

JAMAICAN PANTOMIME – THE PEOPLE’S THEATRE

By Brian Heap

In Jamaica each year, large numbers of people who see no other form of live theatre take time out to visit the Little Theatre Movement’s National Pantomime, the majority of patrons undertaking to journey into Kingston for the occasion from country towns and villages all across the island. What is it about the Jamaican Pantomime that elicits this kind of response in close to seventy thousand people each season?

For one thing, Pantomime never pretends to be anything more than it actually is. Its straightforward themes of “rags to riches” like the traditional fairy stories from which modern Jamaican pantomime has developed, make the plots virtually interchangeable. After all Dick Whittington, Mother Goose, Cinderella and the rest are in search of nothing more than some serious upward social mobility with a little connubial bliss thrown in for good measure. It is to this formula, interestingly enough, that the Disney studios return regularly for inspiration in the production of award-winning animated features such as “**Beauty and the Beast**” and most recently “**Aladin**” and even a Broadway legend like Stephen Sondheim has exploited the adult fascination with the genre in his stage musical “**Into the Woods**”.

In Britain, Pantomime has remained largely traditional. As one reviewer stated the position very succinctly in a given pantomime season in the United Kingdom there are “200 productions, 12 stories and one plot”. The twelve stories are of course the above mentioned along with “**Babes in the Woods**”, “**Jack and the Beanstalk**”, “**Puss in Boots**” and a handful of others. The one plot throughout is simply “good overcomes evil”, the stories merely providing a loose framework within which TV and sports personalities can appear “live and direct” in front of an audience, which in turn, is expected to participate fully in the proceedings. Performances may include a liberal sprinkling of novelty variety acts such as jugglers, ventriloquists, magicians and the like, as well as a practical demonstration of the latest special-effects theatre technology.

However, having said that British pantomime has retained many of its (largely Victorian) traditions, including the cross-dressing of the male Dame and the female Principal Boy, many critics have lamented what they regard as its gross commercialization, and have often alluded to their commonly held belief that it is a theatre form which is showing signs of rapid degeneration, in its sometimes misguided and ill-judged attempts to cater to the sophisticated tastes of audiences of the late twentieth century.

Not so in Jamaica, where the LTM National Pantomime has grown steadily from a production which in its early years ran for just a few performances playing to audiences of the privileged few, into one which now runs for several months of the year, attracting thousands of enthusiastic patrons to performances here in Jamaica, as well as to some most prestigious venues on its North American tours. What gives Jamaican Pantomime its particular character, however, is something which neither critics nor scholars have adequately examined or acknowledged, namely the tremendous vision and quality of its writers and producers over the years,

The production of the annual National Pantomime is a seemingly impossible task. Produced without any form of subsidy, and heavily dependent on the volunteer spirit and goodwill of many people, the show with new book, musical score and lyrics, fresh costumes and sets must open at 6pm on Boxing Day every year. And it must please everyone from the smallest child, to the oldest grandmother, teenagers, adults, uptown and down country and town. The achievements of Jamaican Pantomime ought not to be trivialized. Its treatments of social, historic, traditional and political themes have helped in the forging of an identity for generations of Jamaicans, each performance being a subtle reminder of the rich cultural heritage which is the legacy of every Jamaican.

In a country of two and a half million souls, an audience of seventy thousand is but a drop in the bucket. At the same time it is an enormous achievement, since nowhere else in the English-speaking Caribbean is there a theatrical phenomenon quite like it. Yet there is, in a time of falling educational standards, values and morale, a need to take the Pantomime to even greater numbers of people, not merely as entertainment but as

dialectic. For as Caribbean Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott says in his epic poem **Omeros** “The widening mind can acquire the hues of a foliage different from where it begins.”

In an attempt to keep the form alive in the face of critical and academic indifference, the increasing commercialization of the Jamaican theatre and the decline of voluntarism in the performing arts, in about 1985 the Little Theatre Movement made a conscious decision to move in the direction of the “company” system. That decision has had tremendous repercussions, not only in producing a more professional, better trained core of company members rather than an annual “scratch” cast to back up the “stars”, but in opening up opportunities for a younger generation of performers, particularly those graduating from the Cultural Training Centre, in which the Little Theatre Movement, as founder of the Jamaica National School of Drama, has a vested interest. The development of the Pantomime Company has enabled the LTM to put in place certain processes and procedures which will hopefully not only secure the continuation of the pantomime tradition in Jamaica for the audiences of the next generation, but also ensure that more young people are given the opportunity of working in what so frequently, both here and overseas, becomes a closed shop.

(Taken from souvenir programme “Anansi Come Back” staged at The Hackney Empire, England in 1994)