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MORE FOLLOWING SOON

VILLAGE PANTOMIME IN NORTH NORFOLK

*Survival
of the Carnavalesque*



BY CELIA WARD





THE ORIGINS OF VILLAGE PANTO

This essay explores village pantos, in particular those in North Norfolk where I live. If you google village pantomimes many appear suggesting the village panto tradition is strong. In this essay I look at who participates and what were their experiences of pantomime. What influenced pantomime and how did it change over the centuries?

Village pantos share much in common with professional productions, but in other ways could not be more different, lacking large theatres, spectacular sets and costumes with star-studded casts. Instead, productions are done on a shoe string and played by untrained actors known to the audience and dressed in ludicrous costumes. They are small and intimate with audience and players linked together through the joy of performance.

Part of this research has been the making of an oral history through interviews with people involved in village performances over the last 50 years. The history of pantomime, its antecedents and its supportive organisations I take from the writings of others.



Though pantomime's roots go back to Roman comedy it only transformed into something approaching a modern form in the 16th century, with the birth of the Italian Commedia Dell' Arte. This involved comic actors playing stock characters, each with its own costume and mask that the audience would instantly recognise. Their performances were full of slapstick with lots of action, and were improvised often around well-known stories with plots about sex, love, jealousy and old age. The improvisation enabled actors to satirize local people and current events. They became travelling players and during the late 16th century the Commedia Dell' Arte spread throughout Europe, reaching England in Shakespeare's lifetime. They were among the first professional companies, and adapted performances according to the tastes and interests of the countries they visited. Over the next four centuries they exerted a major influence over a wide range of playwrights, composers, choreographers and theatrical performances, including, Shakespeare's Tempest, Mozart Operas, Stravinsky's Petrushka, Dario Fo, Comedie de Complicite, Cirque du Soleil and many more. But only in England did the Commedia morph into pantomime.



Pantomime (or Harlequinade as it was called) was very popular in London during the 18th century. One of the actors responsible for this development was John Rich (1692-1761), an actor manager in London who ran The New Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields and afterwards the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. He more than anyone turned the harlequinade into something distinctively English and more like the pantomime as we know it. He specialised in extravagant productions of harlequinades, in which he played Harlequin. His speaking voice was poor, so he did not speak, and instead developed sophisticated routines of slapstick, comic mime, dances, magic and myth. There were some story scenes in the performances, but many more scenes of silent harlequinade with wild chases, comic mime and stunts. The clown's central part in pantomime reached its apogee with Grimaldi at the end of the 18th century.



Joseph Grimaldi (1778 – 1837) was born into an Italian acting family with roots in Commedia Dell 'Arte. He made his stage performance at the age of three and was receiving acclaim as an actor by the age of nine. He transformed harlequin into a clown with whitened face, red cheeks, frilly collar, baggy trousers. He had the most expressive of faces and invented many of panto's most famous turns – the banana slide, stealing trays of tarts, and eating huge lengths of sausages. In the early part of his career he was mostly silent, with just a few words or sounds. But around 1809 he began to include songs in his performances, many of which were satirical or absurd. His performances were full of satire imprisoning policemen and mocking authorities and. During the Napoleonic wars pantomime was patriotic about military successes but Grimaldi continued to express the defiant spirit of ordinary people living under a repressive regime. Whatever his antics in pantomime he got away with them. Mischief and fun won over repression. He was hugely popular and famous throughout London, counting Dickens and Lord Byron amongst his admirers. His career was brought to an early end in the 1820s with increasing ill health, in part caused by the many injuries of his clowning. For his last performances he had to be carried on to the stage and performed from a chair.



The Theatres Act in 1843 allowed all theatres to use speech – something formerly only permitted to those with Royal patents (both John Rich and Grimaldi performed in theatres with Royal patents) - pantomime developed to include audience participation, jokes and ribald word-play. Pantomimes appeared all over the country which were topical and satirical, mocking every aspect of the society of the day. They became chroniclers of their age. However, satire always had always had its limits with censors forbidding attacks on the monarchy, national politics and religion - though police were fair game.

The centrality of the clown gave way to the dame in the second half of the 19th century. The performances of Dan Leno (1860 – 1904) made him one of the most highly paid comedians in the world and he dominated the London stage in the late 1880s and 1890s. Satire became less central. Instead he created the iconic dame - a gossipy old woman, struggling with life's difficulties – unemployment, abandonment, hunger and poverty – things that audiences could relate to. He made the dame deeply human as well as comic; a poor woman facing a difficult life with defiant humour. He imagined the suffering and the absurdity of everyday life. Contemporaries said he had “the saddest face in the world”.



Throughout its history pantomime exploited and delighted in all the latest special effects that mechanical developments made possible and were nearly always extravagant. By the 1830s they had spectacular scenery, stage effects and fairytale extravaganzas and by the end of the 19th century performances could last up to five hours and have casts of over a hundred. All classes attended pantomimes, from the Royal family down, and theatres were packed like no other time of the year. They were the money spinner that kept the theatrical world going.

