

Chapter Four – Pantomime

Quick questions Think of your answers to the following questions.

1. What is your favourite fairy tale? Why?
2. What role would you like to play in it?
3. Which famous actor would you cast alongside you in the show?

Picture Look at the picture and answer the questions.



1. This picture shows the stage door of the Apollo Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue in London. How early before a performance do you think the performers arrive?
2. What do actors do to prepare for a performance?
3. How do they feel before going on the stage?

Vocabulary The following words appear in the skit.

actor	agent	cast
C-list starlet	costume	critic
director	ensemble	lines
performance	rehearsal	script
stage	trained	understudy

- ✧ Say the words aloud.
- ✧ Define the words.
- ✧ Make sample sentences using the words.
- ✧ Have a mini conversation, for example, 'Are you an *actor*?' 'No, I'm a *director*.'

Skit – ‘It’s Behind You!’

Cast (4): **Stepmother / Sister 1 / Sister 2 / Actor**

(Sister 1 enters the dressing room.)

Sister 1: You’ll never believe it. Poor Shirley.

Mother: Who’s Shirley?

Sister 1: The understudy. She was practicing her lines in the wings and the castle balcony only fell and landed on her head!

Mother: Oh dear. She was so close to going to the ball.

Sister 1: Now she’s on her way to hospital. *(Enter Sister 2.)*

Sister 2: *(Tripping on entering.)* Who put that...?

Mother: Enjoy your trip?

Sister 2: Not funny.

Mother: Where have you been?

Sister 2: Making myself look beautiful.

Sister 1: Shirley’s had an accident.

Sister 2: Who’s Shirley?

Mother: The understudy.

Sister 2: Good. I never liked her.

Mother: This is serious! We need to find a replacement.

Sister 2: Don’t ask me.

Mother: Hold your breath, we weren’t going to.

Sister 1: Where’s the director when we need him?

Sister 2: Where’s our C-list starlet? I bet they’re enjoying a romantic date together while we’re left stranded in this train wreck.

Mother: *This* is the only job you’ve had this year!

Sister 1: Come on. What are we going to do? Who’s going to play Cinderella?

Sister 2: Go ask the Fairy Godmother if she can help.

Mother: We can’t ask Joyce.

Sister 2: Why not?

Mother: She’s eighty-two!

Sister 1: What about one of the actors playing the horse?

Sister 2: The front or the back end?

Mother: Whichever one’ll fit in the costume. Quick! Go and grab one. *(Sister 1 exits.)* In all my years on the stage! I’ve seen many things, oh yes. Some funny, some squeamish, some shocking, some fatal. Actors entering in the wrong costume. Actors entering the wrong scene. Actors entering and thinking they were in an entirely different play. But when disaster strikes, there has always been help at hand. Now look what I’ve got to deal with. Where has my career gone?

Sister 2: IT’S BEHIND YOU! *(Laughing at his own joke.)*

(Sister 1 enters followed by Actor wearing a horse’s head who trips on entering.)

Sister 2: What did the horse say after he fell over? ‘Help! I’ve fallen and I can’t giddy-up!’ *(Laughs.)*

Mother: Good. You’re here. Have you heard about Shirley?

Actor: Who’s Shirley?

Sister 2: The understudy.

Actor: Oh, you mean Shirl. Some of us call her Curly, because of her hair.

Mother: She's on her way to hospital!

Sister 1: And we need a replacement.

Actor: For tomorrow's performance?

Mother: No! For *tonight's* performance!

Actor: (*Puzzled.*) But we're about to start

Mother: Yes, which is why we need a replacement!

Actor: (*Slight pause.*) Shall I ask one of the costume girls?

Mother: Darling, they are *not* actors.

Actor: They're female.

Mother: I'm not female, but I'm playing a girl's part.

Sister 2: I wouldn't call the stepmother a girl's part.

Mother: Stop it!

Actor: What about the back end of the horse?

Sister 2: He's got a nice bottom.

Sister 1: He's too big. He won't fit.

Actor: And I will?

Sister 1: We'll make adjustments.

Mother: You're a trained actor, I understand?

Actor: I studied at RADA.

Mother: A fellow alumni.

Actor: On the two-week summer course.

Sister 2: More than enough experience.

Mother: And as a member of our ensemble, you have been closely observing rehearsals.

Actor: I know the scenes I'm in.

Sister 2: Better than none at all.

Sister 1: Quick! We haven't got time! (*Sister 1 removes horse mask from Actor's head.*)

Actor: What are you doing?

Sister 1: Measuring you.

Actor: Why?

Sister 2: You're going to the ball.

Actor: Oh no, I'm not.

ALL: OH YES, YOU ARE!!!

Mother: Do you want to be the one to tell three hundred snotty little screaming children that tonight's show is cancelled? No, you do not! So... (*Sisters assist with Actor's transformation.*)

Sister 2: Shirt off!

Sister 1: Pants down!

Mother: Cinderella sings five solo numbers.

Actor: I can't sing.

