



Scene

January 2021

Leicester Drama Society Limited

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Often said. Most often meant.

But boy, we all need it to come true in this new year.

As if the old year couldn't get any worse it ended with more miserable news; the virus had mutated, with the new variant spreading more easily. Mercifully though it seems that it's no more potent than the original virus. Lockdown 2 morphed into Tier 3 & our Theatre must remain closed.

And so we went from a planned reopening of the Theatre in early January to the Trustees deciding to cancel all performances scheduled for the month of January - as there was little prospect of anyone moving to a lower tier until the middle of the month at the earliest.

Some wag suggested that our show entitled 'We all need a "Little" Christmas' should be re-titled 'Easter Parade' and have done with it.

But we live in hope. Eternal hope.

The Trustees decided that it should be an LDS show that re-opens the Theatre and so performances have been tentatively pencilled in for early February and the show content refreshed to expunge all reference to Christmas.

Ticket holders for the show will be informed early in the New Year and refunds made where the new date is not convenient. This isn't often since none of us are meant to be going anywhere anyway!

It was such a shame; the stage set was complete with lashings of glittery sprinkles, the auditorium has been cleaned from top-to-toe and Front of House looked in apple-pie order. Hey ho. Fingers crossed!

Scene this month harks back to happier times when Panto' and Old Time Music Hall packed them in at Christmas and during the summer months. Huge thanks to Emma - recovering after COVID - & Jenny Harding & Mary Jayne Harding-Scott for their fabulous articles.

Enjoy the issue.

Colin & Emma

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It's Behind You! A Brief History of LDS Panto

We can't bring the annual triumph that is the LDS Panto' to the stage this year, so we do the next best thing. Emma Bamford, Scene's Editor at Large, has been digging through the archives and brings you a sparkling history of the LDS Pantomime.

"Shaw couldn't have written it. The Oliviers couldn't act it. Gigli couldn't sing it and Fonteyn couldn't dance it. It's a pantomime. It happens once a year all over Britain. And there's no other art form quite like it."

The quote above is from a 1946 article and honestly, the anonymous author couldn't have written anything more accurate. Panto is one of those great British traditions, like fish and chips, or lots of rain. An American friend of mine asked, "but why is it funny?" Because it is. We all know the story – the villain will get defeated, the main characters will find love with each other (if the panto lends itself to that storyline), and the not-so-intelligent bakers' boy will probably have something slapped across his face – whether that's a fish, a cream pie or his mother's hand (his mother being played by a man in a dress, obviously).

At the time of writing, this December is the first in decades that The Little Theatre has not had a panto playing to a sold-out audience. We're trying not to let it get us down because it's more important for everyone to have a safe Christmas (as much as we long to see John Bale in tights).

Having had a delve into the dark archives of the Little, I unearthed evidence of previous Christmas shows that the Little has held and surprisingly, panto hasn't been an annual event. As late as 2001, our Christmas show was just that – a 'show' ('Toad of Toad Hall', directed by Victor Bonfield for those fact-fans among us). In the 81 shows that I can find a listing for, pantos probably accounted for around 50%.

Have our pantos changed, though? What happens in a panto now that wouldn't happen fifty years ago? I had a look at some of our most recent pantos and had a chat with John Bale – our resident panto director, dame and costume wizard – and Lisa Thirlby, who worked on 'Dick Whittington' in 1966.

Character names

You've got to have a silly name in a panto, right? 1966's 'Dick Whittington' introduced us to Sir Percival Prune and Ben Dover, while 2019's 'Robin Hood' gave us Dame Milly Muffin. John also filled me in on some of the great names he can think of - Nurse Triyxlix, Bodgit and Scraper, Bawl and Shout the Royal Heralds, and Flip and Flop, the Court Jesters. But there are some names that you NEVER EVER TOUCH. Widow Twankey from 'Aladdin' and Sarah the Cook from 'Dick Whittington' ... these names have to stay.

Corny/cheesy jokes and/or innuendo

Ever seen a panto without these? Then it probably wasn't a panto. John said, "people love to hear the same jokes and watch the time-honoured comedy routines. They love the familiarity, and it gives them ownership; feeling like they're in on the joke is a big part of the show's appeal. I love the ghost gag (when certain characters sit on a bench, and a "ghost" – played by one of the other cast members – creeps up behind them and picks off the characters one



The programme cover from 1966

"The Children" from Dick Whittington



by one). "We shall have to sing it again then, shan't we!" The kids go wild and truly believe that the actors can't see the ghost behind them. I don't like to overstep the mark when it comes to adult jokes, but a few things that go completely over the kids' heads, and a knowing look is fine ..."



