

Comment

Pantomime is there to lift your spirits – not lower the tone

GYLES BRANDRETH



Pantomime as we know it is a British phenomenon. It is our island's only unique contribution to world culture. Ballet, opera, circus happen everywhere. Only we do panto. Oh yes we do – and how! Christmas is the one time of the year when every theatre in the land is guaranteed to make money as we flock, in our millions, old and young, frail and hearty, to cheer and sigh, boo and hiss, at an extraordinary entertainment that combines a classic children's fairy tale with music, slapstick and melodrama and peoples it with men dressed as women, women dressed as men and humans disguised as animals. It's amazing. It's amusing. It's magical. Or it ought to be.

But, alas, this year, at the London Palladium (once the home of traditional pantomime), it seems it isn't. The new production of *Cinderella* has been blessed with a huge budget and an all-star cast, but fatally undermined by the one element guaranteed to ruin a family show: smut.

Apparently, when Julian Clary as Dandini tells us he's the prince's "right-hand man" that's just the start of it. By several accounts, the innuendos come thick and fast. (You see: it's catching.)

I'm not averse to a dirty joke (I worked with Bernard Manning in his prime; I am a friend of the great Jim Davidson) but there is a time and a place for everything and Christmas in the theatre with your children and grandchildren at your side is not when and where you want *double entendres* about masturbation.

When I last appeared in traditional pantomime (as Baron Hardup, with Bonnie Langford as an enchanting Cinders) we had our cheeky moments (Barbara Windsor was the Fairy Godmother, after all), but I remember our producer reminding us that this was family entertainment and for many of the children in the

audience their first-ever visit to the theatre, and that we had a responsibility to make them welcome and at home. "It's a party," he said, "where no one should feel awkward or ill-at-ease." Panto isn't Brecht: you want your audience to go home happy, not alienated.

Modern panto took shape in Victorian times when music-hall entertainers (the TV stars of their day) were brought in to be the show's top-liners. There was always something quite adult about elements of it. The idea of the principal boy being played by a woman was very much to let the audience enjoy the sight of her legs in tights. The notion of the middle-aged male comic dressing up as the pantomime dame was to give the character freedom to play the part for raucous laughs.

When Dan Leno and Marie Lloyd – the two greatest popular stars of their day – starred in panto, they certainly brought a whiff of the music hall with them, but they never lost sight of the fact that pantomime is essentially a gloriously innocent entertainment designed, in Shakespeare's phrase, "to give delight and hurt not".

Joseph Grimaldi (the original Clown Joey) was Britain's first and biggest-ever pantomime star. He suffered from depression and went to see a doctor who, not knowing who he was, told him to lift his spirits by going to see "the great Grimaldi". "But I am the great Grimaldi!" wailed the clown. Pantomime is there to lift your spirits, whoever you are, whatever your age. Keep smut out of it.

Gyles Brandreth features in *Just A Minute Does Panto on BBC Radio 4 on Christmas Day*

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The battle for press freedom may have to be fought all over again

Unless something is done, newspapers could soon lose their power to hold the powerful to account

FRASER NELSON



Max Mosley is nothing if not persistent. When his debauches ended up on the front page of the *News of the World*, he sued – and won. After the tabloid collapsed during the phone hacking scandal, he went after the rest of the press. His latest project is to bankroll a would-be regulator, named Impress, to which he wants all British papers to submit. And if they don't, he wants them to face crippling financial penalties. An extraordinary plan, made all the more remarkable because it is terrifyingly close to success.

Fairly soon, the last court case relating to the decade-old phone hacking scandal will come to an end – leaving politicians free to resume their pursuit of the press. This is not, really, about voicemails, nor is it even about Rupert Murdoch's ambitions for Sky. It's about power, and who bends the knee to whom. If politicians set up a new regulatory regime, in this case, by ordering newspapers to sign up to Mr Mosley's outfit, a hierarchy will have been established and 300 years of press freedom will, in effect, have come to an end.