Mother: Just lip sync the words. We'll provide the sound.

Actor: What about the script?

Sister 2: What script?

Sister 1: Improvise!

Actor: I don't know the story.

Mother: The less you know, the funnier it will be.

Sister 2: We'll provide the subplot.

Sister 1: If you get stuck, just say 'Wait a minute. Isn't this supposed to be Cinderella?' They'll love it.

Mother: Look, it's panto, darling, there's nothing serious about it – cross dressing, trashy pop songs, saucy innuendoes, jokes!

Sister 2: Throw in as many jokes as you can. Tell them you once had a part of a pantomime horse but quit while you were a-head. (*All laughing.*)

Sister 1: Why didn't Cinderella make it as a tennis player? She had a pumpkin for a coach. (*All laughing.*)

Mother: Why is Cinderella no good at football? She kept running away from the ball (*All laughing. Actor looks very downcast.*)

Sister 1: What's wrong?

Actor: My girlfriend's coming tonight.

Mother: You know who else is coming – directors, agents, Hollywood film producers...

Sister 1: And the critic for The Gazette.

Sister 2: He's in the foyer right now working on his second bottle of wine.

Actor: What if he gives us one star?

Sister 2: Better than none at all.

Mother: Quick. Where's the wig?

Sister 2: It's behind you.

Mother: That's not funny!

Sister 1: No, it is. It's behind you!

Mother: Oh. Right. (*Grabs wig.*) Put it on. (*Hands to Actor.*) Let's do our final check. (*Mother, Sister 1 and Actor line up as Sister 2 inspects their bras.*)

Mother: (*Pings strap.*) Mmm. Check.

Sister 1: (*Pings.*) Ooo. Check.

Actor: (*Pings.*) Ouch! Check. Shall I check yours?

Sister 1: No, I prefer to let mine hang loose.

Mother: Darlings, gather. (*They gather.*) If anything goes wrong... embrace it! (*They embrace.*) Break a leg! (*Exits.*)

Actor: What's the opening number?

Sister 1: 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'.

Sister 2: Don't worry, just lip sync.

Mother: (*Voice over tannoy.*) Ladies and gentlemen and snotty little screaming children, take your seats for this evening's performance of Charles Perrault's classic fairy tale Cinderella.

Sister 1: Positions, positions. (*Exits.*)

Actor: (*Pause. Nervously.*) How do I look?

Sister 2: Disgraceful. But by the end of the night, you'll feel like a princess! (*Exits.*)

First reaction Highlight any references to the story of Cinderella in the skit.

Comprehension questions Answer the following ten questions.

1. Who is Shirley?
2. What has happened to her?
3. Why is Joyce not suitable to cover the role of Cinderella?
4. What is Sister 2 referring to when she says 'It's behind you' the first time?
5. Why is the actor picked to play Cinderella?
6. How well does the actor know play?
7. Why according to the stepmother is there 'nothing serious about' pantomime?
8. Who is coming to watch the actor perform in this evening's show?
9. What is the opening song of the show?
10. How does the stepmother describe the children in the audience?

Beyond The characters in the skit have distinctive personality traits. Match the adjectives in the Word Bank with the characters they describe.

WORD BANK

authoritarian brash clueless concerned
 cynical experienced frustrated helpful
 naïve nervous organized spiteful

Stepmother	Sister 1	Sister 2	Actor

Class Survey Ask three students the following questions to find out their casting ideas for a class production of Cinderella. Then discuss your answers in groups.

Questions	S1	S2	S3
Who will play Cinderella?			
Who will play the stepmother?			
Who will play the stepsisters?			
Who will play the Fairy Godmother?			
Who will play Prince Charming?			
Who will play the mice?			
Who will play a pantomime horse?			
Who will direct the show?			

Writing Try these activities.

- ✧ Write a review of the production covering the following areas of production: plot, acting, staging, set, costume, sound, lighting and audience reaction.
- ✧ Create a poster for the production and include the following information: title of the show, venue, dates and times of the show, ticket prices, cast information and anything else to draw interest.

Role-play Try these role-plays in pairs.

- ✧ Backstage before the show begins. One of you is a director desperately seeking someone to play Cinderella in tonight's pantomime, the other is a new member of the ensemble who suffers from stage fright. Start with the opening line, 'Shirley's sick. Can you cover her tonight?'
- ✧ Planning what to do. One of you wants to see a live pantomime production of Cinderella at the theatre, the other one wants to see the live-action film version at the cinema. Start with the opening line, 'What shall we see tonight?'

Research Pick one of the popular British theatre plays of the last 150 years listed below and find out the following things: plot, character, themes, the initial reception and notable stage performances.

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) by Oscar Wilde

Pygmalion (1913) by George Bernard Shaw

Private Lives (1930) by Noel Coward

Look Back in Anger (1956) by John Osborne

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1966) by Tom Stoppard

Equus (1973) by Peter Shaffer

The History Boys (2004) by Alan Bennett

Jerusalem (2009) by Jez Butterworth