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| **Abstract:** | Michael Gattrell has been involved in pantomime for over thirty years. He joined the creative team at Cambridge Arts Theatre in 2020 to direct the Theatre’s pantomime show, *Dame Trott’s Panto Palaver.* Gattrell speaks about his career in theatre and the particular experience of directing pantomime at the Arts Theatre in the pandemic era. |
| **Key words:** | Pantomime, The Capitol Horsham, Christopher Biggins, Simon Fielding, Michael Kirk, Basingstoke The Anvil, Keith Chegwin, Bath Theatre Royal, Nigel Havers, Bill Ward, Harriet Thorpe, Wendy Peters, Dave Murphy, Chris Davis |
| **File** |  |
| **00.00.00** | Gattrell introduces himself as a theatrical agent with an office in St Martin’s Lane London, he lives in Chichester and works between the two locations. |
| **00.00.41** | **Could you tell me about your first memory of the Cambridge Arts Theatre?** |
|  | In 1999, Gattrell was a big fan of Christopher Biggins, who was part of the pantomime production at Cambridge Arts Theatre. Gattrell went along to see the pantomime with his friend Tim and met some others involved in the production Simon Fielding, Michael Kirk. The production was *Mother Goose*. He loved Cambridge and loved the Arts Theatre. Since then, he has tried to support pantomime at Cambridge. He wants to support friends involved in productions, and to support the Theatre (Gattrell explains he managed a Theatre for many years at Horsham and it is good to show support). |
| **00:02:18** | **And it is interesting your first memory of the Arts Theatre is a pantomime because in recent years you have directed our annual pantomime, how did that come about?** |
|  | Gattrell explains in 2013, he left venue managing and went to work for a big producer in London but he missed panto! (He used to write, direct, and produce the pantomime at Horsham). After he left this job, he took some time out, a producer at Basingstoke The Anvil said he was looking for a director for their pantomime and Gattrell took the job, the production was *Cinderella*. Keith Chegwin starred as Buttons. The following year he was offered a job at Malvern, but this did not work out and he instead ended up at Bath Theatre Royal. He directed pantomime there was five years, over the years Nigel Havers, Bill Ward, Harriet Thorpe, Wendy Peters starred. His last production was *Beauty and Beast*. Then one year Bath Theatre Royal decided they would not do a pantomime but would instead do a comedy production. Where Gattrell is based in London, Dave Murphy Chief Executive of Cambridge Arts Theatre has the office next door… in October 2020 Murphy asked if Gattrell would come and direct at the Arts Theatre, the production was *Dame Trott’s Panto Palaver.* Gattrell returned to the Arts Theatre in 2021 for a production of *Aladdin* and has already confirmed he will direct again in 2022. |
| **00.05.15** | **We should mention that being hired to direct a pantomime in October is not typical! And this was all because of COVID 19?** [*In 2020, production of the pantomime at the Arts Theatre was significantly delayed because of unknowns around the COVID 19 pandemic and associated government restrictions*]. |
|  | ‘We were running off the seat of our pants’. Gattrell explains the challenges and risks of producing a pantomime at this time. He reflects many of the creative team were those known to the Theatre and that Dave Murphy wanted to support the creatives, many of whom who had had limited work over the pandemic. The creative team arrived on Sunday, for rehearsal on Monday, the pantomime was due to open on Friday or Saturday the same week. On Sunday night there were pizzas and beer, and the company went straight into rehearsal at the Theatre (not at the church hall where they normally rehearse). There was a script and music to rewrite and there was a reduced company with a smaller ensemble. COVID did affect the company and unfortunately the show was forced to close on Christmas eve [*when Cambridge returned to Tier 4 restrictions*]. Gattrell reflects that the production was something special which will not be seen again. It was unique to Cambridge. He was privileged to be working, when very few venues were hosting pantomimes that year. It was a real team effort. Gattrell reflects that there is a real family feel about the creative team on the Cambridge pantomime and that you get to know people. |
| **00.08.29** | **And what was it like coming back for this last year in 2021?** |
|  | Once again casting was left till the last minute, but the company was diverse which was popular. There was deliberately no star name, it was felt it was not needed. Gattrell reflects that he felt very safe. Both for *Aladdin* and for *Dame Trott’s Panto Palaver* there was a strict testing regime supported by a local laboratory [*CTL Cambridge Clinical Laboratories*], no other venue had this. There were no child performers as it was feared they might be a breeding ground for germs, although he reflects anyone could have been. Gattrell enjoys spending time in the city when he can, but often even when you are not rehearsing there is plenty to do. He feels looked after at Cambridge – staff and company do work together. |