Pictured l to r:-
 Bryan Southwell as *Captain Scuppers*,
 Derek Burrows as *Sarah*, Dicks mother,
 Ray Tennant as *The Mate*,
 Penny Brownjohn as *Dick Whittington* &
 Tommy Nicholson as his *Cat* in *Dick Whittington*

Marie Villiers as *Alice the Maid* &
 Ray Tennant as *The Mate* in *Dick Whittington*



Tech

My goodness. The amount that the tech side of things has changed in the last 50 years is fascinating. Lisa filled me in on the tech side of 'Dick Whittington': "The only communication with the lighting operator was via a one-way-at-a-time intercom – and the default was to leave it so they could speak to the person on the desk, so no cues were given by the ASM (now known as the DSM) except presumably at the start of each act. There may have been a cue light to the fly rail, but maybe not. There was a show relay to the dressing rooms and calls were given. The SM's desk was a shelf above a radiator on the wall in the SR wing, so the DSM sat or stood in front of the shelf, facing the wall, and looked to their left to watch the action. For 'Dick Whittington'

there were five musicians in the pit, and they did all the effects – there was no sound engineer, no radio mics, no mixing desk."

Health and Safety

Speaking of tech, Lisa told me that panto hasn't always been the safe environment we know today. "King Rat (and probably the Good Fairy too) was accompanied by a large flash at every entrance. Flashes were operated by the resident electrician, Walter Shirley, who was present at every performance. To create a flash he used a small box lined with asbestos with two brass screws sticking out of it, connected to the box was a cable with a 15amp plug on the end. For several weeks before panto Walter would collect empty crisp packets (they were made of cellophane then). He would cut the bottom corners off the packets, a small quantity of flash powder would be placed in the cellophane corner and a piece of fuse wire threaded through it. The fuse wire was then attached at either end to the brass screws. On cue, Walter would stand well back and insert the plug into the socket; this caused a short which ignited the flash powder. This was very dangerous and, of course, would not be allowed nowadays."

The run

Panto now tends to run from a couple of weeks before Christmas to the beginning of January, the weekend before the kids go back to school. But 'Dick Whittington' ran for a lot longer, playing from 29 Dec 1966 to 28 January 1967), which usually meant a dress rehearsal on Boxing Day. There are four weeks in January when the cast and crew could have done seven performances a week. There would not have been performances on Sundays (nice to have a day off, isn't it?)

Continued overleaf

Quiz No 2. The Answers

Pip Nixon and The Little Theatre Elves hosted a 2nd Quiz in late August. We printed the questions in last month's edition of the newsletter.

These are the answers!

General Knowledge

1. Ronnie O-Sullivan
2. Buzz Aldrin
3. China
4. Kamala Harris
5. They were on a break
6. Lewis Capaldi
7. The only painting sold in his lifetime
8. MASH
9. Hey Jude
10. Ag



Films

1. Psycho
2. Robert Pattinson
3. Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro
4. The Union Jack
5. Aretha Franklin
6. The Third Man
7. A Clockwork Orange
8. George Lazenby
9. Chinatown
10. A Beautiful Friendship

Theatre

1. Montagues and Capulets
2. Charles II
3. Art
4. A pumpkin
5. The Mousetrap
6. Macbeth
7. One Man, Two Guvnors
8. Angels in America
9. Fleabag
10. Rope

Slogans

Name the company that has this as their company slogan

1. Nike
2. Apple
3. L'Oréal Paris
4. Ronseal
5. Tesco
6. Google
7. Pepsi
8. Gillette
9. Maltesers
10. John Lewis

Continued from overleaf

Evolution

My final question to Lisa and John was how they think panto has evolved over the years:

Lisa: Panto is panto – the same story, the same characters, with topical jokes. George Kelman's panto sets were always lovely, just as Al Davis' or Kevin Jenkins' sets are now. The principal boy was played by a young woman (of course). The principal girl in 'Dick Whittington' was played by two young women who did half the performances each.