ORIGINS OF VILLAGE PANTOMIME



Village pantomimes are a far cry from the lavish performances of major theatres with their star performers. They have different roots reaching nearly as far back in time, in the form of theatricals some attached to the Christian church with its dramatizing liturgy, processions and most notably its mystery and miracle plays. Clergy found theatricals a way of teaching the gospel to a mostly illiterate laity. These performances happened over many centuries all over England, and for the most part were not professional productions.

We know there were plays by the beginning of the 13th Century because there was an edict from Pope Innocent III in 1210 banning clergy and monks from taking part. After this the organisation of plays was taken over by town guilds which caused mystery plays to take on a more secular style with vernacular scripts, an introduction of comedy and other non-biblical scenes – all evident in the Wakefield cycle. Another famous example of mystery plays from the late medieval period, are the York Mystery plays which are a cycle of 48 pageants. Here the clergy began organising the first mystery plays, but such was the popularity of the first play they became too big for the church to manage and the organisation was handed over to the city authorities. There were many different subject matters – but all from the Bible. Later clergy were allowed to act again and joined in with the laity. The sets could be extravagant with special effects and were very varied in style with some mystery plays touring the country. Writers were probably monks and priests. By the 15th century mystery plays had become common and from them secular morality plays and “interludes” with no moral message developed.



MEDIEVAL CARNIVALS

Another strand to the development of non-professional theatre were the theatricals in medieval carnivals happening in the winter months before Lent. They were festivals of inversion, with Ships of Fools, inaugurations of boy bishops and many other ways of publicly ridiculing church and state. The Carnival period was a time of licence when for a brief time a greater freedom of expression was allowed. These early forms of comedy and satire had a profound effect on the development of comedy and were by their very nature non-professional.

We can glean a little about the existence of street performances from Acts of Parliament closing them down. Eamon Duffy tracks those that were closed during the Reformation. He shows that by the end of the 1560s most church dramas (including mystery plays) festivals and fairs had been stopped. In the 1640s there was another attack on drama when Cromwell closed all theatres and put street entertainers in gaol. With the Restoration 20 years later these closures were reversed and theatres quickly became popular. Fairs re-started but in 1870 were brought to an abrupt end by Act of Parliament when they were considered unacceptably rowdy.



20TH-CENTURY AMATEUR THEATRE

We know rough village performances were known to Shakespeare through the play within a play featuring Bottom and his fellow “rude mechanicals” in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and it seems that professional companies grew from these simple beginnings. Amateur productions continued alongside professional plays until the present day and were plentiful in Victorian England, as evidenced by the number of play scripts sold. But it was not till the 20th century they came to flourish. After the First World War they grew rapidly in number, and in 1919 the Village Drama Society was set up in Devon by Mary Kelly. In 1921 it had 40 branches, in 1926 it had 210 groups, 9 of which were affiliated to Women’s institutes and 13 affiliated to youth groups, and by 1930 it had 400. Part of the motivation in setting up structures for amateur dramatics was to bring to an end the dangerous exploited lives suffered by child actors and instead find protected ways of involving them in the stage. The Village Drama Society became part of the British Drama League at about this time, not only supporting amateur theatre groups but also campaigning for the setting up of a National Theatre. It was very keen on education and helped set up youth theatres and competitive festivals, while also being committed to new writing.



Professional actors, writers and directors disillusioned with the commercial, anodyne character of many plays in large theatres supported campaigns to set up small travelling theatres performing plays more relevant to contemporary society, usually with a left-wing viewpoint. The most famous of these was the Unity Theatre, which ran from the 1930s - 1975 growing out of the Workers' Theatre Movement. It was based in London's East End and sought to make plays by and for workers, focusing on current social and political issues using agitprop theatre techniques. It was a volunteer theatre, neither fully professional nor amateur, and its plays were often improvised leading to issues with government censorship – the Lord Chamberlain's office censored playscripts and so the improvised plays of the Unity Theatre were a problem. They founded a Unity Theatre School which by 1939 had established a network of over 250 branches throughout the country. Theatre censorship came to an end in 1968 and from then on mainstream theatre could perform more radical plays, which left little role for Unity Theatre, which declined, finally closing its theatre in 1975.



During the war other small travelling theatres were subsidised by the state as part of the war effort to maintain moral through the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), and the support remained for some years after the war. But when this organisation was turned into the Arts Council in the 1960s neither amateur theatre nor travelling theatre groups got funding – instead money was put into setting up more permanent provincial theatres. This led to a decline in travelling theatres, but amateur productions still flourished. This was aided by the setting up of organisations to support children's theatre groups – the biggest of which, Theatre in Education, was founded in 1965 and soon worked all over the

Further energy was given to non-professional theatre through the birth of community plays and theatre in the 1970s. The first community play took place in Devon, with professionals in leading positions, - writing, directing, and producing, working with huge numbers of people from local communities in all theatrical processes, from costume making, set building, acting, to front of house. The subject matter related to issues and interests relating to local communities and were prepared over two years to allow a sense of ownership to develop. Community Theatres appeared, which were again a mixture of professionals leading the production and amateurs doing the bulk of the work and acting. These flourished for a couple of decades before funding dried up and their numbers greatly reduced.



