other popular forms such as the burlesque, extravaganza, and music hall performance. Given the multiplicity of all aspects of pantomime: its origins and progressions, its audiences and popular reception, and its borrowed genres and styles, Baudelaire’s query, “how can the pen compete with pantomime?”, becomes even more difficult to answer. How does one compete with the sensuality of embodied performance or capture the effect of chaos, spontaneity, and hyperrealism using stationary language? Something like the dizzying reverberations of a pantomime performance will undoubtedly be preserved in this investigation. Using a primarily written record of 19th-century pantomime in the form of reviews, advertisements, scripts, and essays, supplemented by a few visuals, I hope to convey the excitement and energy of an hours-long,

hundred-plus person stage production. I will trace how the nostalgic structure of feeling that overlays pantomime artifacts reveals a longing for simpler and more authentic times reminiscent of the slower rhythms of childhood—an affect which is sometimes transformative.

Pantomime with all its transvestism, vulgarity, and unrestrained comedy persists today—albeit in a more sanitized and commercial form. One UK website advertises its pantomime scripts (which are available to licence) as containing “all the true classic ingredients of traditional family pantomime”. Some of these ingredients are: “Good clean fun and no smut![,] Plenty of jokes – old and new![,] Slapstick, visual gags and lots of movement![,] Slosh / mess / goo scenes![,] ‘It’s behind you’ scenes”! (“Pantomime Scripts”). This turns out to be a pretty good recipe for a pantomime, apart of course from the “no smut”, a component of pantomime, which Victorian audiences indulged in heartily. One ingredient not found anywhere in the list might go something like, ‘traditional holiday cheer’! One of the most potent lasting vestiges of pantomime is its association with holiday seasons. This linkage harkens back to the Carnival of Venice, a pre-Easter celebration. During the Carnival *commedia dell’Arte* masks (from which the archetypal characters that populate pantomime derive) were donned by momentarily communal and “classless” Venetians. In Victorian era Britain, pantomimes were most heavily marketed during Easter and Christmas, seasons that were being tied to children’s culture. Though pantomimes, or “pantos” as they are affectionately known, were mostly marketed to children, pantomime “appeal[ed] to a wide cross-section of the community” inhabited by adult and child members of the cultural elite in equal measure with the lower classes (Davis 2). The diversity of the pantomime audience goes back all the way to ancient Greco-Roman pantomime which, like

the later public spectacle of Venetian pantomime, was often free of charge and thus open to a wide cross-section of the populace.

As we have already seen, learned adults admired the pantomime precisely for its childlike qualities. It is often thought that the child leads a more authentic existence than the civilized—and therefore repressed—adult; children exhibit authenticity by residing in the body, rather than the adult realm of the mind. As an embodied form of theatre, which privileges mask, costume,



Figure 1, "Live Properties", etching by George Cruickshank, from *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, 1838

gesture, and dance over verbal performance, John O'Brien argues that pantomime's "sensuality" was considered "suspect" (xviii). The theatre should be a place of language, wit, diction, and intellectual stimulation—a place of high culture and high art. Pantomime's bodily sensuality is suspect because it is too animal, too primitive, much like the portrait of the savage child who embodies "an earlier and more authentic stage of the species" (Kincaid 57). Clown, one of pantomime's most enduring characters, exemplifies the "savage child" in his animality. Clown was most famously embodied by Joseph Grimaldi, the white-faced, sausage-string-wielding entertainer who even behind the costume was "a man of the kindest heart, and the most child-like simplicity" (Dickens, *Memoirs* 260-61). Dickens's enjoyment of the theatre extended from boyhood when he even sought to become an actor (Cook 29). Dickens later, after some success in his literary pursuits, did become an amateur actor and was generally well received (Cook 30-32). Dickens remained an avid theatregoer and critic whose love of pantomime is evidenced by a multitude of reviews. Dickens's edited Grimaldi memoirs are, of course, awash in nostalgia. Again a sensory memory, at once highly personal but evidently also shared, encapsulates the Christmas pantomime: "amid the smell of saw dust, and orange-peel, sweeter far than violets to the youthful noses [...] the pantomime began ("Memoirs" iv)! When not actually playing animal characters, Grimaldi was often adorned with myriad live creatures and plant life (see fig. 1). According to James Kincaid, the savage child "often appears in the softened form of the moderately naughty child, often in trouble but never malicious" (57). There can be no mistaking the naughty child in Grimaldi's clown, which resembled "a great lubberly loutish boy" adorned in "schoolboy's frills" (Halliday 35). The class clown Grimaldi enacted on stage was always mischievous, often physically violent, but never malicious, and certainly never humourless. Clown toes the line between moderately naughty and outright savage, a transformation scene

might reveal “the monster himself converted into Clown” (Dickens iv)! Clown’s excess captures the “materiality of life: garish color, raucous noise, earthy obscenity, and appetite. This ideal *comique* is located squarely within the domain of the fallen, even the bestial” (Hanoosh 48).