Such attempts usually fail because the Government realises that press freedom is worth preserving, and newspapers are normally powerful enough to remind them of the fact. But the press is weaker than at any time in recent history. Since the Leveson Inquiry was called, sales are down by almost a third. Advertising revenue (the lifeblood of most newspapers) has shrunk by about a fifth this year alone. This all has consequences. *The Independent* has vanished from newsagents; *The Guardian* will probably be next. The enemies of press freedom will be cursing themselves for a premature attack six years ago. Now, surely, is the perfect time to strike.

The struggle takes various forms. One group, Stop Funding Hate, is lobbying large companies to stop advertising in newspapers whose editorial line it finds disagreeable. In another era, such a preposterous plan would have stood no chance of success. But at a time when advertising decisions are taken by young executives who spend too much time on social media, such tactics can work. Lego, for example, has been persuaded that readers of the *Daily Mail* are no longer suitable recipients of its free toys. The campaigners, delighted with such triumphs, are now moving on to the *Daily Express*.

Then we have Hacked Off, which is still going – with the support of Mr Mosley, Hugh Grant, John Prescott and a few other celebrities who have had reason to curse the tabloids over the years. They lost the argument last time around. Phone hacking was already illegal, which is why people went to jail. But they have a new cause now: Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, one of the various anti-press

pieces of legislation to have been passed over recent years. The proposal is extraordinary: that publications who fail to submit themselves to Mr Mosley's regulator could have to pay the legal costs for anyone who sues them – successfully or not.

The threat that this poses to press freedom is hard to exaggerate. Take Tim Yeo, who when a Tory MP was caught in a newspaper sting offering his services to what he thought was an energy company. Ever the chancer, he sued for libel using a no-win, no-fee law company. Had he succeeded, *The Sunday Times* would have been on the hook for at least £1 million. The judge seemed appalled at Mr Yeo's brazenness, saying that much of his evidence was "false and, in my judgment, dishonest". But had Section 40 been in effect, the newspaper could have been asked to pay the full costs anyway – as punishment for refusing to swear allegiance to the state regulator.

The implications of all this are deliciously apparent to the MPs now considering the activation of Section 40. Newspapers would be asked to submit to Max Mosley and his friends at Impress, which no self-respecting title would ever do. They would then live in fear of being sued by anyone, for anything. The guilty Sam Allardyce could exact his revenge on this newspaper with a Tim Yeo-style lawsuit, and it wouldn't cost him a penny. The obvious result of this would be far fewer investigations. No more undercover newspaper reporters, finding out what MPs say when they think no one else is listening. No one finding out what Mr Yeo's real price might be.

Theresa May might consider all of this deplorable, but she hasn't stopped it. Many of her ministers fear

that she won't be able to, and that she will eventually lose a battle against Tory rebels who are itching to insert new press regulation laws into other legislation. The Mosley plan has now come before the House of Commons twice, both times introduced by the House of Lords – which is determined to revive the Leveson affair. Last month, the vote was looking so tight in the Commons that the Government had to buy off the rebels by holding a public consultation. So both issues – a new Leveson inquiry, and Section 40 – are firmly back on the agenda.

When I met the Prime Minister earlier this month, I asked how worried she was about this. She replied that if I was worried, I should write in to her consultation. It seems that, so far, no one is really doing so – apart from Hacked Off. This is understandable: no one has really heard about her listening exercise. Hacked Off's website, as you might expect, has a form where you can simply sign a pre-written demand for a new inquiry and more press regulation. Needless to say there is no equivalent from the newspaper industry, the least collaborative group of people in Britain. And a group that is not used to begging for its liberty.

The MPs who always support press freedom (there are only about a dozen of them) worry that all might yet be lost because the newspapers are too disorganised, or too proud to play the consultation game, or suggest that their readers might do so. The idea of a Mosley triumph might sound crazy, they warn, but crazy things are happening all the time in Westminster. It is a depressing thought, but it does seem as if the battle for press freedom might well have to be fought all over again.



