

Letter from Scotland

Scotland's panto season is in full crazy swing. Peter Pan swings by in Edinburgh, along with Aladdin at The Playhouse and Cinderella at the Church Hill Theatre.

Though you can also see Cinderella at the Royal in Dumfries or the Byre in St Andrews, or an "Ulgy" version in Cumbernauld. There are lots of Snow Whites in Glasgow – at the King's and Oran Mor. There's another Aladdin in Perth, a Christmas Carol in Dundee, a Scrooge at the Tron in Glasgow and Sleeping Beauty in Aberdeen and Inverness.



Theatre of the absurd. The Pantomime Adventures of Peter Pan play on at The Festival Theatre Edinburgh until Hogmanay. Peter Pan has not made it on to the poster – a funny fact made into comedy by the other stars on stage PHOTO John Knox

Then there is the pantomime all around us: in the Christmas crowds, in Holyrood and Westminster – and more seriously at the Covid inquiries, the climate talks in Dubai and meetings on Gaza at United Nations in New York. Everywhere there are strange, unreal plots, fancy costumes, theatrics and a mixture of emotions, from joy to sadness and sometimes horror.

Even our city streets have elements of pantomime. There are buskers and beggars, visitors from far-away lands, reluctant children being trailed round the shops. I wonder why there are so many people in the shops when we are supposed to be suffering from a “cost of living crisis”? Are they ghost crowds, just window-shopping? Or is the truth of the matter that only the unfortunate few are in “crisis” and others are on the usual Christmas splurge, if not in the shops, then

online? Nothing is what it seems.

In The Scottish Parliament this week we had the usual pantomime of the opposition parties hissing the Wicked Queen, the Finance Secretary Shona Robison, calling on her to spend more on ambulances, the NHS, the police, schools, holes in the road. But both the Conservatives and Labour know only too well that behind her stands the Austerity Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, who controls her purse strings like a puppeteer. Are they expecting her to shake a magic money tree when she announces her Budget next week?



Sunak at Prime Minister's Questions on 13 December 2023 PHOTO ©UK Parliament

Then there is Westminster, another theatre of the absurd. Rishi Sunak says he will “stop the boats” by giving all their occupants free passage to the Neverland of Rwanda. His parliamentary Bill making Rwanda a safe country – whether the judges in the Supreme Court like it or not – survived its first vote on Tuesday. But we are in for another Brexit-style Punch and Judy Show early next year when Conservative MPs

fight over the amendments. And all the while it's becoming clear that the only people boarding flights to Rwanda before the next election will be hapless home secretaries.

Nothing is off limits for pantomimes. The two Covid inquiries are holding ministers and officials to account in a show trial worthy of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. Ranks of lawyers sit staring into their computer screens as each defendant tries to blame somebody else. But we know they will all be found guilty in the end, with the benefit of hindsight.

As to the climate talks, this is panto on a grand scale. Hundreds of world potentates and their sherpas fly into and out of an air-conditioned conference centre in an oil-rich desert state and politely confer with the Sultan over whether we should cut our carbon emissions or commit suicide. Not a difficult choice you would think, but it took them more than two weeks to agree a statement which suggests that we all "transition away" from fossil fuels, at our convenience of course, and strive oh so hard to invest in renewable energy.

At galactic headquarters in New York, we watched the USA play the role of the Odd Man Out when it was one of just 10 countries at the UN to oppose a ceasefire in Gaza. Britain abstained, though the Scottish parliament has recently voted in favour of a ceasefire.

These diplomatic theatrics have a disappointing affect in the real world. The UN might call for ceasefires in Gaza or Ukraine but the wars go on. It's like watching a ballet by Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev on one screen and a war movie on the other. And in the case of Gaza, the tragedy is played out while we are attending school Nativity Plays in which Bethlehem is a sweet little town lying quietly beneath the stars. A particularly touching pantomime.

This, I suppose, is the value of pantomimes. They highlight the sharp difference between an ideal world in which good

always triumphs over evil and the real world where that triumph is always a struggle.