The sensuality of pantomime can also be understood with recourse to Susan Stewart’s analysis of the “imaginary” body—imaginary in its social and self *construction*—and the inverted realm of the grotesque, wherein she describes “the double nature of Victorian sexuality—the simultaneous urge toward repression and licentiousness which resulted in both a strict moral code and a blossoming taste for pornography and distanced desire” (114). The “urge” toward “repression” and “a strict moral code” is expressed by pantomime’s many critics and by the theatre licensing restrictions in place in Victorian Britain (restrictions like forbidding dialogue in certain “illegitimate” theatres, which had the unintended effect of sparking some of the technological and theatrical innovations of pantomime). The urge toward “licentiousness” is rendered in the bodily and later sexualized enactments on the pantomime stage. “Distanced desire” is implicit in the dynamic between the audience and the physically distant elevated stage. The desire to be a part of the fantasy became more palpably distanced in the later nineteenth century with innovations in lighting which would shroud the audience in darkness, amplifying the lighted fantasy space of the stage. In her analysis of mid-Victorian pantomime, Jacky Bratton argues that *Punch Magazine* “distances the consumer, the reader of the magazine, from enjoyment of conspicuous consumption and dubious stage performances while giving him permission to indulge in them under the guise of initiating his young ones” (98). Pantomime, enjoyed by adults for its “conspicuous consumption” and “dubious” performances, is always normalized by its association with childhood. Conspicuous consumption and licentiousness is

repressed in the adult by being projected onto the child whose “innocence” repackages these dubious traits as innocuous.

The double nature that Stewart signals and Bratton proceduralizes is echoed by James Kincaid’s discussion of the eroticization of childhood:

We see children as, among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous. We construct the desirable as, among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous. There is more to how we see the child, and more to how we construct what is sexually desirable—but not much more. (14)

Kincaid’s conceptualization of desire brings the “double nature” of Victorian sexuality (a double nature that is still with us today) to bear on childhood “innocence”. Childhood is simultaneously coded as erotic and innocent. If pantomime is a site of distanced desire for the sweet, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous, then its ready inclusion in children’s culture is unsurprising. Certainly there is an element of sweetness in the preference for—and at times obsession with—fairies. As Stewart writes, “by the Victorian Age, the domestication of the fairy is complete and the English fairy becomes inextricably linked to the enduring creation of the Victorian fantastic: the fairylike child” (113). The ephemeral fairylike “sweet” child is cast as a literal fairy in the pantomime landscape. Children dancers might preform as fairies alongside the “good” fairy queen. Likewise, there is a claim for vacancy with respect to O’Brien’s configuration of diverting entertainment which is non-literary and often non-didactic. Pantos were, as John O’Brien stresses, the “entertainment” portion of the evening’s—or afternoon’s—full theatrical line-up. As O’Brien indicates, entertainment connotes “diversion rather than moral uplift” (xv). O’Brien’s study of pantomime explicates the discourse of diversion which today

largely comprises the “modern conception” of entertainment (xiii). The smooth-skinned in pantomime can be seen in the literal inclusion of child actors or as the fantasy evoked by makeup and costume. Spontaneity is demarcated by improvisation and audience participation. Stewart describes the enduring figure of the Trickster, who “continually violates the boundary between nature and culture; he is part animal, part human [...] part man and part woman [...] and a violator of cultural taboos” (106). The mischievousness of the Trickster figure of Harlequin, and later Clown, are final evocation of Kincaid’s description of the conflation of childhood with erotic desire.

For Stewart, nostalgia “wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire” (23). The absence that generates nostalgia—an imaginary past (and present)—is the same absence that generates childhood innocence wherein the child is configured as “vacant”, “empty”, or “flat” (Kincaid 17). Like nostalgia, childhood innocence is a “projection” (Giroux 265), a “screen” (Kuhn 286), a *tabula rasa*; a blank slate whereon desire and fantasy are etched. Nostalgia is not an “antidote” to erotic innocence but an “ingredient” of it (Kincaid 25). Nostalgia is an “absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire” (Stewart 23). The pure and clean innocence that characterizes pantomime and childhood was always an imaginary absence. Looking-back is bittersweet; the idealized past is gone and even pantomime cannot bring it back.

The pantomime is suspect not only because of the sensuality on stage, but also because of its varied audience. The mixed-class attendees of a pantomime interrupt the usual process of cultural consecration. According to Pierre Bourdieu “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social

differences (7). The “legitimate” “mode of artistic perception” requires an educational system (Bourdieu 3). The universal language of gesture requires no special knowledge to be decoded. The active participation of children—non-entities who lack the sanctified ‘eye’ endowed by education—similarly upends pantomimes’ cultural legitimacy. Entertainment is regarded as “‘facile’ [...] [offering] pleasures that are too immediately accessible and so discredited as ‘childish’ or ‘primitive’” (Bourdieu 486). Yet, the educated eye is inferior to Ruskin’s mythical “innocent eye”, a purer gaze that “devalues scholarly knowledge and interpretation” (Bourdieu 2). Like the myth of childhood innocence, the innocent eye fails to account for class difference. The innocent eye can only be accessed by “those who have had early access to legitimate culture” (Bourdieu 2). The “illegitimate” “‘popular aesthetic’ ignores or refuses the refusal of ‘facile’ involvement in ‘vulgar’ enjoyment” (Bourdieu 4). Nostalgia certainly seems like an “illegitimate” way of seeing which celebrates “lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment” (Bourdieu 7). The nostalgic remembers their childhood pleasures as “primitive”, “vulgar” and “natural” delights. But, as with the process of cultural consecration, nostalgic remembrance all too often occludes class.

