

JOEY AND JIM

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Early last February a dear friend of mine died. Her death came as no surprise – she was 95, and for some years she had been eager to be on her way. Her husband had been dead twenty-five years; they had no children, and she had outlived the world she felt comfortable in. An interior decorator by profession, she continued her business (for the benefit of a dwindling clientele) until she was well up in her eighties. Never reticent in her opinions, she often remarked that “modern” had no future, and there was no excuse for “off-white.” Her own house reflected these prejudices: Brilliantly wall papered throughout and chock-a-block with traditional furniture upholstered in a startling profusion of patterns and colors. Although our tastes were not always in sync, there was undoubtedly much to admire in her house, and no one could deny that the rooms she created for herself (and her clients) were both striking and original.

She had always been an engaging talker, well informed, well intentioned, and eager to share ideas. In the last years of her life, however, her thoughts turned increasingly to her possessions and their disposition. When I went to see her, more often than not the conversation would come around to the provisions of her will. Although this document underwent frequent amendments, I was aware that charitable bequests constituted virtually the whole of it. My legacy, she had long ago informed me, would be an object from the house. In the course of one of these conversations my friend, perhaps impulsively, insisted that I make my own selection – then and there. With suitable expressions of gratitude and a diffidence appropriate to the occasion, I at length proposed a large, recumbent porcelain cow. My choice was not so much capricious as sentimental. The cow did duty as a soup tureen, and had caught my attention more than fifty years earlier (the very first time we met). I was all of thirteen at the time, and remember being bug-eyed when the cow appeared at table, and my friend, the young matron, began matter of factly ladling crab gumbo out of it. My choice met with her approval, and a slip of paper with my name on it went into the cow to confirm my claim.

In the months that followed, she sounded me out on other items. Did I like that large, round, lacquer box? Its chief interest lay, she explained, not in its size or its red lacquer, but the fact that it was a hatbox, used by Chinamen to store their conical straw hats. “Do you like it,” she repeated? “Well, yes,” I said. “I like it very much.” “I am so glad. I want you to have it. I will put a note inside saying it is to come to you.” On another occasion she asked me how I liked the picture of a clown balancing on a barrel. It had hung in her dining room for as long as I could remember – not a picture, really, but a figure in half-round bright metal, mounted against black cloth. “I’ve forgotten his name,” she said, “but he was a real person. It would make me so happy if you took him.” Being by training something akin to a historian, I viewed the likeness of an unidentified (though once real) clown with some skepticism – indeed, with less enthusiasm than the Chinese hatbox. Had he possessed a name, birth and death dates, and an entry in the

Dictionary of National Biography it would have been another matter. Yet, touched by her generosity, I agreed, and a note to that effect was pinned to the back of the frame.

Several months later my old friend went to Spring Grove. The cow and the clown came to me, mementos of a long, affectionate, and congenial friendship. As it happened, the Chinese hatbox went elsewhere. And there, any reasonable person might expect, the matter would rest. But in fact there was a sequel. Not more than six weeks afterwards, far from Cincinnati, I encountered the clown's double.

The meeting took place at the Chelsea Antique Show. I was passing the entrance when it suddenly started to rain, a real London downpour. I had come off without an umbrella, so an antique show seemed as good a place as any to take shelter. Twenty minutes later I spotted him, a familiar figure in the crowd, displayed in a booth presided over by a man in pearl gray. The man in gray assured me that the Clown was a rare piece (the price tag confirmed this), and that of course it didn't represent just any clown. It was Grimaldi, the greatest pantomime actor of his day! Surely you've heard of Grimaldi.

Feeling ignorant and transatlantic, I owned up. No, I had *not* heard of Grimaldi.

But during the six months that followed, Grimaldi became an inseparable companion. He directed my reading; he awakened an interest in popular entertainment; and in the due course, he convinced me that I should bring him to the Literary Club this evening.

Today, when we think of pantomime, we think of Marcel Marceau. His brilliant, silent performances speak a language everybody understands: Marcel climbing an imaginary ladder; Marcel trying to escape from a room that isn't there; Marcel sharing a 3rd class compartment with an invisible mother and an equally invisible, hyperactive child. But to the English, Marcel Marceau is dumb show, not pantomime. Pantomime is something quite different: a children's Christmas treat, a slapstick comedy, based on a nursery story such as Puss in Boots. In England, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without pantomime.

