

Goldilocks and the Three Bears: A Pantomime History

By Simon Sladen, Chair of the UK Pantomime Association



*Lydia Thompson (Victoria & Albert
Museum)*



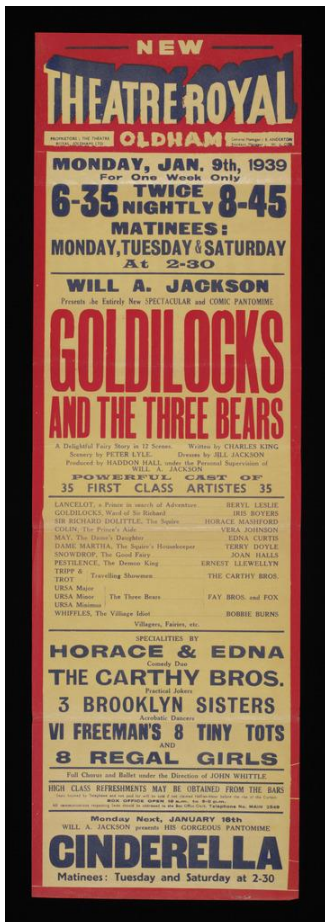
*1839 adaptation of Southey's telling
of the tale*

Once Upon a Pantomime

Goldilocks and the Three bears might not be one of the most well-known pantomimes, but it has a history stretching back almost two hundred years. Believed to have its origins in a Scottish folktale that sees a vixen get eaten after trespassing in a bears' den, the first published version appeared in 1837 and told the tale of *The Three Bears* being visited by a little old woman who escaped discovery by jumping out a window. From fox to old lady, it wasn't until 1849 that that our heroine appeared as a little girl, but not by that name. It took another 55 years for Silver Hair, Silver-Locks and Golden Hair to evolve into the Goldilocks we know today.

Pantomime embraced the narrative as early as 1853 when *Harlequin and The Three Bears; or, Little Silver Hair and the Fairies* was staged at the Haymarket Theatre, London. The production featured well known performer **Lydia Thompson** as Little Silverhair and became the first pantomime to ever be produced at the venue. Even **W. S. Gilbert** of Gilbert and Sullivan fame contributed to the genre

with his version in 1867 and prolific producers **Howard and Wyndham** staged the title nine times across the UK between 1925 and 1945. A tale with few key narrative points, pantomime writers have sought a number of ways to develop the story into a two-act show. Newspaper *The Scotsman* described the plot to Howard and Wyndham’s inaugural *Goldilocks* as including “performing bears who were spirited away” in a production that saw the Dame become their housekeeper, a villainous suitor named Mysterio vie for Goldilocks’ attention, and a comedy sequence aboard a flying double-deck aeroplane. The Oldham Coliseum’s 1939 production featured travelling showmen Tripp and Trot and acrobatic dancers, demonstrating a further affinity with showbusiness that gave birth to our modern telling of the tale, which sets Goldilocks in the frame of two rival circuses thanks to 1980s writer **John Morley**.



Join the Circus

Due to its circus setting, *Goldilocks* has seen many a famous clown as part of its cast from Charlie Cairolì Jr to father and son double-act **Clive Webb** and **Danny Adams**, not forgetting Tweedy the Clown from Giffords Circus. Clowning and comedy are a key part of any pantomime, with the role of the all-important Ringmaster especially written for **Larry Grayson** when he starred in Brighton’s 1970 pantomime, a part later played by fellow camp comics **Frankie Howerd** and **Julian Clary**.

But the Ringmaster isn’t always the master of merriment and doyen of double entendre. From boxing ring to circus ring, **Frank Bruno** played the role for many seasons touring Birmingham, Southend, Wolverhampton, Milton Keynes and Southampton with **Lisa Riley** also taking on the part. When Bruno and Riley played the role, their co-star was none other than **Sooty**, giving those productions four, rather than three bears.

Whilst the bears are usually played by performers in costumes, the Grand Theatre, Swansea's 1953 production featured three live Norwegian bears, with producer **Philip Bernard** retitling his pantomime *Goldilocks and the Three LIVE Bears* on account of using **Mary Chipperfield's** black bears and Canadian bear cubs in his shows. In addition to bears, audiences could also witness pigeons, poodles and even tigers! However, one of the most famous faces to play a "scene stealing" Baby Bear was a twelve-year-old **Sheridan Smith** at the Plowright Theatre, Scunthorpe back in 1994.

For **Tommy Steele**, his 1957 pantomime debut in the title at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool is one he certainly won't forget after students from the local University threw paper darts, fruit and toilet paper at the stage. The police were called and the show was cancelled after the first act, with reports of the students rustling papers throughout and shouting "I prefer Elvis!" Widely acknowledged as Britain's first rock and roll star, Steele played a young boy who wanted to join the travelling circus and even performed a rock and roll number with the Three Bears.

Goldilocks will also forever be a memorable pantomime for dancer **Wayne Sleep** as it marked his Dame debut. After Russell Hunter fell ill in His Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen's 1988 pantomime, Sleep donned frocks for the first time in a production that also featured Victor Spinetti and international circus stars The Halfwits.

Often the owner of the circus, the pantomime Dame has taken many names from Dame Martha to Mrs Diddlum, Sadie Spangle to Brenda Jolly, and Gertie Gemmell to Betty Barnum. Whilst John Inman, Dick Emery and Gary Wilmot have all graced the stage in the role, *Goldilocks* has also had its fair share of female Dames including Dora Bryan, Bella Emberg and Su Pollard.



Above and right: Photos from the 1997 production at the Birmingham Hippodrome





Peter Butterworth as the Dame in Goldilocks

Roll Up! Roll Up!

Goldilocks has seen somewhat of a resurgence in recent years since the London Palladium announced the title as their 2019 pantomime.

The London Palladium was the perfect setting to revive *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and bring it back into Pantoland's consciousness. Not only did Hengler's Grand Cirque occupy the original site of the theatre, but musical *Barnum* made its West End debut there in 1981. Almost forty years later, 2019 marked the first time *Goldilocks* had ever been presented at the Palladium and 2022 will mark the first time it has been seen at Richmond Theatre, bought to the stage by the same team behind the London Palladium's prestigious panto.

With Matt Baker reprising the role he originated at the Palladium and panto Dame extraordinaire Nigel Ellacott as Betty Barnum, Richmond Theatre looks set to present its most spectacular pantomime to date!