

# **The Crazy Christmas Cabaret**

## **- how did it all start?**

Every year in Denmark during the Christmas season, the London Toast Theatre , presents the Crazy Christmas Cabaret - "the craziest show in town".

Written and directed by Vivienne McKee since 1982, today the show is part of the internationally famous Tivoli Christmas Season and plays in the magnificent 1000 seat Glassalen Theatre in the heart of the city, to audiences of more than 80,000 a year. It has become a cult phenomenon and many believe that it is not really Christmas unless they have seen the annual Crazy Christmas Show .

Since 1982, the show has developed in size and appearance - but one thing has never changed , the crazy English humour which has endeared it to the hearts of the Danish audience. A humour which is as British as fish n´ chips and warm beer. The show has gradually acquired a danish flavour too, a humour which is as Danish as "frikadeller" and "kold bajer i hånden" !

The very first CCC, in 1982 , "Jack and the Beanstalk " was performed in the Cafe Teaters Kælder Scene in Skindergade, which had a stage as small as a postage stamp and space for an audience of about fifty, very slim people. The Danish theatre company, Cafeteatret, had a gap in its repertoire in December and asked Vivienne McKee if she would be interested in presenting a typically English Christmas show for the few weeks leading up to Christmas .

Vivienne had been a writer and an actress in Britain and had often performed as "The Principal Boy" (see below) in many of the traditional "Pantos" which are the favourite shows for the whole family in the UK around the Christmas period . These shows, however, are gigantic productions , requiring well-equipped theatres, complicated scenography and a large cast of comedians, dancers and singers. With this in mind, her first response to the Cafe Teater's request was - "It's impossible! " . But she changed her mind when she decided that she could write a smaller version of the traditional English "Panto" - a version that she would adapt and make specifically for the tiny stage and , in particular, for the danish audience. And as Danes did not really know what a "Panto" was , she called it : The Crazy Christmas Cabaret.

## **Crazy Christmas Cabaret - the big break through!**

The first Crazy Christmas Cabaret was received enthusiastically by the critics and the audiences squeezed into the little auditorium in Skindergade every night to watch the madcap antics of the English actors. They happily joined in the fun and shouted , "Boo" at the villain and "Hooray" for the hero with the same enthusiasm as any English audience would . Nevertheless, if it had not been for the Danish television presenter, Otto Leisner, Vivienne McKee would never have thought of writing and producing any more of these shows. He loved the unique, very British style of the show , in which the part of the hero is played by a girl, where the audience singalong to well-known tunes, and are encouraged to participate , some

even being brought onstage to take part! At that time nobody in Denmark had experienced a song and dance comedy show in which the main role is played by a man dressed up as a very unattractive woman, complete with ghastly wing-glasses and a Union-Jack handbag and who, in the middle of the action, stops to have chatty telephone conversations with the Queen of Denmark ! He was so amazed by what he saw that he invited the small English troupe of four to appear on his DR television programme, HOPLA, where they proceeded to encourage an entire audience of elderly Danes to sing rock n' roll, live, in the TV studio. The next day the show was sold out for the rest of the run and the hastily created, London Toast Theatre Company, was here to stay !

## **What is the Crazy Christmas Cabaret ?**

The subject and content of the Crazy Christmas Cabaret scripts have changed and become less traditionally English every year, with subjects ranging from science fiction: "Spaced Out " (2000) and to King Arthur "Oh What a Knight" (2001) and Hamlet and Sherlock Holmes in "Hamlet's Private Dick " (2008) - but some of the elements of the original English Panto are still there - "booing" the villain, cheering on the hero, the singalongs with the audience, and the irresistible "dame".

Over the years, Vivienne McKee has added more and more of her own comedy ideas and running-gags, such as ; the annual telephone chat with the Queen , the response of the audience to a particular cue from the stage , (for example in the "Mamma Mafia " 2010 , the audience all shouted the amaerican gangster phrase "Forget About It! ") and the use of the famous line from the TV sitcom "Allo Allo": "Listen very carefully , I will say this only once" - and many many more.

