

LTM PANTOMIME HISTORY – *The Early Years*

The first Little Theatre Movement pantomime was “Jack and the Beanstalk”. In the first pantomime, Roma Presano was succeeded as director in the middle of production by Elinor Lithgow, originally the co-director, who was thoroughly versed in this medium. For this, and all subsequent production, the pantomime had the strong organizing efforts of two Jamaicans, whose love of the theatre, and whose sheer hard work on its behalf over the period of thirty years or more, has made their names almost synonymous with the Little Theatre Movement, Greta and Henry Fowler. Greta Bourke, as she was then, belonged to the old Jamaican Todd family, of Sportsman’s Hall in Trelawny. Henry Fowler came from similar lineage in St. Ann. He was founder and Headmaster of the Priory School, an independent secondary school along modern lines.

From the beginning of pantomimes, a decided effort was made to bring contrasting racial elements and a variety of amateur talent into a single production.

In this first pantomime, “Jack and the Beanstalk”, the boy was played by a girl, in true English fashion. She was Petra Browne, the wife of the Colonial Secretary. The dame was Peggy Dougall. The cast included the witch, played by Miss Ethlyn Rhodd, headmistress of a city primary school who was an amateur comedienne of repute; and a group of singers who were later to become the Frats Quintet, the famous singers of Jamaican folk music. Special dance numbers were choreographed by Hazel Johnston, the Jamaican dance teacher who was attempting to introduce the concept of European ballet in the island. The training of the chorus, and the large dance numbers fell to Mrs. Lithgow. The older pupils of Hazel Johnston’s dance studio were brought into the show. The members of the chorus and dancers from the developing dance groups found in the amateur theatre (in which the pantomimes remained until the 1960’s) much rehearsal excitement, theatre fever and cast-party enjoyment.

The pantomime opened on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, as it does in Britain, and in this matched the natural entertainment pattern of the people of Jamaica. This yearly show brought before the public of Jamaica old and new talent. The show business careers of seasoned actors such as Louise Bennet, Ranny Williams, Lee Gordon and many others, received a notable boost from the pantomime. In addition, the pantomime stimulated the writing of original scripts, the composition of original music, and the development of modern local choreography, as well as encouraging the formation of theatre orchestras.

These orchestras eventually replaced the Jamaica Military Band. The members of this band, however formed the nucleus of any musical ensemble. Major Robert Jones, who directed the Jamaica Military Band, was a tower of strength in the first pantomimes, and Mapletoft Poulle continued for many years to provide sensitive accompaniment such as that which he had displayed with the Ivy Baxter Dance Group.

The lead actors and actresses in the pantomime were, at first, from the expatriate community of Kingston and had some experience in amateur dramatics abroad, or were from the resident Jamaican white and light group, which had talent and dramatic ability. It was interesting to note the gradual merging of shade and the reversal of the proportion of dark light in the cast of Jamaican pantomime over the past 20 to 30 years. The first leads were Margaret Dougall, sister of Greta Bourke; Doris Duperly; Clinton Nunes; Robert Verity; Roma Fitchelt; Felicity Pallissier; Margaret Lauder; Mare Manning-Carley and many others who joined to create the merger of English and Jamaican tradition. As time went on notably darker heroines began to emerge. Among these were Hope Sealy, Mercedes Kirkwood, who had a trained coloratura soprano voice, and Carmen Manley. Among leading men were Keith Sasso, Neville Willoughby, and Eddy Thomas. The need for native-looking leads, followed, on the whole, if not entirely, the development of local materials in the story line.

English pantomime is based upon a nursery tale fairy story and certain traditional elements of comedy, variety acts, dance numbers, singing and scenes of transformation are built into its script. At first the Jamaica pantomime followed this pattern. Very soon,

however, a Jamaican theme would replace the English nursery tale. The first truly Jamaican pantomime was the third one, “Soliday and the Wicked Bird”. The script was written by Vera Bell and was based on a Jamaican legend (probably the Maroon tale of Bubiabo). However, it was not as successful as those which had gone before. The fifth pantomime was “Aladdin”; the ninth “Bluebeard and Brer Anancy”, which linked the well-known legend of Bluebeard to that of Jamaican folk figure Anancy the Spiderman.

“Bluebeard and Brer Anancy” came to be called just “Busha Bluebeard”. The character of Bluebeard was made to fit that of an estate overseer, called Busha in Jamaica. Its first scene developed out of creative drama sessions held at a summer school at Knox College in 1958. Noel Vaz, with at least seven successful productions for the Little Theatre behind him, was the guest tutor in drama. The exciting summer school version, which was presented on the last night, including participation of such people as Leila James Tomlinson, veteran amateur folklorist and possessor of deep knowledge of things Jamaican. The final script was prepared by Louise Bennett in conjunction with Noel Vaz the producer, and the finished production at the Ward Theatre, the home of pantomime, brought to the Jamaican public, Jamaican songs and dialect, mixed with original music, by Jamaican Barbara Ferland and Englishman Orford St. John. It was an imaginative and beautiful production.

Harold Brownlow, one of the old timers of Jamaican Theatre was Bluebeard in this first version; Louise Bennett, now well known, played Nana (nursemaid); and Shirley Wood, a teenager, was the lead girl. Ballet dances were arranged by the Soohih School, whose master was Anatoly Soohih of Russia. Creative dance was supplied by former students of the Hazel Johnston School who were brought together and trained by Ivy Baxter.

