

Pantomime – The perfect form of Christmas entertainment? Oh yes it is!

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Research from the University of Birmingham has highlighted striking similarities between today's Saturday night television talent shows and another great Christmas tradition, the Victorian pantomime. The appeal of pantomime in providing spectacle, melodramatic villains and a guaranteed happy ending for a Victorian audience is paralleled today in *Strictly Come Dancing* and the *X Factor*.

In the first archival study of the origins and practices of Victorian pantomime, Professor Kate Newey from the University of Birmingham's department of Drama and Theatre Arts, is unlocking the traditions of everyone's favourite Christmas pastime and has highlighted the formula that has made pantomime so enduringly successful and that forms a key part of the success of today's blockbuster talent shows.

This distinctly English entertainment has been a Christmas tradition since the 19th Century; where every theatre across the country offered this cathartic outlet, opening on Boxing Day, with two and a half hours of trivial fun, complete make believe and of course, a fairytale ending. Pantomimes offer escapism for the whole family with a focus on the spectacle and romance as well as implicit connections to more serious issues which explains why it remains popular today.

Professor Newey explains:

"Not a lot has changed since pantomimes began; they still offer the chance for the audience to be silly at a time of general relaxation with the family, which is always needed at Christmas. In a similar way, Strictly Come Dancing and the X Factor have been allowing their audiences to indulge in over the top behaviour over the past 12 weeks."

"These programmes segue nicely into the pantomime genre, offering good singing and dancing, high performance value and spectacle, and of course evil villains – the judges – all coupled with opportunities for audience participation. The fairytale ending is realised with the crowning of the winner, making their dreams come true in a similar vein to the much anticipated kiss between the hero and heroine in the theatre."

Pantomimes were previously more political than today's offerings, parodying the notable happenings of the year. The railway boom of the 1840s was reflected with steam engine props and an array of Russian characters appeared in pantomimes staged during the Crimean War, not to mention the pantomime dame parodying a powerful older woman under the rule of an enigmatic Queen. Pantomimes were also very localised, with frequent references to local jokes and advertisements, introducing the notion of product placement which we associate with Hollywood today.

Professor Newey adds:

"We think of the Victorians as being very straight-laced and morally proper, but from their pantomimes we can see that they had fun enjoying the comedy of pantomime's slapstick humour and the often grotesque violence of the stage fighting, not to mention the risqué costumes, all of which are conventions of today's pantomimes and popular entertainment programmes."

"As well as offering a commentary of political and economic life, pantomimes were, and still are, jolly good fun. Stemming from a time when theatre was very heavily censored, pantomime developed out of the need to satirise, affording grown-ups the permission to be silly and there aren't really very many other opportunities for this which explains why they continue to be so popular. They are entertaining for children with their fairytale stories and spectacle, meaning they attract a diverse theatre audience kept entertained by local references, including local business advertisements representing the birth of product placement."

Professor Newey's ongoing research sheds light on why pantomime remains the most popular form of theatre today. It consistently satisfies audience expectations by providing fun, escapist entertainment tailored to a local audience. This festive period will be no exception and will even witness a blurring of the boundaries between the theatrical form and Saturday night television with a number of popular *Strictly Come Dancing* and *X Factor* stars taking the helm of much-loved pantomime characters up and down the country.

Notes to Editors

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