John O’Brien quotes dramatist and theorist Antonin Artaud, who famously developed a ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ as an antidote to “useless, artificial amusement” (qtd. in O’Brien 30). O’Brien’s examination of pantomime begins with the Restoration and ends with the death of King George II (1760). He draws heavily from publications that were in tune with the moral code of the day, such as Addison and Steele’s *The Spectator* and Steele’s *The Tatler*. My survey of primary materials starts at the turn from the eighteenth to nineteenth century and ends at another with the sentiments and traits of the *fin de siècle* of the 1890’s. During this timespan, pantomime was simultaneously endorsed as educative and belittled as artificial amusement. *The*

Monthly Magazine and British Register, a periodical that was at the time of the following review (1800) edited by Dr. John Aikin, co-writer of *Evenings at Home*, describes the “vivid fancy and correct judgement” of the overture in *Pantomime of the Volcano* on stage at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden (“Review of New Musical Publications” 173). That the “rational moralist” children’s writer Aikin signed off on a review that describes pantomime as having “correct judgement” seems to indicate that, at least in 1800, pantomime was more than just diverting entertainment. A similar sentiment is expressed in 1855 in *The Examiner*, a weekly paper founded by John and Leigh Hunt:

The child having been taken to the Princess’s [Theatre] to study birds and beasts, should have his love of natural history developed by being taken in the next place to the pantomime at the Haymarket [Theatre Royal Haymarket], where he will be informed concerning insects. The nursery poem of the *Butterfly’s Ball* is the topic of the introduction, and the leading performers in it are a grasshopper, a wasp, a spider, and the *Lady Silverwings* herself, together with a good and evil genius. (“The Theatrical Examiner” 822)

Here the educative sentiment is tenuously connected to “natural history”. The “correct judgement” found in the first review might be linked to a clear moral structure of “a good and evil genius” signaled in the second review. A pantomime need not have been didactic to express a moral sentiment, such as one where the “baddies” get it. This may be why school groups were often taken out to pantomimes. Theatres would even offer half-price tickets to “children and schools” for matinee performances and on occasion free seats were offered to children’s charities (Varty 139). But pantomime as an educative form of theatre was never the dominant selling point; rather, it was a special kind of retreat.

As a source of amusement, pantomime is permitted when it is contained. It is often referred to as a “species” of entertainment; Leigh Hunt, an animated proponent of the panto calls it a “species of drama” that “enchants the little holiday folks” (“On Pantomime” 140). “There is something *real* in Pantomime,” Hunt writes: “there is animal spirit in it” (140, emphasis in original). Hunt captures key elements of pantomime’s reception that can be found in reviews: panto is a “species” with “animal spirit” that “enchants” “little holiday folks”. In a review of the *Pantomime of the Volcano* in *The Sporting Magazine*, a monthly publication that is a jumble of sports, politics, literature, and entertainment, one observer describes the “beauty of the scenery, the elegance of the decorations, and the extraordinary skill with which the machinery is managed” as a preeminent exemplar of “this *species* of popular amusement” (184, my emphasis). The review ends jovially: “A gentleman, enormously corpulent, very politely offered to pay double price for admission to see the *Volcano*, on the first night” (185). Similarly, a review from *The Spectator* describes the pantomime *My Own Lover* as “so much of that *species* of entertainment” (“New Drama at Drury Lane” 39, my emphasis). And again, Andrew Halliday, in his largely favourable 1863 history of the pantomime, calls it “that favourite species of entertainment” (Halliday 6). To contain pantomime as a species is to segregate it as a member of a “class composed of individuals having some common qualities or characteristics; as a subdivision of a larger class or genus” (OED). “Species”, especially when coupled with “animal spirit” removes pantomime from the manmade sphere of art, where the designation might instead be by “genre”. The connotation of pantomime as a species or “a subdivision”, lingers on the idiosyncratic qualities of the form rather than on the theatrical attributes of the more dignified descriptor of genre. Genre is inorganic and structured; it follows a method and manner of composition. Pantomime as a “species of entertainment” rightly conjures the evolutionary and

organic nature of the form, but simultaneously confines it to a “class” that should be understood in its place. *The Spectator* review excerpted above also emphasizes the place of pantomime with respect to its audience:

When a new play is brought to the assistance of a pantomime in the second week, we augur the declining success of the later; but the ‘musical drama’ called *My Own Lover*, which was put forth on Wednesday at Drury Lane, is so suitable to the *audiences* of a pantomime, and partakes so much of that species of entertainment, that we may fairly conclude it is only intended to bear the pantomime company through the remainder of its pilgrimage, and that they will both make their exit together, like Clown and Pantaloon, arm in arm. (“New Drama at Drury Lane” 39, emphasis in original)

The tone is condescending; the message is clear: pantomime is not serious theatre. Even the “enormously corpulent” but very polite gentleman that offers to pay double for admission to see the *Volcano*, sounds either a bit daft or overly emotional, not like a serious theatregoer. The affective strand suggested in this review imports a further weight on the species descriptor; audiences of pantomime are also of a species. In Hunt’s evaluation the species is clearly one aligned with childhood animality, with the littler species. In *The Spectator*, which remains today a conservative newspaper, and in *The Sporting Magazine*, there is link to popular culture as a species, “a subdivision of a larger class”.

The other sentiment latent in these descriptions that works to confine pantomime within digestible and acceptable limits is its attachment to *Christmas* entertainment; “the spaces (time-outs) within our social systems that have been set aside for nostalgia - holidays and weekends [...] may seem to work only to reinforce social roles and structures, diffusing discontent with sentiment” (Tannock 459). The holiday space marks the commercial success of pantomime—a

success which presumably could not sustain throughout the year. Christmas is a time of indulgence—this formulation was ushered along by Hunt: “give us [...] true old Christmas sincerity [...] and like the better sort of Catholics, who go to church in the morning and to their dance in the evening, we can begin the day with a mild gravity of recollection, and finish it with all kinds of forgetful mirth” (“Christmas” 305). Hunt’s little holiday folk belong to the realm of indulgent nostalgia and diversion—a sanctioned space because it is limited to a few weeks of the year; “these officially sanctioned spaces may well, at certain points in history, provide sites, materials, and inspiration for meaningful social change” (Tannock 459). Entertainment is configured in Hunt’s formulation as the evening portion; the pudding you get after the day’s obligations (going to Church) have been met. A holiday is a time for diversion, but if a holiday extends for too long the novelty wears off and it becomes part of the everyday wearing of time. Holidays are magical contained spaces that are perfectly suited to pantomime—they are also needfully delimited by time. During one time of the year anything is commercially, theatrically, socially possible (with the implicit acknowledgement that this time is finite). A reviewer from an Edinburgh paper captures the diverting and nostalgic nature of Christmas pantomime along with its necessary time-frame:

In the Christmas week we think of nothing else. We dream of the pantomime; we breakfast, dine, and sup on the pantomime; we give up all our ordinary pursuits, and do not care one farthing for the state of Europe. [...] It makes us young again! And only think what it is to be young! ‘Tis to be unsuspicious, confiding, romantic, joyous! ‘Tis to be full of rosy health, and never-failing spirits! ‘Tis to believe that the world is what it seems and that all the men and women are *not* ‘merely players’. (“The Edinburgh Drama” 17)

The author, signed “Old Cerebus”, goes on in this vein before getting into the review proper, which is neatly bookended with:

and then, alas! The curtain falls and shuts out Paradise from our view. Nothing lasts for ever, and even a Christmas pantomime must come to an end, though we have often wished that it had no end, but went on through the whole year, for ever and for ever! We can see it again to be sure, that’s one comfort! To-morrow and to-morrow. (17)

The author is positively buzzing with childhood nostalgia. His language is reminiscent of Hunt with the addition of a few more exclamation marks. This review has it all: Hunt’s animal spirit “we breakfast, dine, and sup”; childhood innocence “unsuspicious, confiding, romantic, joyous”; erotic innocence; “full of rosy health, and never-failing spirits”; fantasy and arcadia; “We dream of the pantomime”; “Paradise”; and childhood nostalgia “think what it is to be young”! But all these are, reluctantly, delimited by time: “nothing lasts for ever”. Macbeth’s dragging “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” is inverted to signify a desired slowing down of time. But the wish that pantomime go on “through the whole year” is merely a wish; Christmas pantomime “must come to an end”.

The finiteness of holidays is paralleled in the configuration of childhood innocence. As Marah Gubar notes in her discussion of innocence: “many nineteenth-century children’s authors promoted the romantic notion that all children, regardless of their class status, deserved to experience childhood as a holiday from the demands of adult life” (123). Holidays, like entertainment, and like the innocence of childhood expressed in literature, should be a diversion from adult demands and “adult” structures such as class. Pantomime would seem to promote a kind of classlessness. The Venetian street roots of pantomime where it could be freely enjoyed by all, and the ongoing attendance of both upper and lower classes seem to conjure a magical

inclusive space. But many of the child performers were at the very bottom rung. Rather than class being somehow outside the realm of childhood innocence as it expressed most fully in Christmas pantomime, Richard Foulkes describes the reality of these working children as another Victorian double nature: “the binary nature of Victorian pantomime with on the one side the performing children, often earning vital wages for their families, and on the other those from more affluent circumstances for whom the occasion was a treat and a diversion” (55).

