

The Christmas Pantomime

This event brought the autumn 2010 series of research events to a close with a round table discussion exploring the form and tradition of Christmas pantomime from the perspectives of the director and the designer. Participants include Keith Orton (Central) and director Joyce Branagh, collaborators on Christmas pantomime at the Watford Palace Theatre between 2005 and 2008.

This event took place at Central School of Speech and Drama on 15 December 2010.

Panel:

Keith Orton (KO) Senior Lecturer and Pathway Leader, Crafts, Central School of Speech and Drama.

Joyce Branagh (JO) Director.

Chair:

Millie Taylor (MT), Lecturer, University of Winchester and author of *British Pantomime Performance* (Intellect, 2007).

About Keith Orton:

Keith Orton is Senior Lecturer and Pathway Leader, Crafts, at Central School of Speech and Drama. After graduating from Central, in 1994 Keith Orton became resident designer at Oldham Coliseum Theatre in Greater

Manchester. In 1997 he returned to Central as a full-time design tutor combining teaching undergraduate students in set and costume design with designing for in-house public productions. In 2005, he was chosen as a finalist for the World Stage Design Exhibition in Toronto. Now combining part-time teaching with professional design work, he is also the co-author with Joyce Branagh of *Creating Pantomime* (The Crowood Press Ltd, 2011).

About Joyce Branagh:

Joyce Branagh has been a Director since 1995, overseeing productions at venues such as Bristol Old Vic, The Orange Tree Theatre, Watford Palace, Harrogate Theatre Royal and Oldham Coliseum. Her production of *Travels With My Aunt* at Oldham Coliseum was nominated for Best Production at the MEN Awards. She has been the dramaturge for many new plays, including those by Sarah Daniels and Ben Elton, and written three Christmas pantomimes, two of which have been produced at Watford Palace Theatre. She is the co-author with Keith Orton of *Creating Pantomime* (The Crowood Press Ltd, 2011).

About Millie Taylor:

Dr Millie Taylor is a Lecturer at the University of Winchester with particular expertise in pantomime, musical theatre and music theatre. She has been the Musical Director of several pantomimes, and is the author of *British Pantomime Performance* (Intellect, 2007). Her next book *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment* (Ashgate Press) will be published in 2011.

Millie Taylor: Hello and welcome. I'm going to be chairing the session and making sure they don't fight too much. So what I want to do is talk a little bit about my interest in pantomime, and then I'm going to introduce each of our guests to talk about their interest in pantomime. When I started thinking about this, I realised it was in 1982 that I first played in a pantomime, which is quite a long time ago. I was just playing piano then, for rehearsals, and then I played for a Christmas show, and then I went on to start MDing performances.

That first one was back down at Plymouth Theatre Royal. Since then I've worked for E&B Productions, which became Qdos Entertainment, and Kevin Wood Productions, which became First Family Entertainment. They all seem to change their names. Chris Lillicrap's company that started as Muffin and ended up as Proper Pantomime Company – all these pantomime companies seem to merge and transform themselves, which I think is sort of quite an interesting track to follow.

But, about 10 years ago, I moved into education, into higher education, and discovered that, more than the denigration of pantomime in the profession, the denigration of pantomime in academic life is even greater. So as an academic who studies musical theatre and pantomime, I am the lowest of the low. But nonetheless, I've found plenty of people who share my passions. So I want to introduce two of them today, and ask them to say a little bit about themselves.

First I'm going to introduce Joyce Branagh, and I'll tell you a little bit about her. She's a freelance writer and theatre director. She directed at Watford Palace, Bristol Old Vic, Oldham Coliseum, Harrogate Theatre Royal, Dublin Tivoli, Cork Opera House, Southwark Playhouse, Holland Park Open Air Theatre, and the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond. I'm getting upstaged. But, more importantly, from our perspective, she's directed four pantomimes at Watford Palace, two of which were written by other people, two of which she wrote herself, and all of which were designed by Keith [Orton]. And that's predominantly the experience they're going to talk about today.

So I'm going to ask you just to sort of say a little bit about your background, and particularly about what you feel about contemporary pantomime, where you think pantomime is now, what it is that you enjoy about pantomime.

Joyce Branagh: All of that? Well, I suppose I'm here, if nothing else, to sort of defend pantomime, because I love it, and I'm not ashamed of that. I'm out of the pantomime closet. Because I think – we were talking upstairs – that, it has got a bad name. It's got a sort of, slightly seedy, rubbishness associated

with it. I think it's a very difficult art form to get right, but if you do get it right, you're reaching lots and lots of people. You're reaching young people, old people, huge amounts of families, people who do that 'only going to the theatre once a year' thing. And so because of that, I think it's hugely important.

I think people who think of pantomime as an extra, an add-on, just a money making thing, just a commercial nothing, are very wrong. And I get very hurt and upset by people who treat it like that. I was saying, I had a conversation with an Arts Council Officer about the new writing that we were doing at Watford Palace at the time, and I talked about various shows that we had produced, and the writers that we worked with. And then I said: "And of course our pantomime script is new." And he went: "Yeah, but that's just pantomime." I was so annoyed. And I said: "Do you know, that's gone through seven drafts? Do you know we researched it for a couple of weeks before we even started? I've had 10 dramaturgical meetings with him!" I was fuming.

I think that typifies what people feel toward it as an art form. And so that's why I'm here. If any of you have even a tiny bit of that in you, as you sit there now, I want you to leave not thinking that, because I feel very passionately about pantomime. So there you go.

MT: Excellent. Okay. And also here, we have Keith Orton. I actually first came across Keith on the *Beware the Jabberwocky* project, which went down to the Minnack [in 1999].

Keith Orton: That's right.

MT: We were both working on that, I was a researcher on that. Which is a good few years ago as well, isn't it?

KO: A good few years ago, yeah.

MT: Keith has also done very many other things, including two years as resident designer at Oldham Coliseum, in which he designed the national tours of *The Little Shop of Horrors* and *Josephine*, and a whole series of productions including *Sylvia's Wedding*. And then, there's a mammoth number of things, I'm not going to mention them all...

KO: No, that's fine!

MT: ... at Central School for Speech and Drama. But most importantly, in 2005, he published *Model Making for the Stage: A Practical Guide* by Crowood Press, and I think it's as a result of the success of that book that, perhaps you were approached to write the next one, which will be coming out, next year. So, do you want to respond to the same sorts of questions about why you're here, what your interest in pantomime is?

KO: Yeah, again, similar to Joyce really. I was thinking about this as well, when I first started – because I was a student here, back in the early 1990s – and I sort of had to hide my love of musical theatre and pantomime while I was studying design, for a similar reasons [to Joyce]. You didn't talk about the fact that you liked that side of things.

I was very lucky when I left [Central] to get a job fairly quickly at Oldham Coliseum, and was also the resident designer up there for a number of years. That was the first time I got the opportunity to actually design pantomime. And when we were having a discussion earlier, I was saying one of the things I found really hard when I first started out was that I was slightly daunted by the fact of doing this huge production and so I was clinging on to looking at other people's work and researching, and thinking, I really want to try and follow that person's style. For the first two pantomimes, I don't think I was really successful because I was trying to copy someone else.

It wasn't until 10 years later, when I started working with Joyce at Watford, that I suddenly realised that actually, it was about me being true to my own identity, and true to my own style. And so I then got really excited as well at

the prospect of working on new writing within pantomime. For me, what's exciting is being able to talk about the narrative of the piece, and letting the design drive some of that narrative right from the beginning, rather than being given a script, and having to design pantomime from that. So we've been quite lucky in that respect – that's the way we worked at Watford, so it's given me that opportunity.

