



# NEXO DOES PANTO

**STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN IN BRITISH THEATRES AT THIS TIME OF YEAR. MEN DRESS UP AS WOMEN, WOMEN DRESS UP AS BOYS, BOYS DRESS UP AS HORSES. CHARACTERS NAMED WISHEE WASHEE, BARON HARDUP AND THE UGLY SISTERS LISTERIA AND SALMONELLA WEAR OUTRAGEOUS STYLISED COSTUMES AND MAKE-UP: STAGES ARE FILLED WITH SHETLAND PONIES, SHEEP PUPPETS AND DANCING DWARFS - ALWAYS IN GROUPS OF SEVEN. THERE ARE TRULY TERRIBLE JOKES, AND USUALLY, A FAMOUS STAR TOPPING THE BILL. "WHERE'S MY CAREER?" HE CRIES, AS THE AUDIENCE CHORUSES IN REPLY, "IT'S BEHIND YOU!" LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO PANTOMIME...**

It's pantomime season, a quintessentially British theatre form that has never really caught on anywhere else in the world. As Andrzej Lukowski, the Theatre Editor for Time Out London, said: "Frankly, pantos are so weird...I've never managed to explain what they are to somebody who didn't already know."

Let us try. Dating back to the 17th Century, the development of English pantomime was strongly influenced by the continental *commedia dell'arte*, a form of popular theatre that started in Italy. This street entertainment made its way to the theatres of 18th Century Britain, where production values really took off: fusing spectacle, music and ballet, the London theatre scene added mechanical serpents and flying vehicles, and introduced animal roles - dragons, ostriches, camels.

It gradually became more topical and humorous, often involving spectacular and

elaborate theatrical effects. By the early 1800s, the pantomime's classical stories were supplanted by stories adapted from European fairy tales, classic English literature or nursery rhymes. The arrival of the modern clowns like Joseph Grimaldi brought comedy and slapstick to the panto formula.

Traditionally performed at Christmas, today's pantomime stories include *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Aladdin*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Mother Goose*, *Dick Whittington and His Cat*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Peter Pan* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Scripts change from year to year, but generally contain four strands of humour including sight-gags, topical jokes, corny lines and downright rude innuendo. In the UK, this is considered to be family entertainment!

One person who does understand the mysterious art form of panto is Chris Headlam, MD at leading theatre audio providers London-

based Orbital Sound, which had 40 pantomime productions in the UK this season. Yes, you read that right - 40 productions, all running from mid-December to early 2016. Working closely with the UK's specialist producers First Family Entertainment, Qdos and Evolution, the seasonal load takes Orbital teams all around the UK, to regional auditoria as well as some of the largest theatres in the country, such as the 2000-seater Royal Opera House in Manchester, the Theatre Royal in Newcastle, and the Hippodromes of Bristol and Birmingham.

"The production values are of the highest order," explained Headlam. "These shows ask for a lot of volume, with live bands competing against an audience of screaming kids. Yet because of the script and the jokes, speech intelligibility has to be perfectly clear above the music level."

Orbital has got the business of pantomime down to a fine art. The company provides

Previous: The bright lights and extravagant costumes that are all too familiar to the population of the UK. Below: This season Orbital Sound was involved in 40 pantomime productions; The company employed the services of French loudspeaker manufacturer Nexo to develop sound solutions for the UK theatre market.



design, logistics, support, accommodation, for more than 150 crew throughout the season – in fact, the process starts in early summer. The company joined forces with some of the UK's top theatre sound designers, scattering the likes of Gareth Owen, Rick Clarke, Richard Brooker, Chris Wybrow and Tom Lishman into the provinces. In the most prestigious venues, they bring in high-spec sound reinforcement to deliver SPLs high enough for the all-important audience interaction, while maintaining a duty of care for the delicate ears of young audiences, getting their first experience of live theatre. This is no easy task.

This season, for the first time, Orbital has sourced its new systems from French manufacturer Nexo, which recently squared its R&D sights on the theatre market. In Bristol, a little bit of history has already been made, as Orbital became the first in the world to install Nexo's brand-new ID Series loudspeakers, developed with under-balcony fills in mind.

For the Hippodrome's production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Sound Designer Tom Lishman is working with three complementary Nexo loudspeaker systems, a modular STM line array for the main PA, supplemented by a GEO M6 compact line array flown above the proscenium arch to serve the second balcony, and numerous compact cabinets from the ID Series installed as under-balcony and front fills.

Chris Headlam is as energised as a pantomime Dame about his investment in the little ID boxes, buying the first units off Nexo's production line for Orbital rental inventory. "This

is a latest generation product from the modern era of loudspeaker modelling. The ID24 has a user-rotatable horn, providing 60° or 120° HF coverage; at 120° it is ideal for our delay, under-balcony, infill applications in the theatre auditorium."

The bijou ID24 cabinet (310mm wide by 132mm high) contains twin four-inch drivers in combination with an HF compression driver offering two preset directivity options. Since the box can be mounted vertically or horizontally, this effectively gives the user four different directivity options in a cabinet that, Nexo reported, is the smallest it has ever created.

"Vocal projection is very important and these cabinets sound natural even at high SPL. Nexo has made it easier for theatre sound designers; the ID24 is small enough, powerful enough and light enough for use in multiple applications. In Bristol, we're using two different Nexo line arrays with the ID compacts, and as a rental supplier, I'm impressed by the 'family sound' that makes all these loudspeakers sound so cohesive as a system."

One of the hallmarks of pantomime is the highly interactive participation of the audience. "This is not a respectfully hushed environment," said Headlam. "There's a lot happening on and off stage. Sound imaging quality is a priority so that the audience remain engaged, even with a very crowded stage, but it is harder to maintain the imaging when you're working with high SPLs. We keep our speaker line arrays low, closer to the performers, but this increases the risk of feedback. This season, we've used Nexo's GEO M6 compact line array on several shows,

and I believe this is the new benchmark when it comes to feedback rejection, often the problem that lets down the baby line arrays."

Headlam cites another *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* production taking place at the elegant Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury. For this 1,200-seater, with two balconies, Orbital has installed six arrays of GEO M6, at performer level, upper stage level for balcony one with two more six-cabinet arrays flown over the proscenium arch to address balcony two. In Manchester, at the historic 1,800-seat Opera House, the GEO M6 is deployed in left and right 12-cabinet arrays, under the direction of highly experienced Sound Designer Chris Whybrow. "The SPL and throw of this little cabinet almost defies logic. In this auditorium, we're still getting consistent SPL in the 90s!"

As you'd discover if you went to the 11am show, packed with 1,800 primary school children, jumping around like excitable frogs and screaming the classic panto responses, the defining characteristics of pantomime sound are that it has to be dynamic, highly energetic and LOUD!!!

"Oh no, it doesn't!"

"Oh yes, it does!"

"Oh no, it doesn't!"

"Oh yes... [right, that's quite enough of that - Editor]"

**TPI**

Photos: First Family Entertainment  
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