



PANTOMIME À L'ANGLAISE

BY DAVID LOWE

Jerry Hall, Mick Jagger's ex-wife (ex-girlfriend, according to his lawyers), is starring in a Christmas pantomime version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, at the Richmond Theatre, south London. Priscilla Presley, ex-wife of Elvis Presley, is playing the same part in a different production of the same pantomime in Manchester. David Hasselhoff (*The Young and the Restless*, *Baywatch*, *Knight Rider*) is playing Captain Hook in the pantomime version of *Peter Pan* at Southend-on-Sea, a holiday resort which, in December, is the very antithesis of Malibu. Jimmy Osmond, the youngest of the Osmond Brothers is starring in *Cinderella* in the Welsh town of Llandudno. Jimmy, whose great-great-great grandfather was Welsh, has been to Wales quite a few times according to his agent, but has never been to Llandudno... he's in for quite a shock!

What, then, is this British Christmas pantomime that attracts all these foreign stars to drab seaside provincial towns in the middle of winter? It is a theatrical genre peculiar to the British Isles that reveals something essential about the British character, like putting vinegar on their chips. Basically it's a mixture of vaudeville, burlesque and music hall, with its origins in the *commedia dell'arte*. The narrative is loosely based on a classic fairy story such as *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, and *Puss in Boots*. The adaptation is very free, but obeys strict rules. Bad jokes are scattered throughout like currants in a bun.

I say, I say, I say, it took me three days to bury my mother in law. Three days! Yes! She wouldn't keep still.

Boom, boom!

These two words are added on the end to tell you where the joke ends and when to laugh, which, in most cases, is unnecessary as the jokes are so well-known anyway. It's the holiday season and "should auld acquaintance be forgot, and auld lang syne?"

The rules of pantomime are as follows. There's always a villain with a stupid name. Since the financial crisis, he's generally become a banker. Baron Madoff Star of Sub-Prime Time, *boom, boom*, for example. Every time the villain comes onto the stage, the audience boos. If he appears behind somebody, the audience shouts in

unison, "Look behind you!" If the person says, "Oh, no, he isn't," the audience shouts in unison, "Oh, yes, he is." Do this and you'll look as English as fish and chips.

There's a fairy godmother who, with a wave of her wand, can resolve the most tortuous of plots, giving writers and directors a valuable way out of a dead end.

The fairy speaks in rhyme:

Je suis ta bonne fée, venu pour t'aider.

Ton vœu par magie ta fée t'accompli.

(Fait accompli – boom, boom!)

This is a translation, but it's just as bad in English.

Prince Charming is more often than not played by a woman in tights and a close-fitting bodice. She makes no effort to hide the fact that she's a woman. The female lead is played by a pretty young woman, often the star of a television soap opera or recent winner of some reality television talent show. It's generally a swan song. Last stop before the motorway of oblivion.

What's the capital of France? About 7 euros 50.

Boom, boom!

The post-menopausal, widowed mother of the female lead is played by a man in women's clothes. Older British women often look like retired generals in drag, so this doesn't take much of a leap of the imagination. The Oedipus complex of young spectators is swept aside in one fell swoop, replacing it with something probably worse. Older spectators feel some deep-seated urge moving around in their guts like emotional tectonic plates.

Officer, a man just attacked me...

and I think he was drunk.

The policeman looks the "woman" up and down.

I can well believe he was drunk, madam!

Boom, boom!

Ian McKellen, the distinguished Shakespearean actor (as well as being Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* films and Magneto in *X-Men*), gave a memorable performance as Widow Twanky in *Aladdin* a few years ago. King Lear and Widow Twanky are the pinnacles of an acting career.

A man carrying a camera comes on stage and addresses the king.

Can I take your picture, your Majesty?

The king says of course and adopts a regal pose.

The photographer unhooks a portrait of the king from the wall,

puts it under his arm, and walks off stage.

Boom, boom!