

John Crabtree, Bea Dennis and Peter Stace in a slapstick scene from MADC's *Cinderella*, 1978.



## CHRISTMAS

Nanette Brimmer in full principal boy drag.



# Oh no he isn't... Oh yes he is

**Louis Gatt** listens to the first panto laughter in Malta.

It is an often-quoted misconception that the popular Christmas entertainment, known as pantomime or panto, began in Malta with the MADC in the late 1970s. Well it didn't. Actually the first record of panto being performed in our islands can be seen in the early years of the 20th century. And yes, it was indeed the MADC that was responsible for this, at the time, innovation.

But to be fair, for many years during the 1960s and 70s, the British services amateur company The Aerial Players had staged a panto at the Manoel Theatre. However these always contained, what to a Maltese audience were, somewhat obscure references. Possibly very funny if you happened to know that the station commander at RAF Luqa's wife had a penchant for wearing knee-length bloomers or that the sergeant major at 41 Commando at Pembroke barracks could shout louder than a Boeing 747 on take-off. But for most of the indigenous punters it was, to say the least, somewhat obscure.

What the MADC managed to do, over a number of years, was to make each panto relevant to a Maltese audience. They did this by bringing in more and more local references, lampooning politicians and other so-called celebs and by introducing Maltese language references into the English script.

Many people don't realise that paradoxically *Cinderella*, the very first MADC panto in 1978/79 was the work of

John Crabtree, a Malta-based employee of the British services radio station BFBS. Crabtree had worked professionally in the UK and had an extensive knowledge of all the ins and outs of the genre. He also gave a superb performance as Buttons.

The year 1978 was the last one where the British forces would be present in Malta – they left for good on March 31, 1979. But apart from Crabtree they had two other members of the Brit contingent on stage that year. Peter Stace was a six foot four inch tall RAF policeman who dragged-up to play one of the ugly sisters; then Charlie Lowndes, a colleague of Crabtree at BFBS took the minor part of the royal major domo. The second ugly sister was played by one of the finest actresses ever to grace the stage of Teatru Manoel, Beatrice Dennis. Bea was a classically trained English actress who usually played leading roles in heavier plays, but here she showed she could slum it with the best of them.

Maltese performers made up the vast majority of the chorus and also took leading roles. Nanette Brimmer began her protracted love affair with panto when she played Prince Charming's sidekick Dandini, while the late Kit Ripard was brilliant as Baron Overdraft. *Cinderella* herself was played by a – then very young – Astrid Vella (Mifsud).

*Cinderella* ran for just 12 performances, but each one played to a packed house. Legend has it that at one matinee performance 26 adults and kids were crammed into one box meant

to hold just four. These were family and friends of one of the theatre ushers. I'm told that a photograph of this very dangerous squeezeathon was doing the rounds at the time.

If this particular show set a standard, following pantos benefitted accordingly. Panto tickets for 1979/80 *Aladdin* and further pantos were scarcer than colour TV sets at the time. I understand that people used to camp out overnight in Old Theatre Street the day before panto booking opened. On one occasion a queue for tickets stretching from the booking office right down Old Bakery Street to near Fort St Elmo was observed.

Certainly the MADC panto was the one go-to theatrical event throughout the 1980s – and one of the most popular innovations was the scene where a small group of children in the audience were brought onstage to participate

in games relevant to that particular panto. And it is sobering to think that some of those kids who were involved in the 1970s and early 1980s shows would later be bringing their own children to today's shows.

Crabtree was able to advise the MADC writers on some of the more traditional aspects of the staging. For instance, most pantos contain a transformation scene, where the stage set changes before the audience's eyes from the drab or mundane into a sparkling palace or a land of fantasy. Another vital ingredient is the obligatory slapstick scene. In *Cinderella* it is the bakery scene involving a radio and changing stations. In *Aladdin* it is obviously the Chinese laundry.

There also needs to be a chase around the theatre stalls, baddies pursuing goodies. And if you are not enjoying the show, if you hang around long enough a small bag of sweets could well be flying your way.

The conventions of panto require an awful lot of cross-dressing... a female principal "boy" and the dame character, usually played by a man in comic drag. *Cinderella* does not usually have a dame, unless the script calls for a wicked stepmother. The ugly sisters are not strictly dames and are often played by actresses or comediennes.

Most pantos also need panto animals – these are usually an actor inside an animal costume. However *Cinderella* normally uses a real pony to pull *Cinderella*'s coach in the transformation scene – and the 1978 show did have such a pony.

In the same show the tricky business of getting *Cinderella* out of her ornate ball gown and back into her rags, as midnight struck, was solved by using a body double, which gave Rita Camilleri her debut in panto, albeit a very brief one.

MADC's *Cinderella* was followed in December 1979 by *Aladdin*. This presented Nanette Brimmer with her first principal boy role as the eponymous *Aladdin*. The late Joe Mompalao Depiro was excellent in the dame role of Widow Twanky. He made his first entrance descending from the flies attached to both an umbrella and a rope and it was only after the run of the show that he confessed to an absolute terror of heights. What a trouper!

This panto also saw Colin Easton play the principal comic's role as Wishee Washee. He was to go on to play two more similar parts in the following productions, *Dick Whittington* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, before migrating to Australia, where, I understands, he still resides.

I've heard it said that the early years of MADC pantos in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, were the most successful and most watched live theatre shows that Malta has ever known. I don't know about that, but they certainly filled our national theatre for a couple of weeks, including matinees, every year.

In the second part of this series, I will move on to panto from the 1990s up to the present day. •

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