

My First Pantomime at the Hippodrome in 1937

by Harry Dyer

Last year I attended the pantomime at the Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury. It was a family party, two grandparents, two offspring with spouses plus four grandchildren. In the auditorium there was an air of expectation, the chatter of excited children and much sorting out of seats before that magic moment when the overture started. The curtain went up, the age barrier disappeared and we all became the same indeterminate age, which the essence of pantomime demands. We joined in the fun and laughter, hissing the villains, cheering the heroes, passing chocolates, eating ice creams in the interval and agreeing, "Let's all go again next year".

How very different from my reaction to the first pantomime I saw! First you have to know that at the age of eleven or so I did not know what a pantomime was. Yet I was no stranger to the "performing arts". I had taken part in school plays, attended concert parties put on by local organisations and, of course, joined in the 'Saturday morning rush' at the old Regent cinema.

I suppose it was taken for granted that I should know what a pantomime was, but I didn't and nobody enlightened me. That year it was Robinson Crusoe at the old Hippodrome in Snargate Street. Each Saturday during its run there was a free ticket performance for the children of Dover. Tickets were issued by schools, but on what basis they were allotted I have no idea. My younger brother and I were given tickets. My elder brother was

not. I did know the story of Robinson Crusoe, having had the story read aloud when I was in a lower class at school. Now, having a ticket to see it, I was inspired to go to the children's library and obtain the book, which I avidly read. So there I was, totally prepared to see this wonderful story enacted on the stage - as per Daniel Defoe.

I was told by my parents how lucky I was to have been given a ticket and how I was going to enjoy myself thoroughly. However, my big brother, who knew all about pantos and probably acting out of jealousy, said that if I was expecting to see what I was reading then I was in for a unpleasant surprise, for in his opinion it was 'a load of old tripe- rubbish-nonsense' and no more like Robinson Crusoe than chalk was like cheese. He left it at that.

On Saturday afternoon, making sure our tickets were safely in our pockets, we set off for the old "Hip". After being shown to our seats the first thing that struck me was the utter din the rest of the children were making. I thought, 'Well, if this was a Saturday at the Regent the manager would have thrown this rabble out'. Then the orchestra struck up a medley of popular songs. This did not seem strange to me at all. After all at the cinema popular songs were played before a film started and the Granada had an organist who did the same.

When the curtain went up I had the first of many surprises. There on the

stage was the interior of a hut with a notice over the top saying 'Robinson Crusoe's hut'. Among the strange things inside were a giant cooking pot, a large wash tub, a mangle and a man, dressed in outrageous women's clothes, who turned out to be Robinson Crusoe's mother, who was a drunken Irish washerwoman. There was also a blacked up, incompetent character who was always falling over his own feet and was (believe it or not) 'Man Saturday' because he over slept! But the biggest shock of all was when 'Robbie' came on. He was a woman and had a girl friend who was also a woman! This was just the start of the nonsense.

At times Mrs Crusoe would sing the old Irish song, 'Sure a little bit of heaven fell from the sky one day' and a huge basket was lowered with an outsize bottle of Guinness in it. Every other character who tried it was showered with feathers, flour or shredded paper. Strangest of all, Laurel and Hardy were on the island too. 'Uncle Ollie' had a bicycle which he left on the stage and if anyone touched it we, the audience, had to yell out 'Uncle Ollie'. If he failed to arrive the children screamed their heads off. Up-to-date and old popular songs were sung. A bunch of female pirates in skimpy costumes danced all over the place. Man Saturday was put

through the mangle as Mrs Crusoe did the pirates' washing. Robinson Crusoe sang a couple of love duets with his/her girl friend. Mrs Crusoe was nearly turned into Irish stew in the cooking pot by the 'cannon balls', but was rescued by Robbie and Man Saturday, but not before Man Saturday landed in the pot himself. There was not a goat in sight; only an over-dressed woman who spoke in a silly French accent. This was Madame Fifi la Bonne-Bonne and her performing poodles.

And so, to me, this bizarre performance must have had Mr Defoe spinning in his grave. I was quite relieved when it was all over. My younger brother enjoyed it, but I put this down to his ignorance of the real story and concluded that I was the only sane person in the theatre and that my elder brother was absolutely right - it was the biggest load of rubbish. The only good thing about it was that, as we left, we were presented with a goody-bag - the contents consumed long before we got home.

Oh, yes! I did tell the family what a great time I had. I was not giving my elder brother the pleasure of saying 'I told you so', but I made a vow there and then that I would never again attend a thing called a pantomime.

But time brings changes.

Wanted - Secretary

We are seeking applications from any Society Member who would be interested in undertaking this worthwhile honorary post when Leo Wright retires in April 2001.

Ideally, applicants should have word processing skills and have access to a personal computer. The duties include writing, typing and distributing agendas and minutes for the monthly committee meeting and dealing with general correspondence. The successful applicant will be a very welcome addition to our friendly executive committee.

If you would like more details please telephone the Chairman, Jeremy Cope on 01304 211348 or e-mail jeremycop@compuserve.com