John: The traditional use of a woman playing the panto principal boy (e.g. Prince Charming, Aladdin or Dick Whittington) has gone out of fashion at the moment, although some productions still carry on the tradition. I'm happy to think of either a man or a woman to play the role, but in recent years I've gone for a male actor. Of course, panto has changed over the last 50 years. It has to evolve, that's its success; modern references and changing attitudes, things that the kids can latch on to that are familiar and make them feel involved. But this has to be balanced with the traditions of pantomime. A good healthy mix is best. • EB

Dec 2020 Winners

LDS
200
CLUB

1st prize - £250
Share Number - 021
2nd prize - £100
Share Number - 0518
3rd prize - £50
Share Number - 76

The LDS Old Time Music Halls

Summer Old Time Music Halls were a feature of the LDS artistic programme for many many years and are still remembered with huge fondness by many of our audience. A winning mix of songs, comedy, magic and speciality acts, they ran in high summer to packed houses. Jenny Harding and her daughter, Mary Jayne Harding Scott tell the story.

There have been many things I have disliked in 2020, including lockdowns, isolation, lack of freedom and social activity, but as a family, we have been fortunate as we have been together. In normal years the three of us spend most of our time rushing out to work or university, but lockdown forced us all to stop and find ways of doing things differently, such as working at home and sitting down together for meals each day! We have talked more and we have done lots of quizzes together. Before lockdown, I did not know that Music degrees include lots of social history and I had no idea that my daughter Mary was very interested in Victorian music halls and their performers. Talking about her interests reminded me of the 1970s, when, as a teenager, I first joined The Little Theatre, and I started to spend every summer working on the LDS Old Time Music Halls.

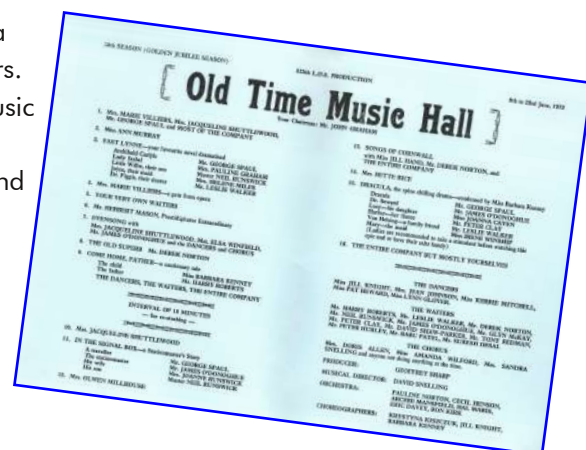
So – “At Enormous Expense!” - Mary and I hope you will let us share some of our music hall memories and interests with you.

Geoff Sharp produced LDS’s first Music Hall at The Little Theatre, with performances between 19th July and 3rd August 1968. This was the start of an incredibly popular (and profitable) set of shows as LDS went on to present a Music Hall each summer for 35 years! Most years these ran for at least 2 weeks, often playing to full houses. The shows were a mix of music, sketches and speciality acts. Lots of fun and audience participation – in some ways reminiscent of pantos, but for adult audiences. Each year, a bar was constructed in the upper foyer and a team of waiters and waitresses served drinks to the audience throughout the performances. Many of my first experiences volunteering at The Little were as a Music Hall waitress or serving behind the Bar – and a team of at least 6 waiters would be kept very busy all evening! Some years the waiters even provided entertainment as singers. Music Halls were more than a show, they were all-round entertainment combining performance, participation, drink and sometimes food, and they attracted many party bookings. For many years a Cockles and Mussels stall was located in the lower foyer, run by Kay Kenny and occasional Gala Evenings provided a combined ticket for a buffet meal and the show.

The success of the LDS Music Halls is perhaps not surprising as it builds on a long history of popular variety entertainment, going back well over 100 years. Originating as ‘free-and-easies’ staged in pubs, Leicester had numerous music halls during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Old Cheese pub (Belgrave Gate) staged popular free and easies as long ago as 1863 and when the venue was destroyed by fire, it was rebuilt in 1890 as the Prince of Wales Theatre of Variety. After several changes of name, it finally became The Pavilion Theatre and many popular performers appeared there (including Harry Houdini). The famous architect Frank Matcham designed the Palace Theatre of Varieties in Leicester which opened in 1901. It attracted famous music hall performers, who were the “A-List” celebrities of



Music Hall Singing Waiters - as pictured in the Leicester Mercury.



their day. Vesta Tilley received an impressive salary of £225 per week (nearly £20,000 in today's money), whilst Marie Lloyd was paid £150 for a week's engagement. Popular variety performances continued into the 1950s, including Max Miller, Benny Hill and Frankie Vaughan. There were also other small music halls in Leicester, even closer to The Little Theatre, at The Barley Mow and The Rainbow and Dove.