In particular ,she has introduced a running character : the Danish doctor Dr Van Helsingør fra Elsinore - a role she herself plays and who has become an annual "must". Today Bent van Helsingør even has a Facebook profile and 5,000 friends!

Since his first introduction, as the vampire-killer in "Dracula" in 1986, he has popped up every year in increasingly odd guises: as the witch doctor in "Robinson Crusoe" , as the Viking chief in "Oh! What a Knight!", and even as the genie of the P.H. Lamp in "Aladdin". Every year, since 1986 Vivienne McKee dons his checked suit , his red beard, glasses and deerstalker hat and announces:"My name is Dr Van Helsingør fra Elsinore, but you can call me Bent!". To which the audience spontaneously shouts back ,"You're bent!!". He also provides a wonderful excuse for Vivienne McKee to make fun of the Danes, and to play with the differences in the two languages - only in a "huugelig" way, of course!

## **The Origins and Traditions of British "Panto"**

In Denmark, we mostly associate the term "Pantomime" with the classic, wordless performances of Harlequin, Columbine and Pierrot in the Tivoli Gardens. But in the United Kingdom, "Pantomime" or as it is more widely known "The Panto" means a form of theatrical entertainment performed during the Christmas season.

The origins of British Pantomime date back to the middle ages, and include the traditions of the Italian "Commedia dell' Arte, a theatre genre originating in Renaissance Italy. Troupes of travelling players, working from a basic plot or scenario, improvised comedy routines, dialogue and "business". Every company had its own principal player who would introduce his own special routine into the plots and many famous characters emerged such as Harlequin, Columbine and Pierrot. An important aspect of pantomime is its ability to adapt, innovate and develop as trends and fashions change. Thus, modern British Pantomime owes a lot to more modern sources of inspiration such as the Music Hall, variety stage, and more recently, stand up comedy and television.

In Britain, Pantomime has become a thriving business. It is a show predominantly aimed at a family audience, based on a popular fairy tale or folk legend, like "Cinderella", "Aladdin", "Jack & the Beanstalk" and "Sleeping Beauty". Large theatres compete with each other for the subjects and the "star" names that will attract full houses, and the pantomime can often run for six to eight weeks, providing much needed revenue to box offices up and down the country.

Pantomime may well be a child's first experience of live theatre and if that experience is magical enough, it can leave a lasting impression. In a world where children are surrounded by computer games and videos, DVD's and the influences of television, a visit to a pantomime is often a catalyst to a life-long love of theatre.

## The First Panto Clown

The most famous of the pantomime clowns was Joseph Grimaldi, who made his first appearance in 1800. His influence on these early pantomimes was immense. The public clamoured to see his performances and left the theatre singing the comic choruses of the songs he introduced. Pantomime had its first real star, and by this time the elements of comedy songs and slapstick were firmly rooted, as they have remained to this present day.

Grimaldi also pioneered the next important element that a "traditional" pantomime should have, that is the art of cross dressing - the "Pantomime Dame". The theatrical tradition of men playing women can be traced back to the early days of theatre, when it was deemed not appropriate for women to enter the theatrical profession. Boys played all the female roles in Shakespeare's plays, and even later, when actresses were established on the stage, actors played the roles of older or comedic ladies, since the new breed of actress did not want to play such unglamorous roles

### *Traditional Elements of the Modern Panto*

All pantos take as their plot or basic story line a fairy tale, folk tale or fable. This story line has to be well told and incorporate the all-important element of good battling against evil and defeating it in the end. Favourite tales are *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, *Dick Whittington* (the story of the Lord Mayor of London), *Snow White*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Peter Pan* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Once a pantomime writer has chosen his story line he has to include into his manuscript as many as possible of the following traditional pantomime elements:

### **The Principal Boy**

Traditionally, the principal boy was always a girl ! The traditional idea of a girl playing the boy came from the Music Hall and, since the girls dressed in shorts and boots, it was very popular with the male audience in Victorian times. Whilst ladies were covered up in everyday life, on stage they were allowed to wear costumes that revealed shapely legs in tights on condition that they were playing a male role! The principal "boy" traditionally needs long legs, a good singing voice and a strong comedy talent for those clown and slapstick scenes with the Dame. Today the trend seems to be reversing in favour of men playing the Principal Boy part, but as Pantomime constantly adapts , we may well see the Pantomime Hero return to those glamorous long-legged ladies yet again.