Christmas pantomime and Marcel Marceau both descend from a common ancestor: the Italian *Commedia del Arte*. This ancient form of popular theater dates back to the street carnivals held in Roman times. By the 17th century it had become an improvisational entertainment that mixed juggling, acrobatics, animal acts (the classic components of street fairs) with broadly comic depictions of human folly. These follies were the usual ones, the most popular, as one might expect, being amorous passion, particularly between persons of widely divergent ages. Masks permitted quick character changes, reinforced by the tricks of speech and catch phrases that identified Harlequin, Columbine and each of the changing cast of stock characters. Verbal acrobatics accompanied the headstands and back flips: puns, poems, wisecracks, Macaroni Latin, all designed to keep the pace fast and the audience laughing.

Commedia gave birth to a numerous progeny. Among her offspring, (many long deceased, some that still survive) may be numbered jesters, circuses, *Mardi Gras*, Charlie Chaplin, scatological humor, Punch and Judy, the Ship of Fools, grotesquerie, side shows, the World Turned Upside Down. Each in its own way celebrates strangeness, role reversal, excess. Servants mistreat masters, men give birth to babies, fools are wise, animals talk, fat men walk on wires. Ordinary people can be anybody they want, just by putting on a mask. Anything Goes, and no one is accountable. *Commedia del Arte*'s influence in the development of western popular culture was clearly a pervasive one.

But let's not get bogged down. Weren't we talking about Grimaldi, the early 19th Century pantomime actor? Surely he came along too late for the *Commedia*, and he's got to be too early for the pantomime English children see at Christmas. And while we're at it, where do Joey and Jim come in? As I probably should have mentioned before, Grimaldi's first name was Joseph (his admirers called him Joey). And Jim is Jim Crow, who comes in later.

Pantomime's introduction into England can be dated precisely: it came in 1660 with the restoration of the Stuarts. As you may recall, the first installment of Stuart kings ended with the beheading of Charles I and the introduction of Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell's Puritan Commonwealth lasted fourteen years, fourteen very austere years. By 1660, he was dead and England, worn down by so much piety and clean living, invited the Stuart kings to come back. With the restoration, Charles II returned to England, bringing with him the license and excess that the country craved. He also brought with him various foreign notions he had picked up during his exile on the Continent, some dangerous, some innocuous. Among the innocuous ones was a taste for the *Commedia del Arte*. The *Commedia* as performed in England gradually developed its own characteristics, and in so doing, transformed itself into pantomime. It was not the Christmas pantomime English children know today, but its precursor: a vulgar, slapstick, rip-roaring entertainment that reigned as England's most popular form of theater for over a century.

In the years when Joey Grimaldi dominated the popular stage, roughly the first two decades of the 19th century, pantomime took the form of a farcical drama made up of about twenty scenes and lasting about an hour and a half. Although pantomime's authors (or arrangers, as they were called) enjoyed wide latitude in the development of plot, it remained a highly structured theatrical form, built around a fixed framework that could not be tampered with. Divided into two unequal parts, a pantomime always begins with a short opening section based on a nursery tale or a well known story such as Gulliver's Travels. This part of the play (which establishes the plot line) is interrupted by the sudden appearance of a magical person, a wizard or a fairy princess, who transforms the principals into the stock characters of the *Commedia del Arte*: Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon, Clown and Lover. These traditional characters were as familiar to 18th and 19th century audiences, as Donald Duck, Snoopy, and Miss Piggy are to us. Much loved, each with his own personality and distinctive costume, Harlequin, Clown and friends pick up the pace and play out the longer second part known as the harlequinade.

From this point the original story becomes secondary. The performance turns into a slapstick spectacle, with comic songs and dances, rough and tumble, farts, rockets, acrobatics, and smashed crockery. The story line, barely kept alive during these diversions, returns in the penultimate scene, known as the “dark scene.” The hero and heroine alone in a spooky place and about to be overcome by adversity are rescued at the last moment by the return of the good fairy who transports them to a splendid palace or a magnificent garden. With a wave of her wand, adversaries are reconciled, the lovers pledge their undying love, and everyone lives happily ever after. To modern tastes, it sounds the height of absurdity. But then again, the popular entertainment of virtually all eras, all cultures, strains the credibility of persons not brought up on them.