MEMORIES OF STREET THEATRE IN HUNSTANTON

Tony Keeler

I first got involved in street theatre when we lived in Hunstanton in the 1970s. There was an Arts Festival and it was a bit highbrow. We and our friends wanted to make it more inclusive and we decided that we would have our own alternative festival on the green.

Growing up in Great Yarmouth I was interested in Punch and Judy. Seaside traditions were dying out. There were no donkeys on the beach anymore. We had squeeze boxes and we made the puppets and a stage for a Punch and Judy show. We did face painting. Christine bought a perfect girdle skirt.

“Look what I’ve got – we can be Punch and Judy without puppets!”



It had yellow, red and green stripes. I researched and found an original 19th-century script and built our performance around that. We went to a little dell in Ringstead Downs to rehearse with our children on a Sunday, then all went down to the pub afterwards. The festival went ahead and our performance was a great success. Kids can be quite awful – that’s perhaps why they like the evil characters of Punch and Judy.

There were people from villages who said “Come and perform at our fete” so we went to Heacham and other villages – Snettersham and Docking. Steve used to drive a bus after school, and the owner of the local coach company liked what we were doing, and let us have the use of a bus for free. This allowed us to go further afield. It was a little bit of freedom, without the conformity of the past. We didn’t think about money; it was done for the fun of it.





CHRISTINE CONTINUES THE STORY

I loved textiles and dealt in antique clothes. I made costumes for the kids, and pointy shoes with bells on. I collected buttons and put them on the clothes. We made Punch and Judy's papier-mâché noses. Steve's Mum came down one afternoon and helped with my hat. The children loved dressing up – my house was full of dressing up stuff. Lucy had a vivid imagination and invented a circus and put a skipping rope on the floor and a ballerina dress on to perform in front of her friends she invited around. Sometimes a magic rabbit was part of the show. The children were mesmerised.

We never asked for a fee for our performances – instead a hat went round to pay for the petrol. Usually, we were already dressed up when we got to the villages. I had loads of clothes. I went as a fairy. I had a see-through vintage dress – in those days we didn't care as we all had good busts. I wore flowers and sparkles in my hair.



LUCY ACCOUNT

My parents' street theatre was formed from their friendships. I don't know how it came about, but it was a highly creative time and I would have been 4, 5 6, 7 those years of my childhood. It was playful and happy. We would stitch. I remember everyone stitching slippers. They were doing some medieval pantomime with Maid Marion in it and we had all these old slippers. My mother had these fantastic fabrics and we made these pointy shoes with buttons on the end and we all had a pair. We'd be stitching in the living room and my dad would be making papier-mâché noses, so when the Punch and Judy arrived there were lots of different noses around – the house was full of noses and bells. Then my Mum arrived one day with a fabulous Judy skirt – like it was God-given.

We lived in a terraced house in Hunstanton. My dad painted a bright sunshine on the door. I would round up the kids on the streets and I thought it would be good to have a circus, and I got them all to bring their animals. My Mum had really good dressing-up sacks of clothes. All the kids would love to wear our clothes – a real trapeze outfit - white, frilly with bright red sequins, or a ballet dress like something from Swan Lake. Then we dressed our animals – Dandelion our bunny would have a tutu and our dogs would have shoes and then we would have a curtain and I got 4 people to bring the animals on. We had a top hat to take the money and charged everyone to watch. Quite entrepreneurial. We took it very seriously. I was 5 or 6. I was very influenced by this in my career as a fashion designer. First, I wanted to be an actress but I loved the process of fashion and loved being around all those clothes. Theatre is part of my DNA.

BARSHAM AND OTHER FAIRS IN THE 1970S

Nick who wrote two pantomime scripts went with his family.

Barsham Fairs were near Beccles, at first partly in the grounds of Roos Hall which was bought by friends of ours who are now in New York. There was a gentle sub-culture of which Barsham was a part. Quite a few late-in-the-day hippies who came up here to live as cottages were really cheap in the 1960s and 70s. There was some communal living, some true hippies, though it often ended in tears. The Fairs were extraordinary. I remember in particular a camel race. Several people owned camels and there will still camels in fields years later. I don't remember much of a political nature – maybe a few people with placards.



CHRISTINE'S STORY

The Keeler family then heard about Barsham Fair and learnt they could apply to be part of it.

We heard of Barsham, and went with a stall of vintage clothes. We made so much money. I bought white nightdresses in Leeds and had them flowing in the wind around the stall.

There were real free spirits there. They were not thinking about where they were going to live or getting mortgages. Renting was easy and terrace houses were going for a few hundred quid.