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Tone-deaf Labour plumbs new depths

Comparing a cutback in staff perks to famine in Ethiopia is symptomatic of a party in terminal decline

JEMIMA LEWIS



If you haven't yet seen it, I implore you – don't. Save yourself the psychic anguish of watching 20 Labour MPs (including some previously regarded as sane, such as Dan Jarvis and Angela Rayner) divest their party of the last skimpy undergarments of political dignity.

These 20 have recorded a Christmas single. But that's not the worst of it. They have rewritten *Do They Know It's Christmas* – Band Aid's 1984 single about starving Ethiopians – and turned it into a critique of employment practices at certain British firms. "At Christmas time, we give but some employers take," pipe the MPs raggedly, like irregular churchgoers half-mimicking the Lord's Prayer. Why do they seem so

embarrassed? Had they, perhaps, not actually read the new lyrics until they got to the studio, donned their Father Christmas hats and pressed "record"? Alas, too late to turn back now. So on they warble with rictus jollity: "And we know that they have plenty, but they give out less and less./Stand up against their greed this Christmas time."

What, you may be wondering, have John Lewis, Waitrose and M&S (among other previously well-regarded employers) done to merit comparison with a famine caused by drought and civil war in which more than a million people died? Let our band of happy carollers explain: "No double time on Sundays, your Christmas bonus gone, Your overtime's now ended, your lunches have been took, Just to keep their profit margin and they just don't give a damn."

You may, like me, need to have a little sit-down after that. Put your head between your knees until the word "took" stops dancing in front of your eyes. But let us not be distracted by the clunkiest lyrics since The Killers pondered the question: "Are we human or are we dancer?"

The point being made is that these firms are all cutting back on staff perks in order to offset the increased costs of

the national living wage. John Lewis, for example, has introduced a three-month probationary period for new recruits before they can qualify for all the benefits of a fully-fledged "partner", although they will still be eligible for a share of the group's annual bonus.

Distressing stuff, I'm sure you'll agree. We await Michael Buerk's harrowing dispatch from the haberdashery department.

Could it all be part of an elaborate set-up for *You've Been Framed*? Is it some sort of coded cry for help? "He who sings frightens away his ills," wrote Cervantes, and Labour MPs certainly have plenty to feel sick about these days.

Indeed, this year's singles charts are stuffed with politicians singing out their blues. The most sympathetic is a cover version of *You Can't Always Get What You Want*, recorded by a cross-party choir of MPs and pop stars to raise money for the Jo Cox Foundation. But if you fancy something more hard-Left this yuletide, there's the liltingly catchy *JC 4 PM 4 Me*, by Robb Johnson and the Corbynistas. ("We're all for peace and justice, and anti-austaaaaairity! I'm voting Jeremy Cooooorbyn, JC for PM for me!")

The awful thing is how cheerful this ageing socialist folk singer seems,



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compared with the actual Labour MPs. He sings with waltzing optimism of the Corbynite paradise to come ("I'd like no one being hooooome-less./good jobs and fair pay for all"), while the MPs seem consumed by a hyperbolic despair.

This is what happens when a political party is mortally wounded. It reels around in blind, self-righteous fury. It starts seeing things, such as a moral equivalence between John Lewis trimming its sails and one of the worst famines in African history.

Even its elders lose all sense of perspective. Hence, Harry Leslie – the 92-year-old war veteran who has become a sort of cuddly Labour mascot – tweeted this week: "It leaves me gobsmacked that anyone can think #Georgesborne cares about the civilians in #Aleppo after he brutalised Britain with austerity." Yeah, Syrians. You think you've got it tough but we've got, like, loads of libraries closing.

Of all the bad things about the MPs' song (entitled *National Minimum Rage, geddit?*), the worst is that someone in Labour's high command must have signed off on it. Our Opposition has gone completely tone deaf, politically as well as musically. How could it hope to produce a Christmas hit, when the party itself is a turkey?