



MEET THE CUSTODIANS OF PANTOMIME!

A CONVERSATION WITH STEVE AND SARAH BODEN OF IMAGINE THEATRE

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For many, Pantomime, marks the start of festive celebration, something we begin to think about as the dark nights draw in, but for some it's a world they live and work in 365 days a year!

Husband-and-wife team Sarah and Steve Boden, who run the pantomime and theatre production company Imagine Theatre, share their 'panto land'; How it all began, what inspires them, and their vision as they celebrate their 243rd professional pantomime production.

How it all began

Speaking from their (very sparkly!) purpose-built facility in Coventry with thousands of boxes of chocolates lining the walls ready to be packed into goody bags for lucky audience members, Steve shares how Imagine began:

"In the late 1990s, I worked at the Belgrade Theatre where Iain Lachlan and Will Brenton were creating traditional, wholesome rep style family pantomimes. With fresh scenery and costumes each year, at the end of the season everything would be discarded, a huge waste! Iain, being a canny Scotsman with a big barn outside Banbury, decided to store the sets. He came to me and said, 'I've got some panto scenery sitting in a barn. What should we do with it?' so, we started hiring the sets out to other producers. Soon enough venues started asking, "These are really nice sets. Can you produce our pantos as well?" And we thought "Yeah, we can do that."

What started as a barn full of scenery quickly evolved into a full-blown pantomime production company with the team fast acquiring scenery from other theatres. As the company grew so did Steve's relationship with Sarah who he met in 1999 at the Priory Theatre in Kenilworth. Sarah recalls:

"I had a 'normal' job back then. Steve was involved in the creative side of things, in theatre and pantos. Our paths didn't really cross much at first. I was performing, and he was behind the scenes. It wasn't until later, after I returned from a job in Cambridge, that Steve cast me in a production of Nunsense, and the rest is history. We got married in 2002".

A turning point came when Sarah became more involved in Imagine helping Steve with council procurement contracts, something she was experienced with in her 'day' job. Steve remembers:

"This was well out of my comfort zone as a creative! But Sarah understood the business side perfectly. It's the perfect balance of 'show' and 'business'. Our skill sets complement each other"

Sarah agrees: *"It's a great balance because we both understand and respect what the other brings to the table. It's really been the foundation of Imagine's growth – Natural and gradual".*

A few years later Sarah joined Imagine full time, and in 2009 the couple took on sole ownership of the company. Still working alongside Iain and Will to this day, *"This is when Imagine literally became a family business"* Steve notes.

Fast forward to 2023, after a period of exponential growth and Imagine teamed up with Trafalgar Entertainment, a company who share a synergy with Imagine, not least as a family business, also run by a husband-and-wife team, Howard Panter and Rosemary Squire. Steve describes this partnership as *"The perfect fit"* and a natural step toward expansion and bringing even more joy to an even wider audience.



Life in 'Pantoland'

This upcoming season will see Imagine work on over 40 shows across the UK, supplying everything from a single prop through to the staging of entire productions.

But what is it like to live in Panto land 24/7... 365 days a year? Steve explains:

"It's hard work. For us, panto is not just about Christmas; it's a big operation that requires a huge amount of planning and logistics year-round. We have an extraordinarily dedicated team giving it 100% every day of the year. But we do it because we love it. It's fun, a bit mad and often very silly!"

Sarah adds with a laugh: *"We spend most of the year finding glitter everywhere. But we wouldn't want to do it with anyone else by our sides. It's an adventure, and though it can be exhausting, seeing families come together to enjoy the show is so rewarding and makes it all worthwhile"*

In the past two years, Imagine Theatre has received 20 nominations from the UK Pantomime Association Awards, winning five, including Best Set and Best Pantomime (over 900 seats). Steve believes their ongoing success comes from their passion for pantomime, storytelling and dedication to family values:

"Family is central to everything we do. Not just in our own lives but it's on the bones of our business too. Our team, from cast to crew are part of our extended family. Everyone feels a sense of ownership and belonging"

With a core team of 30 staff growing to over 500 during panto season Imagine truly operates like one large family. Sarah agrees:

"We have built wonderful friendships over the years. When we walk into a venue, it's wonderful to be greeted by familiar faces, even in our audiences. We are so lucky to work with such dedicated and talented people working in partnership with us, across the whole of the UK."

Family Values and Inclusivity

It seems fitting then, that Imagine is committed to producing the shows which help to bring families together and create magical memories. Steve explains:

"Our ethos is about strong storytelling combined with high-quality production values. We create shows that are accessible to everyone, whether you're 5 or 105, you can enjoy them together as a family. It's important to us that any child can sit with their grandparents and that everyone enjoys the show. We embrace spectacular family-friendly pantomimes, where everyone can have fun!"

Championing family values and inclusivity, Steve and Sarah themselves often go out of their way to go the extra mile. Sarah laughs *"For our Santa shows we've personally driven across the country to deliver goody bags when we were running short to make sure every child gets a gift. No one is left out!"*

As one of the few large-scale panto producers to host open auditions for youngsters Imagine's commitment to inclusivity is clear. Steve adds:

"We want to live our values, not just talk about them. We believe in giving young performers a chance to grow. We want to nurture the next generation of panto professionals, both on and off the stage. A lot of the people we've worked with have grown with us, from being in the junior ensemble to becoming lead actors. It's incredibly rewarding to see that progression"

The couple see the role of Imagine as being one of the current custodians of panto, passing on these values to the next generation, helping to ensure that panto has a long and fruitful future for generations to come. Sarah believes there will always be a young passionate panto enthusiast ready to take the baton:

"I have no doubt there is another young Steve Boden standing waiting in the wings, who has the same passion for panto as we do, we want to nurture this talent!"



Looking Forward

Imagine is committed to keeping the much-loved tradition of panto alive. Their shows continue to bring our favourite fairytales and traditional panto characters to life, in shows brimming with all the panto ingredients that families across generations love; song, dance, comedy, audience interaction and slish scenes. But they also embrace innovation. As Sarah explains:

“Panto is so steeped in history and the traditional panto conventions like “It’s behind you!” and the ghost gags will always be there. They are what people expect and love and long may that continue. But evolving with the times is key to keeping the art form alive and relevant”

For Imagine this evolution has included the introduction of their state of the art, award winning digital sets five years ago, which have taken the panto world by storm winning accolades from audiences and critics alike. Steve explains:

“This kind of new technology has allowed us to enhance the experience for a new generation, while keeping the heart of Panto intact through the core elements of storytelling whilst embracing technology which feels very current and accessible.

As custodians of the much-loved tradition Steve and Sarah both feel privileged to be part of the magical, fun-filled world of pantomime. Steve concludes:

“Pantomime is something we both love and cherish. It brings so much joy and brings families together at the most magical time of the year, creating long lasting memories, laughing together and enjoying an experience that only live theatre can achieve. We want everyone, no matter their age or background, to feel like they’re back to being six years old again for those two hours. If we’ve achieved that, we’ve done our job”

Find out more about Imagine Theatre’s spectacular star-studded pantomime season at www.imaginetheatre.co.uk

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