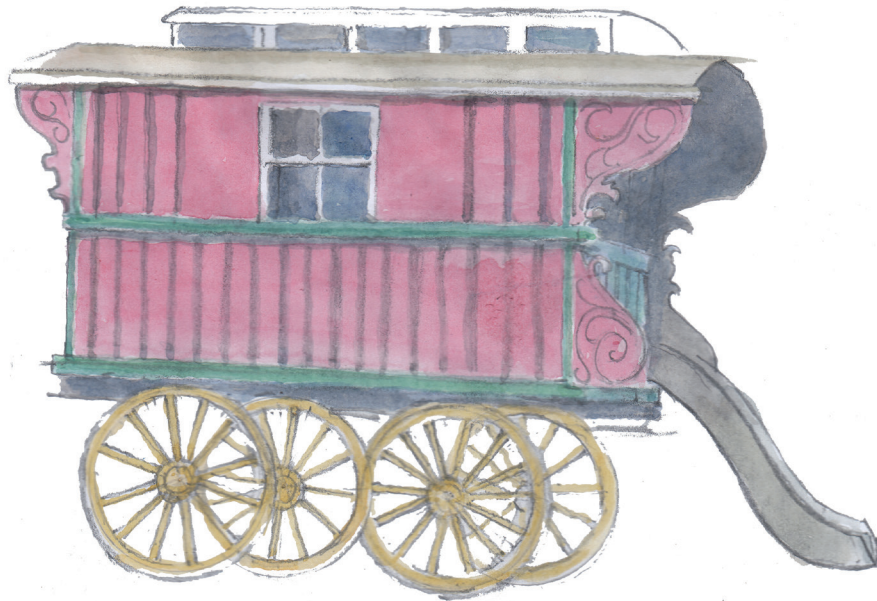
First time to Barsham we took the kids. We dressed Lucy up and she went picking wild flowers on the marshes and made little bunches for button holes and went round selling them. We saw all the performances, so the following year we applied to take our Punch and Judy and were accepted. They said we were "Our kind of people". This was the last Barsham Fair in 76.

It was not a heavy drugs place. It was organised well and there were shops, blacksmiths, and lots of food stalls and a big area for lost children. You never thought about horrible things as you do now.



One evening there was a huge downpour and thunderstorm when we were to perform, and we went inside a kind of domed yurt they constructed. There were lots of people. The Fair as absolutely magical.

It all had to look medieval to get a stall. You had to disguise your tent with rugs. You could buy anything. They sold chickens to barbeque, then there was a pen for animals and another for lost children. No radios were allowed. Second hand clothes were popular and I had lots to sell. In those days it was easy come and easy go. We bought our house, but others didn't think about it. They lived in caravans. It was a free time to think about stuff. Now you've got Glastonbury which is very commercial which I don't like. The gypsy caravans were all hand painted – my mother can remember filling bits in. They'd keep pigs, and when I was a little girl they all had gold teeth. People married in and out of gypsy families.



By the mid-70s other people were doing the same kind of things as our street theatre, and in Briston where we moved there were lots of gypsies. My mum was a gypsy but married out. Here there are the Kidds. They always have their caravans dripping down the road. Everyone is inter-related in this village so you can't say anything. They used to go to Sowerby and Bungay Fairs. We went to meet Sid and Nigger Kidd. They all went with their caravans. I did my DNA and my family are potters back to the 17th century – they made them as well as selling them.





LUCY'S MEMORIES OF BARSHAM FAIRS

Smell of night-time fires, of things cooking, strange shapes, people like performance art. Everybody was involved in something. It was like going into a different time zone. I can remember this old lady who would just appear – the old hag they called her. Her face was made with warts – like the old woman who lived in the forest that would turn into a witch. She had fingerless gloves and big floppy hats and would carry matchsticks and bits of lavender. Spelly things. The kids would run away from her. She was like a bit of performar



The goblins were terrifying. They worked like a pack of wolves. They were quite ugly and made cackling sounds and pounced on children and put them in dustbins and carried them off screaming. All the children loved it. They had no boundaries and would come straight into our tents. It was like being part of a fairy story. There were lots of children at the Fairs. Nobody knew each other but felt like they did. It felt like one big family – very creative. Those initial fairs – no one was interested in making money – but to be part of the fairy story. The Fairy Fairs were still great fairs. The goblins were still there. My mum would sell her clothes. Beautiful Crepe dresses, Victorian ribbons – real vintage. My mum would wear 1920 slip dresses with floral 1940s blouses over the top and permed hair. My mum's sister would have flowers in her hair.

LATER FAIRS

Christine

And then the Convoy came along and heavy drugs. There was a lot of mariuana at Barsham but not heavy drugs. We stopped going.

Tony

We thought, "Well we still have our Punch and Judy show."

We expanded our performances. I found an old Mummers script and we rehearsed that. We involved the kids who had speaking parts and it was performed at Ringstead. The children were 5 or 6.

