Drama revision guide
Year 7: Pantomime
The History of Pantomime

Pantomime literally means “all kinds” of “mime” (panto-mime) . It is generally acknowledged that British pantomime is modelled on the early masques of the Elizabethan and Stuart days. In the 14th century the early masques were musical, mime or spoken dramas, usually performed in grand houses although by the 17th century they were really no more than an excuse for a theme party.

The timing of the British pantomime at Christmas and the role reversal of the lead characters (the principal boy being played by a girl and the Dame by a man) may have also evolved from the Tudor “Feast of Fools”, presided over by the Lord of Misrule. The feast was an unruly event, involving much drinking, revelry and role reversal.

The Lord of Misrule, normally a commoner with a reputation of knowing how to enjoy himself, was selected to direct the entertainment. The festival is thought to have originated from the benevolent Roman masters who allowed their servants to be the boss for a while.
Social Context

Pantomimes take place around the Christmas period and are nearly always based on well known children’s stories such as Peter Pan, Aladdin, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty etc. Pantomimes are performed not only in the best theatres in the land but also in village halls throughout Britain. Whether a lavish professional performance or a hammy local amateur dramatic production, all pantomimes are well attended. Pantomimes are a family show that aim to make both the children and parents laugh. There are recurring characters (stock characters) in Pantomimes.

Commedia Dell’Arte

Pantomime developed from a type of traveling street theatre called Commedia dell’arte which came from Italy in the 16th century. Commedia is a very physical type of theatre that uses dance, music, tumbling, acrobatics and buffoonery.

Commedia dell’arte troupes had a repertoire of stories that they performed in fairgrounds and market places. Often the touring troupes were made up of family members who would inherit their characters, costumes, masks and stories from their parents or grandparents. Commedia spread across Europe from Italy to France and by the middle of the 17th century began to be popular in England.

Slapstick Comedy

A key part of Pantomime is its form of comedy, slapstick comedy. Slapstick is a type of physical comedy characterized by broad humour, absurd situations, and vigorous, usually violent action. The slapstick comic, more than a mere funnyman or buffoon, must often be an acrobat, a stunt performer, and something of a magician—a master of uninhibited action and perfect timing.
**Audience Participation**

Audience participation is a very important part of a pantomime. The audience are encouraged to boo the villain whenever he enters the stage, argue with the Dame (who is always a man) and warn the Principal Boy (who is always a girl) when the villain is behind them by shouting out “He’s behind you!”

**Music in Pantomime**

Due to its origin as a musical comedy, modern songs are often spread around the story line. The music is often upbeat and aims both to make the audience laugh and to create more audience involvement. Due to the music, Pantomimes often have large choruses that will sing and dance along with the songs.

**The Star of the Show**

Another contemporary pantomime tradition is the celebrity guest star, a practice that dates back to the late 19th century, when Augustus Harris, proprietor of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, hired well-known variety artists for his pantomimes.

Many modern pantomimes use popular artists to promote the pantomime, and the play is often adapted to allow the star to showcase their well-known act, even when such a spot has little relation to the plot.
The characters

Principal Boy (Alladin)

A Principal Boy is a woman playing a male part. The tradition of women dressing up as men on stage started in the 18th century. Male roles played by women were known as 'breeches parts'.

The principal boy character evolved slowly throughout the 19th century. Women such as Vesta Tilley made their names as male impersonators in the music halls before treading the boards in pantomimes as principal boys. By the 1880s the hero role in the pantomime was always played by a woman.

Famous principal boys have included Marie Lloyd, the Queen of the Music Halls, and in the 20th century, Dorothy Ward.

More recently principal boys have been played by TV soap stars, pop stars and sports personalities. In the 1950s and 1960s there was a trend for male principal boys with pop stars like Cliff Richard playing the role.
Pantomime Dame (Whishy Washy)

A Pantomime Dame is a comical lead of a man playing a woman. There were no pantomime dames in early pantomime but there is a long tradition of women's roles being performed by men in English theatre.

Comic dames first began to appear in pantomime in the early 19th century. In 1820 the clown Joseph Grimaldi played the Baron’s wife in one of the earliest versions of Cinderella. The dame role slowly evolved over the next fifty years and really took off at the end of the 19th century.

Dames came in several types: working class and plain, glamorous and snobbish, or grotesque and elegant. In the late 19th century it became the vogue for Music Hall and Variety stars to perform in pantomimes. Some female impersonators from the Halls began to play the Dame role. Famous 19th century dames include Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell.

In the 1940s and 50s Variety stars such as Arthur Askey took on the Dame role for the pantomime season. More recently pop stars, television personalities and sports stars have played the role of the Dame.

The Dame character has remained consistent for the last hundred years or so. Dames have a bawdy sense of humour, outrageous costumes and extrovert characters. They interact with the audience, initiate slapstick and play tricks on the other performers. The costumes they wear play a large part in the jokes and are often visual puns.
Pantomime Horse

A pantomime horse (there are also pantomime cows and other animals) is a theatrical representation of a horse by two actors in a single costume who cooperate and synchronize their movements.

One actor plays the front end, including the horse's head and its front legs, in a more-or-less upright posture and with a reasonable field of view afforded by eye holes in the horse's head. The other actor, playing the rear end of the animal, must bend at the waist so that his torso is horizontal like that of a horse, and put his arms around the waist of the first actor. He can see little, although there are normally eye holes in the bottom part of the horse's torso to enable him to see where he is putting his feet and to enable him to breathe. Pantomime cows also usually have comically prominent udders.

A skilled pair of performers can dance as a pantomime horse.
Pantomime Villain (Abanazer)

A pantomime villain is the bag guy of the play. The point about pantomime villains is that they are ridiculously overblown. This is done deliberately and for comic effect in an actual pantomime. A good example would be Alan Rickman in Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, except that the film as a whole is so daft that Rickman’s otherwise pantomimetic [1] Sheriff of Nottingham seems almost appropriate.

The job of the pantomime villain is to drive an audience of small children into a paroxysm of hisses, boos and “she’s (or he’s) behind you” whenever they appear on stage. They strut, they stalk, they scheme, they plot, if they have moustaches, they twirl them.

They are a caricature of what a serious villain should be, the louder and larger the better.
**Pantomime Damsel in Distress (Jasmine)**

A pantomime Damsel in Distress is the character that gets saved by the Hero (often the Principal boy). The Damsel can be either male or female and often the love interest of the Principal boy.

Her plight to be saved unites the cast, causing them to put aside their differences and work together to save her or provide the premise for most story lines of pantomimes.

As pantomimes are often fairy tales or folk stories, the Damsel in Distress is often a princess.

Sometimes the character gets kidnapped for the sake of her good looks or royal blood, but in other works she's more likely doing something that is a threat to the party that kidnaps her and sometimes she is being forced to do something she doesn't want (e.g. marry the villain). Alternatively, she can end up prisoner as a Heroic Sacrifice; situations where she puts herself in peril so that others can get away are popular, even if her plan ultimately fails.

Generally expected to give The Hero a Smooch of Victory when he rescues her.
Questions

1. When was the first Pantomime performed? Where did it come from?
2. What is the purpose of Pantomime and who are their key audiences?
3. What Pantomime was performed at the Theatre closest to your home? Who was the most famous actor in the performance?
4. What was the Drury Lane Theatre Pantomime from 2017-18? What makes this Pantomime so famous?
5. How are set and costume used in Pantomime to create interesting performances? Do Pantomime set’s and costumes look similar? How so?
6. How has Pantomime been influence by Italian theatre style Commedia Dell’Arte? What elements of Pantomime are influence by this form of theatre?