MT: Can we take one step back? Because we now know what your passions are, but I want to take one step back, and start thinking about what pantomime is, and what we mean by “traditional pantomime”, which is on so many posters.

JB: Well, I think this is something we struggle with. We're trying to write this book, and you bandy that around all the time: “This is a traditional family pantomime.” And we've seen quite a few “traditional family pantomimes”, and they're all really different. What they think of as traditional, and indeed what they think of as family sometimes, is quite debatable. But the traditional aspect... it's all sorts of things. It's the cross-dressing, it's the pies, it's the fact that the Dame is always called Widow Twanky in *Aladdin*... there's all sorts of things that kind of follow through.

I think of all the productions that we've seen, people take it to mean different things. As a writer, what I did was I went to the Theatre Museum – which is no longer, it's part of the V&A now. You can go and the archives they bring you lots of scripts, and you read lots of old scripts, and from that, what I did was then go through and, I suppose, find what I thought seemed to be the traditional elements through these 19th century and early 20th century pantomimes. That might be particular characters being called certain things, or certain settings, or certain moments that happened in particular stories, and I'd think: when I write my *Jack and the Beanstalk* I want to keep the fact that the henchman is called Fleshcreep, but I might change this aspect or this aspect.

And I think, for me as a writer, it's working out what those traditions seem to be for that story – rather than pantomime as a whole – and then, again, looking at it as a narrative. Looking at it as you would a normal play adaptation and trying to think: what's this story, and how do I want to tell it, and what do I need to keep that will satisfy the people who know this story already? What can I tweak, and what is no longer acceptable? And I think that's something that we're going to talk about later, about that kind of... the political correctness of some pantomimes that leaves a lot to be desired.

So I think I start from the 19th and early 20th century scripts and then move on from there.

MT: And look at the relationship between tradition and adaptation.

KO: Looking at the style of pantomime – sort of the end of the 1900s to now – it's settled quite a lot, and the style – this illustrative style that pantomime has – is sort of part of that tradition. And so for me, I got quite excited by that, because I come from a graphics background, originally, so that I was really interested in pursuing more the illustrative qualities,.

One of the other things that I think with tradition is to do with the families. The fact that this is an entertainment for all age groups. And the fact that you've got grandparents who may have taken to the pantomime when they are three or four years old, who have gone through their whole life going and seeing pantomime. And you have some sort of onus on you, to make sure that you're living up to the expectations of that older age group as much as you are to that younger age group.

So that some of the tradition – pantomime is so treasured, and held by Britain as a genre that although you play with it, you don't want to change it. We will try and think about those original twists that we can add to the work, but there still has to be that same format, and there has to be those certain things within it to fulfil the expectations. Because the audience will come with quite a lot of

really held expectations about what a pantomime is. And if you don't deliver that, then quite a lot of them will go away from it feeling very disappointed.

JB: Yes, yes. You need to literally orchestrate your "behind you" moments. And it's silly, but there's different ways of getting right response. Because if you just say: "Oh, I don't know where the baddie is," they *might* say, "He's behind you!" But if you go: "where is he?", they will. It's things like that that you sort of just have to point out to people, and they're so delighted when they find that they've said it!

You know, a friend of mine saw her first pantomime at the age of about 28. Me and a friend had said: "Well, you know, you come in, you have to do the 'he's behind you' and you do a big sing-song, and blah blah blah..." And I think she thought we were winding her up. And for some reason or other, we didn't get to sit together, and at the interval, she was so delighted, because she was going: "'Cause he said the thing, and I was already going 'he's behind you! Oh no, he IS behind you.'" It's half knowing what to expect, and then it happening. I think is lovely for the adults, because they go: "Oh!"

Similarly, I was working closely with a chap with the Watford African and Caribbean society who are, like, two doors down from our theatre. He'd never been and I went: "For God's sake, come to the panto!" And so the bloke came with his two kids, and he rang me up the next day to say: "Oh, I loved it! And you know, there was a bit when the baddie came on and we were all screaming!" And I think he was surprised at himself for getting caught up in it, because he thought only kids did that. And the silliness of it. Of looking around and seeing that, yes, there's a four-year-old there, screaming, but there's also an 84-year old, also going: "Don't sell him the lamp!"

I think, if you can keep the triggers to make you do that, then you've got that traditional element. And you love it despite yourself. You do feel: "Oh, I'm doing 'heads, shoulders knees and toes', and there's 600 of us doing it, and I can't believe I'm doing it but I am. Because I look more foolish not doing it."

MT: You'd look like a stick in the mud, if you...

JB: You do, yeah.

MT: You've been talking a little bit about what a traditional pantomime is, and sort of implied from that how you engage in the writing process. And I think particularly you talk in the book about how you write together...

JB: Yeah, well I think, I know quite a lot of you probably know Keith, or sort of know him around the building. When I first asked to direct the pantomime at Watford, I hadn't directed pantomime before, and you know, it's a huge show. There was going to be 10 in the cast, there was going to be a full junior chorus – you know, it's sort of a musical. As I hadn't directed a musical before – obviously I didn't point this out to too many people, in case they didn't let me direct – I thought, I need the designer to know their stuff.

I must have met about 20 designers, and in my head I sort of wanted it to look story-bookish, but I didn't want it to be twee. I thought, it's not just for kids, we're not doing a Christmas show that's aimed at sort of seven-and-unders; and I didn't want it to look like something from the 19th century that's from a box – that, you know, should be on some chocolates; and I didn't want it to be garish.

I think I sort of knew what I wanted, but I couldn't quite phrase it, and I met with all these people, and some people weren't experienced enough, and some people scared me with their experience and I felt almost that they'd be directing it, and I'd just be telling the actors where to stand, and that was a bit scary.

I explained to the Artistic Director that I'd met all these people and I didn't know who to pick. I said: "I know what I want, I want someone with a sense of humour, who gets me, that I don't have to spend ages apologising for my bad jokes. That I get humour in the set, that it looks like a storybook, but not quite twee." And he said: "Oh, there's a bloke I work with up in Oldham. Well, he

works at Central now, I don't know if he does anything professional any more, but you should ask him, because I think you'd get on." It was like dating.

And we met, and me and the production manager, who'd also met all these 20 people, said: "That's the chap." And I can't explain to you that, getting that right. You probably all direct and stuff, but for panto – because there's so much to think about, and there's so much money, and it's so hectic, and there's so little rehearsal time – getting that relationship right is even more crucial than on a normal show.

KO: Yeah, absolutely. Also, year I had some friends come to see it, and I was with them. In the interval they turned to me and said: "I can't believe those jokes you put in the script." And I said: "That's not me – the stuff that's on the set are the jokes that I would do..." It's partly because it's almost seamless. The humour that's involved in the set and the jokes that are played with within the set match so well with the script, that it becomes a whole piece, rather than it seeming as two different things.

JB: And I think that's perhaps what I was looking for when I was meeting all these people. I didn't know that was what I was looking for, but perhaps that's what it was. And then it makes those other conversations easier, doesn't it. You were saying about bring a set and the writing together – the first year I was going to write, the panto was *Jack and the Beanstalk*. And we went for a pint (we have to do it in pubs, but you know...). And I said to him: "It's a bit odd, but I've been thinking that maybe the giant shouldn't be horrible. Is that odd?" And you said, "I've been thinking that the giant shouldn't be horrible." So then, you were able to kind of think about how the giant couldn't be horrible...