Entertainment then is only really a diversion for the child attendees. That is not to say that child performers did not enjoy being in fantastical pantomimes. Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, in her examination of two depictions from *The Illustrated London News*, of hundreds of child performers preparing for a Christmas pantomime and another of affluent children riding in a coach on their way to a pantomime performance, notes the “excitement” in both images (46). For both the children entertainers, and the children expecting to be entertained, pantomime is exciting—at least this is what the images from *The Illustrated London News* are hoping to convey. Pantomime was big business—criticism of child labour was generally minimized in the popular press. Thus Weltman’s reading of the image of “at least ninety children” readying for a performance uncovers only one vignette “that comes close to suggesting negative criticism” out of the many “tiny dramas” depicted in the image (44).

Dyan Colclough, in her book *Child Labor in the British Victorian Entertainment Industry: 1875–1914*, spends some time discussing pantomime and its marketability as family entertainment: “the decision of employers to market children so solidly, both as performers and audiences, during the most important periods of the theatrical year is testament to the significant position they held within the industry’s success” (21). As Colclough stresses, without child labour there would be no pantomime. But in order to attract families and child patrons, the

realities of child labour had to be clouded in notions of childhood innocence and diversionary entertainment: the entertainment industry “needed to profile its children to fit the Victorian model of childhood” (Colclough 22). This model fits with Kincaid’s description of the desirable as “sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous” (14). Jerome K. Jerome, Victorian humourist and essayist, describes the desirable stage child as “clean and tidy. You can touch it anywhere. Its face glows with soap and water” (97-98). The stage child Jerome invokes, “never has the Whooping cough, and the measles, and every other disease that it can lay its hands on, and be laid up with them one after the other, and turn the house upside down” (99-100). His description of the stage child as unblemished, or in Old Cerebus’s words “full of rosy health, and never-failing spirits,” does not pretend that this is in any way related to authentic children, rather the opposite: “The Stage child is much superior to the live infant, in every way” (Jerome 99). Jerome suggests that the stage child be a model for attendees, that the “real child” must “wish *it* were a Stage child” (102, emphasis in original). The sanitized child of the stage was meant to evoke a model for real childhood, one that is clean and pleasant with all traces of class erased. As Colclough uncovers, actual “street urchins,” as they were termed, might be employed to “represent poor street waifs, but the salability factor required stage children to be visually pleasing. In effect, employers could take an authentic street waif have them washed and dressed in theatrically designed costume and makeup [*sic.*]” (22). The imaginary classlessness of childhood and the coming-together and generally charitable air characteristic of Christmastime does not actually add up to a genuine classless arcadia.

Pantomime simultaneously promotes tradition and progress; “Somehow progress didn’t cure nostalgia but exacerbated it” (Boym “Future” xiv). Familiar characters, “old-fashioned” stories, and the yearly custom of attending a Christmas panto exist alongside technological

innovations (propelled forward by the tricks and transformations of the show) and stories about science and technology. In 1848, E.L. Blanchard staged “Land of Light! or Harlequin Gas! and the Four Elements, Earth, Air, Fire and Water!” in which “Science” is the main character (Keene 156-164). Both nostalgia and progress are “beyond the present space of experience” (Boym 13), lending pantomime viewers the sensation of time-travel. National progress and nostalgia are found at the beginning of the 1886 pantomime *Sindbad the Sailor and The Wicked Old Man of the Sea*. King Pantomime and Queen Orienta together exclaim:

Although to most of us newness has glories,
We can yet love old-fashioned fairy-stories,
Against my word you cannot be a railer,
The subject this year is ‘Sindbad the Sailor.’
The lad’s true blue, he’s not aesthetic greenery,
The books [sic] been written this year by machinery,
In which Americans are so *au fait*,
Although we’re [sic] got them start of them to-day.
Though they invent so much you’ll make admission,
We had the first ‘Inventions Exhibition’ (Thorne and Palmer 6)

There is both a sentimentality for “old-fashioned” fairy tales and a gently mocking jab at American machinery. Fairy tales, of course, diverged from the common tales of the folk and presented tales to the royal court. During this transition they were also sanitized, given morals, and generally tidied up for the consumption of children. Neither Sindbad the epic nor Sindbad the panto resembles a Perrault-style fairy tale. Sindbad is “true blue;” he derives from an older,

more authentic style of storytelling, not the aestheticized form. At the end of the panto “true blue” is elevated to a national scale:

Sindbad: In every quarter of the globe its history can brag,
That Britons did their best to hold John Bull’s un-
tarnished flag.

//

It’s the genuine sort of colour you can’t wash out (59).

