

A LANTERN IN PANTOMIME

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The English pantomime of the Georgian age, which was born in the 18th century and reached its apogee in the years of the great clown Joseph Grimaldi (1779-1837), was a strange and unique theatrical phenomenon, with remote roots in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. In its ultimate form, the pantomime of the early 19th century was divided into two parts. In the first, some fairy tale, legend or historical theme would be dramatised, with dialogue in rhymed couplets and a great deal of comic business. Typical titles were *Harlequin Gulliver*, *Harlequin Whittington*, *Lord Mayor of London*, *Harlequin Guy Fawkes* and *Harlequin Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

At the climactic point of the story there was the spectacular 'transformation scene', when the hero and heroine were turned into *Harlequin* and *Columbine*, and the villain and his henchmen into the comic grotesques, *Pantaloon* and *Clown*. This led on to the second half of the entertainment, in which *Harlequin* and *Columbine* danced, tirelessly, while *Pantaloon* and *Clown* indulged in a lot of knockabout comedy, abetted by a variety of funny characters, based on familiar types of the day. Generally the *Harlequinade* scenes took place in settings representing real contemporary locations – streets or shops or new buildings currently in the news, such as the *Thames Tunnel* or the *Crystal Palace* – and made great play with topical events and manners.

Harlequin carried a magic bat, which transformed whatever it touched; and this involved one of the most important scenic elements of the pantomime, the 'tricks'. These were free-standing props or pieces of scenery, skillfully engineered with moveable flaps and panels, and perhaps making use

of trapdoors in the stage in order to produce the effect of magical transformations. The techniques were closely-guarded secrets of the scene-builders, so very little information about them has come down to us, although we know a lot about how they looked to the audience and the kind of humour they entailed. Thus a barrel marked 'British Spirits' might turn into a brave British tar; a clothes-horse might change to a real horse; a jar labelled 'capers' would turn into the clown – the whole process accompanied by a nonsensical running commentary by *Clown* and *Pantaloon*.

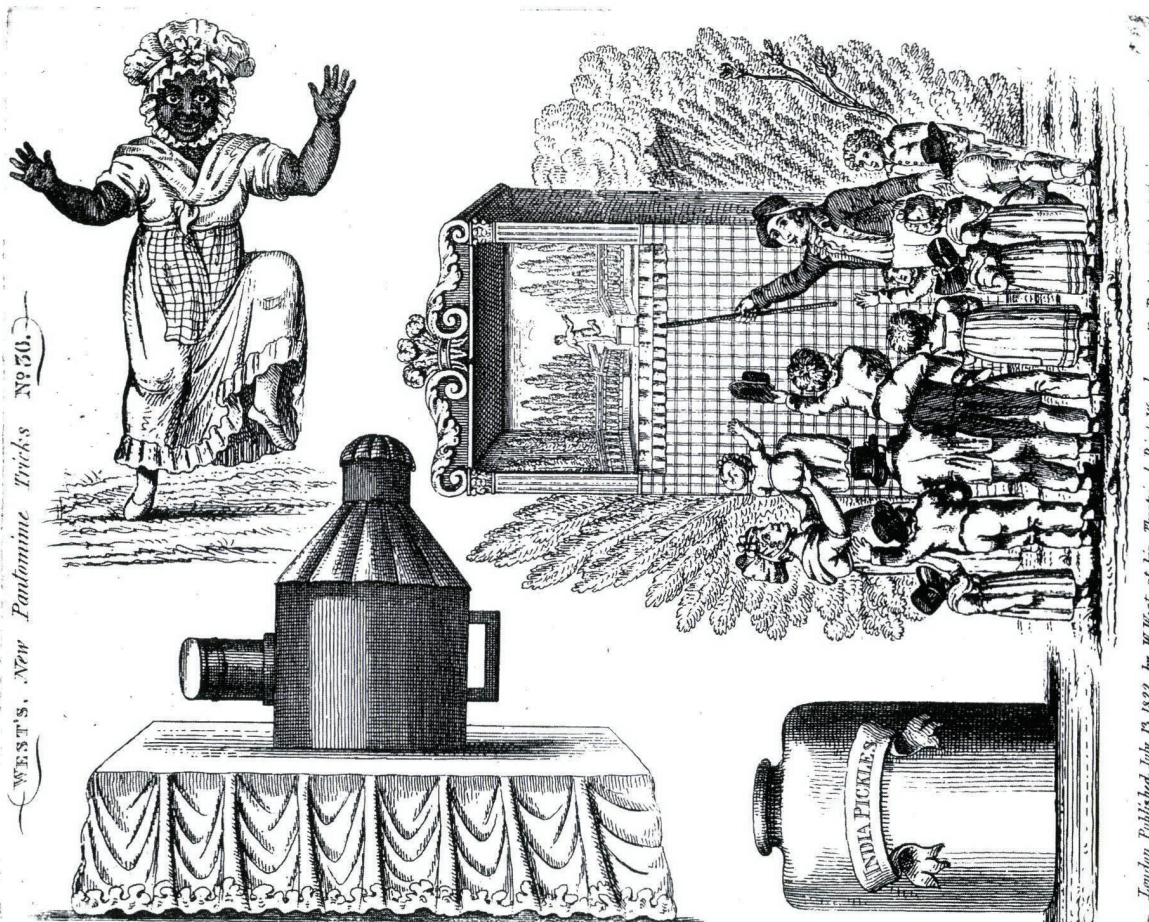
An invaluable documentary source for the way such 'tricks' appeared to the audience are the prints issued between 1811 and the 1840s under the generic name of 'Juvenile Drama'. These publications had begun as souvenirs of stage successes – sheets bearing pictures of the favourite actors in costume. Quite soon printers and patrons alike had the notion that the prints might be coloured, cut out and mounted on model stages; and the print-sellers responded by producing not only prints of the actors, but also miniature reproductions of the scenery, and decorated stage prosceniums to be made up into theatres. It is important to recognise that these were not 'toy theatres' but definitely 'model theatres'. The prosceniums were based on the real London theatres of the day, and the prints meticulously documented the latest dramatic successes. Thus the diligent Regency fan who built his little theatre and cut out the scenes and characters was making a faithful copy in miniature of the *Drury Lane* or *Covent Garden* stage in action.

Luckily, the publishers also offered their customers

the latest tricks from the new pantomimes, which could also be cut out and made to work by means of hinges and hidden threads. The most famous publisher of the *Juvenile Drama*, William West of Wych Street, opposite *Drury Lane* itself, issued more than 70 such prints of tricks between 1815 and 1832; and it seems fairly safe to assume that he was recording the latest novelties from each successive year's Christmas pantomimes.

Thus in July 1822, West published the sheet illustrated here. Two tricks are offered for the model-maker to colour, cut out and mount. One – of rather dubious taste for modern sensibilities perhaps – is a bottle marked 'India Pickles' which transforms into a cheery, dancing Indian maiden. The other, which is of rather more interest to readers of the *New Magic Lantern Journal*, shows a giant magic lantern on a table. When the trick was stuck together and the right string pulled, the lantern magically changed into a street puppet show, with an audience of children crowding round the showman.

Historically this trick is interesting because it is evidence that the magic lantern was so familiar to the public at large, and its associations so appealing, that it could be presented on stage in this iconic way in the certainty that it would both interest and excite an audience. Further, the fact that the lantern and the street puppet show were chosen to provide the theme and wit of such a transformation trick is evidence that the two must have been sufficiently closely associated in the public mind. It is sad indeed that we will never know what impromptu gags and commentary the lantern provoked from *Clown* and *Pantaloon*.



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