KO: Yeah, and I think on the second pint I went on to actually say: "Yeah, and I really, really see this beanstalk being able to talk. I like the idea of kind of animating it in some way." And you went: "That's exactly what I was thinking!" And it's partly probably because we'd already done two pantomimes up to now, that we'd got onto that kind of same wavelength. But it's really

interesting from the point of view of a designer, being able to have those sorts of conversations, which are absolutely about the start of the narrative. It's not about picking up part way through the process. It's about actually being right there at the beginning of the process.

JB: And that Beanstalk talk – talking of the beanstalk – then went on to... so I started writing it, and initially I'd kind of had it in my head it would be, you know, like an Audrey [from *The Little Shop of Horrors*] plant, so if people knew that, they would get that reference. But it didn't matter, and it would be this sort of American-sounding beanstalk. The Artistic Director read the first draft and she said: "It's such an English story, the rest of it... this American beanstalk thing, I'm not sure about that." And I said to you: "Huh, she didn't like the American thing, I thought it was quite good." And you went: "Well, it could be a French bean." And I thought: "It *could* be a French bean!" So I made it into a French bean, which then lead you to design it with... it had a beret.

KO: There's some pictures I think later on you might see, but one of the leaves was a red leaf, that sort of scraped across the top of the face of the beanstalk, so it created this almost red beret-type effect with it.

JB: Which then led to lots of terrible '*Allo, 'Allo!* jokes, which I have to say went down very well with most dads. You just had to say a couple of, "Listen very carefully, I shall say this only once..." Kids: nothing. Adults: very funny. But you had this kind of French thing.

KO: I think it's a dual thing with that, as well, because the beanstalk in the face had the charm and the qualities that the young ones in the audience feel for straight away. And then by giving it that voice, and giving it that sort of humour, then it's that double thing that appealed to both age groups. Both the parents, grandparents and the young children as well.

JB: And it's also something that came up earlier when we were talking about commercial theatre and budgets – as opposed to rep theatre which is sort of

our main background – is that we saw tonnes of different *Jack and the Beanstalks* before we started, to see kind of what worked. And also, as well as the research, we were just kind of looking at what elements we ought to be including, and what we wanted to get right. And one of them for me was, that I felt really dissatisfied when Jack can't climb the beanstalk. You know, those productions where they have the kind of inflatable beanstalk. They look great, they look very beautiful, but when Jack starts to climb the curtain comes down. I thought: "Oh, I want to see him climbing up." I dunno, I kind of turn into a five-year-old sometimes – I'm disappointed he didn't get to climb it. And we sort of worked out we weren't going to be able to do what you've discussed...

MT: Yeah, the hydraulic one where they can actually climb it, and they disappear up as the curtain comes down...

KO: ... but that would have been our entire budget.

JB: So I said to Keith: "I really want him to be able to climb it. So, how do we do that?" And then you sort of came up with the...

KO: Yeah... in a way, it was just really one of the compromises you have to make when you're trying to maintain the magical quality that it needs to have, but still bringing it in within budget, which is the tricky thing. And what we did in the end with that one was to create a large truck which had a steel structure inside it, but it was polystyrene covered and scrimmed to create the face and the shape. So Jack could actually climb two metres up the beanstalk, and then there was a section flown in from above which joined up to it and carried the design through, which you couldn't touch, because that was obviously a flown piece. But the illusion was, then, that the beanstalk went all the way up. And that also gave us quite an opportunity to look at what we did with our fairy for the production, which was Fairy Bo Peep and because it was Fairy Bo Peep...

JB: Ah, and it was Fairy Bo Peep, because, so... to go backwards, I did my research, and you know, Fleshcreep was in every single script that I read. The baddie was never called anything else, so I thought: Alright, he's gonna be called Fleshcreep. Bloody hell, I've got to write this rhyming stuff at the beginning, I could really do with a Fairy's name that rhymed with that. Oh, Bo Peep!" So I wrote that. And then you said: "Oh, Bo Peep..." and then you took it from there.

KO: It was then going on to think about, well actually, that would lend itself to something that's kind of like gingham, and the sort of traditional Fairy Bo Peep. And then I thought we could give it a Dolly Parton-type look, and it could be more country and western than that. And then that led on to the sheep, that were Bo Peep's magical sheep. The young children's chorus took part of it, so we then had eight kids dressed as sheep.

JB: Which is not traditional, I have to say – the fairy does not normally have magic sheep. But, you know, the kids looked very cute, dressed as sheep, and...

KO: ... and it meant that because they were so entertaining, and did look great, it didn't feel like we were cheating by then putting the beanstalk on the truck. Because what we had to do, obviously, was move the truck on behind, position it, fly it, and then reveal it – so we didn't have the magical growing, but we could have Bo Peep and the sheep.

Something else that I was thinking about, as far as the script feeding into the design and the design feeding into the script, was the moment when you came up with the town name for *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Which was Windy Bottom [please check]. Which was great.

JB: One of my prouder moments.

KO: Because from that moment then, it gave me carte blanche to do lots of jokes on a lot of the cloth. So, we had street signs with "Big Bottom, two and a

half miles”, and things like that, so there’s lots and lots of opening for those kind of puns. But not necessarily the puns that are said, but more the puns that are on the cloth. So, we just kind of created that extra level of humour in it.

MT: I think, you also talked, when we were upstairs, about a ship. Which I think you might want to...

KO: Yes, that was in *Dick Whittington* and, it’s again, sort of slightly to do with regional theatre, and having so much money. But actually when it was built, we suddenly realised how perfect it was for pantomime. It was one of the things that, when we did *Dick Whittington*, I really wanted to have a situation where I could have a three-dimensional ship onstage, that they climbed into – rather than going on board ship, and having a scene on board. And so we actually had, you know, the ship blow up or whatever. So in doing this, I had to think about how we could make this ship move, and we started by thinking about things like putting a revolve down, and having it on the revolve, and all sorts of things. And we’re thinking: No, that’s too much. And in the end what we created was this wooden structure that had no floor in it, so the characters would climb into the boat and then they’d walk it ‘round.

JB: It was kind of like a *Flintstones* boat.

KO: Like a *Flintstones* moment. And it was set at harbour, that would then part, and the ship would set sail, with smoke coming out the chimney from a little smoke machine built into the chimney...

JB: It was quite nice, because it looked like flat, like a 2D thing in the background, and then suddenly when the sides of the port came away, then you suddenly realised it was a...

KO: ...a three-dimensional ship. But the fact it just moved around... The adults all knew that it was being walked around, but it was the joy of knowing that’s how it was done that was great. That sort of, to me, epitomises

pantomime – the fact that there’s that recognition of the joke and the how you’ve done it, but it’s the joy and the charm of it as well.

JB: And our lovely band played *Captain Pugwash*. And then they obviously had to do a *Titanic* moment, briefly. So you kind of had those different cultural references, just over 30 seconds of just daftness, of: “Buy into this, there’s no sea, it’s them pushing it, but go with it, because we’re in a boat, so that’s okay.” And obviously kids had no problem buying into that at all.

MT: And I think that is one of the joys of pantomime, isn’t it, that whole sort of reflexivity starts to happen, because, you know, silly things happen in the design and the script.

Moving on to sort of think about the rehearsal process, and how actors managed to perform with lots of scenery, big costumes – you know, all those sorts of issues that arise. How have you experienced that?

