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Christmas Pantomime

Hugh Walpole

The rubric Texts around Theatre features historical and contemporary cross-cultural and culture-specific perspectives on theatre – unexpectedly funky, unusually enthralling, disturbingly fascinating.

***Kontext**: Der achtjährige Jeremy, Sohn des Pfarrers Cole, hat sich tagelang inbrünstig auf die Vorstellung von "Dick Whittington" gefreut, die in der Gemeindehalle des kleinen Ortes Polchester stattfindet. Nun ist er am Morgen in Ungnade gefallen und darf seine Eltern und seine beiden Schwestern nicht zur Aufführung begleiten. Sein Onkel Samuel, erfolgloser Maler und schwarzes Schaf der Familie, nimmt ihn trotzdem heimlich mit. Auf der Empore der Gemeindehalle erlebt Jeremy mit allen Sinnen seine erste Theateraufführung, die – ungeachtet ihrer Mängel – die Welt für ihn verzaubert..*

***Context**: For days, eight year-old Jeremy, the son of Reverend Cole, has fervently been looking forward to the play "Dick Whittington", that is about to be staged in the assembly rooms of the small town of Polchester. Due to him misbehaving in the morning, he is barred from going to the show. But Uncle Samuel, unsuccessful painter and black sheep of the family, takes him along on the sly. On the gallery of the assembly rooms, Jeremy experiences his first theatre production with all his senses, a production which – despite its shortcomings – makes his world "a more magical place than it had ever been before."*

[. . .] Uncle Samuel paused at a lighted hole in the wall and spoke to a large lady in black silk who was drinking a cup of tea. Jeremy caught the jingle of money. Then they moved forward, stumbling in the dark up a number of stone steps, pushing at a heavy black curtain, then suddenly bathed in a bewildering glow of light and scent and colour.

Jeremy's first impression, as he fell into this new world, was of an ugly, harsh, but funny voice crying out very loudly indeed: "Oh, my great aunt! Oh, my great aunt! Oh, my great aunt!" A roar of laughter rose about him, almost lifting him off his feet, and close to his ear a Glebeshire voice sobbed: "Eh, my dear. Poor worm! Poor worm!"

He was aware then of a strong smell of oranges, of Uncle Samuel pushing him forward, of stumbling over boots, knees, and large hands that were clapping in his very nose, of falling into a seat and then clinging to it as though it was his only hope in this strange puzzling world. The high funny voice rose again: "Oh, my great aunt! Oh, my great aunt!" And again it was followed by the rough roar of delighted laughter.

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He was aware then that about him on every side gas was sizzling, and then, as he recovered slowly his breath, his gaze was drawn to the great blaze of light in the distance, against which figures were dimly moving, and from the heart of which the strange voice came. He heard a woman's voice, then several voices together; then suddenly the whole scene shifted into focus, his eyes were tied to the light; the oranges and the gas and the smell of clothes and heated bodies slipped back into distance – he was caught into the world where he had longed to be.

He saw that it was a shop – and he loved shops. His heart beat thickly as his eyes travelled up and up and up over the rows and rows of shelves; here were bales of cloth, red and green and blue; carpets from the East, table-covers, sheets and blankets. Behind the long yellow counters young men in strange clothes were standing. In the middle of the scene was a funny old woman, her hat tumbling off her head, her shabby skirt dragging, large boots, and a red nose. It was from this strange creature that the deep ugly voice proceeded. She had, this old woman, a number of bales of cloth under her arms, and she tried to carry them all, but one slipped, and then another, and then another; she bent to pick them up and her hat fell off; she turned for her hat and all the bales tumbled together. Jeremy began to laugh – everyone laughed; the strange voice came again and again, lamenting, bewailing, she had secured one bale, a smile of cautious triumph began to spread over her ugly face, then the bales all fell again, and once more she was on her knees. It was then that her voice or some movement brought to Jeremy's eyes so vividly the figure of their old gardener, Jordan, that he turned round to Uncle Samuel, and suddenly grasping that gentleman's fat thigh, exclaimed convulsively: "Why, she's a man!"

What a strange topsy-turvy world this was in which women were men, and shops turned (as with a sudden creaking and darkness and clattering did this one) into gardens by the sea. Jeremy drew his breath deeply and held on. His mouth was open and his hair on end. . .

It is impossible to define exactly Jeremy's ultimate impression as the entertainment proceeded. Perhaps he had no ultimate impression. It cannot in reality have been a very wonderful Pantomime. Even at Drury Lane thirty years back there were many things that they did not know, and it is not likely that a touring company fitted into so inadequate an old building as our Assembly Rooms would have provided anything very fine. But Jeremy will never again discover so complete a realisation for his illusions. Whatever failures in the presentation there were, he himself made good.

As a finale to the first half of the entertainment there was given Dick's dream at the Cross-Roads. He lay on the hard ground, his head upon his bundle, the cat as large as he watching sympathetically beside him. In the distance were the lights of London, and then, out of the half dusk, fairies glittering with stars and silver danced up and down the dusky road whilst all the London bells rang out "Turn again, "Whittington, Lord Mayor of London."

Had Jeremy been of the age and wisdom of Uncle Samuel he would have discovered that Dick was a stout lady and probably the mother of a growing

family; that the fairies knew as much about dancing as the Glebeshire wives sitting on the bench behind; that the London bells were two hand instruments worked by a youth in shirt sleeves behind the scenes so energetically that the High Road and the painted London blew backwards and forwards in sympathy with his movements. Jeremy, happily, was not so worldly wise as his uncle. This scene created for him then a tradition of imperishable beauty that would never fade again. The world after that night would be a more magical place than it had ever been before. [. . .]

From: Hugh Walpole (1919): Jeremy. Chapter III/3. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3474/3474-0.txt