As we had the loan of the bus we went to Bungay where there was a horse fair – it was a gypsy fair. We learned about it from the travelling people in the village. They also had dog races and bet a lot of money on them. There were side shows. The famous can-can girls performed. The gypsies were dealing horses.

Got invited to Scole, just outside Diss, where a big old pub put on a fair for a day. They didn't pay us, but gave us free food. Pulses and things not very well cooked. It was outside and the kids didn't like it. I bought some organic flour but it was hard and had a bit of flint in it.

Then we went to Cambridge -nthe Strawberry Fair on Midsummer green. It was more commercial than Barsham – just stalls and the beginning of wholefoods.



Marion

Ladenham had a fair and I was part of it. They asked me to do something so I did numerology. It was a bit spooky as people took me so seriously. It's not really a great religion, just something I learnt to do in Canada. I studied it and then realised there was something to it. I had a yurt and drew children in. They thought I was a witch or a fortune teller. I also did do fortune telling. I had a Romanian gypsy dress and all the gear. It was all fake, as I told the children what I knew about them from my son. But they were very impressed and so it was quite rewarding.



TONY

After the summer season of street theatre and fairs we thought "What next?" And we thought of pantomime. We first did Sinbad and decided to take it round the villages, as nothing was going on about Hunstanton. We wrote to all the parish councils and said, "Would you like us to bring our panto to your village if you give us the village hall and advertise it?" We turned up and charged nothing. They were well attended. The local pubs often gave away drinks and crisps for the children. There was cross dressing with Prince Charming and the dame – this goes back to Victorian times, I think. Further back it was based on the Commedia Dell' Arte and the birth of Harlequin. Punch and Judy derived from this.

Look up old editions of Punch and you find a heading of Punchinella.



When we moved to Briston we found a group of people putting on panto at Heydon. The first one we saw was The Wizard of Oz. Our daughter Lucy was in it at the last moment and got the lead part. She looked perfect. The next year was Robin Hood. The woodland scenes brought half Heydon woods into the village hall. Lucy was a unicorn and I made some props including a big unicorn's head. Nick Attfield had a stag's head. Somebody dropped out and I played the part of Little John and our son George was a soldier. Jackie got a load of onion bags and sprayed them silver and they were the soldiers' chain mail. The soldiers were all children except for Bob who was the chief soldier.