KO: I think one of the interesting things is that there’s such a short rehearsal period for pantomime that in effect you’re presenting most of your cast with finished costumes on the first day of rehearsals, almost. But one of the people that I always made sure that I contacted or talked to in an early part of the process was the person that was going to be playing pantomime Dame. It’s partly because there’s as many pantomime Dames as there are people playing it, because they’re all going to want to do it in their own particular way, and Joyce has got her own viewpoint about what that character is, but they’ve got to feel really comfortable about their own particular Dame.

And also, you are going to build that whole thing that the first costume is establishing their trade, almost, and then the costumes will develop and become more and more outrageous as the pantomime progresses. But you’ve also got to be aware that they’ve got to be able to work in those outfits as well. So you can do some really outrageous ones that are ridiculous shapes, but you’ve got to make sure they’re very short scenes. And the scenes where

they have got a lot of action to do, you've got to make sure they're a slightly different type of costume, so...

JB: ...And I think that's where, working together, sometimes you could point that out to me. If it is going to be something huge, you'd say: "It'd be really lovely if he got to go off after that song, Joyce."

KO: Yes.

JB: Or: "Does he need to be involved in that conversation? Could he suddenly have to put a cake in the oven or something?" And I say: "Oh yeah, good point, because otherwise he's going to be too hot, isn't he?" Those sort of boring things.

MT: I liked your dinghy story, too. Share your dinghy story.

KO: Oh yeah, the dinghy story...

When we were chatting before, Millie was saying: "How much do you have to do in the way of changing when you get into rehearsals?" And because Joyce and I have worked together for four years, we kind of have eliminated quite a lot of the problems that might crop up, because there just isn't time. You've only got two weeks' rehearsal, there isn't time for things not to work almost – so you've got to make sure as designer and director and writer that you've solved a lot of those things in the design process.

JB: I think because, also, we worked with a couple of very good production managers, who are very good asking exactly how we're going to do things as well, so that a lot of those logistics were thought through in advance. So there wasn't as much last-minute faffing as there might have been.

KO: No, absolutely. But... when it came to the ship, one of the things that we had to do, was that we had to blow it up, and the script was developed in such a way that the baddie and sidekick had to – originally, in my design idea –

come on a rowing boat. Which they'd have a hole in the bottom, again, and they could row. It would come on, and they'd stick this mine onto the side of the ship – which was fine, but the problem is, the rowing boat idea wasn't as fluid and flexible as we would have hoped in the rehearsal room. And also, it was going to mask too much of the ship because of its height and because the ship wasn't that high anyway – the ratio between the rowing boat and the ship was too small. We had to have something that was much lower.

So Joyce came up with the idea of using a children's dinghy for it. And that was one of those times when you suddenly realise that's why we need to think all these things through beforehand. Because we've got the dinghy, which was great, we put it on a caster and thought it would be brilliant. Couldn't move it.

They'd shift their weight, which meant that we couldn't get it to turn...

JB: We tried rubber, and...

KO: ...and I think we probably went through about four or five variations before we could try and get this to work. And it was literally in the technical rehearsal that we finally got it to work. So... it sort of goes through that thing of how important it is to have thought through all those things beforehand., because if you don't, it can really trip you up.

I suppose the great thing about panto – something that Ali Fellows, who's a production manager, said to me when I was doing some research for the book – is that if something doesn't work, you can make a joke out of it. So, if it doesn't work, then you kind of re-write the script to make it funny, and then it becomes a joke as part of it. Rather than worry too much about it, you know? So, I think you can always get around those things, but it is trying to make sure that you have thought about all those things that might happen in the rehearsal process.

MT: I think the other thing that we were talking about upstairs was the flatness. Because one of the beauties of pantomime is its flatness, and the sort of cartoon-like imagery of it, and yet, sometimes that flatness also can be a downside.

JB: Well I think it's also about that commercial versus, I suppose, rep panto, or, small scale panto. That money doesn't necessarily mean quality. I've seen some fantastic, glorious commercial pantos that have loads of money, and I've gone: "Cor, I wish I could have had flying, and a hydraulic, and all this..." And then I think, sometimes, necessity is the mother of invention, and maybe you find a more interesting way around it.

I suppose some pantos give things a bad name. I went to one – in fact, I will name it – in Peterborough! I went to see an actor that I was thinking of casting in something. And I went to the theatre, and it wasn't at the theatre. I then found out it was in a sports hall on the edge of town. And I got to this place, already my heart sinking slightly. It seemed like quite a big panto, because they had – I don't know if you remember Bobby Crush? He was the Dame. And he's, you know, a very good panto Dame, and a good pianist and stuff. And they some local celebrities and faces and names from telly. But they had literally, obviously, only spent the money on Bobby Crush and these couple of people, because...

MT: ...and the piano...

JB: ... and the piano. It was shower curtains, really. Shower curtains with a very poor excuse for a background, that just sort of got pulled across. And a script that seemed to consist of: "Hallo boys and girls, I'm Peter. Say hello!" Over and over again. Different people came on, and there would be a chase through the audience. A couple of lovely bits, but that was it. And I was so disappointed – I mean, it wasn't the best setting, and they obviously didn't have a lot of cash, but there was just no love in it. And nobody had cared. I suppose that's what I sort of object to.

MT: Yes. It's that loss of heart, isn't it?

JB: Yeah. Whereas I've been to – I don't know if any of you have been to Greenwich panto; very, very good panto – and I don't think they have enormous budgets. And there's backdrops, but they're beautiful backdrops! And the music's thought through, and the script's hilarious, and the people they get are brilliant. It's quite a small stage, and they do brilliant, brilliant things. And I'm sure the budget was much smaller than Peterborough had. They probably weren't raking it in as much as Peterborough.

You sort of worry about those families, whether they'll bother spending – I think it was 25 quid or something – next year. Hopefully they don't go to the same place next year, because the adults were suffering it. You know, there was nothing for the adults. They were just sitting in a room full of noise.

MT: Yes, I must admit, I feel quite strongly about the way pantomime's going in relation to noise. It seems to me it's getting louder and louder. And although they ask everybody to shout and scream, it's not actually so that there's a genuine interaction. And I think a really good pantomime employs those features in a much more witty way.

JB: Yeah.

MT: So you know, that whole thing of pantomimes getting louder and louder with technology, and electronic instruments and all that, I think that has in many ways been to the detriment of the interaction.

KO: But I think one of the things that is quite interesting is that some of the new technologies that are around now and that the large commercial pantomimes are already using – like 3D and projection and things – sit really well in pantomime. And it's partly because it's 2-dimensional, it's about that flatness we talked about. So, in a way, with a projection or 3D animation of something that's flat, it's about that fact that the actors are working in front of a cloth – in a way the projection is replacing that. So it seems to work really well in pantomime. I've seen quite a lot of times when it has.

And sometimes you just think it feels a bit clunky having to put the glasses on when you go into the theatre to watch a 3D film, but when I saw *Sleeping Beauty* in Birmingham a couple of years ago that was that point when I suddenly went, yeah, that's when it really works. It was because they'd used the 3D for the ghost scene as part of the pantomime. So that what they did was, although the characters couldn't really interact with the screen, you got your glasses on and they had this ghost hover up out of a well, as part of the 3D in the background. And so all the kids were screaming: "It's behind you!". And then suddenly, the ghost moved and they all just went: "Aaah!" and screamed for a different reason. And I thought that was just brilliant, because that was absolutely about new technology, but using it in a traditional pantomime way.