I remember LDS Music Halls as being great fun with lots of people involved. It has been very interesting to reminisce, exploring photos and spotting some of our current members. From newspaper cuttings of the time, it is also clear that some popular performers were looked for year after year. No article about The Little Theatre Music Halls could be complete without mention of Jacqui Shuttlewood. She was a soloist (and director) from the early productions until her untimely death in 1990, often singing songs made famous by Marie Lloyd – and like Lloyd, Jacqui was an expert at being able to fill an apparently innocent song with silent innuendo. Jacqui was also an expert on Music Hall history and for many years produced a touring version of Music Hall which a group of us took around local clubs and village halls. Jacqui also appeared in the 1970 LDS Music Hall which was probably the most travelled of all LDS Music Hall productions, as it ran at The Little Theatre between 10th June and 4th July and then moved to the Minack Theatre in Cornwall between 20th and 25th July. The programme lists Jacqui as singing a Marie Lloyd song *One of the Ruins That Cromwell Knocked About a Bit*. One of the famous comic songs written for Lloyd, it is actually biographic, being based on the mistreatment she suffered from two of her husbands.

Marie Lloyd made her performance debut at the age of 15 in 1885. Over the years, she created a collection of characters that changed as she matured from pert young women to plump middle-aged matrons. One of Lloyd's early hits, *The Boy in the Gallery* was written by the theatrical agent George Ware, who had initially sold the rights for the song to another performer, Nellie Power. However, when Ware saw Lloyd performing the song (albeit illegally), he was so impressed that he signed her up as one of his acts. Lloyd was very successful in the UK and internationally, and completed five American tours. Despite personal tragedies and ill-treatment from her husbands, she was a determined performer and continued to have hit songs for many years. The most famous of these was probably *Don't Dilly Dally* which was written for her in 1919. Her death in 1922 shocked the nation and 50,000 lined the route of her funeral procession.

The 1970 LDS Music Hall also included Thea Crane performing *Burlington Bertie*, a famous Vesta Tilley song, satirising the image of an affluent Victorian gentleman about town. Vesta Tilley had a long and hugely successful career, performing from the age of three (1867), initially under the name 'The Great Little Tilley'. She became the most famous male impersonator of her time, and states in her autobiography 'I concluded that female costume was rather a drag. I felt I could express myself better if I were dressed as a boy [...] I discovered that my forte was mimicking a man'. Her husband Walter de Frece was a theatre impresario and politician. At the start of World War I, Tilley earned the title "Britain's Greatest Recruiting Sergeant" for her performances in military uniform. Her song *The Army of Today's All Right* is featured very persuasively in the film of *Oh! What a Lovely War*.



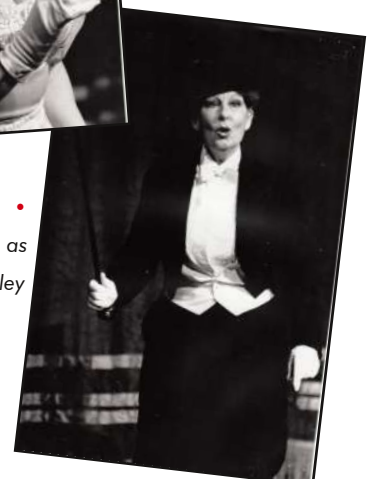
• Our very own John Ghent as a singing waiter & Jacqueline Shuttlewood.
Photo: Leicester Mercury



• Jacqueline Shuttlewood performs *Don't Dilly Dally* (Marie Lloyd).



• Dianne Norton singing *The Boy in the Gallery*



• Thea Crane as Vesta Tilley



Mike Dack as Max Miller

Herbert Mason – the loveable
but incompetent Magician

One of my personal favourites from LDS Music Halls was Mike Dack's impersonation of Max Miller. Gaudy suit and quick-fire gags kept audiences in stitches every evening. Thomas Henry Sargent (stage name Max Miller) joined the army in 1914 and performed in concert parties for the troupes. After the First World War, his reputation grew steadily and was at its peak by the 1931 royal variety performance. Like Max Miller, Mike Dack would work from close to the edge of the stage and draw audiences in through continual asides and speaking directly to them. He created a rapport, almost a comic conspiracy, between himself and the audience. The gags would vary from performance to performance depending on audience reaction, but although the material changed frequently, Mike would always be sure to give the technical crew warning that he was coming to the end of the routine – from my years of operating the lighting desk, I remember that we simply had to remember how many "F's" there are in "Cod"!