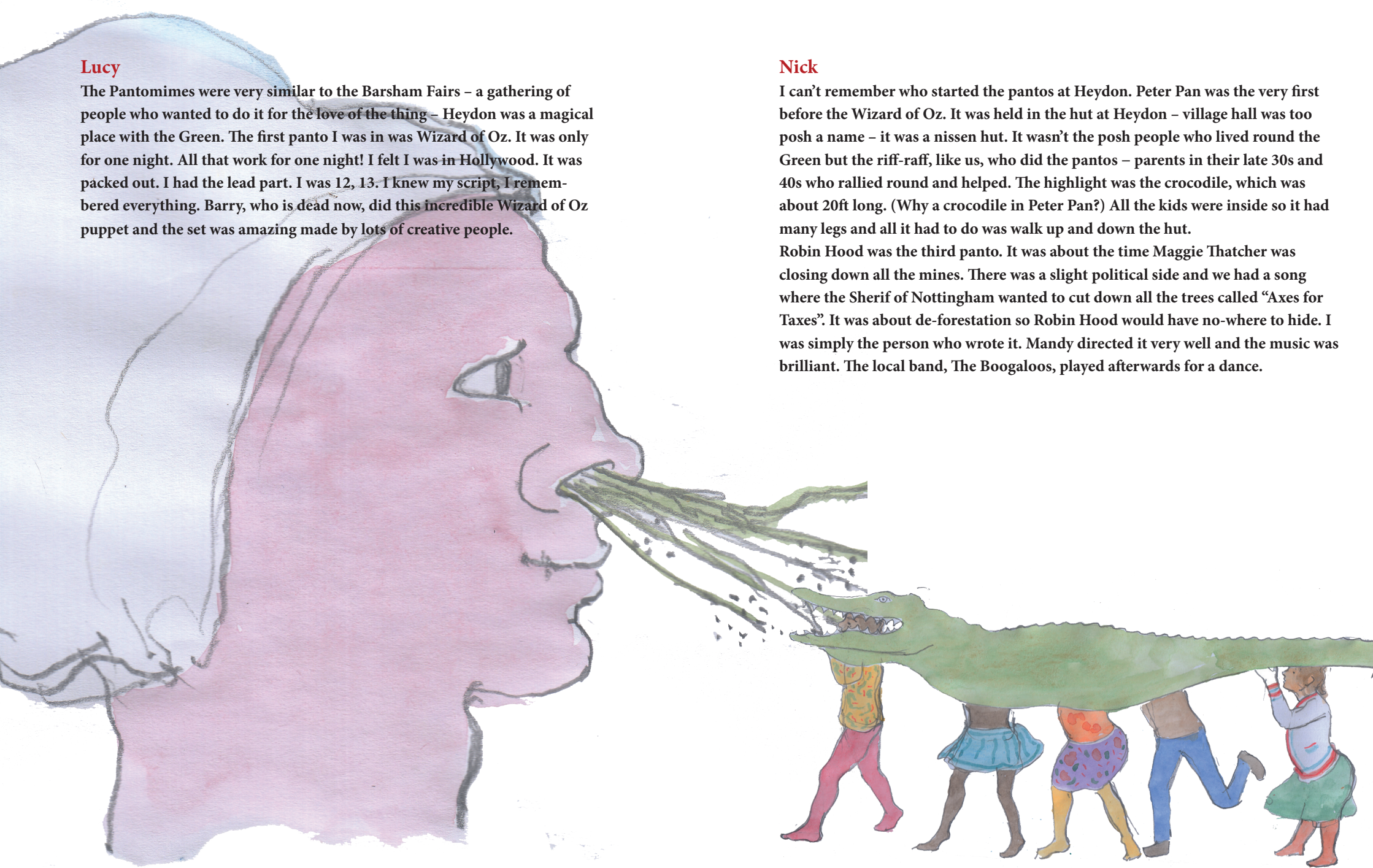
Lucy

The Pantomimes were very similar to the Barsham Fairs – a gathering of people who wanted to do it for the love of the thing – Heydon was a magical place with the Green. The first panto I was in was Wizard of Oz. It was only for one night. All that work for one night! I felt I was in Hollywood. It was packed out. I had the lead part. I was 12, 13. I knew my script, I remembered everything. Barry, who is dead now, did this incredible Wizard of Oz puppet and the set was amazing made by lots of creative people.

Nick

I can't remember who started the pantos at Heydon. Peter Pan was the very first before the Wizard of Oz. It was held in the hut at Heydon – village hall was too posh a name – it was a nissen hut. It wasn't the posh people who lived round the Green but the riff-raff, like us, who did the pantos – parents in their late 30s and 40s who rallied round and helped. The highlight was the crocodile, which was about 20ft long. (Why a crocodile in Peter Pan?) All the kids were inside so it had many legs and all it had to do was walk up and down the hut.

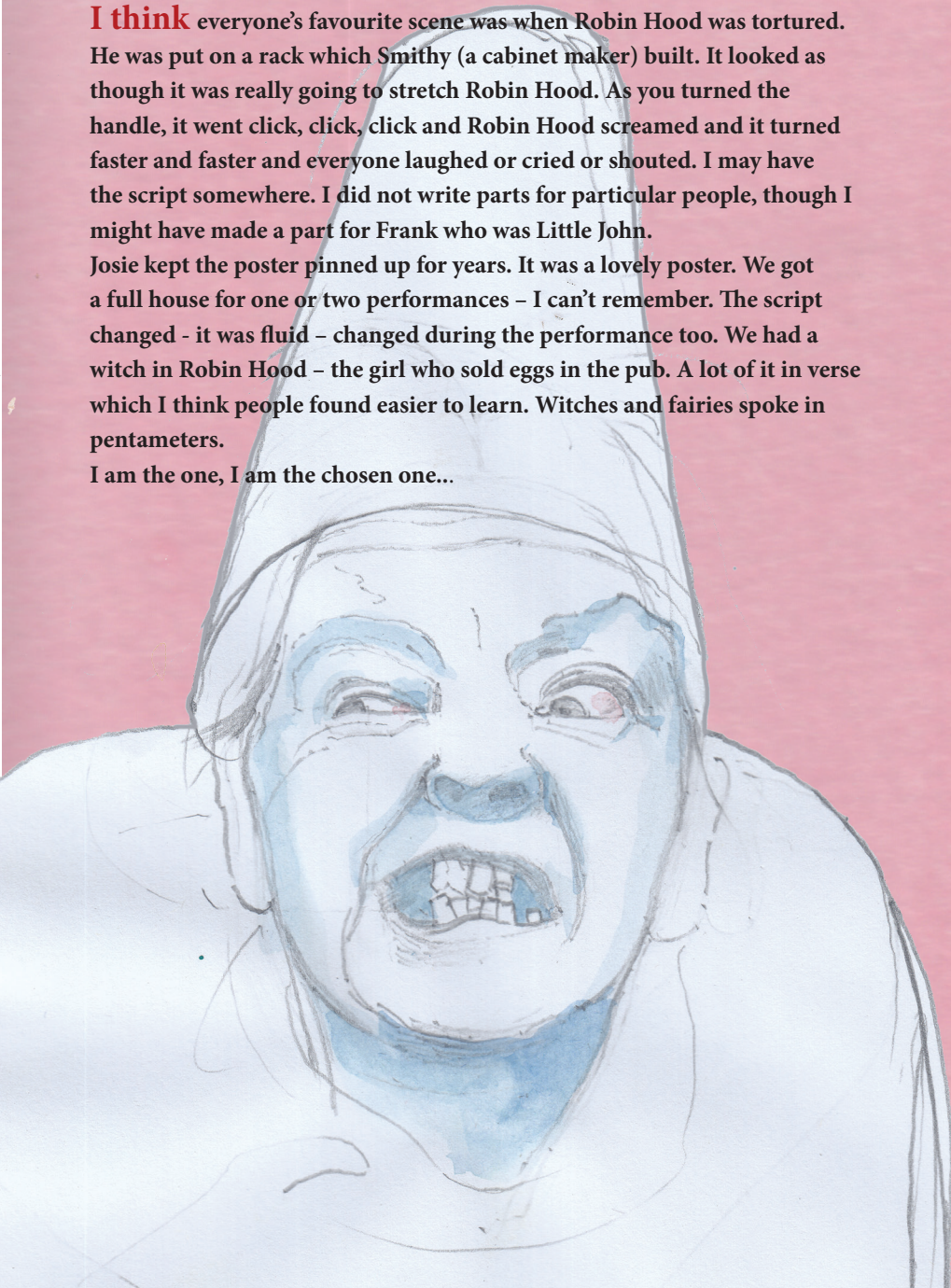
Robin Hood was the third panto. It was about the time Maggie Thatcher was closing down all the mines. There was a slight political side and we had a song where the Sheriff of Nottingham wanted to cut down all the trees called "Axes for Taxes". It was about de-forestation so Robin Hood would have no-where to hide. I was simply the person who wrote it. Mandy directed it very well and the music was brilliant. The local band, The Boogaloos, played afterwards for a dance.