The story of Bluebeard lent itself well to woodland scenes. It was adapted to the Jamaican setting in a dance called the “Garden of Weeds”, in classical ballet style. The “Dance of Weird Creatures” was one of the most effective ever done in this type of show. The imaginative costumes for this number were designed by Stella Shaw, who lived in

Mandeville. Miss Shaw's designs were made into costumes by Mrs. Lola Abrahams, who had wide experience in producing period costumes.

The Little Theatre Movement's yearly productions of pantomime projected new dance talent as well as established dancers and choreographers before a large public in the island. Subsequent choreographers in the folk, creative and modern mode have been Jeff Henry, Eddy Thomas, Rex Nettleford and Sheila Barnett, among others, all formerly of the Baxter Dance Group. Neville Black, a Jamaican who left the island before these developments in dance had taken place, returned from teaching in Chicago in time to be involved both in the dance theatre scene in the island and with choreography for the pantomimes.

One of the most prolific and successful dramatic directors for the Little Theatre Movement, whether of pantomimes, straight plays or musicals, is Noel Vaz. He began his career with school plays while at Calabar College and developed original scripts like those used in fund raising productions for the Jones Pen Baptist Church in the slum area behind the college. After gaining depth of experience in stage management at the Old Vic theatre in London and breadth of theatrical knowledge in Britain and the USA, Mr. Vaz returned to Jamaica, and was appointed Extra-Mural tutor in Drama for the University of the West Indies. Next to him in number productions have been Morris Harty, Rex Nettleford, Lloyd Reckord and Louise Bennett.

Script writers for the pantomime have been Greta Bourke, Ranny Williams, Louise Bennett and Orford St. John as well as Sam Hilary who provided the story line for "Banana Boy" one of the most successful for the pantomime-musicals.

The script of one pantomime production was furnished by a Guyanese writer Cecile Nobrega, who originally composed the book, lyrics and music for the musical "Starbroek Market", produced in Georgetown in 1958. The script was adapted and some of the music was used in 1960 for the Jamaican pantomime-musical entitled "Carib Gold".

Original musical composition appeared in almost every pantomime since “Busha Bluebeard”, when the songs of Barbara Ferland were used. She composed the music for 12 songs in all. Six had lyrics by Orford St. John, five have lyrics by the composer and one by Louise Bennett, This last is the now famous “Evening Time” in a classic folk style, which has almost become the theme song of the Jamaican soprano Joyce Lalor. No sheet music has been printed except for the first version of Bluebeard, but long playing records have been made beginning with the 1959 “Jamaica Way” pantomime .

“Anancy and Pandora” and “Anancy and the Magic Mirror” continued the linking of Jamaica legend with European fairy tale themes. “Anancy and Beeny Bud” was completely Jamaican in theme and this tradition was consolidated by “Jamaica Way”, “Quashie Lady”, and “Queenie’s Daughter”. “Carib Gold” created the link which led from the old into the new style musical. Between these two types of pantomime came “Once Upon a Seaweed” the tenth anniversary performance of the Ivy Baxter Dance Group in 1960. This was declared in the program to be a Jamaican musical, with script and lyrics by Alma Hylton and music by Eddy Thomas. After 1960, pantomimes were called pantomime-musicals. The Dame, which was the only surviving character of the traditional English pantomime, substantially disappeared after “Jamaica Way” when it was played by the comedian Charles Hyatt, successor the great Cupidon.

The pantomime productions have been one of the most successful theatrical ventures in Jamaica, both from the financial aspect, and from the point of view of audience response. Many people attended the shows several times. There was one Jamaican resident abroad, who returned to visit the island and went to see a pantomime 20 times in succession.

The Little Theatre building, long awaited, was completed in 1961. The new building was opened with a program of selections of dance and music from successful shows and Festivals of Arts. Since that time, a rehearsal room has been added. Together with the elegant buildings of the Jamaica Library Service, and the religious and educational buildings help to form a veritable “culture corner”, for the public of Kingston and for the many theatre, dance and cultural groups which use its facilities at a nominal fee.

Production costs grew from year to year. Previously, only the few professional actors, musicians and other operative persons like stagehands, lighting men etc., received remuneration. With more people earning a livelihood from dance, drama and singing the Little Theatre Movement rose to this challenge of professionalism and met it at the time of the show “Jamaica Way”.

The pantomimes were by no means the only Jamaican oriented productions of the Little Theatre Movement. The Little Theatre Movement also put on some West Indian and Jamaican plays; one of these was “Play without Scenery” by George Campbell. However, on the whole, experimental West Indian and Jamaican drama was left to other groups, and later to the Federal Theater which grew out of University Drama workshops and student dramatic activity and which was directed in turn by Errol Hill and Noel Vaz.

The scripts of the pantomimes, which have been the most successful popular Jamaican productions for a long time, have never been published or written down for others to read. This is because pantomimes depend to a great extent upon the personalities, the musical turns, dancing and humorous situations, rather than the quality of the scripts for their success. Local playwrights, other than writers of sketches and pageants for particular occasions, are relatively new in Jamaica.

(From the LTM archives)