

# PANTOMIME PERFORMANCES

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. On 11 October 1843 Niels Henrik Volkersen (1820 - 1893), an acrobat, performed as Pierrot for the first time in Tivoli. It was the last night of the first season and Volkersen performed tableaux from Pierrot's life. That marked the beginning of Volkersen's 50-year career in Tivoli and the beginning of the history of a unique and charming theatre form which has only survived thanks to Tivoli.

The Pantomimes come to Denmark in 1880 Although the pantomime was well known and popular all over Europe, it had only been seen in Denmark when performed by foreign theatre troupes on tour. In 1800 two families came to Klampenborg in connection with a large market in Dyrhaven (the Royal Hunting Grounds). These were the Price family from England and the Casorti family from Italy. At the end of the weeks at Kirsten Piils Kilde, the spring in the park, the 2 families tried to make it in the city of Copenhagen. Price came off better than Casorti. He succeeded in getting citizenship and a work permit to make a living by teaching various sports and gymnastic arts. Casorti on the other hand only applied for a work permit for the city and did not get citizenship. He never became a taxpayer and didn't get a work permit either. In 1801 and 1802 both troupes got permission to perform at the Court Theatre at Christiansborg (the parliament building) for a short period on the condition that they also renovated the theatre for free. The cost of this soon mounted up but the troupes performed and from their repertoire lists we recognise titles which are still performed at Tivoli today, for example Harlequin Mechanical Statue. During the winter the troupes still toured in Europe.



The Casorti Family split up again but Guiseppe, the oldest son of Father Gaetano stayed in Denmark where he trained the mimic Pettoletti who in turn became Volkersen's teacher. Guiseppe Casorti also gave his name to the traditional pantomimes, as we know them from Tivoli. They are called the Casortian Pantomimes.



The Price Family also did well for themselves. They started a theatre in Vesterbro which was well attended. The King himself was a patron. They continued to tour in the winter when the people of Copenhagen could not get to Vesterbro because of the muddy roads.

The pantomime is descended from the Italian masked comedy, *comedia dell'arte* which dates back to the Renaissance. In the *comedia dell'arte* all the actors and actresses have fixed character types: the young lovers, the father, the crafty servant, the stupid servant etc. The stories were written down in note form called

scenarios. These scenarios only show the action with no dialogue or staging instructions. Both dialogue and staging instructions were therefore improvised, not entirely freely but according to the will of the actors. Every actor knew his character type inside out and knew exactly how the character should be played. The troupe rehearsed a selection of dialogues and acrobatic sequences beforehand which they could use as and when they needed them during the performance. It goes without saying that the sequences needed to be rehearsed beforehand to avoid danger. They often contained fights and falls and involved many performers at the same time. The sequences and dialogues which were rehearsed are called *lazzi* (a *lazzo*).

When the *comedia dell'arte* troupe arrived at the place of performance, the first thing they had to do was to erect their stage. This consisted of 2 posts and a curtain on the cart with which they travelled. Then they decided which scenario they would perform and then the action packed performance would start. The stories were fantastic and dealt with subjects such as kidnapping to other countries, marriages arranged with wild Turks, escape attempts

and heroic actions. The characters of the plays were the fine, noble heroes and lovers and the more normal, provincial servants. There was always an old man who could be a merchant, soldier or doctor. Whatever his profession he would always be stuck-up and very interested in women. Therefore a performance could contain high poetry, comedy, satire and sex.

The similarity with the Tivoli Pantomime today is perhaps not immediately apparent, but the connection remains. Comedia dell'arte went to Paris where it became very popular. It inspired the comedy playwright Moliere who also trained as an actor in one of the comedia dell'arte troupes. This popularity was however a threat to the existing theatre of the time which did whatever it could to try to prevent the guest troupes from performing including making the pantomime silent. The established theatres in Paris insisted that only they were allowed to speak and sing on stage. Pantomime evolved from these circumstances. Pantomime actually means "everything in mime".

The pantomime went from Paris to London where it was used as a lively interlude between acts during big opera productions. The operas used a tremendous amount of scenery which could do almost everything, smoke and steam and tricks with trapdoors in the stage floor. This complicated theatre technique influenced the pantomime and gave it its characteristic transformation scenery. It was also in London that Harlequin's character took shape as the sharp and agile mischief-maker with the magical sword, club or wand.

From London the pantomime travelled back to Paris and then around Europe. The guest troupes in Copenhagen before 1800 came via Germany and left the town shortly afterwards. Ludvig Holberg (the famous Danish author) certainly went to see pantomimes in Paris and was a great admirer of Moliere's comedies which he used as a source of inspiration. The pantomime characters as we know them today come from Holberg's comedies and characters.

These characters are:

Harlequin: nimble mischief-maker, in love with Columbine

Columbine: cheeky daughter, in love with Harlequin

Kassander: Columbine's father who wants her to marry well

Pierrot: Kassander's simple servant who must guard Columbine's virtue. Is himself very fond of her

The Suitor: wealthy young man and Kassander's choice for Columbine



Farmers, citizens, sailors, fishwives, farmers' wives, magicians, fairies, devils etc.

Two types of character inhabit the world of pantomime. One type is the good people who carry a large part of the comedy and the other type is the supernatural beings who develop the drama. These supernatural beings do things like casting a spell on Harlequin's sword, intervening with magical powers at the last moment and blessing the troth of Harlequin and Columbine with heavenly charm

The stories are always love stories which end happily ever after with the Fairy Queen marrying Harlequin and Columbine surrounded by fairies carrying palm leaves.

This scene is called apotheosis and is a feature of all of Tivoli's pantomimes. The back curtain in the apotheosis shows a Greek temple in shining light and the Bengal light with its flickering, reddish gleam burning in two pots.