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Past Issues

□ Taylor, Millie (Ed):

British Pantomime Performance

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A Review by Martin Barker

Here is a book that is in itself intriguing, yet to any reader of *Participations* ought to be deeply frustrating and irritating. Millie Taylor, herself a former musical director, has written this careful dissection of the formal and performative characteristics of the peculiarly British tradition of pantomime. She sketches the history of the genre, attends to its typical narratives (which pretty much all are premised on an adventure journey and a return), its use of rhyme, the specially staged slapstick numbers (the slosh scenes, for instance), the role of the Dame and cross-dressing, and the contribution of dance and music – from main themes to percussive support of moments of humour. All this is based on good research, including observations at professional and community performances in many places, supported by interviews with a number of leading exponents of the art. Anyone interested in pantomime as art-form will read the book with profit.

But anyone interested in audiences for pantomime will do well to shudder and pass by. Not because they do not appear in the book – they do, on just about every page. There is admittedly one substantial index entry under ‘audience participation’. But they are there, throughout. And yet there is not one trace or indication of any actual enquiry. Instead what we are offered is a spiral of implicative claims about ‘the audience’.

These begin innocently enough. Audiences enjoy pantomime. They laugh, they shout, they sing, they respond to the Dame’s banter with them. They become excited, anxious, fearful, amused. They are ‘entertained’. Even, because they know the stories in advance, the stories might by dint of being altered a bit become ‘subversive’ ... (I have to say, my granddaughter didn’t know the stories of the first two we took her to – does that mean she was not yet part of the ‘audience’? She *thought* she was ... oh no she wasn’t, oh yes she ...) But bubbling away behind these seemingly innocent notions are all kind of semi-theorised claims which are worth attending to, not just for themselves, but for the way they signal the state of play in much drama theory. The ‘audience’ is not really worth researching because we ‘know already’ most of what is worth knowing.

So, not only do audiences give these overt responses, they also do things that might give pause for concern. Gender is an obvious topic. The Dame is for Taylor the paradigmatic embodiment of the single woman, struggling to make her way in a hard world. The presentation of the Dame in panto has changed over time.

It follows that as society changes, so will the dame, providing a barometer of society's attitudes. In Victorian society where unmarried women were a drain on their fathers or brothers and an embarrassment in society, this portrayal set a different light on the situation. It forced society to consider the woman as a person, rather than an object. But why do we still accept this in a supposedly more equal society? Perhaps because society is still not equal. Single mothers still have to support their children, whether through work (in which case, childcare is an issue) or on benefits, and are still among the poorest people in our society

So, that raises all kinds of tricky questions about what 'the audience' do. For instance, says Taylor, they 'identify' with the principal boy – who is not a boy, of course, but a girl in drag. And that leads them on strangely ideological journeys – as here: "The presence of a woman playing a boy striving for manhood allows the audience's imagination to be released to create for themselves the representation of the ideal man" (p. 116) Oh well, that's alright then, phew – or is it alright? Hmm.

Pantomime is apparently made up of, indeed structured around, contradictory tendencies. You see, there is the story which because of its formal construction *involves* us, and makes us care about characters, and wonder what will happen to them. It plays with *illusions* of many kinds. And that, by implication, is 'not a good thing'. So, for instance, describing one production of *Robinson Crusoe*, she summarises the role of the music:

The music covers the scene change, but does not run across from one scene to another, thus music is helping to articulate the change of mood from one scene to another and signifying a change of geographical location or anticipating the entrance of a character. At these moments the music is supporting the development of the story and creating the illusion of integration. (p. 166)

But then there is all the comedy paraphernalia and the 'numbers' which *distance* us, undo the illusions, reveal the artifactuality of it all, and make us safer from any residual lurking 'messages'. So, phew, again – we can carry on laughing.

On its own, any one such audience-imputation, and insertion of the occasional bit of assumptive theory, would not matter. But across the book their constant presence, their resonance with those dreadful old theories of 'interpellation' couples with the total absence of any trace of interest in *actual* audiences, to constitute a typical problem. We don't need to know, because we already 'know'.

The curious thing is to see how easily and readily this kind of pseudo-theory of the audience can coexist with strong elements of traditional moralising about what is 'suitable for children'. Double-entendres, just about OK, as long as they are 'spoken' by the right character and with just the degree of distance and discretion that the little- 'uns won't

understand ... of course, there is always the risk that s/he will turn to mummy or daddy and ask, sotto voce or louder, "Why is everyone laughing ...?"

The sad thing to me is just how rarely, in the fields of drama and performance, scholars even see that there is a problem, and a need, to know concrete things about audiences. The rot was confirmed by Susan Bennett who, after her *Theatre Audiences* became the source of just about all knowledge/ignorance on the topic, followed it up with an essay in which she effectively declared that research into actual audiences was unnecessary ... since theatre companies were already doing it (asking people what they liked, and why they came ...).^[1] Oh dearie me, that's a bit of a lacuna. Oh no it isn't. Oh yes it very definitely is.

Note

^[1] Susan Bennett, 'Theatre audiences redux', *Theatre Journal*, 47, 2006: 225-230.

Contact (by e-mail): [Martin Barker](#)

Biographical note

Martin Barker is Professor of Film & Television Studies at Aberystwyth University.

