

HARLEQUINADE

Peter Gillies

THIS STORY STARTED when I went to visit an old lady who had some slides for sale. *Beauty and the Beast*, in 24 slides, is how they were described. As I looked through them I could see that they were nicely painted, obviously a longer set than normal, and made by W.C. Hughes, which seemed like a good omen. However, I very quickly became confused and thought I had been given two or three incomplete sets muddled up together, even though the bindings, labels and numbers were all consistent. I questioned the lady, who assured me that they had belonged to her grandfather and were absolutely original, all present and correct. Sadly, she couldn't remember anything about the days when she had watched them or exactly how he had used them. I eventually bought the slides, but left convinced that I had thrown my money away.

The figures of Harlequin, Columbine and the Clown were recognisable, but that didn't seem to fit with the story of *Beauty and the Beast*. The breakthrough came when, with help from John Burgess, I met Roger Brasier who performs in Alan and Rene Marriott's lantern show. As soon as he saw the slides he said, 'Oh, this is pure Harlequinade!' He provided several more pointers, and the trail began.

The theatrical tradition of Harlequinade was introduced into Britain in the early eighteenth century, evolving directly from the *commedia dell'arte*, which had originated in Italy during the sixteenth century. Audiences in Britain didn't take to the continental humour or style of theatre, so the concept was adapted to the Anglo-Saxon taste. Gradually a small proportion of fairy story was introduced to the Harlequinade performance (it is widely reported that *Mother Goose* was the first story to be used), and over the next hundred years the balance gradually altered, until the Harlequinade disappeared altogether and the show became the 'traditional' English pantomime as we would recognise it today.

Harlequinade consisted of a few traditional characters playing storylines within well-known themes. These were recounted using a mixture of knockabout slapstick humour, dance, mime, practical jokes and a lot of acrobatic agility. The stories revolved around two main principles and always depended upon the very specific relationships between the characters involved.

The first principle was the **Transformation** – a manoeuvre in which the scene and characters would change completely and (almost) instantly. The stage scenery would be rapidly changed, and the actors would change character and costume equally quickly, playing on the audience's imagination and on the supposed magical powers of some of the characters.

The second principle was the **Chase** – a continual succession of players looking for one another, constantly being thwarted and misled (the sort of routine that film comedians such as Buster Keaton and the Marx Brothers would later use). The Chase made extensive use of secret trap doors so that players could enter and exit the stage very quickly. There was an old joke that some actors never met, because when one was going up the other was going down. One actor supposedly dived through a window into a ready-prepared woman's costume so that he could run straight back on stage in disguise in order to cause even more confusion.

The main players in the Harlequinade were:

Harlequin: a magical figure dressed in a suit of brightly coloured lozenges and always carrying a bat or a magic wand. Using this device he had the power to change the scene or create transformations. The bat consisted of two pieces of wood slightly separated by a handle, so that when it struck an object it made a loud crack. Gunpowder was sometimes added to enhance the effect. When Harlequin donned a mask, the audience would understand him to be invisible to all eyes except those of his beloved Columbine. **Columbine:** Harlequin's sweetheart, who was also invisible to the eyes of all other mortal characters. She was a beautiful, dancing



1. Title slide of W.C. Hughes's *Beauty and the Beast* pantomime set.



2. Balletic interlude in the *Beauty and the Beast* story

figure, almost fairy-like, wearing a dress of multi-coloured silk. In terms of action, she appears to have *done* very little, or possibly nothing at all, except to act as a catalyst for trouble between Harlequin and his rival Clown.

Clown: a character who spent a great deal of time causing mayhem, the effects of which were generally suffered by his sidekick Pantaloon. Clown was also in love with Columbine. The most famous actor to have played Clown was Joseph Grimaldi (1779–1837), who introduced the art of cross-dressing (a tradition which lives on in the modern 'pantomime dame') and who enjoyed tremendous popularity in his day. Many other actors played Clown, but Grimaldi's death seems to have contributed to the beginning of the long, slow decline in Harlequinade, and there is no equivalent of the Clown part in the modern English pantomime.

Pantaloon: Columbine's father, a comic partner to Clown and usually described as a cunning and dangerous old man. He spent quite a lot of his time trying to keep unsuitable suitors – i.e. Harlequin and Clown – away from his daughter.

Other characters seem to have been added at will, and to have faded in and out of fashion over the years. Sprites seem to have been quite common, as was a Policeman character, and sometimes a Masher (a young male dandy, with top hat and cane).

The nineteenth-century English pantomime was divided into two parts: firstly, a fairy tale or fable, portrayed in dialogue, song and dance; secondly, a madcap Harlequinade. The two parts were linked by a transformation scene, in which a character such as Mother Goose or the Fairy Queen transformed the characters of the fairy story into the Harlequinade figures. The finale was generally a long chase scene, with Pantaloon and Clown in pursuit of Harlequin and Columbine. Part of the fun for audiences was guessing which pantomime character would 'transform' into which character in the Harlequinade. Masks were frequently used to make it more interesting.

One device used to make the transformation easier to perform was the use of oversize artificial heads on some characters, or large costumes which could be worn over the costume for the 'transformed' character. The 'big heads' in particular became one of the traditions of pantomime, lasting for much longer than the transformation itself. Gerald Frow, in his history of the pantomime *Oh Yes It Is*, quotes a theatrical magazine claiming in 1883 that 'No pantomime is worth the name without big heads!'

