



Why pushing back our pantomime, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, to 2022 is our only real option.

With regret, we have decided to postpone our 2021 pantomime, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, by a year. By now, in any normal year, we would have already started our show marketing and be organising our auditions that traditionally take place in early September. But, as we all know, COVID-19 and the restrictions that are in place to keep us all safe, has made 2020 anything but a normal year. Far from it.

We understand the importance of pantomime to our cast and crew, their families, our theatre, our audiences and our local community. A uniquely British institution, pantomime is at the very heart of Upstagers during the autumn and winter months, with families coming together to make memories to remember forever. Our pantomimes allow us to fulfil so much of our stated charitable aims of encouraging young people to participate in the performing arts, to provide a valuable community focus and raise funds for local good causes. It felt particularly important this coming year as we've already had to postpone our planned 2020 summer show, Shrek the Musical, until July 2021 due to the pandemic. As with 'Shrek', we want to reassure everyone that we are not cancelling 'Goldilocks' completely but are *postponing* it for a year. We are also looking at whether there are any alternative performance options open to us and will keep you posted as opportunities develop and progress.

It's only August, isn't this decision a bit premature? Well, we thought we'd explain why we have come to the conclusion that this is our only course of action and the reasoning behind it. The decision has taken months of research, discussions and assessments and was very carefully thought through from a multitude of angles and in collaboration with other individuals and organisations involved. Postponing a production is not a decision to be taken lightly, and we're incredibly disappointed.

Surely it doesn't take that long to prep for panto? Well, quite simply, yes it does. We are constantly planning for pantomimes. Show planning begins 14 months ahead of the performances (so our planning for Goldilocks began well before we had even performed 2020's pantomime, Sinbad!) What title? What dates? What ticket prices? Which set? What props? What style of

artwork? What profile of cast, crew and performers do we need to look for? This pre-production work is done ready for a show to be announced as the previous year's production opens.

The work on our pantomimes really starts to ramp up from July of the year before the production, when our summer show closes. We're fully into the swing of production meetings, casting, scripting, costumes, set, props, musical choices, marketing etc. Of course, this year all of that was massively impacted by COVID-19 and the associated uncertainty, not knowing what new restrictions could be brought in or when existing restrictions will be eased.

We've put an enormous amount of work into researching the Government guidance and health and safety legislation and found these produced an enormous list of barriers to try and solve. For every problem we thought we could find a workaround, several more problems were revealed.

The Government has issued their roadmap for theatre, but it has no timelines. As of August 2020, we have a roadmap of how we might return to reopened theatres and full auditoriums, but there are no dates given. We might start to prep for a full panto show, but then find that our theatre is unable to reopen for a number of reasons, or indeed the whole industry remains closed into 2021. We need guidance on timescales and rules to help us understand how the roadmap might be rolled out. There is a plan, but we won't know when it will be possible to go back into a theatre until November at the earliest, and possibly later than that.

Social distancing just doesn't work for theatre. Current guidelines state that social distancing will remain in place in auditoriums under Phase 4 of the planned return. For our venue, the best estimates mean that capacity would be cut to between 20% and 30% of the norm. Pantomime relies on playing to an average of 70%+ capacities for financial viability. With social distancing, that's just not possible. We can't easily social distance backstage – have you ever been backstage at The King's Hall, or indeed any theatre? If so, you'll know that the space is very limited. At the best of times, it's usually cramped and crowded. Social distancing is impossible.

In addition, to make a venue COVID-19 compliant, it is likely that additional Front of House staffing will be needed for cleaning, monitoring, temperature checking and so on. Some venues are suggesting the cost of their FOH staff and cleaners will triple, further increasing costs, but with less income coming in from ticket revenue. Quite simply, it becomes financially unviable for both the producer and the venue.

But most critically of all, we need to put the health and welfare of our cast, crew and audience members first. If there were to be a breakout of COVID-19 in a theatre and it were to become a 'hot spot' then this could potentially be hugely damaging to the health of the individuals concerned. That is not a risk we're prepared to take.

As it stands, the moment anyone showed any sign of illness, we would have to send them and potentially the whole team working on the show home. We'd be into a scenario of full 'show stop' for up to two weeks if someone were diagnosed with COVID-19 and with a ten day production run that would spell the end of the show.

There is guidance to suggest the cast and crew should go into 'social bubbles' but as well as all the logistical challenges this throws up, this could also mean everyone working on the production have to stay away from their families during the production run. As an amateur youth theatre group this is completely impractical.

Would a COVID-19 era pantomime be fulfilling? We all know that one of the reasons pantomimes are enjoyable as a live theatrical experience is because of the collaborative nature of the shows between the cast and the audience. If an audience had to sit apart from each other and not have the feeling of being all in it together, if they were not able to laugh out loud, shout "he's behind you", have the Dame sit on your knee, experience the auditorium chase or if the cast had to look out at a sparse, socially distanced audience, all with face masks on and not see rows upon rows of smiling faces all joining in with the community song then, putting aside the logistical and financial issues, would it really be worthwhile? We are not convinced it would be. Indeed, would audiences be willing to come? Many health experts believe that there could be a second spike come the winter which may see increased lock down restrictions and reduced 'public gatherings'. It is all so very uncertain.

Pantomime works the same way as any theatrical production. There is a set of pre-production costs and a set of running costs. For a West End production, there is usually a relatively long period of time to recoup the pre-production costs alongside the running costs. For an Upstagers pantomime, we have just nine days to recoup our costs. Can we get the insurance we need? Post-pandemic, some of the usual insurance we take out is not available to us. This makes the financial risk even greater than usual. If we have to stop the show for any reason (local lockdown, one of the cast or crew shows symptoms), the losses we would incur could be crippling with no way of recoupment.

Producing theatre is always a risk – but usually it's a calculated risk and one which has consistent patterns year on year. This year is very different. If we go ahead with pantomime in January 2021, we just won't be able to calculate the risk, either health-wise or financially, and that's not something we can accept. We have a very clear responsibility to make sure Upstagers is able to provide the long-term support for those people in our community who love theatre and to help fuel the passion of local kids for the performing arts once we get through this pandemic.

The loss of our 2021 pantomime will have an enormous effect on lots of people. We are truly sorry that this decision has had to be taken, but please rest assured that a huge amount of work has been and is still going on behind the scenes. What was, at the start of all of this, our worst-case scenario of not producing panto, has now become the safest and best-case scenario. It is safer for us to batten down the hatches, get through this and see you all again as soon as we can and take the short-term pain for long-term gain.

We are sending all our love to everyone who is involved in, performs, loves, creates and/or watches theatre. This year, more than ever, we are one big theatrical family and we will weather this storm and we will come back bigger and stronger than ever later in 2021. We are tremendously excited about our July 2021 production of Shrek the Musical and our team is committed to make this an event fit to usher in a return of Upstagers shows to The King's Hall.

In the meantime, we continue to work behind the scenes, talk to our production partners and monitor the situation. We have loads of ideas for alternative offerings and with the continued support of our members and the local community, we will be teaching kids and entertaining audiences in person again as soon as we safely can.

Take care everyone and stay safe and well.

Sending our best wishes to you all.

John and Andrew

On behalf of The Upstagers Trustees

24th August 2020