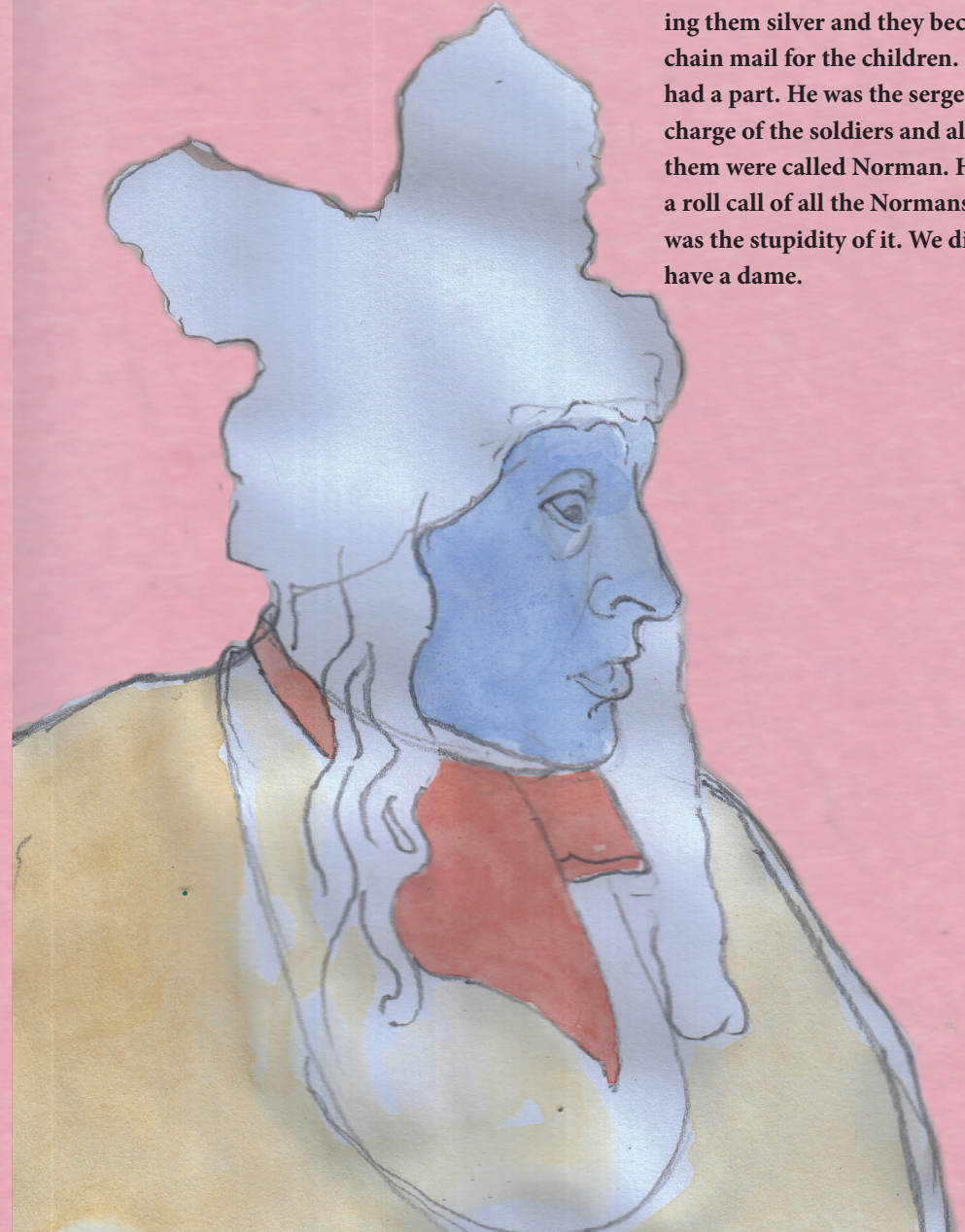
I think everyone's favourite scene was when Robin Hood was tortured. He was put on a rack which Smithy (a cabinet maker) built. It looked as though it was really going to stretch Robin Hood. As you turned the handle, it went click, click, click and Robin Hood screamed and it turned faster and faster and everyone laughed or cried or shouted. I may have the script somewhere. I did not write parts for particular people, though I might have made a part for Frank who was Little John.