• Magicians were also well represented in the shows, Roy Vickers was on the bill of the 1971 production and then, from 1973 onwards, Herbert Mason's loveable but incompetent Magician



It has been a real pleasure looking back over this wonderful period of LDS history. We could easily fill many more pages of happy memories – we have not even touched on the comic sketches, melodramas, Morris men or the infamous car sketch. I acknowledge that there may be some nostalgia for my lost youth in these reminiscences, but the enduring memories I have of LDS Music Halls are of a lot of fun and laughter and contented audiences leaving the theatre after a good evening of light-hearted entertainment. The days of Music Hall may be passed, but perhaps we can still learn from them. It is sometimes a good thing not to take ourselves too seriously and particularly when times

are hard people need music, laughter and FUN! • JH & MJHS

HAVE YOU MISSED PERFORMING?

Then it's time for us all to get back to it ~ together. The Olympics begin on July 23rd 2021, so we plan to stage

Chariots of Fire

the week before. There will be 40 + roles available, opportunities for all.

Rehearsals will take account of whatever restrictions are in place.

Get in touch NOW to express interest or to ask for more information, so that we are ready to go, as soon as the starting pistol is fired!

Contact Mary Jones e: adamary86@hotmail.com or m: 07814510059

Notes from the office

Trustees, with others, have been busy preparing for the much-anticipated re-opening of the Theatre in January; polishing, cleaning, tidying up, ordering stock and generally making good. Regrettably, as we now know, all for nought!

▶ The Anchor Centre is no-more. Demolition was completed in early December and the site left level and secure. Unfortunately, there was water ingress into the Theatre through the now exposed party wall after the first wind and rain following demolition. Leicester City Council have made temporary repairs to make us watertight and will fund the repairs needed in the lower foyer ladies' toilet where tiles have fallen from the wall.

▶ The Auditorium has been fully cleaned from top to bottom. High-level cleaning was completed first, followed by seat cleaning and then finally the carpets in the auditorium, upper foyer and bar. All of the work was completed by local companies.

▶ All elements of our heating and air-conditioning systems have been serviced. A performance report has also been received on the functioning of the air-conditioning system. It has been adjusted to allow the maximum amount of fresh air into the auditorium as possible, given the design of our system. We now understand that it's functioning much better.

▶ The Theatre & No 52 asbestos surveys have been refreshed. A small number of items were identified as requiring immediate attention and one of these has already been completed. All else, where asbestos was identified, was deemed "low risk" with the control measure being "management".

▶ The kitchen area and toilet in No 52 Up have been sympathetically refurbished. It now looks rather smart. The stairwell and upper corridor have also been redecorated.

▶ The Theatre's IT system has been rebuilt and super fast wi-fi installed. We are just waiting to upgrade our Virgin Media account and it will get faster still. Audience members will now just have to select "Audience" from the wi-fi offer within the building, accept the T's & C's and they are connected. No password needed.

▶ Trustees are considering proposals to upgrade the heating system in both No 52 rehearsal rooms. Much will depend on whether we can upgrade our gas meter from a 6 cu m domestic meter to a more substantial 16 cu m light commercial meter. Thereafter, it's £425 to produce a plan of where our current meter is, fees to install new pipework and fees again to connect the meter. Ouch.

▶ As we are closed throughout January we are taking this opportunity to redecorate the dressing rooms and deal with the damp and mould in the toilets.

▶ The tech team is working up a manifest of items to service our new shows when they eventually hit the stage.

▶ We are looking to change the uplighters on the outside of the Theatre.

Four of the current fourteen units are not functioning and all are showing signs of rust and wear. LED replacements are being considered if a suitable unit can be found.

▶ Fran Harris has totally re-organised the foyer desk and made its operation more streamlined and efficient.

▶ Rob Thirlby has rationalised the chip & pin machines within the Theatre. These are the units that allow us to take card payments within the Theatre. The number of hard wired units can be reduced as we have a new mobile payment solution that has no monthly fee.

▶ Charles Wade has joined the finance team to help Rob Thirlby and Charles Moss in all things financial.

▶ Newby Castleman LLP, our auditors, are with us in early January producing the audited accounts that will be presented to members at the AGM to be held in the Spring. • CH

