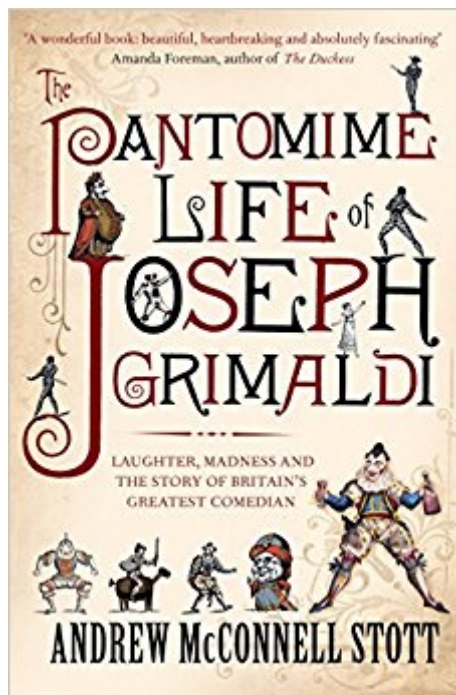




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# The Pantomime Life Of Joseph Grimaldi: Laughter, Madness And The Story Of Britain's Greatest Comedian



## Synopsis

The son of a deranged Italian immigrant, Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837) was the most celebrated of English clowns. The first to use white-face make-up and wear outrageous coloured clothes, he completely transformed the role of the Clown in the pantomime with a look as iconic as Chaplin's tramp or Tommy Cooper's magician. One of the first celebrity comedians, his friends included Lord Byron and the actor Edmund Kean, and his memoirs were edited by the young Charles Dickens. But underneath the stage paint, Grimaldi struggled with depression and his life was blighted with tragedy. His first wife died in childbirth and his son would go on to drink himself to death. The outward joy and tomfoolery of his performances masked a dark and depressing personal life, and instituted the modern figure of the glum, brooding comedian. Joseph Grimaldi left an indelible mark on the English theatre and the performing arts, but his legacy is one of human struggle, battling demons and giving it his all in the face of adversity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A round of applause is due to this exuberant, impassioned portrait, for bringing the great Grimaldi, 'Joey the Clown', into the limelight again (Jenny Uglow Observer) This interesting and entertaining book gives a real insight into how much professional comedy has changed over the last 250 years, and how much it hasn't changed (Frank Skinner) McConnell Stott's engaging book...presents a fantastic panorama of stage history, tracing how pantomime rose to be the most popular British art form at a time when the rest of Europe was convulsed by the Napoleonic wars (The Sunday Times) Fascinating, informative and compelling, this is essential reading for lovers of theatre and

comedy (Waterstones Book Quarterly) Always vivacious and engaged, Stott's writing is earthed in research that gives resonance to the amplitude of detail he provides, tactfully tucking away documentation of sources in endnotes that are a pleasure in themselves (Jennie Renton Sunday Herald) The biographer once did a comic turn himself and it animates his account. Stott doesn't just bring the man to painful life but his world as well (Scottish Review of Books) Superb (The Telegraph Review) Sad though his decline was, his story, as McConnell Stott tells it, conveys an overwhelming impression of verve and ingenuity. . . [McConnell Stott] recounts these wonders with infectious brio (John Carey The Sunday Times) Stott has had fun with this life (Irish Times) [A] great big Christmas pudding of a book, almost over-stuffed with rich and colourful life (Simon Callow Guardian 'Book of the week') As a portrait of London life in all its mutinous and anarchic variety this book would be hard to beat (Spectator) Grimaldi's is a story of comedy mixed with pathos, endurance with absurdity. It is exceptionally well told here (Sam Leith Daily Mail) In this attractively written, well-illustrated and well-researched biography Andrew Stott brings this extraordinary genius vividly before us, in the process richly evoking the tumultuous life of the London theatre (Michael Slater Literary Review) Rich in detail... [Stott] succeeds in evoking the London theatrical world of the time in all its riotous energy (Patrick O'Connor Times Literary Supplement) A wonderful book: beautiful, heartbreaking and absolutely fascinating (Amanda Foreman author of The Duchess) Splendid (Sunday Telegraph) A round of applause is due this exuberant portrait for bringing Grimaldi into the limelight again (Observer New Review) Full of wonderful descriptions of how this manic yet poignant clown beat off competition ... to be the "supreme comic being, part child, part nightmare" (Guardian Review) A dazzling yarn (The Independent)

A fascinating history of theatre told through the story of Britain's first ever pantomime clown

Not to put too fine a point upon it: one of the best books ever written about the world of the theatre. A wonderful introduction to the ribald, sleazy, corrupt, energetic and wholly unpredictable Regency. Impeccable research, terrific editing instincts and an eye for the telling anecdote, and at the same time, a sense of pathos, this book chronicles the life and times of Joseph Grimaldi, 1788--1837, the clown who gave his name, Joey, to the practice and profession of clowns ever since. Grimaldi's life has long fascinated this reader; in some ways I have longed for this book for ten years and it did not disappoint. Moreover, the author's skillful, readable weaving of the influence of current events (it was not then history; they lived it) on the lives of the many characters here, on the theatre itself, on the life and more to the point, the livelihoods of troupes of actors, musicians, clowns who broke their

hearts and occasionally their very backs to bring entertainment to a hungry and passionate public. The author's own background as a comic and not a mere academic infuses the narrative with a deep vein of understanding. Even if you care nothing for the Regency, read it as an antidote to Jane Austen's Regency. This book will take you far away and fill you with both delight and sadness. A gem.