The astonishing longevity of this curious form of theater was due in large measure to Joey Grimaldi. It was he who helped shape it, he who dominated England’s popular stage for twenty years. Grimaldi came by his theatrical talent honestly. His was a family of actors, dancers and clowns. Italian by descent, but English by birth, he got off to an early start. In 1781, at all of three years of age, he made his stage debut at Sadler’s Wells Theater. Thereafter the child made regular appearances on the stage with his parents. In time he was sent to boarding school to pursue a more conventional education. Here, he supplemented the scholastic routine with pigeon breeding and collecting insects. This last-named interest blossomed, if such a word can be used, into a love affair with flies. Grimaldi’s more conventional biographers assert that the flies in question were butterflies, not house flies. However that may be during the course of this brief infatuation, he assembled, we are told, a collection of more than four thousand specimens. During school holiday, the child returned to the stage, where he gained experience under the supervision of his actor-parents.

Grimaldi’s father died when the boy was nine. The loss probably prompted him to give up school and turn full-time to acting. Each performance brought him greater recognition, and this in turn brought him more parts than he could easily handle. Legend has it that he occasionally appeared at two theaters on the same night, running between the two, changing costume as he ran, to arrive breathless in time for his cues. The passage of years saw to it that he outgrew the persona of “child prodigy” and “chip off the old block.” As success followed success, he established his own solid reputation for brilliance, acrobatic agility, and wit. Indeed, many *aficionados* claimed that the chip off the old block was far better the old block had ever been, and probably ranked with the best ever. His appearance as Clown in *Harlequin and Mother Goose* when he a 27, established him as the quintessential Clown. *Mother Goose*, which opened on Boxing Day, 1806, became a perennial favorite, enjoying not only a record-breaking initial run, but frequent revivals.

Theatrical biography by its nature, risks turning into a recital of plays, dates, and roles. To all but the theater historian this holds but little interest. Suffice it to say that Joey Grimaldi rose to the top of his profession, performing both in London and in provincial towns to great acclaim. Although he ventured occasionally into drama and melodrama, it was in pantomime that he achieved his greatest success. Any pantomime that starred Grimaldi as Clown could be counted on to play long and profitably.

Harlequin, traditionally pantomime's principal character, no longer occupied center stage. Arrangers now elevated Clown from a supporting role into the principal role, always with the hope that Grimaldi could be induced to accept the part.

With success came substantial earnings, but Grimaldi possessed little business sense, and money vanished as soon as it came to hand. The wife he married at twenty died early. After a year he took as his second wife a Drury Lane actress who kept him in line during his triumphs and stuck by him through his years of declining health. A Clown's role was physically demanding, requiring a high level of resilience, fitness, and acrobatic skill. Every night for years he was jumped on, knocked down, thrown out of windows, rolled over by carriages, dragged by his heels, doused with water, punched, knocked on the head, and pushed down the stairs. There was never time to recover from sprains or pulled muscles. He was always "on." By 1823 his body was used up. Although he was only forty-four, he could no longer take it. To the distress of theatergoers throughout Britain, Joseph Grimaldi, one of the most popular stage personalities in the history of British theater, the embodiment of "Clown," announced his retirement. Sadler's Wells and Drury Lane did what they could over the next few years to meet at one and the same time the public's demand that he return, and the invalid actor's acute need for cash. At a series of benefit performances, always played to packed houses, he did indeed return to the stage, but the once-frenetic Clown, now virtually immobile, delivered his lines and sang his songs, seated in a chair. At the conclusion of his last benefit performance, on June 27, 1828, he addressed the audience as follows:

Ladies and gentlemen, I appear before you for the last time. I need not assure you of the sad regret with which I say it, but sickness and infirmity have come upon me and I can no longer wear the motley. Four years ago I jumped my last jump, filched my last oyster and ate my last sausage. I cannot describe the pleasure I felt on once more assuming my cap and bells tonight – that dress in which I have so often been made happy in your applause; and as I stripped them off, I fancied that they seemed to cleave to me. I am not so rich a man as I was when I was basking in your favour formerly, for then I had always a fowl in one pocket and sauce for it in the other. I thank you for the benevolence which has brought you here to assist your old and faithful servant in his premature decline. Eight and forty years have not yet passed over my head, and I am sinking fast. I now stand worse upon my legs than I used to do on my head. But I suppose I am paying the penalty of the course I pursued all my life; my desire and anxiety to merit your favor has excited me to more exertion than my constitution could bear, and like faulting ambition, I have over-leaped myself. Ladies and gentlemen, I must hasten to bid you farewell; but the pain I feel in doing so is assuaged by seeing before me a disproof of the old adage, that favourites have no friends. Ladies and gentlemen, may you and yours enjoy the blessings of health is the fervent prayer of Joseph Grimaldi. Farewell! Farewell!*

* Evans, James Roose, *London Theater from the Globe to the National*. Oxford, 1977.

The crippled actor survived for nine more years, dying in 1837 at the age of fifty-eight. It should be noted that in the year of his death, 1837, Princess Victoria, a nineteen year old girl, became Queen of England. The Georgian period was well and truly over.

Considering that pantomime plots are based on nursery stories, it comes as no surprise that pantomime and English children's literature are closely linked. Before the late 18th century, children's books were designed with but one aim: to instill Christian morals. Around 1770 a new kind of juvenile book came into being: books designed not to instruct but to amuse. Some of the earliest of these told the stories of Clown and Harlequin. Consisting of only a dozen or so pages, with an illustration on each page, they were printed across a double flap that could be lifted to reveal smaller pictures that helped move the story along. These fragile booklets, with their movable flaps were considered the perennially popular pop-up books. The few that have survived to the present day are preserved in museums and the rare book rooms of large libraries. Last spring at an exhibit in Toronto I saw several printed about 1770. All of them featured Harlequin. A generation later, thanks to Grimaldi's popularity, these same booklets would have cast Clown, not Harlequin, as the star. But in 1770 Harlequin stood center stage, easily recognized by his patchwork suit and his signature stick. Known as a "slapstick," Harlequin's cudgel thwacked and prodded, belaboring donkeys, poking people in the bottom, and lending its name to a brand of humor not universally admired.

Pantomime never took itself seriously. In the eyes of both its producers and the public, it was a diversion, an ephemeral entertainment – its scripts too trivial to write down, its scenery and costumes not worth the effort of recording. Despite this act, a greater body of documentation exists for pantomime than for any other form of English theater. This is due, surprisingly enough, to the popularity of children's toy theaters. These were bought in great numbers for 19th century boys and girls, played with for a few years, then put away in nursery cupboards. When in due course they came to light again, scholars recognized in them an astonishing visual record of 19th century popular theater.

The toy theater was the brain child of a London print seller named William West. As early as 1811 he came up with the idea of selling abridged scripts of current plays together with sheets engraved with the pictures of the scenery and the actors in their various costumes, all of which could be cut out and assembled. Also on sale at his shop were toy theaters, their cardboard stages, awaiting the strutting and fretting of cardboard actors. The sheets could be turned out cheaply, "a penny plain and two pence coloured," a price within reach of all but indigent parents. Thus, for a modest outlay, West (and the other printer-engravers who were quick to jump on his bandwagon) gave English children the means to stage home theatricals: either traditional fairy stories or adaptations of London's current hits. One theater historian describes the process like this:

Many happy hours were spent in colouring the sheets, in pasting them down, in cutting them out, and in preparing the play. The actual performance was sometimes an anti-climax, or never even took place; but if the children persevered to the end, the stage would

be set up in the drawing room, the parents and often the servants would be assembled, perhaps a piano or an elementary orchestra would play an overture, and the curtain would rise upon a miniature representation of some popular drama. [George Speaight, "Toy Theatre." In: Fawdry, Kenneth, ed., *Toy Theatre*. London, 1980].

In this way some three hundred pantomimes and light comedies have survived, their texts recorded, if not in full, at least in essence, their visual components saved for posterity in garishly colored cardboard.