JB: Yeah, and what you were saying about the first use of film.

MT: Oh yes, it's probably about – I can't remember the exact date, I should have looked it up before I came – it's about 100 years ago, the first time that a screen was used for a pantomime chase. And I think pantomime at that point, in the early part of the 20th century, was part of that whole modernist tradition of the Meccano [unknown, please check] and dream scene. When Meccano [unknown, please check] just came out, and you know, there were a lot of those new inventions that appear in pantomimes. And to some extent, they still do.

KO: It's just embracing it. It's embracing new stuff all the time.

JB: We had our fairy godmother get a call on a mobile phone, telling her that Cinderella needed her, and yes, everyone loved that – because you've got that kind of recognition. When we talk about the traditions, I don't know if any of you have seen the pantomime at York – a chap, Berwick Kaler, has been the pantomime Dame for over 30 years, crikey! And he is a very old-school Dame, he's very sort of Dan Leno, no boobs, just this straight black hair, only has a couple of changes, has a big walk-down outfit... But they did a film

sequence. They do all sorts of crazy pantomime titles – they did *Dick Turpin*, the pantomime, and they had a lovely film sequence. Obviously the pantomime was in York, so they went down into London, and had the pantomime horse led by Dick walking around Trafalgar Square. They'd filmed that and various London landmarks. Obviously just done it with a handheld camera. And then they said: "Oh, time to get back up to York" and filmed him getting on an Intercity 125. Which is just hilarious, because they'd just done that whole mishmash of: "We shouldn't really be using film, but we are, and then we're doing the pantomime horse but it's getting on a train." It was just very silly.

MT: They actually did that another year at York. I think they always do a film sequence. And the one I saw, they actually were wandering around in York, and then they went onstage at another venue in York, and interrupted a music concert, and then became part of the music concert in York. But actually, *Dick Turpin* is one of the ones that is recorded at the V&A. The V&A, for those of you who don't know, they do have a film archive, and there are four 1990s pantomimes. I actually went up with them when they filmed *Dick Turpin*, and so, *Dick Turpin* is there, I don't know whether they've done one this year. But the V&A archive is a fantastic place for pantomime research.

I just want to move us on to one more topic, which was the one your raised, about the political correctness difficulties. The gender, the racial stereotypes, the morality, all those sorts of things.

JB: Yeah, I tell you what, when you are researching and going kind of into those old pantomimes you kind of go: "Oh, hello. We'll not be saying that any more." It's just dreadful racial stereotypes, dreadful depictions of women being rubbish and weak, and... I think it's quite interesting to challenge those. Sometimes, sort of, meet them head on.

And sometimes it's the narrative even. I keep talking about *Jack and the Beanstalk* – but you're reading the story, and going: "Hang on." So he gets this beanstalk, and he goes up, and he steals the giant's stuff, and then

seems to be surprised when the giant's a little bit annoyed about that. But that's okay because he kills him. What kind of story is that to be telling children? So in our one they belong to Jack and his mum to start with, and then we had the giant being nice, and the giant actually was Jack's dad, so we had a bit of a Luke Skywalker moment, you know: "I'm your father." Again, that made all the adults laugh, and the kids were just going: "What, it's his father, that's good."

So yeah, just little tweaks, little references and then you're on. Just addressing that bit of the story helped me in my head to just go, "That's why he's doing it, because they belonged to him before and it's all Fleshcreep's fault." Because again, I kind of thought, hang on, you've got two baddies in this story. You've got Fleshcreep who's the henchman, but the giant's the baddie. And I saw lots of – again, it's that kind of thing of seeing stories and being dissatisfied.

In *Jack and the Beanstalk* there's this big build-up to the baddie giant: "Fee-fi-fo-fum, baddie giant, baddie giant." and there's normally one scene, even in the big commercial pantos, when you'd kind of have big animatronics and this thing... they weren't satisfying. They kind of felt like – well, that's just a big head, or that's a big fist coming down, and I'm not scared of him because I didn't get to meet him. So we're sort of trying to address those things.

We were talking before about gender, and cross-dressing. And I, you know, it might not be very PC, but Dames work, they are funny. I don't know why. And the cross-dressing with the principal boy, the girl, I haven't actually directed a girl as a principal boy yet. And that's not because I'm against it, but some of the pantomimes I've done, I've felt that maybe part of the story was romance, and would a modern audience – and they do – go "eeug" like that, at the end. And does that sort of spoil the ending? And so I've kind of wrestled with that, a little bit. About whether to follow the tradition, and the ones that we've done so far, we haven't. But we did sort of address it, didn't we?

KO: We did, yeah. And again, it's sort of trying to get that whole thing of: "How are we going to have fun, really." Because I think one of the things that's really important to do is for us to have fun in creating it in the first place.

JB: Sounds pretty selfish to say.

KO: No, not in a selfish way, because it needs to come across to the audience as well, but it's: "How can we have fun?" And one of the things when we did *Dick Whittington* is to think about that whole thing with cross-dressing and how we can perhaps really push that, and test that, and see how much we could possibly get away with, within it. And neither of us had done a principal boy, so we really liked the idea of doing it. We had the opportunity because, in the development of the script we had Alice Fitzwarren, who disguises herself to get on ship, and disguises herself as Bob the Sailor in ours. And it was a very, very obvious pantomime boy tunic, the very traditional outfit, but with a little black moustache on, as well. Because it wasn't a principal boy, and because it was in disguise, we wanted the whole idea that the moustache was the disguise.

Yeah, quite a good moment. So nobody recognised her until after the moustache, and then: "Oh, it's Alice!" You know, so it was that sort of moment, being able to disguise that way. But what we also wanted to do is try and play with that cross-dressing. So, in the second act, when the heroes were trying to smuggle their way into Neptune's Palace to rescue King Neptune, the goodies were all disguised, themselves, as friends of Purcell, who was Neptune's daughter.

JB: Now it's all going complicated! They all had to dress up as girls. For spurious reasons.

KO: Yeah, they had to dress up as girls. It also meant that we could have our hero, Dick – who was actually the boy, so wasn't a principal boy – but we could actually dress him up as a girl as well. And also, it gave an opportunity for our cat to cross-species dress – so we got them to disguise as a fish as

well. So we kind of did that whole cross-dressing as much as we possibly could. And it sort of all made sense.

JB: It kind of did. I'm not sure if it makes sense now, but... We had Alice, dressed as Bob, dressed as a girl.

KO: Yeah, so it was a double-cross-dress.

MT: Sounds a bit Shakespearean to me.

JB: It was a bit. Again, it's that kind of mix of design and also, I think, what I try to do as a director is try and keep my mind open to sort of anyone popping ideas in. Because I think, if you've got an idea for a bad joke, I'm all ears. I'd said that we wanted everyone to dress up as girls at the end, and as teenage girls – so Dick's trying to dress as a teenage girl, and Alice dressed as Bob trying to be a teenage girl. I wasn't quite sure where the Dame should go with that, and the production manager said, "Well, she should wear a shell suit, because it's all set under water." And then we all kind of went, "Oh no – because then we could have real shell. Shell suit – that's a dreadful joke, we must do it." And then we went looking...

KO: Yeah, well, obviously, one of the things with pantomime is you can't afford – well certainly we can't in the theatre – to actually make absolutely every costume. So we do have to hire and source some. And on a trip to Birmingham costume hire, I was going through the rails, sorting for something else, and I actually went, "Oh my god". There was a shell-suit hanging up, with shells appliquéd on it. It was a pantomime outfit, complete with all the shells already.

