

Features

ALADDIN'S MAGIC

STANLEY BAXTER TALKS TO THE SENTINEL

According to Stanley Baxter, "Aladdin", this year's pantomime at the King's Theatre is easily the best he has ever performed in.

Speaking to the Sentinel between shows he said: "This production really is astonishingly good". Aladdin is the only totally new pantomime in the whole of Britain this year.

"All the rest are re-runs. Every sketch in this lavish production is totally new, it really is just unbelievable." Praise indeed from the famous Scottish actor who has performed in 30 pantomimes since 1952 when he played Buttons in "Cinderella". His next panto was Aladdin where he played Wishee Washee.

Stanley Baxter loves pantomime. All the hard work and hours of practice are worth it for a traditional Scottish audience which has been brought up on pantomime and has come to love it.

Advance box office sales exceed £200,000 and with most seats sold before next year this production looks set to smash the records. It is a production of the highest standard and quality.

"We had a great first night and if that's anything go by it should be a great success. Scottish audiences are really great and it makes it all worth while. That's why I am back here in Edinburgh for the third year but it's hard work and we couldn't do it for more than the 11 weeks," enthused Stanley.

Is it the Christmas spirit that makes panto so special and so well liked?

"It's glamorous for the whole 11 weeks but I suppose there is a little extra feeling in the air on Christmas night. The Scottish audience is bigger than anywhere in Britain and while every audience is that little bit different, the atmosphere is always good."

If a Scot makes it to the top in any walk of life he or she can guarantee adulation from a Scottish public hungry for heroes. It doesn't really matter where - Billy Connolly, Stanley Baxter on stage, Dennis Law, Kenny Dalglish on the football park or Midge Ure, Rod Stewart in the charts. When they return to home territory they are treated like gods. By the same token, the Scots public isn't easily taken in and any fall in standard carries a guarantee of instant chopped meat. The list of "stars" who made it to the top but ended up in some obscure meat factory is endless. I won't begin to mention them because the list is so embarrassingly long. Ally McLeod might be one though. Who?

interview

Some say Baxter is a total perfectionist, practicing and practicing until the product is perfect, willing only to give the paying audiences his very best.

Not having worked with him I couldn't say but he hasn't received many bad notices in his long acting career.

Waiting and watching the man, organise some of the most pushy news photographers in Scotland at the press photocall earlier this month was perfection in itself. A total professional at work. And that's why he will remain at the top until he decides to retire - he's a working professional with bags of talent.

We were at the photocall to try and snatch a few words for our features editor. We had tried to fix up an interview weeks earlier through the promoters, Edinburgh District Council.

"We've tried and it can't be done", they told us, "he's not very keen on the media anyway".

We decided to 'brass neck it' and it worked. Stanley agreed to chat to us for a few minutes in his dressing room, back stage.

The District Council were right about the press. "I hate the tabloids, all about the vicar in the village and all that, it's rubbish," he said.

But, Mr Baxter was kind and friendly to us, enquiring genuinely about our newspaper and Wester Hailes in general.

"Pantomime is about cheering people up at a time of year that's black and dark and at a time of high unemployment and poverty. There is no controversy in panto, no social comment, no left wing or right wing politics; just plain old laughs and I believe there is a role for this in people's lives", he explained.

He is delighted that the governing local authority, Edinburgh District Council, are helping to promote the theatre.



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"I remember paying just 5p to see my first panto and it was the reason for my interest in acting and my career. It is important for any youngster to have a really good first impression of theatre. Panto should be grand to give you that thrill, something you'll never forget. Many of these youngsters will come into theatre as a result."

People sometimes say that Stanley Baxter should do more. Is it that he is frightened to water down what is a perfect routine?

Baxter denies this, saying the number of hours needed to produce a good pantomime and a good T.V. show is staggering.

"I've been working on Aladdin and this year's Christmas special on the Beeb in tandem since February", commented the comedian.

"The pantomime lasts three hours so you can imagine how long it takes to write and then rehearse."

"Each stunt takes about one hour and I play all of the characters so that a programme takes a very long time to make."

After Aladdin finishes, Stanley Baxter heads back down to London to prepare for next year's Christmas special. What about the role of T.V. compared with the stage?

"It's different and you can't get away from the magic of the stage but T.V. has a role too. When you are on T.V. you are doing a very intimate thing with people who might be watching alone. I don't find it chilling at all not playing in front of an audience for that reason. It's a different kind of thrill, I'm watching a jigsaw come together from what just an idea and I know people will enjoy it."

Baxter's theatre and television bears the hallmark of the polished professional and the people love it.

"Hey, how long is this interview going on for - you'll be writing more than the Observer!"

A professional way of telling us that our time was up. Thank you, sir.

Mel Young