What is a pantomime?

Pantomimes are loud, brightly coloured shows, with singing, dancing and general craziness. Most are based on traditional tales, such as Cinderella or Jack and the Beanstalk. Every pantomime has certain stock characters, with many of the main parts given to TV stars.

The absolute star of every panto is the dame, always played by a man in drag. The dame is usually a widow, and she will pick on a man in the front row of the audience to flirt with and make jokes about.

The principal boy is the hero of the panto and is traditionally played by a young woman in tights, thigh boots and a short costume. At the end of the play, he marries the principal girl, and they both live happily ever after.

The evil villain always enters from stage left (the right from the audience’s point of view), whereas the good fairy always comes on from stage right. This tradition dates back to medieval times, when the two sides of the stage represented heaven and hell.

The pantomime horse (or cow or camel) is played by two actors in one costume. Like all the two-legged characters, the animal has to dance in the grand finale, which is usually a wedding scene.
Why is a panto so much fun?
A panto has a lot of physical comedy, or slapstick: people fall over, fall off ladders, get a foot stuck in a bucket and throw custard pies (paper plates full of shaving foam) at each other. There’s always a chaotic chase scene. There are silly jokes for the kids, and a lot of sexual innuendo and double entendre for the adults, as well as topical jokes and parodies of popular songs.

The audience is expected to participate, too — to boo the baddies, to cheer the goodies and to shout out warnings (“He’s behind you!”) and other stock phrases (“Oh, yes, it is!” and “Oh, no, it isn’t!”).

At the end, there’s always a singalong, with the audience divided into two teams for a singing battle. The audience is rewarded with sweets thrown from the stage — and squirts of water, too.

PRACTICE
Now try the following exercises to practise talking about pantomimes.

Exercise 1
Study the illustration on the opposite page and find the words defined below.

A. The area where the actors perform is the ..................................................
B. The people who watch the pantomime are the ..................................................
C. Clothes worn by an actor are a .................................................................
D. False hair worn by an actor is a ...............................................................

Exercise 2
Match the names of the different panto characters (1–4) to their descriptions (A–D).

A. She uses her magic to help the good characters.
   1. dame
B. It has four legs and can dance.
   2. villain
C. He’s the baddy in the story. Everyone shouts “Boo!” at him.
   3. fairy
D. She’s the absolute star of the panto, always played by a man in a dress.
   4. pantomime horse

Exercise 3
Complete this description of a visit to a pantomime with the correct words from the list.

booed | innuendo | participation | picked on | silly | singalong

We had a great time at the panto. We were sitting in the front row, and poor Mike was (A) ................. by the dame. There was a lot of sexual (B) ................., but there were also plenty of (C) ................. jokes to make the kids laugh. The audience (D) ................. was wonderful: we (E) ................. the villain and joined in the (F) ................. at the end.

Answers
1. steep
2. audience
3. costume
4. wig
5. picked on
6. silly
7. participation
8. booed
9. singalong
10. Dame
11. villain
12. fairy
13. pantomime horse