### **The Principal Girl**

The principal girl is the pretty romantic heroine - singing, dancing and in love. She is often saved by the principal boy and she always marries him in the end.

### **The Dame**

The Dame is always a man! Traditionally, Dames were music hall performers but now they are usually well known TV comedians. The Dame is never feminine in any way but she always tries to be. She is quite obviously a man in drag with costumes that are outrageously crazy and sometimes parody the fashions of the day. She talks directly to the audience , is full of warmth and comedy and always looking for a husband. Essentially, the Dame is a clown.

### **The Villain**

The villain is always nasty, mean and horrible beyond belief. He is rude - particularly to the audience who shout "boo" at him at any opportunity. He sometimes sees the error of his ways and agrees to be good in the end. Sometimes his punishment is to marry the Dame. He is a character that the audience love to hate.

### **The Immortals**

There is often a good and/or bad fairy. They usually appear in a puff of smoke, speak in verse and keep the story going with their various magic skills. The fairies take sides in the plot and sometimes rival each other using the humans as pawns.

### **The Double Act or Comedy Characters**

To increase the fun, the pantomime often has two comedy characters that provide additional clowning. They are often the villain's stupid assistants, two policemen, two robbers etc.

There is also one comedy character with whom the audience is supposed to identify, like the unnoticed admirer, Buttons, in Cinderella, a sad clown resembling the Charlie Chaplin character who is the most sympathetic in the pantomime.

### **The Pantomime Animal**

Most pantomimes have an actor dressed up as an animal, - a cat or a dog , the larger ones (cow or horse) are represented by two people inside an animal costume. This allows for a lot of comedy "business" where the two pairs of legs get mixed up or even stay in perfect timing for a graceful dance.

### **The Slapstick Scene**

There is always one scene in the pantomime that has nothing at all to do with the plot but all to do with laughs. Usually it gets these the easiest way possible - a

cooking scene, throwing custard pies, splashing water etc. Whatever the scene may be, the keyword is slapstick not subtlety.

### **The Song Sheet**

The song sheet is yet another element of the pantomime's indispensable audience participation. The audience sing along to some very well known or very silly song. Sometimes people from the audience are brought up on stage and the comedy actors can use their improvisational skills to create more laughs from the situation. Other elements of audience participation are "booing" the villain, cheering the hero and the various shouts of "Oh yes he did" and "Oh no he didn't" throughout the show.

The mad knockabout comedy of the pantomime, where people are hit but not hurt, where authority is constantly ridiculed, where well-known politicians and celebrities are made fun of and where laughs can be found in everything from past to present, has also had a great influence on British comedy in general, including the famous humour of "Monty Python's Flying Circus."

And Now -

### **"OH MY GOTH !" - CCC 2010**

This year's show - OH MY GOTH ! - springs from the Horror genre .

GOTH is a short version of the word "gothic" - and Gothic encompasses everything from Gothic architecture to Gothic Art and to the Gothic "look" as created by young people with long black coats and black makeup etc.

Gothic Horror is usually based on creatures from beyond the grave and monsters as depicted so brilliantly in the classic horror movies like "Frankenstein" (1931) starring Boris Karloff and "Dracula" starring Bela Lugosi .

These films have all the elements we associate with Gothic Horror - spooky old castles with staircases and ancient suits of armour and chandeliers covered in cobwebs , as well as a main character who is a cursed and lonely creature.

Both of these characters are fascinating creations .

Count Dracula was created by Bram Stoker and Frankenstein's monster by Mary Shelley. I decided to overlook Dracula, because I have previously written a Crazy Christmas Cabaret based on the vampire myth - ("Dracula , or a Pain in the Neck" 1997) .

