

National Pantomime

As Jamaican as a good rice and peas!

By Brian Heap

When, in 1941, the curtain rose on the Little Theatre Movement of Jamaica's production of Jack and the Beanstalk, based on the traditional English Pantomime of the same name, few people then could have envisaged that they were witnessing the birth of what was to become the largest annual theatrical event in the English-speaking Caribbean.

OVER FIFTY YEARS LATER, a new generation of writers, directors, designers, technicians, composers, choreographers and performers have been working feverishly to ensure the December 26 opening of the LTM's 53rd National Pantomime production, *Anansi Come Back!*

To anyone unfamiliar with the LTM's work in Jamaica, the term "Pantomime" can be somewhat misleading. It has little or nothing to do with the European classic mime theatre, but has been derived from the English Pantomime, which one writer has described as "so indigenous that its conventions have to be interpreted to non-Britons." One American theatre writer, bravely attempting to explain the intricacies of the form to his fellow countrymen, simply stated that "It is a lively, even raucous, style of theatre which has



Dorothy Cunningham and members of the Pantomime Company in a scene from the 1989 pantomime, "Schoolers."



Captain John Rackham (Brian Heap, left) and Seaside Harry (Oliver Samuels) enjoy a lively toast on board ship in the record-breaking 1981 production of "The Pirate Princess."

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been evolving for well over two hundred years." From its earliest origins among the characters of commedia dell'arte, in Victorian England the pantomime quickly became a "real potpourri of theatrical elements" within the framework of a traditional fairy tale or fable, absorbing elements of clowning, burlesque, music hall and operetta, and establishing several theatrical conventions along the way, including the cross-dressing of the principal characters, invited audience participation and a magical transformation spectacle.

two performers, Hon. Louise Bennett-Coverley and Randolph "Ranny" Williams, known affectionately to thousands of Jamaicans as "Miss Lou and Mas' Ran." Both consummate artists whose performances were informed with a deep love and knowledge of the lore and language of the Jamaican people, they carried the art of Jamaican pantomime to new heights with their skillful delivery of topicalities, folk songs, proverbs and stories in the singularly expressive language of the Jamaican creole or patois.



Jamaica's foremost folklorist, the Hon. Louise Bennett-Coverley, who along with the late Randolph "Ranny" Williams were featured actors in the pantomime for over three decades.

In Jamaica the pantomime tradition can be traced back in one form or another to the eighteenth century, but the unbroken series initiated and continued by the Little Theatre Movement since the 1940s has established pantomime as a vehicle for authentic Jamaican cultural expression.

In Jamaica, the traditional fairy tales or fables such as *Cinderella* or *Aladdin and his Lamp* were quickly challenged and replaced with Jamaican stories such as *Soliday* and *The Wicked Bird* appearing as early as 1943. Soon after, the appearance of Anansi, the spiderman of African folk tradition, marked the beginning of a whole series of shows with the trickster hero at their centre.

The process of the Jamaicanization of the form was made irreversible by the towering presence over three decades of

THE 1993/94 LTM PANTOMIME SEASON marks the completion of a baker's dozen of outstanding original Jamaican pantomime scripts by Barbara Gloudon whose continued dedication to the art form as LTM Chairman and writer has brought it into the modern era, with the establishment of the Pantomime Company, and the exploration of a whole new range of subjects in productions, such as the historical themes of *Hail Columbus* and *The Pirate Princess*, Jamaican legends in *The Witch and River Mumma* and *the Golden Table*, as well as controversial social issues in *Trash*, *Ginneral B* and *Schoolers*. Mrs Gloudon's script for the current season, *Anansi Come Back*, marks the welcome return of the trickster spiderman Anansi, folk hero of Akan-Ashanti tradition, whose storytellers brought tales of his exploits

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