JB: And you just go: "Some other bugger's had my joke!" But that was exactly what we meant, and it's always quite nice to see someone else had come up with the same terrible joke. Again, the joke went down very well. And that was just very much the production manager just chipping in something at a meeting, and I think it's quite nice to just do that. That kind of whole

collaborative thing can be between the writer, designer and director, but also the choreographer coming up with certain moves, and definitely the MD coming up with songs.

I know that for the underwater sequence, we said we wanted the Dame and King Neptune singing a duet. So you've got blokes singing a duet, so it's going to be a comedy duet of them getting together. But I said that the bloke we had playing King Neptune, you know, had been in *Les Miserables*, he can sing. So we wanted something that, you know, he could belt and – over a glass of wine, I have to say this time, rather than a pint – he went: “Ooh, ooh ooh – I've got it! Meatloaf – ‘Dead Ringers!’” And he ran round the room. So we had that and it was a showstopper, and it's something that I would never have thought of in a million years. And then the choreographer said, “Oh, we'll just have everyone going past in the background, in Ray Bans.” They weren't in the scene, they shouldn't see this, but they just did. It was just this sort of nice moment, and if it was just us two [Joyce and Keith], we wouldn't have come up with it, but that sort of input is lovely. It can be written in, and then it can expand into different drafts.

KO: I was thinking about the first time I noticed that whole thing about the impact that I could have on the narrative of the story. working with **Joe's** **[please check]** script. When it came to the second act in *Cinderella* it said we needed to go back to the kitchen, and Cinderella was going to be locked in the cupboard – so that, when the Prince arrives with the slipper she's hidden away. I thought: “Well, that's very good, but I've had to bring the ballroom at the back of the set on at this point, and I don't have enough room to bring the whole of the kitchen scene back on...”

JB: For very practical reasons we have to think about...

KO: So I was thinking about how we could possibly do it? And I thought: “Well, actually, we could bring part of the house back on, the front half of it, and detach the other half, and leave it offstage. And we could take that scene out into the garden, rather than it being inside the kitchen.”

JB: But she's got to be locked away somewhere, where could she be locked away? And then we went: "Well, the outside loo. That's amusing." So then went back to **Joe [please check]** and said: "Can you write this scene?" It says in the garden – don't know why the Prince comes to the garden, but he does – and she gets locked in the outside loo...so then he wrote back...

KO: But it's just a whole great thing for the kids having the fairy coming onstage and gong: "Where's Cinderella?"...

JB: "She's in the loo!"

KO: So the kids love shouting that anyway. But then also to be able to have the fairy with a pyro-flash, and the walls of the toilet fall apart, and it reveals Cinderella sitting on the throne. It was just a perfect opportunity not to miss, really.

JB: Oh it was lovely to just sort of fight against that very girly fairy tale of Cinderella. Because we had done that, and we had had a beautiful coach and a beautiful moment, and a beautiful frock. And it was quite nice then, to have a very silly moment of her...

KO: Absolutely, and **Joe [please check]** picked up on it as well, within the script, because he gave one of my favourite lines in the whole pantomime. Because we'd got the toilet there at the opening of the scene, one of the ugly sisters was actually in the toilet, and so the first thing you heard was the toilet flush, and her come out, and then she turned to one of them and said, "I'd leave it a minute or two if I was you..."

JB: It was just horrible.

KO: It was just one of those moments where you just go, that wouldn't have happened if we'd have done it the original way.

JB: If we had a bigger theatre and hydraulics, we wouldn't have done that!

KO: Yeah, we wouldn't have been able to do it.

MT: I think it's time we asked our audience if they have any questions, but also perhaps to share their favourite moments, or favourite lines, from productions they've seen. There's one up there.

Audience Member 1: I have a question about the stories that you're using. Because a lot of the stories are like, very old, written in a time in which they were written for European audiences. Like *Cinderella* is actually from China, and has nothing really to do with her wicked stepsisters – it's about a woman's process, and how to let go, and move on... So do you ever take these really strong stories [with their original meaning], or do you just take them from, like you said, the 19th-century perspective of them?

JB: Well I actually hadn't gone back as far as the Chinese, but I had gone back to an *Arabian Nights* tale, which is Cinderella-ish, and it's *The Tale of the Anklet*. It's an anklet rather than a slipper, and it's a magical vase rather than a fairy godmother, and it is two sisters that are horrible, and she's almost a kind of slave – it's a much darker tale.

Audience Member 1: No, it's the same plot-lines, but the meanings are not the same for a European audience, because they're from different cultures. Where there are ethical ways of understanding yourself as a woman and of progress through life, there are these sort of really strong, simple stories that were translated into like the meta-text. So I was saying that with pantos – because it's mainly here, we don't really do it in the States, ever – do you ever go back beyond the fairytale rendition? Or do you use the fairytale rendition as, you know, the drop-off point?

MT: I think that reading of fairy stories is there, you know – it's the idea of journeys through life, and that, at different stages in life, one moves forward, so one goes up the beanstalk to another phase of life. Those stories are

implied, and I think Marina Warner and Jack Zipes talk about things like that, in their analysis of the stories. But, in our pantomime tradition those meta-texts are why those stories continue to be used, and continue to appeal to such a wide audience. Because at different stages in your life, you respond to those stories. And you can continue to respond, because we're always moving on to different parts of our lives. You know, there's always time to move on. So I think there is a lot there.

But I think the other thing we have is the tradition that we were talking about at the beginning. And so, in a sense, the stories have become refined and stuck in the pantomime versions as well. And so there is a tension between doing the pantomime version of a story... because I have actually seen somebody go back to a different version, an earlier version of a story, and it was absolutely, totally awful as a pantomime, because they were trying to be too serious. By trying to be sort of truthful to this story and this tale and everything, it actually wasn't then pantomime. And so I think there is a tension there. Sorry, I'm interrupting.

JB: No, I think you're right. I suppose I think it's not the place to state it out loud, those sort of darker things, but you sort of touch on it. So you were saying sort of like, *Cinderella* is perhaps the 'growing into the woman' thing, and...

Audience Member 1: ... in a particular culture...

JB: Yes, yeah. But certainly that aspect... I think things like the costume for Cinderella that we started with – it was just things like hem-lines and her hairstyle, so she looked like a girl at the start, and she looked like a woman at the end. But we didn't go into it any further, like you say. I've seen ones where that sort of subtext, or those kind of darker stories, or different culture stories have come in, and they take it to a different place. And I think you can do those, but I think if you say it's a pantomime and then do something like that, it can backfire, because you get people in who want a pantomime, who aren't

going to like what you're doing, and also put off the people who would like something a bit darker, a bit more of those other cultures.

So I've seen something called *Ashputtel* which is from some of those earlier stories, and I think then you get away from pantomime. Because you're not saying to people this is *Cinderella* the pantomime, you're saying this is a story you may recognize some aspects of. If you say pantomime, I think you can upset people, and not get the people that you want, in. Even if it's a fantastic piece of work.

MT: I'm trying to remember the name of it, the fantastic show that was on... all the Brothers Grimm fairytales, with the puppets... *Shockheaded Peter*.

KO: Very dark.

MT: Where it was much more in that [tradition]...and much darker, and also it used music in a very different way, as well, didn't it?

JB: But that had a bit of *Cinderella*, with the chopping the toes off, didn't it, to get into the shoes?