If we think that nobody but the prissy, overly polite children of Victorian England could have enjoyed something as rarified as a toy theater, we should think again. Toy theaters have never lost their popularity, and are still sold in great numbers in England, France, Germany and Denmark. For generations the Pollock family, proprietors of Pollock's Toy Museum in London, has sold toy theaters and a variety of plays to perform in them. They are still in business. The play booklets reproduce the original 19th century scenery and costumes, but the scripts are now highly abbreviated to conform with the highly abbreviated attention span of the modern child. In this country toy theaters enjoyed a brief popularity during the decade before the First World War, but soon fell out of favor.

Grimaldi's time in the sun lasted from 1806, when he was 27, to his retirement in 1823 at age 44. Yet in that brief period of less than twenty years, he achieved what we would call today "celebrity status." What's more, he achieved it in a theatrical medium that for our present-day perspective, seems not just contrived, but inexplicable. What did English men and women – people in all walks of life – see in pantomime's outrageousness to make it the most popular entertainment of the period?

Making fun of government, of the foibles of the rich and powerful, has always been risky business. In Grimaldi's day, this kind of criticism (when voiced publicly) violated the law. Strict censorship, including censorship of plays, prevented the spread of ideas that the authorities considered a threat to law, order, or morality. The Lord Chamberlain had the right to prevent the staging of any play that contained dialogue he considered objectionable. Because his authority applied only to the spoken part of the performance, not to the action, pantomime's arrangers learned to get around the system by keeping the dialogue clean, and putting the message in the action. Hence the mayhem, the knock-down-drag-out that characterized pantomime. And who got the worst of it? Invariably it was the self-important, the puffed up, the big cheeses.

In pantomime, grave and dignified persons: judges, magistrates, constables, military officers, suffered indignities that in real life would be unthinkable in Britain's highly class conscious society. Learned professors and men of the cloth were pummeled, judges had their wigs snatched off, ladies of high rank were pushed into mud puddles, policemen retreated in disarray before the assaults of buffoons and simpletons. Pantomime, like Italian *Commedia del Arte*, depicted a World Turned Upside Down, the Mighty Fallen from their Seats, the triumph of the Humble and Meek. Noblemen and

their ladies became a laughing stock, their finery derided, their affected gestures parodied. Precious objects were smashed; tables set out for banquets were overturned; military officers found themselves disarmed and humiliated. Each outrageous act served to undercut authority, to release the anger produced by the daily humiliations and injustices of a society run for the benefit of a very few. Retribution is always sweet. In Georgian and Regency England it was meted out not in the streets, as happened across the Channel, but in the theaters – accompanied by roars, not of rage, but of laughter.

Modest prices of admission made theater affordable to all but the very poor. At Drury Lane and Sadler's Wells, people of virtually all classes rubbed shoulders – not literally, of course, for the upper, the middle, and the lower classes sat in different parts of the theater. But everybody was under the same roof, laughing at the antics of Clown, Pantaloon, and Harlequin, everybody enjoying the spectacle of Authority being brought low.

Grimaldi's retirement from the stage dealt pantomime a crippling blow. To survive, it turned, perforce, to novelties. Productions became increasingly elaborate. Arrangers introduced water spectacles, with fountains spouting real water, and naval battles fought in tanks sunk into the stage. Huge strip-paintings known as dioramas, which were slowly unrolled on one side of the stage and taken up on the other, gave the impression that Harlequin, Clown and their friends were on the move – traveling to exotic locales: to Seville, to the Pyramids, to Indian bazaars with snake-charmers, to Shanghai. This innovation, introduced to attract larger houses and increase receipts, expanded the horizons of theater-goers, many of whom had never ventured outside their own neighborhoods and had little notion of what lay on the other side of the Thames, let alone the Channel.

Animal acts enjoyed a revival. They had been introduced at Covent Garden much earlier, but had been discontinued because the principal performer, an elephant, had proved itself unreliable. Before each performance it had been liberally dosed with rum in the hope of making it docile. However, during most performances it behaved so badly, either rushing on and off the stage bellowing, or standing immobile with its rear-end facing the audience, that the novelty soon wore off, an audiences started to boo when it made its entrance. The rival Drury Lane Theater countered by introducing a wooden elephant that was made to imitate the graceless maneuvers of its live counterpart and became a great favorite with theatergoers. As was intended, this so mortified Covent Garden's management that it discontinued the act and returned Jumbo to its owner.