While Sindbad teases Britain’s history of global imperialism, there is no mockery of the genuine colour of the flag. The domestic, rotund, country-dwelling John Bull is a pastoral personification of England, especially compared to the armoured Britannia. Authenticity is again linked to simpler origins. Mixed with nostalgia for old-fashioned tales and English constancy is pride for new technology. While Americans may be more conversant with machinery, the British held the first exhibitions. By “first” the panto may be referring to the Great Exhibition of 1851, although the wording is more similar to the International Inventions Exhibition held in 1885. The Great Exhibition was certainly the first in a slew of World’s Fairs that popped up around the globe in the 19th century. Showcasing new technologies and gadgetry from over 40 countries, the Great Exhibition was also a monument to Britain’s splendour both old and new. According to the exhibition guide, British machinery was not only responsible for creating the wonder of the palace, but also maintained a pride of place within it:

As might have been expected in a practical nation like ours, little difficulty was experienced in finding a very large proportion of exhibitors in the departments of machinery and manufactures. These engrossing and paramount branches of our own

industry would almost of themselves have flooded the Crystal Palace with their products.

(“Guide” 40)

Machinery, for The Great Exhibition and for *Sindbad the Sailor*, allows for faster, cheaper, and more efficient methods of production and consumption. Seemingly at odds with the sentiment for slower, simpler times, the excitement for the marvel of machine-produced goods still emphasized the true blue worker. A poem by Martin F. Tupper included in the exhibition guide illustrates the authenticity of honest labour behind the grandiose exhibits:

Whatever Science hath found out, and Industry hath earned,

And Taste hath delicately touched, and high-bred Art hath
learned;

Whatever God’s good handicraft, the man He made, hath made;

By man, God’s earnest artisan, the best shall be displayed! (“Guide” 28)

Science, Industry, Taste, and Art come together by the workman’s hand. A similar picture is presented in *Sindbad the Sailor* of a “Pantomimic workshop with machinery” where the workmen sing “For we do the work that makes folks glad / So why should the workmen themselves be sad!” (5-6). Even the future-looking Great Exhibition and machine-made pantomimes contain nostalgia for an artisanal past. Nostalgia and progress are both “dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time” (Boym 13). Yet, the modern straightjacket of time as a linear-progression can be loosened up by stretching backwards and forwards in the theatrical imagination.

Writing in 1894 in William Archer’s *Theatrical World*, Henry George Hibbert describes Oscar Barrett’s 1893 production of *Cinderella*. In seeking a “new epoch in pantomime” we really “[carry] the art of Christmas spectacle back to the days of its youth,” writes Hibbert (1-2).

For Hibbert pantomime's golden youth is not found in the days of Grimaldi as it was for Dickens but instead resides with Charles James Mathews and Madame Vestris, who preformed in the 1830s and 40s and dramatist J.R. Planché and scenic designer William Beverley. Charles Dickens Jr., whose love of pantomime would have been inherited from his father, describes the "death" of pantomime in "On the Decadence of Pantomime" published in 1896: "the floodgates of music halls were opened, and all that was agreeable about 'the grand comic Christmas pantomime' was promptly and effectually drowned out" (24). The prior "serious melodrama" of the dumb show was replaced by "hopeless, inane, and offensive vulgarity" (24). Dickens Jr. writes: "the conditions of the past fifty years have been unusually and extraordinarily favourable to changes in the manner of life of mankind everywhere; but I venture to think [...] that nowhere have the manners and customs of a people [...] altered so completely as in England" (21). These manners and customs belong to the theatergoing public who now of course participate in a "hopeless, inane, and offensive vulgarity" (24). Dickens's nostalgia is elevated to a serious concern for the national character of England. Dickens Jr. ends his lament with a third and final "pantomime is dead" but tempers this by stating pantomimic acting is not dead: as evidenced by the performers of *L'Enfant Prodigue* whose effective and appropriate gestures deserve to be studied by "modern" actors (25). A similar sentiment prompted by the same panto is found in *The Spectator*:

If there be any lovers left of the ancient art of dumb-show as applied to dramatic representation, we should strongly recommend them to go and see the very curious "musical play without words" called *L'Enfant Prodigue*, now being given at the Prince of Wales's Theatre. Real pantomime, a story told entirely by gesture, has almost died out in this country, at any rate as regards the legitimate theatres, though we have been told that

very clever pantomimic sketches—generally, of course, of the purely grotesque kind—are to be seen at the music-halls [...] The Christmas pantomimes of fifty years ago were almost altogether dumb-show, and of course consisted entirely of buffoonery, though often extremely clever. Now, we are given to understand they are simply brilliant spectacles, with the lazzi and songs of music-halls interspersed “A Real Pantomime” 475)

Both Dickens Jr.’s commentary in 1896, and *The Spectator* review, published in 1891, look back to when pantomime was dumb-show, “serious melodrama” and an “ancient art”. Dickens’s nostalgia is both a very personal account (he recalls his long experience of going to the theatre and discusses particular pantomimes) and an account of the ‘condition of England’ which frames its narrative around the social conditions of England at a particular historical moment. That the seemingly trivial art form of pantomime is used as a vehicle to express serious concerns with a changing technological and social landscape demonstrates the significant impact of this form of theatre.

“Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective” (Boym “Future” xvi). William Archer, in *The Theatrical World of 1893* writes, “even more interesting than the pantomime of the past is the pantomime of the future”, going on to say that the pantomime is “in its essence, an invaluable art-form” (3). While nostalgia is usually backwards-looking, it can also abstract to the future. Archer, in projecting from the wellspring of the past, narrows the “gap between signifier and signified” (Stewart 24) that nostalgia opens up. Archer, in his discussion of the future of pantomime, laments the recent death of Alfred Tennyson “whose name should be familiar to every English-speaking child; for he had at his command the simplest, sweetest melodies, no less than the loftiest and most complex harmonies”

(5). Instead of simply mourning the loss of the great poet, Archer imagines a pantomime that makes tribute to Tennyson: “What I dream of—what I venture to foretell—is a pantomime in which an episode of serious emotion should not be felt as an incongruity; a pantomime in which it should be possible to invoke the greatest memories without fear of smirching them by contact with the common or unclean” (5). Tennyson utilizes nostalgic memories of simple, sweet melodies reminiscent of childhood to advocate for the artistic value of emotion. The “common” form of pantomime, rather than being further besmirched by emotional content is instead elevated by a nostalgic reflection of Tennyson.

Illustrator and comics artist Alfred Crowquill does not ooze nostalgia in his comic *Pantomime As it Was, Is, and Will Be*. The comic presents a panto “to be played at home” (see fig. 2; *cgcomics* for coloured version and *old-coconino* for readable text). The ecclesiastical-sounding title suggests not that pantomime is dead, nor does it project pantomime into a new machine age, but instead asserts that pantomime is eternal. Indeed, the very form of the comic provides the most enduring colour portrait of a pantomime I have come across; it is more vivid than single illustrations, faster paced than a panto script, and more encompassing than a theatrical review. One might be able to play the comic at home today needing only actors, costumes, and a simple backdrop. Within the comic are further instances of the eternal in pantomime. The transformation scenes remind readers that panto characters are not so drastically different from their original selves. One panel featuring a cross-eyed Clown tells us “The father is changed to Clown and a fool, both of which he was before” (Crowquill).



Figure 2, *Pantomime*, Alfred Crowquill, 1849, *Cgcomics.com*

The panto characters of the harlequinade are contiguous with their pre-transformation selves; as Clown would so often announce, “Here we are again!” The transformation of the father in the comic mimics what might happen on a stage. The father’s gigantic head, rendered as caricature in print, would have been a mask in the theatre. After the transformation he has a regular-sized head, but retains an element of the grotesque with exaggerated spikes of blue hair. His costume and pose are similarly altered from everyday attire and forlorn posture to the classic outfit and stance of Clown. Like Clown’s transformation, the change in the Lover is more witticism than genuine alteration: “The Lover is changed to Harlequin. As he never had any change about him before he is delighted” (Crowquill). The continuity of the pantomime and of panto characters is perhaps a lesser nostalgia—we can look forward to constancy.

A concern for authenticity in pantomime is also linked to the venue. In the “legitimate theatres” serious drama was shown, whereas illegitimate theatres were permitted melodrama, comedy, and pantomime. Music hall arrived on the scene in the 1880s and further added to pantomime’s illegitimacy. But even before the rise of the music hall, pantomime was perceived as degraded. The nostalgic “always just lost” (Bratton 91) and “distinctly utopian face” (Stewart 23) worn by theatre critics is no doubt connected to the nostalgia of childhood: for Dickens, it is a vividly remembered childhood and a possible lament for his career as an actor. In John and Leigh Hunt’s *The Examiner*, a review from 1855 on a production of *Puss in Boots*, describes Sadler’s Wells theatre where the pantomime “is always of the old school” (“The Theatrical Examiner” 822). Although it is not entirely clear from the review what “the old school” constitutes it is deemed to be “perhaps the best”. Old school likely refers to the “traditional” dumb show pantomime, referred to as ‘Arcadias of Pantomime’ by John Ruskin (Richards “E.L. Blanchard” 35). Ruskin compares the pantomime to church; both institutions retain true notions of value and morality. Pantomime thus configured is not merely corporeal, diverting entertainment, it is intellectually and morally stimulating. The expression of nostalgia as a loss of childhood and English manners is connected to a perceived loss of clearly delineated morals. Always already just passed because they were never there to begin with.

The music hall influence on pantomime was perceived as troublesome because, as Dagmar Kift puts it: “the values propagated in the halls were anything but the Victorian values of hard work, sobriety or respect for marriage and the family” (77). While these values may also have been mocked in some pantomimes, the “legitimate” theatre environment was unlike that of the wet and working-class music hall. The music hall was a place to relax after work with your pals, enjoy variety entertainment and scantily-clad ladies, all while having a drink. But

attendance was not confined to the male proletariat—young people of both sexes made up a large portion of music hall frequenters. Kift suggests why “a large part of the audience consisted of youths and children”— “they were predominant in the cheapest seating areas” (65). Kift stresses that despite their reputation, music halls were not wretched hives of blasphemy and demon drink; they were merely not “Sunday School”. Music hall really did not pose a serious threat to the pantomime, but it acted as an easy scapegoat. If a pantomime was overly lewd or too fanciful the outside influence of another popular form of theatre or music could be uncovered and blamed.