MT: Yes, coming from the Brothers Grimm tale, rather than the [Charles] Perrault tale. Yeah, we had another question, sorry, there was somebody up here, I think, first?

Audience Member 2: I just wanted to say that the joy of panto isn't just bringing different audiences, it brings in a vast array of different actors who want to do it. I heard Simon Russell Beale on the radio only a couple weeks ago, and he said he did pantomime for decades, literally. But the thing that stopped him was – it was Wimbledon, or somewhere like that – he said he walked into the dressing room and saw the 40 dresses that he had to change into during the evening, and he knew he wouldn't get home until he'd changed dresses 40 times. That was the thing that made him think, this might be the last pantomime...

MT: Yeah.

JB: I think, it can be really tiring. You sort of see people, and they've managed to get through the season without getting a dreadful cold at some point...

MT: ...and doing it twice a day...

JB: ...and I think that some of those schedules are punishing. And some of the smaller venues sometimes do three shows in a day. Those kind of shorter ones.

MT: Yes, yes. I remember the first time that happened – and when we started doing Sundays as well, it was horrendous.

JB: You kind of get to the middle of Act Two and you're going, "Have I said that? Shit." Hard, hard work.

MT: There was a question down here, and then up at the top.

Audience Member 3: I'm a great fan of the slop scene, so I've never seen one that I hated. And I'm interested in the idea of seriousness, perhaps, and how it relates to campness in your process. In a way the camp says the thing you're not allowed to say – it tells the toilet jokes, you know... How does that fit into your processes, or more generally the idea of panto? How does camp function, I suppose?

JB: It depends what you mean by camp?

Audience Member 3: I'll allow you to interpret that...

JB: Okay. Certainly we have actually stayed away from camp innuendo in our pantomimes. So I think the naughtiest... we've got a couple of raised eyebrows about sort of, naughty sexual things...

KO: I think there's quite a lot of what I call visual camp – which can come in with the style of drawing, almost. As an example, the trees in Cinderella – the enchanted forest – had to have faces on them, and branches. The scenic artist was a very close friend of mine. I went down, and she was drawing them out, and she turned around to me and said: “Do you realise how camp these trees are?” [And I went...:] “You know, they're just children's trees with faces on them.” “No, no, step back...” And actually, the way that the hands were coiled, and these poses, and most of them had very bushy moustaches – it was part of the tree – and I was thinking, yeah, these are quite camp really, aren't they? And I hadn't really kind of taken that on board. So, I think some of it sometimes happens almost subliminally, and it may be happening through the design as much as sort of visual aspects of it.

JB: But interesting what you're saying about the seriousness of the slop scene, because I think they are quite serious. And normally the characters in them have to be quite serious about not getting dirty. And the best ones nearly always have the line of: “Whatever we do, we mustn't make a mess.” And already then, anyone who sits in the audience is going [nervous expression?] which is lovely. But it's interesting – I don't know if you've choreographed one, or directed one?

Audience Member 3: No, no, just a great fan.

JB: They're a bloody nightmare. Because it is the difference between... I don't know. If you do that, and it sticks, it's funny – but if you do that and not enough sticks, it's not funny. So you spend ages with the stage management getting the right consistency of stuff that the wardrobe aren't going to shout at you because they can't get it out for two shows a day. And doing all that, and that you can clear it up so that everyone isn't skidding on flour for the rest of the show, because we've got a big dance number in the next scene...

Again, when you're writing it, you kind of go: "We can't have a big dance number after that scene, it's upstaged because it will be covered in flour and we need to mop it before we can dance on it." And it can be choreographed, literally: "We need to take five steps before you turn around, because somehow that looks funnier than if you take three steps. I don't know why, just do it." And repetition of the phrases within those scenes, as well. Of the: "Well, we mustn't mess it up." Or, if you've got people popping up within it, or whatever it is. And the jokes that people want to hear.

I think, weirdly, I don't think there's any other art form where you want to hear the old jokes. But it is that kind of... oh, we were doing a cake scene, and one of the actors said: "Oh, we haven't got the 'season it' joke." And I was like: "Oh, I don't know the 'season it' joke." And he went, "Oh, you've got to 'sneeze/season it'. Ahchoo." I thought he'd said to sneeze on it, you know, and I'd missed that one out – oh, it was a nightmare. And I did go through it with the Dame and the comic character, in a really nerdy way during rehearsals. It was: "We're going to take four steps, then you have to kick the phone" – we had a phone that splurged stuff. You do have to take it very seriously. And when it doesn't work, it really doesn't work. And it's about – you were saying – about the actors that you get, because you want people who can sing, dance, be funny, and that somehow engage you immediately, as well. And that's really hard to find.

KO: I think quite often that the character that shows it the most is that comedy character. Because it's about that developing that rapport with the audience. And it has to be almost instantaneous and it has to feel relaxed, it can't feel forced, as well. And it's such a tricky thing to do, there's very few people that can really do that well.

JB: Yeah: And it's interesting, within your own sort of rep, you can get stars. So our comedy character did four years in basically the same part, in different outfits. And, you know, in our theatre-going community, he was a star. People might not have known his name, but they were saying: "Oh, you're getting that

little guy back? Because he's funny!" And he was, you know. I remember he had such a rapport with the audience, that we did a songsheet at the end, and he said: "Well, I've got to go to the wedding, and I've got to sing a song. I don't know if anyone's got any songs they want to sing?" And someone shouted out: "Hats, Jackets, Pants and Socks!". It was the song from the year before. I thought, that's brilliant! So they've, not only have they remembered that, but they know that you're you. And he was kind of going: "I don't know what you're talking about, I have never sung 'Hats, Jackets, Pants and Socks.'"

MT: But that, of course, is what they play on at York. They do that all the way through, they actually refer to the previous shows. And that has become part of the tradition as well.

JB: Because they've had the same baddie for 21 years!

MT: Yes.

Audience Member 4: Following on from this, as writer and director, how do you feel about ad-libbing? Because people were saying here about three shows, and I was in one, where literally by the last show, we actually had to cut two dances and one scene – we were overrunning that badly, because the comedian and the Dame loved adlibbing, seeing how many people they could catch out. They were constantly getting [good] feedback from the audience. Do you have any rules about when you do it, about how much they can extend or ad-lib?

JB: I get a bit grumpy, actually. I like a little bit, but if there's too much, normally the quality goes down anyway. What I think is the best of both worlds is if you've got a comic character who can say the rehearsed stuff as if they've just thought of it. So you get that camaraderie with the audience of: "Oh, he's just said that, it's an ad-lib, oh that's brilliant!" But it doesn't throw anything out, it doesn't make the show half an hour longer. It is lovely if there are ad-libs, but I think sometimes... I've had shows where, there are a couple of

people who are brilliant at it, and can do it, and can find just the right moment, say just the right thing, just say it quickly and move on. But there are other people who, it's quite laboured, and they feel like they ought to ad-lib, and they're not very good at it. And just sort of falls flat. Do you know what I mean? It just sort of spoils the flow.

KO: It's also very important because the pace of a pantomime is so important, and that's been sort of designed in from the script, from the design, from everything. So if you then start to extend stuff, you sort of lose that pace. And it can be very funny for the kids, and some of the adults, but you can start to lose the younger children in the audience, because that pace is dropping.

JB: What we did have was our songsheet bit, the comic character would talk to the kids that came up to sing, and that, of necessity, had to be ad-libbed. And that was lovely, because you literally didn't know what the kids were going to say, so that bit was always different every night. We did have to kind of, sometimes go, you need to crack on –you know, some people have got buses to get.