Frankenstein became my main source for the show this year - and what a fruitful source he is ! Just check the wealth of material we can find about him and how he has inspired other works since his creation by Mary Shelley in 1818 by looking at this link :

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankenstein>

I decided that my Frankenstein monster, despite being ugly and very strong, he should be a sad lonely creature. In the CCC , he is forced to live in a cupboard and he wants his creator - Dr. Fran Kenstein , to create a female monster for him - to

share his loneliness . It seems like a fairly reasonable request - but Dr Kenstein is not interested in helping him . He has other experiments which interest him more ....

Which is how I moved on to another Horror Film subject - werewolves !

Werewolves are a favourite topic for the Horror genre - and another splendid myth . All details about werewolves and the mental condition of lycanthropy can be researched on this link :

<http://alam25.tripod.com/>

Lycanthropy - where the patient believes that he is a wolf - is actually a real psychological condition . In the CCC , I introduce a character called Herbert who has this mental condition - and Professor Kenstein is using him for research . His aim is to bring out the wolf in everybody and thus develop a whole race of werewolves - who will be entirely under his control .

Other Horror themes are mentioned or referred to in this year's show . The "Twilight " series of movies which are much loved by teenagers and feature Bella and Edward, "The Shining" - "Hannibal Lector" - " The Sixth Sense " and many many more references - for those who want to pick them up !

## THE CHARACTERS AND THE PLOT

Once I settled on my theme for this year's show . I started to work out a plot and the characters I needed to tell the story (and create the comedy) and - most complicated of all - how to organise six actors to play the 12 or more roles !

The leading role is Professor Fran Kenstein (David Bateson) - he is a mad scientist who has already created the monster , know as "Nobody" (Rhydian Jones) - and now is concentrating on his new race of creatures , developed from werewolves .

He is helped by his dreadful hunchback assistant , Igor (Andrew Jeffers) and a Danish doctor, Dr van Helsingør from Elsinore. (Vivienne McKee)

The Professor is using a laboratory in the spooky castle - Schloss Schadenfreude - owned by Baron Edward Lugosi (Bennet Thorpe) . Edward is an orphan and has been brought up by his housekeeper, Frau Bockwurst (Vivienne McKee)

We find out that Edward's mother , Baroness Lugosi was a werewolf ! She was shot and killed 25 years earlier, and therefore she was not allowed burial on Holy Ground. Edward's father, the old Baron, died of a heart attack on the day of her funeral .

Back to the story-line-

A beautiful young girl, Bella Honeycott (Katrine Falkenberg) arrives at the castle to visit the Professor . She is his fiancée and has not seen him for 6 months .

Soon afterwards, her mother arrives. Mrs Hyacinth Honeycott (Andrew Jeffers) is the larger-than-life "dame" . She is most concerned that her daughter wants to marry a mad scientist twice her age - and has come to take her home. She is accompanied by a handsome, but useless, butler , Willie (Rhydian Jones) .

**Willie is actually Lord Foppington Phipps and is in love with Bella . He has disguised himself as a butler so that he could follow her to the castle .**

### **THE PLOT THICKENS ...**

**The Professor orders Igor and Herbert to murder the monster. Before they can do so - Frau Bockwurst is killed and has her head ripped off !**

**Who did this dreadful murder ?**

**The police inspector arrives to solve the crime . Inspector Gunther von Hinten (David Bateson) has only one hand . We discover later that his hand was ripped off by a werewolf , and a new hand was attached - which has a mind of its own !**

**Meanwhile Bella has been given a penny whistle by Herbert to protect her from wolves. As this whistle was found at the scene of the crime , it becomes the main evidence against Herbert , who is accused of killing Frau Bockwurst .**

**At the end of Act One , the audience have been presented with a terrible crime and have been introduced to all the characters - except one !**

**Lady Gay Spanker , (Vivienne McKee) lives in a nearby castle together with her husband Lord Spanker . She holds a Halloween Ball every year and all the guests must come in Halloween Costumes supplied by her . These costumes are very odd - and reveal that Lady Gay is not your normal kind of neighbour ...**