As a further attempt to shore up the faltering pantomime business, minstrel shows were introduced. The inventor of the minstrel show, an American named Thomas "Daddy" Rice, brought his one-man act to England in 1836. This was eight years after Grimaldi's positively-last farewell appearance and one year before his death. London needed a theatrical sensation, and Rice provided it. He took London by storm. After his return to America, imitators rushed to blacken their faces with burnt cork and to get the hang of the walk, the talk, the slouch, the songs, that Rice, in the character of Jim Crow, had made the rage of London. These imitators found ready employment in pantomime as

specialty acts, where they made a change from the inevitable stage Irishman. Pantomime and black-face make unlikely partners, or so it seems to me. One gets its laughs at the expense of the powerful, the other at the expense of the vulnerable. However in London they played separately and in tandem for many years to great applause.

Thomas Rice's success in England in the character of Jim Crow, came after he had achieved even greater acclaim in the United States. Rice was born in New York City in 1808. At age nineteen, he set off for the Ohio country to seek his fortune. Fetching up in Louisville, he found employment at Ludlow and Smith's Southern Theater as carpenter, keeper of the properties, and the man who lit the lamps. His diligence was rewarded with an occasional bit part and the chance to entertain the audience between the acts with impersonations of blacks. Taking his cue from a black man he had seen washing down horses in a livery stable, he developed the character of "Jim Crow." With black-face make up, a comic, shuffling walk, and a song sung to a catchy tune, Rice soon found himself the toast of Louisville. Certain verses of his song he repeated at each performance till they became an essential part of the act; others he improvised to fit each particular audience. But it was the refrain, always accompanied by a little dance, that the audience waited for and went wild over.

First on the heel tap, den on da toe,
Ebery time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.
Wheel about and turn about and do jus so.
And every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.

In 1828-29 Thomas Rice came to Cincinnati, where he appeared at the Columbia Theater on Second Street. Here, too, his impersonation of Jim Crow delighted audiences. Gradually he moved eastward until, on November 12, 1832, he opened in New York, the city he had left, a penniless youth, just five years earlier. New Yorkers already knew his signature song – it had just been published as sheet music and everybody was signing it – so they were prepared to be captivated, and they were. When his show moved to Washington, D.C. Rice appeared on stage with a pint-sized partner: four year old Joseph Jefferson, face blackened, dressed identically, each step, each gesture synchronized with Rice's. In time, Jefferson became one of the most accomplished actors of his day. It is curious to think that he began his career at Tom Rice's side as a miniature Jim Crow.

Rice's showmanship, launched a whole new form of entertainment – a form of entertainment built, from our present perspective, on racism and exploitation. But such considerations were not part of the sensibilities of the time. Minstrel shows were seen as good clean fun, and ranked as America's favorite form of entertainment from about 1840 to 1880. They declined in popularity not from outrage at their depiction of Black Americans, but because the public just got tired of them. They survived in some parts of the country as an outmoded but acceptable form of comedy until the beginning of World War II.

Clown hangs in my dining room, as he hung for so many year in the dining room of my old friend. She knew that his namelessness disturbed me, and I dare say she would

be amused at the way he got his identity back. “Tell me what you’ve been reading,” she would say whenever I went to see her. And no matter what it was, it led to a discussion. It’s too late now to discuss Grimaldi’s career with her, or pantomime’s connection with *Commedia del Arte* – but then again, she probably knew much of it already. She read extensively and remembered what she read.

During the past six months I have watched Joey Grimaldi strut his stuff at Drury Lane. I have followed the antics of Harlequin, Pantaloon, Columbine and Clown. I have seen Tom Rice delighting Cincinnati audiences at the Columbia Street Theater. Yet despite my pleasure in all this, I am nagged by what might have been. I find myself wondering what surprises the past six months would have held, what books I would have read, what tonight’s paper would have been, had I inherited, not the Clown, but the Chinese hat box.

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