MT: Yes, I've sat through half an hour long ones...

JB: Yeah, and you just go: "I know, little Joshua's very funny, but come on..."

MT: I think we've probably got time for one or two more at most. Anybody?

Audience Member 5: I was really interested in what you were saying about the form having been around since 1900s, but that you have the freedom to work within that, and up to what point you can work within that and so on. And you've mentioned the fact that panto can incorporate anything really – cultural references up to new technology. But what do you think panto historians would be saying 50 years from now, "Oh, pantomime at the beginning of the 20th century had this kind of tendency"? What are the kind of... the fashions, or the things that are happening now? Apart from what you've mentioned already?

JB: What do you think will change, is that...?

KO: ... no, what's key to...

Audience Member 5: ... what do you identify as panto now?

MT: Well, I'll say something about commercial...

KO: I would say, possibly, and it's not because Nick's in the room, I would say possibly lighting within pantomime. Because I think that the way technology's moved, there's a lot more we can do with moving lights and things now, and that has had a real impact on the way that the audience engage with the show. So I would say probably that's been one of the key things that's happened in the last 10 years or so – how much the light can become much more part of that narrative.

JB: Is that... sorry, you were going to say about...

MT: No, I was going to say about when I go to see the very big musical theatre ones, obviously the 3D has made a big impact, so the big technological tools... The big thing they were advertising last year was a transformer that they could make work onstage. Fantastic things like that. But the other thing, it seems to me, is that the big pantomimes are moving towards musical theatre. They're becoming musicals. There are great long stretches that are virtually accompanied sections. And even if they have moments within them where there's an interaction with the audience, it's all underscored, with big, company numbers. So I think the big musicals are moving in that direction – big spectacles. They have these big, fantastic technological things, but they're becoming musical theatre.

Audience Member 5: So you think that's kind of the magnetism of musicals, kind of drawing pantos towards being more like musicals?

MT: Well, it may be, but I think it's also to do with what's happening perhaps in sound design. Where, you know, there's a sense that you're creating an object. I think there's this thing where you are sort of slightly distancing your audience, you're creating a really big fantastic show, and there are these elements of interaction, but actually, they're perhaps much less interactive in reality than the sorts of regional productions that you've been talking about. So what you've got is this fantastic spectacle, this beautifully sung music, and the comedy, I think is perhaps declining in some of those. Whereas I think it's very different in regional theatre, so maybe one of the things is the diversity of what pantomime is.

JB: That's quite interesting, actually. Because the first pantomime I directed, *Cinderella* there were discussions – I was going to say fights, not fights, obviously – heated discussions with the musical director who wanted to underscore everything, and I was going: "Yeah, but that's a story bit, and we need to know what's going on." And he was going: "But you can hear them." And I went: "I can hear them, but not as much as if there was no music there." He very much came from a musical theatre background, and obviously I didn't. So there was a conflict there.

In subsequent years I sort of resolved that a bit more, so there were some bits that, yes, it would be lovely to keep music going there because we're still in that moment – but actually, no, that needs to end because now, I need to move the story on, and I need to be funny. And you can't be as funny if you're underscoring with romantic music. I think that was about me getting to know what I wanted as a director, and how I wanted it to go as much as ...

MT: Because of course music can help you with the, you know, with the camp, in the sense of using stings, and momentary references to things. But if what you are doing is underscoring, it has a different function.

KO: Yeah, absolutely, very much.

JB: It does, yeah.

MT: Good. It'll have to be very brief because we've got about two minutes left.

Audience Member 6: What do you guys think about other actors that are outside of the British culture coming in and performing in panto? Because you were talking about diversity...

Paul Barker: Can I answer that?

MT: Let Paul...

PB: I can only answer from the position of this college, because I run an MA in Music Theatre, and in my 24 students we've got eight people who come from outside Europe – South America and the US and Asia included – and they are divided into groups of six. So I've got two non-Europeans in each group, creating and performing a pantomime. And the really interesting thing is that of course the four English people in each group know what a pantomime is, but the two who came from outside of Europe know nothing about pantomime. Now they have brought some freshness to pantomime, and the freshness they've brought is seen by English people as something very valuable, because it couldn't have happened if they didn't have somebody from the outside. I see that the pantomime that they do is enriched. Because you literally can't get away from the fact that there are different cultures clashing. And that dialogue that they're having is actually visible onstage, but in a funny way. It has to be in a funny way, of course, otherwise it's...

JB: But I think it is, it's about having all sorts... You were saying, about different actors, as well – that, what I've tried to do in the shows that we have got people from sort of different, I suppose ethnic backgrounds. But you've also got people from different acting backgrounds. I've had RSC actors, and musical theatre actors, and people who haven't done...

KO: Coronation Street actors...

JB: Coronation Street actors! I haven't done that. But to greater and lesser extents of success, mixing that up is lovely. I remember going home on the train with sort of musical theatre people, and it's not my thing, and I felt like they were speaking a different language, it was crazy! But that mix is lovely, as is that whole thing that you used to get in rep theatres of learning from each others' disciplines, because you will have actors that are kind of, maybe in their 50s and 60s, and you will have people who are maybe 21. And also you'll have the kids in there as well, in your kids' chorus, who are maybe having their first time on stage ever! You've got all that mixing up and...and you see it's really nice sometimes – you see really odd mixes of friendships, that you wouldn't have expected. It's not sort of, just all the 21 year olds hang out together, it's a really nice mix.

And some of those people are from different countries, and some have been influenced... our baddie in *Cinderella*, her chap was an American opera singer. And the first time he watched it, he went: "My God, I didn't know what to expect, this is crazy, I've never seen a pantomime before!" And I notice that last year, he's in one. So, we've got him round. How exciting is that?

KO: Another thing, picking up on that as well – I've got this slight theory that one of the reasons why panto hasn't transferred across to the States is because parts of their musical theatre have essences of pantomime absolutely within them. You can go and see things like *Legally Blonde* and things, and sit there and go: "That's pantomime!" You know, that whole moment there is absolutely pure pantomime. And so we as a nation, looking at that, might go: "No, I can't do that, that's pantomime." We kind of separate it off pantomime from musical theatre, because we've got those two genres. Whereas I think sometimes in America, those two things blur much more.

Audience Member 6: But surely the one thing about pantomime in this country is it only happens at Christmas.

KO: Yeah, absolutely!

JB: I know...

Audience Member 6: Certainly there's nothing Christmassy about it.

MT: No, but it is an historical...

JB: I'd like to start a movement for a summer pantomime.

MT: But I know people who have tried, and it doesn't work.

JB: Just can't do it?

MT: Can't get the audiences there, because, as you say, it's become part of our rituals of Christmas. Traditionally it started on Boxing Day, through the Victorian period.

KO: But I think another reason as well, is because it needs to be a time – because it's the whole family – when absolutely generations can all go together. And because we've got the situation where everybody's off for a whole week in between Christmas and New Year, you know full well that you're going to be able to get those audiences, because everybody's off. If you try and do it in the summer, you're not going to get that, because people are working, and you've got people on different holidays and things, but everybody's on holiday together at Christmas, which is probably another reason why it's chosen.

Audience Member 7: I don't think I'd want to wear those costumes in the summer...

MT: Anyway, on which note, it's just after seven o'clock, so I am going to have to thank you all for a very excellent discussion, and thank our two speakers...

[ENDS]