Under the “Green Room Gossip” section of the *Daily Mail*, the actress Miss (Louie) Freear’s hiatus from the play *The Gay Parisienne*, is described as a stint in “panto-mime-land” (“Christmas Pantomimes” 3). Panto-mime-land, like fairyland “presents a hallucination of detail” (Stewart 112). The increasing preference for fairy tale material in pantomime in the 1850’s was paralleled by fairyland settings. Fairies were in vogue in painting and literature, but “became most alive for Victorians [at] the theatre” (Richards “E.L. Blanchard” 36). Detailed scene paintings and moving panoramas, innovative and varied lighting, and the trap doors and mechanical instruments increased the magic of the transformation scenes to bring fairyland to life. In the same section from the *Daily Mail*, a review of Cinderella touts the use of electricity as “an indication of the modernity and completeness of the Brixton production” (“Christmas Pantomimes” 3). This production involved an electric coach, “electrical coloured flowers” and “demons [that] breathe electric fire”. Such spectacles offer a hallucination of detail that would have titillated adult and child audiences alike. A review of the Drury Lane Christmas pantomime of 1891 from *The Academy* reports that the scenery is “amazingly beautiful. A whole panorama is unrolled before the audience who have nothing to complain of but a surfeit of landscape, a surfeit of song and dance, and a surfeit even of picturesque humanity” (“The Stage” 20). The

completeness of fairyland, of the other world, only becomes problematic when it risks excess. If there is a surfeit of magic the fantasy becomes too obvious.

The fantasyland of the stage required the enduring myth of the fairylike child who is simultaneously innocent and wild to keep pantomime afloat. Pantomime was marketed to children and families, fueled by child labour, and kept alive by adult nostalgia for childhood. An illustrated review (reminiscent of the “advertorial” of today) of Oscar Barrett’s *Dick Whittington*, a successful pantomime which ran for 120 performances, (Richards *The Golden Age of Pantomime* 386) demonstrates how important the idea of childhood was to pantomime. It appeals



Figure 3, “At Play”, from *Judy: The London Serio-Comic Journal* 18 Jan, 1899

the “golden age” sentiment of pantomime at a time when it was “variety entertainment masquerading as pantomime” (“At Play” 32). The legend of *Dick Wittington and His Cat* would have been well known at the time appearing as ballads, chapbooks, puppet shows, and a variety of stage productions. The advert suggests that adult audiences consult their children if the story is “a little hazy” and, failing this, “borrow [their] neighbour’s children for a few minutes, they will not doubt quickly furbish up your memory-box for you” (see fig. 3). The review is directed towards adult audiences, but without children to consult and bring along, the story is unfamiliar, distant. The curly-topped “Miss Elsa Morter” pictured in the midst of a jig with her costume in motion but face perfectly posed is Jerome’s perfect stage child. In contrast to the still portrayals of the adult figures, the image encapsulates the modern child, innocent but in motion, full of animal spirit.

Pantomime is not a stuffy Victorian pastime. It showcases engorged masks, cross-dressing prince-boys and Dames, physical “slapstick” comedy, and hallucinatory lightshow; a psychedelic production the members of Pink Floyd would no doubt have admired. Panto elements of parody and pastiche act as “symbolic inversions [which] present the world upside down, the categories and hierarchical arrangement of culture in a recognizable disorder” (Stewart 106). The popularity of pantomime in the nineteenth century creates a diorama, a miniature encapsulation of nineteenth-century meanings and values that correspond to the formal and systematic structures of the period. The upside down world presented on the pantomime stage and inside the pantomime theatre—where the divisions between class and age are temporarily effaced—is in a “recognizable disorder”. Inversion works because audiences can still recognize the proper order of things. The reviews profiled here tend to assess pantomimes along the lines of moral character: a recognizable order. Pantos that do not abide by any semblance of moral

structure are deemed empty spectacles. Pantomimes that meet appraisal demonstrate the correct values of class, culture, and childhood. Hopefully, we have here witnessed some of those values using the diorama of pantomime in lieu of a time machine. Peeking in to this scene, we have seen non-didactic entertainment configured as suited to children; appropriate only when it retains a sense of moral order. We spent some time admiring the little vignette of childhood innocence which is simultaneously configured as smooth-skinned-clean and spontaneous-animal. We indulged in both kinds of eggnog at the legitimate theatres and at the music hall, and we removed our rose-coloured glasses to assess the emotional semiosis of nostalgia and its dual production of a falsely Arcadian past and a transformative future. The dominant structure of feeling that seemed to be plastered on the utopian faces of the miniatures in our model, the tiny Dickens, the Ruskin with removable mutton chops: a lament for their own imagined childhoods. There were never any real children in the scene at all!

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