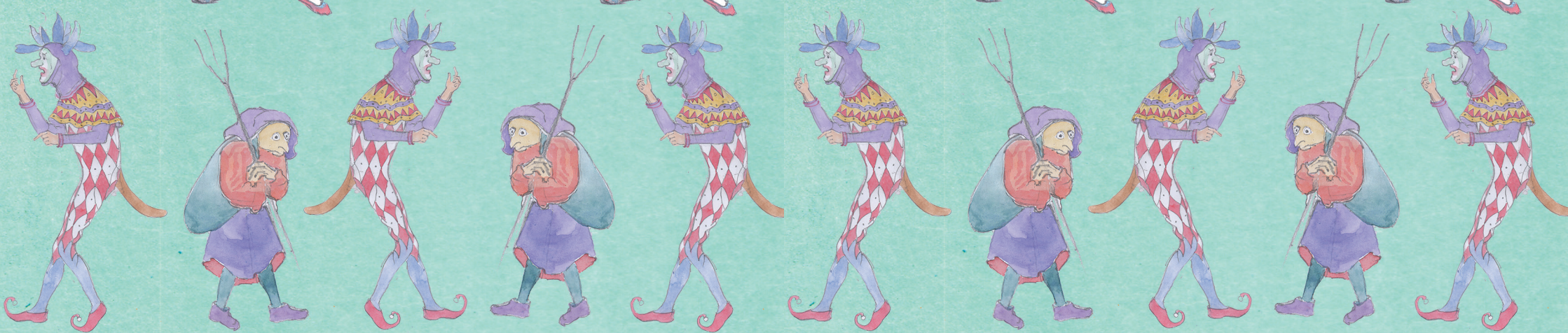
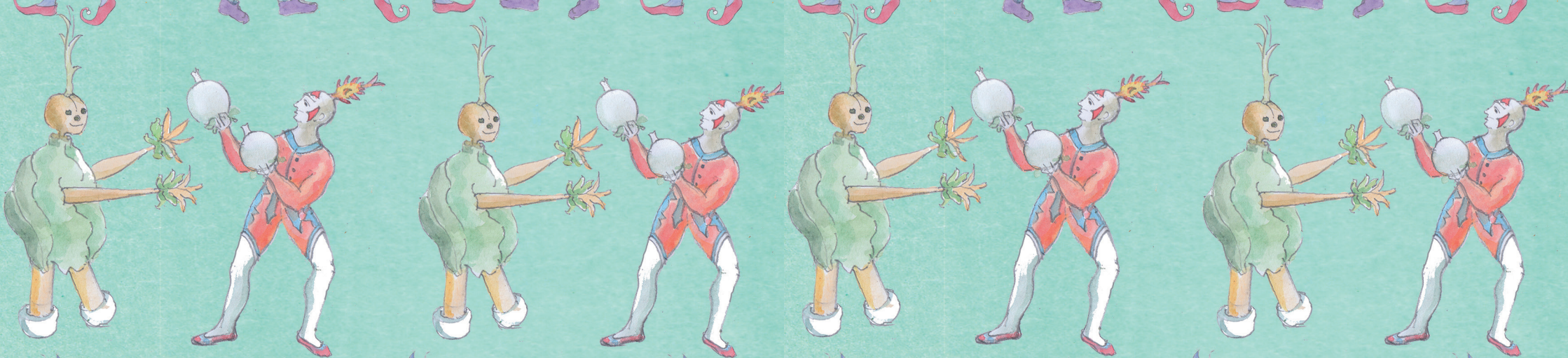
Josie kept the poster pinned up for years. It was a lovely poster. We got a full house for one or two performances – I can't remember. The script changed - it was fluid – changed during the performance too. We had a witch in Robin Hood – the girl who sold eggs in the pub. A lot of it in verse which I think people found easier to learn. Witches and fairies spoke in pentameters.

I am the one, I am the chosen one...



Jackie Attfield produced wonderful costumes by getting orange string onion sacks and spraying them silver and they became the chain mail for the children. Dave had a part. He was the sergeant in charge of the soldiers and all of them were called Norman. He did a roll call of all the Normans – that was the stupidity of it. We didn't have a dame.





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