**What is Lady Gay's part in the murder of Frau Bockwurst ?**

**Why is Inspector Gunther von Hinten so terrified of the old church on the mountain ?**

**What happens when the monster falls in love with Mrs Honeycott ?**

**Can Bella trust Edward , or is he too , a werewolf ?**

**Will Lord Foppington Phipps reveal his true identity to Bella ?**

**All these questions and many more are answered in the show - but in truth, the audience don't really care .**

**After years of writing the CCC , I have found out that my carefully devised plots are usually forgotten or overlooked by the audience - and the point of the show is just to be highly entertained by the crazy jokes, the slapstick and the fabulous songs.**

### **THE JOKES**

**There are literally hundreds of jokes in a CCC. When I write the manuscript , I make sure that there are at least 2 jokes on every page . Sometimes these jokes grow in performance and the audience can laugh at the verbal joke and also the way it is delivered - by the slapstick performance of the actor .**

**I always cast actors who are not only terrific comedians but who are also very physically capable. The style of acting in a CCC must always be big with a capital "B" !**

**For example , the joke - " I used to be a werewolf , but I'm all right noooooow ! " - is funny if the actor ends the sentence with a howl - but it is even funnier if he physically can act like a wolf as well.**

Other jokes are funny because of the sound - for example , when Gunther von Hinten leaves he says , “Auweidersein “ - and Mrs Honeypott replies “ I feel the same”. It gets a laugh because a) it is obvious she does not speak German and b) she makes up something in English which sounds similar.

Dr van Helsingør is a constant source of humour because he tries to speak English and keeps making mistakes : for example , “Han er fuld af løgn “ becomes in his English , “ He is full of onions!”

Physical comedy is everywhere in the show and includes Gunther von Hinten’s hand which does things he does not expect, Herbert’s sudden changing into a wolf , and of course , the “Dame” - Mrs Honeypott , who looks hilarious and she is full of crazy comments and funny expressions .

## **THE SONGS**

Every year I include popular hit songs which everyone can recognise.

This year - Beyonce’s “Single Ladies “ and Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance “ (which I changed to “Vampire Dance” ).

I also write at least 2 songs with my Musical Director . This year - “ You Gotta Have Brains” - and “ The Pumpkin Mash “ ( - the latter is a rip-off from “Monster Mash” .) The songs are important because , not only are they fun and lively , but they provide a welcome break from the English dialogue . I know that my audiences do not necessarily understand every word of the show , but they have the chance to enjoy other aspects: the costumes, the physical comedy and the songs.

## **THE GENRE**

I have chosen the Horror Genre as my theme this year , but the CCC is also a Genre in itself . There is not any other show like it either in Denmark or in England .

As with any genre or tradition , those who come every year , expect certain elements and I do my best to provide them .

Here are a few of these elements :

1. The involvement of the audience is high on the list . No other show involves the audience as much as the CCC. This year , a “volunteer “ from the audience comes on stage to help the Professor and the Doctor with their lecture on the bones of the body .
2. The “Dame” always has a telephone chat with Queen Margrethe.
3. Dr van Helsingør always arrives with the opening lines: “My name is Doctor van Helsingør from Elsinore but you can call me Bent”
4. The audience are taught to shout something out . This year , they shout “Oh My Goth ! - and scream ...
5. The audience are also encouraged to shout “Boo” at the bad guys and “Hooray “ for the good guys .
6. There is usually a song which involves the whole audience joining in.
7. I always introduce the show at the beginning with some light-hearted Stand Up material and getting the audience “warmed up” for the craziness to follow .

**BUT MOST OF ALL ...**

**Please enjoy the show ! The Crazy Christmas Cabaret has lasted as long as 28 years thanks to the loyal support of thousands of fans who come every year to sit back and have a good laugh .**

**We do not make a DVD of the show as we feel that it only works as a “live” performance - and I feel that this keeps the theatre tradition alive too .**

**If young people come in and have a great time watching a CCC then they will, hopefully, be encouraged to see more theatre . Too many comedy shows are made into DVD s and sold for extra profit - but this kills the theatre and encourages people to stay at home and stare at their screens .**

**So come to Tivoli , enjoy the Julemarket , and then come into Glassalen and forget your winter depression by spending a few hours in our in our crazy company !**