

## Show and Tell: Panto, the Perfect Pressure-Free Holiday Tradition - ParentMap

Thursday, October 30 2014, 1:21 PM

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## Show and Tell: Panto, the Perfect Pressure-Free Holiday Tradition

By Gemma Alexander



Men dressed as women, women dressed as men, humans dressed as animals, and Richard Whittington, a turn-of-the-fifteenth-century London mayor. What does all this have to do with a family Christmas? On the surface, about as much as British Pantomime has to do with mimes – which is basically nothing. But panto theater is an old British holiday tradition, and the folk tale [Dick Whittington and His Cat](#), which Fremont Players is staging this year, is a panto classic.

For those unfamiliar with the genre, panto is a **rowdy, family theater where interaction between the actors and the audience** – especially the kids – generates most of the energy of the performance. While audience members are encouraged to scream and shout, booing the villain, cheering the hero, and especially warning the actors when someone is behind them, the theater company is subject to a strict set of rules:

1. The story must be loosely based on a familiar folk or fairy tale.
2. There must be a fairy and an animal in the cast of characters.
3. There must be cross-dressed actors.
4. There must be slapstick for the children.
5. There must be adult humor (nudge nudge, wink wink) for their parents.
6. There is no fourth wall.

The information in a regular theater review does not cover what is most important about a panto. You don't need a reviewer to tell you that the sets will be simple, the costumes thrived. The performances will not be nuanced and the story will only make a little sense.



What you might not know is that trying to warn a stage full of actors that a **ghost is right behind them will make dozens of children lose the power of speech** and dissolve into near hysterical shrieking. The shrieks will almost be drowned out by the waves of their parents' laughter. Parents will be challenged to choose between **holding their sides as they double up in laughter and holding their beer**.

Because the Fremont Players present their panto at Hale's Palladium, which is connected to the Hale's Ales brewpub, concessions include popcorn, pretzels, brats (sausages, not children), and beer. Shows are conveniently scheduled around dinner time, although reservations are recommended to get a table at Hale's on performance nights. Parents sit on folding chairs arranged in theater style while children congregate on the floor in front of the elevated stage, and rarely remain seated. A converted warehouse, the Palladium can be a little cold inside, so a little bit of jumping around is a good thing. Performers join the audience for pictures and Q&A after the show.



Many parents who are driven to distraction by their kids' bickering will find themselves gleefully arguing with the villain, "Oh, yes it is!" "Oh, no it isn't!" because at a panto regular rules of behavior are turned upside down. It doesn't really have anything to do with Christmas except that Christmas-time is when it happens. It's a season loaded with traditions, but perhaps more than any other time of year, Christmas benefits from a **pressure-free tradition that brings families together** without elevated expectations or special rules.

It only took one panto for my family to know the Fremont Players were going to become a traditional part of our Christmas. This year, you might want to include Dick Whittington in yours.

### If you go ...

**Where:** The Fremont Players' *[Dick Whittington and his Cat](#)* is being staged at [Hale's Palladium](#), 4301 Leary Way N.W., Seattle.

**When:** Through January 5; Saturdays 4 p.m. and 7:30 pm; Sundays 1 p.m. and 4 p.m.

**Tickets:** \$7 children 12 and under and seniors 65+; adults \$13. Tickets are available through [Brown Paper Tickets](#).

**About the author:** *Gemma Alexander lives and writes in Seattle, where it's easy to make the arts part of family life. Pacific Northwest Ballet's Nutcracker is her family's oldest holiday arts tradition; the Fremont Players' panto is their newest. She blogs at [gemmadealexander.wordpress.com](http://gemmadealexander.wordpress.com) and tweets [@gemmadeetweet](https://twitter.com/gemmadeetweet)*

December 11, 2013