Most biographies are so boring and dry. I don't mind scholarly books but I do mind boring books. But this book is excellent. I was so moved by the story of Joe Grimaldi. He was such a likeable person. The book made me long to see him perform. He sacrificed his life for his craft by punishing his body with falls and stunts until he couldn't even stand up. His last performance (he was only in his late 40s) was done from a chair. He sang his "hit song," Hot Codlins. Oh, how I wish I could have been there. I'm grateful that he got a rousing and cheering send-off from the audience. Andrew Stott tells a fascinating story here. I knew zero about pantos. And he really made me fall in love with Joey Grimaldi. P.S. I also recommend the Dickens' edited version of Grimaldi's memoirs.

This truly is an entertaining read - Not only does the book chart the biography of one of England's theatrical inventors but it lays out the history of modern English theater. Grimaldi's story crosses almost half a century and with it we get an insight into how audiences behaved, into the importance of theater as a public space and free speech and also the regulations imposed upon theater as the site of public opinion. Reading this volume alongside the biography of Grimaldi by Charles Dickens shows two related sides of the story. A great read!

Who invented the clown? I had not realized that this was a question with a good answer; surely clowns have been around in some form every since people could laugh. There were funny simpletons and conmen, for instance, in Greek and Roman comedies. But these were not clowns as we know them, in white face with enormous red lips, and in shocking parti-colored clothes, doing mostly wordless pratfalls and pranks within skits, and enduring sadness behind the mask. These characteristics come to us from the archetype clown, someone you probably never heard of but whom everyone in Regency England knew. In *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi: Laughter, Madness and the Story of Britain's Greatest Comedian* (Canongate) by Andrew McConnell Stott, this forgotten figure is brought back, with an appreciation for his fundamental contributions to clowning, comedy, and the role of the comedian within society. Stott's book is a wonderful recreation of the entertainments of the late Georgian age, and an important history of an essential

part of show business. Grimaldi was born into the theater, with a father who insisted on perfect performances and was horrendously abusive if he didn't get them. Grimaldi used the pain to advance his performances. He thought that his knockabout acts were insufficient unless he felt real pain in their fulfillment. He was first seriously injured at age seven, falling through a trapdoor because someone had omitted to cut eyeholes in his costume. The injuries did not stop when he was little, and even the scripted beatings, pratfalls, and leaps gradually wore him away. He could scarcely depend upon his legs to carry him in his mid-forties, but he continued to perform.

Audiences probably didn't know what he was sacrificing for their attention, but attend they did. Stott gives a history of pantomime within the biography, which changed because of Grimaldi's art into a new form as a mix of variety show, acrobatics, ballet, and slapstick, as well as a satirical view of contemporary issues. These were not seasonal Christmas shows for kids, but entertainments enjoyed by royalty or by cobblers, even though (showing how there are always those who refuse to approve of new art forms) *The Times* viewed pantomime as an "alarming symptom of a nation's degeneracy." By the time Grimaldi had taken his most famous roles as Squire Bugle and Clown in *Harlequin and Mother Goose*; or, *The Golden Egg!* of 1806, even *The Times* had come around: Grimaldi, it reported, was received "by JOHN BULL with that clamorous expression of his feelings to which he is accustomed on the view of an old favorite." It is hard to understand completely what all the fuss was about. Perhaps Grimaldi's familiar business of stealing sausages, for instance, had a special tang of humor when there was real hunger within London, and when shoplifters might hang. Much of the rough stage humor came from physical cruelty beyond simple pratfalls. When Stott describes in detail the action within *Mother Goose* (and even gives as an appendix the script), it seems more silly and chaotic than risible. We might not be able to comprehend what was so funny, but even at the time, commentators repeatedly admitted that they could not communicate just what was so sensationally hilarious about a Grimaldi performance. One journalist attempted to review him, but wrote, "We can in no way describe what he does, nor give any idea of the inimitable style in which he keeps up the ball from the beginning to the end." You had to be there, I guess, and that's never going to happen. That we a couple of centuries later cannot comprehend all of Grimaldi's showmanship does not make Stott's book any less fascinating. In addition to the life of the protagonist, the book's examination of the theater of the times, its fashions and rivalries, makes it a valuable portrait of the pattern of entertainment of the age. After Grimaldi died, the pantomime fashion for clowning subsided, and clowns found their employment in the equestrian ring - in other words, the circus. Stott's picture is of an influential artist, "the first great experiment in comic persona," and Grimaldi did not just bequeath whiteface and pratfalls to his

successors. He had a tough life, not only with physical pains but with his horrific upbringing, his losing a beloved first wife, his outliving his one son, and his being repeatedly betrayed by those he trusted. He took these demons and battled them onstage with showmanship and humor, initiating a classic pattern or tradition of the rueful clown followed by Charlie Chaplin, Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, and many others.

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