| **00.11.02** | **Could you talk us through the process of producing a pantomime…?** |
|  | This year, Gattrell met Dave Murphy in February to talk through some potential titles and Murphy decided on Dick Whittington. At Cambridge there are a cycle of titles. They have talked more recently about script and creatives. But they cannot talk about cast until we have a script because it depends on the weight of the characters. Around May, Gattrell will meet some creatives, and then it will be casting. He reflects that they are in a much stronger position this year, than the previous two years because the future of theatre is much more secure, and the venue is fully open. The pantomime should be cast by September. Gattrell will arrive in November and spend three-and-a-bit weeks in Cambridge. He explains that even after the previews the team will continue to tweak and develop the production to get it perfect. He is excited to be doing *Dick Whittington* which he has not done for a number of years, and to have a fresh script and a fresh cast. Gattrell reflects that last year, the audience were wowed by the great vocal abilities of the cast, and so there is a bar set for casting good vocalists this year. |
| **00.14.12** | **Is there anything different about directing at Cambridge Arts Theatre, as supposed to another regional theatre?** |
|  | Gattrell says he approaches it in the same way. He says Cambridge are very hands on, whereas working for a commercial manager they kind of leave you alone. You do not have any scope to make changes later in the production process when working for a commercial producer. He explains that pantomimes are often tailored to their specific regional audiences and Cambridge is no exception. He remembers on the opening night of *Dame Trott’s Panto Palaver*, ‘we just looked at each other and through “wow! We have got to put on a show in lockdown…”’ |
| **00:15:44** | **It would be great to hear more about your career as an agent…?** |
|  | Gattrell explains how leaving school he went to work in a bank, which was a great grounding. He then got a Front of House job at Horsham Theatre. His parents were worried when he left the bank. He worked his way around the venue at Horsham ending as Artistic Director. He explains he particularly likes working with people and solving problems. From here he went to work for a big London producer and then a cinema chain but did not stay there long. Some of the producers he worked with suggested he become an agent. He was introduced to Chris Davis who was looking for a new agent, it worked out and he has worked as an agent for the last seven years. He reflects that the relationship between the actor and the agent is close, and he works very openly with his clients. ‘Communication is an artform’, he remembers how they kept in touch with their clients over the lockdown period. |
| **00:19:14** | **Does your work as an agent influence your work as a director?** |
|  | Gattrell says he treats people respectfully, as he would like to be treated. He explains that last year was his thirtieth year of pantomime, he sees a lot of pantomime, and he relishes the challenge of making panto a bit different. He says that who you cast makes a real difference to a production. Where there is no star, someone steps up to fill that leadership role. |
| **00:22:55** | **A favourite panto?** |
|  | Every production is different. And this keeps it fresh. Gattrell says there are titles, rarely seen that he would like to do in the future but recognises that they are a box office risk. He lists the common pantomime titles *Aladdin,* nobody really does *Babes in the Wood* anymore they do *Robin Hood*, *Cinderella, Dick Whittington*, *Goldilocks, Mother Goose, Jack and the Beanstalk, Peter Pan, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Wizard of Oz*. Some are more story led than others. Gattrell has already spoken with this year’s script writer for the Arts Theatre pantomime. |
| **00:23:38** | **What do you think is so important about pantomime as supposed to the other genres of theatre?** |
|  | ‘Panto is for everyone, the family, old and young’. Gattrell remembers watching *Aladdin* last year and enjoying an older couple who were ‘laughing their heads off’. It is an introduction to Theatre for children and young people. |
| **00:25:08** | **What will be the long-term effects of the COVID 19 pandemic on the industry?** |
|  | Gattrell remarks than as an agent he has clients still being pulled off shows because of COVID. He thinks we need to be continually mindful of hygiene. We must support mask wearing if that is what the audience wants. Theatre is a closed environment and so there is a responsibility to be mindful. Ultimately, he believes COVID will become like a cold and we will live with it, but no one really knows. |
| **00:26:27** | **What is your favourite memory of Cambridge Arts Theatre?** |
|  | Gattrell says two memories stand out. The first-time seeing Biggins walk on stage as *Mother Goose.* And the opening night of *Dame Trott’s Panto Palaver.* He reflects that if he did not enjoy directing at the Theatre he would not want to come back. |
|  | **ENDS** |