Beauty and the Beast is very well represented in the Hughes slide set, with 17 slides including the title slide (see fig. 1). Interestingly this describes the set as *The Grand Juvenile Pantomime*, with the only reference to the fairy story being a small sign held by Clown which gives the title as *The Rose and the Beauty*. The illustration portrays the four Harlequinade characters along with two sprites who are giving an unknown lady a hard time.

The seven Harlequinade slides in the set all follow the same general theme: scenes of chaos always caused by Clown, often a chase, but with Harlequin and Columbine looking relaxed, debonair and nonchalant. It seems possible that these slides were almost an independent set, which could be interchanged with different



3. *The Beast catches the merchant picking a forbidden rose*



4. *The finale of Beauty and the Beast, with a fairy about to perform...*



5. *... the Transformation to the Harlequinade*

pantomime stories. One fascinating slide (see fig. 6) shows a general chase scene, but features a baby with '1882' clearly marked on its forehead. Presumably this is a reference to the New Year which coincided with the pantomime season, thus giving a clear date of 1881–2 for this slide set. The 'Goodnight' slide (see fig. 9) at the end of the set again features only the Harlequin characters, but also seems to have been a standard slide for use with other pantomime sets.

No direct link with any specific theatre's production has been found for these slides, and there were no productions of *Beauty and the Beast* at the major London theatres in 1881–2. Lester Smith tells me that 'W.C. Hughes often took the stories that were popular at the Royal Polytechnic and copied or redrew them for their own slides.' Barry Clarke, of Pollock's Toy Museum, points out that the sprites pictured in the slides are reminiscent of the Vokes family, who performed at the Drury Lane Theatre from 1869 to 1879, then moved briefly to Covent Garden.² Shop scenes (see fig. 8) were often featured in the stage productions, and the names used were often those of real shops, paid for by the shopkeepers as advertisements. If these names had been kept they might offer a clue as to the whereabouts of the theatre, but presumably Hughes deleted them since they would not have meant anything to a wider audience.



6. *General Harlequinade mayhem: note date '1882' on the baby's forehead*



7. *Harlequinade skating scene: Columbine and Harlequin glide effortlessly past the disorder*



8. *Bull enters china shop: further Harlequinade action*



9. *'Good Night' from the cast of the Harlequinade*

10. *Slipping slide: Clown, Pantaloon and exploding soda bottle*



One aspect of the importance of the Harlequinade for the lantern which has quite amazed me has been the number of references to it that can be found in slipping slides. I believe that there are many more of these to be found and understood. Some will be direct references like those shown here (see figs 10–13), while others may show similar tricks and jokes but with different characters. The only character I have not yet found an example of is Columbine, but that may be because she does relatively little, so the slide makers found it difficult to find a role for her on an action-based slipping slide.

It would be reasonable to assume that if pantomime and Harlequinade were such widespread subjects for humorous slides, there would be evidence of this somewhere. And sure enough, W.C. Hughes's catalogue of about 1878, which includes a list of well over 200 'Humorous Slipping Slides', has a separate listing of 25 slipping slides headed 'Pantomime Subjects' (see fig. 14),



11. Slipping slide: Harlequin falling to pieces



12. Slipping slide: Clown jumps through window; 'Gone to Tea'



13. Slipping slide: Clown with unidentified 'Big Head' character (resemblance to any well-known prime minister is coincidental; this is a non-political journal! – Ed.)



including a couple of those reproduced here. It has often been observed that we no longer understand many of the Victorian jokes and visual references we see in slipping slides and other humorous slides, but perhaps the pantomime and the lost art of Harlequinade can provide a source for at least some of them.

Peter GILLIES has been a member of the Magic Lantern Society for 14 years. He remains an avid collector of lanterns and slides and still gives the occasional show. This article is based on a talk given to the Society in October 2001.

NOTES

1. *The Theatre* magazine, 1883, quoted in Gerald Frow, *Oh Yes It Is: A History of Pantomime* (London: BBC, 1985), 105.
2. See M. Willson Disher, *Clowns and Pantomimes* (New York and London: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 313–5, and Gerald Forsyth, 'Notes on Pantomime with a list of Drury Lane Pantomimes 1879–1914', *Theatre Notebook* Vol. 2 (1947–8), 22–30.

PANTOMIME SUBJECTS.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 Clown Moving Eyes | 16 Clown and Fisherwoman |
| 2 Do. Falling to Pieces | 16 Harlequin Falling to pieces |
| 3 Do. on Kicking Donkey | 17 Do. and Harlequin Jumping |
| 4 Do. Tumbling* | Through Window, "Gone |
| 5 Do. and Rum Punch | to Tea" |
| 6 Do. Bending | 18 Pataloon Falling to pieces |
| 7 Do. and Christmas Boxes | 19 Clown and Pantaloon Dead Beat |
| 8 Do. Throwing his Leg up | 20 Clown Jumping over Horse* |
| 9 Do. Loosening his Head | 21 Clown gone through the World |
| 10 Do. on the Tight-rope | 22 Clown riding on a Goose |
| 11 Do. and Flying Bottle | 23 Clown and Mr. Snipe Fishmonger |
| 12 Clown and Policeman | 24 Harlequin and box Patchwork |
| 13 Do. Caught in the Well | 25 Clown Sailing in a Washing Tub |
| 14 Do. and Watchman—Drinks his
Rum | |

14. List of pantomime slipping slides from W.C. Hughes's 1878 catalogue