

## THEATRICAL COSMETICS: MAKING FACE, MAKING “RACE”

*By Jessica Clark*



In the world of British theatre, nothing marks the holiday season like the annual pantomime. A traditional panto features all the requisite elements of family entertainment: a wicked villain, slapstick that delights both young and old, and, perhaps most importantly, the archetypal dame, a male actor in female costume. While all panto characters wear some form of makeup, the pantomime dame’s overdrawn brows, gaudy eye shadow, and exaggerated lips are especially emblematic of this particular theatrical form. Despite evoking feminine beauty traits, the dame is embellished to the point of farce.

20 Theatrical makeup like that of the Dame has a long history in the Anglo world, dating back to Elizabethan productions on the south shore of the Thames. By the late nineteenth century, actors created their stage looks using greasepaint, a major development in modern theatrical makeup. Greasepaint was a German innovation created and refined by two different theatre men. Endeavouring to conceal the seam of his wig in the 1860s, Carl Baudin of the Leipziger Stadt Theatre first mixed a concoction of yellow ochre, zinc white, vermillion, and lard. By 1873, Ludwig Leichner, a Berlin chemist who moonlighted as an opera singer, marketed a stick greasepaint that would become ubiquitous in the theatre world.

30 But what did theatrical performers use before the invention and marketing of commercial greasepaint? Actors relied on a range of time-honoured techniques to provide coverage and illumination in the glare of nineteenth-century footlights. At times, common cosmetics were used to fashion looks for the stage: vermillion for rouging the cheeks, Indian ink for contouring the eyes or eyebrows, and violet powder for refining the complexion. But it was also possible to alter recipes for run-of-the-mill paints to make them suitable for the theatre. For example, “Rouge de Theatre” was created from “Rouge Vegetal” – a natural concoction of safflowers and carbonate of soda – by adding mucilage of gum tragacanth, which hardened the rouge into a dry, vivid powder.

40 In other cases, actors relied on ingredients better suited to the chemist’s laboratory than a dressing room. No actor’s makeup kit was without powders like dry whiting (finely powdered chalk), burnt umber (calcified brown earth used as a pigment), and fuller’s earth (a hydrous silicate of alumina). Actors mixed such powders with grease or lard to create vibrant unguents, which they applied to the face. By the mid-nineteenth century, enterprising businessmen sold these powders as part of elaborate “Make-Up Boxes,” but individual ingredients were as readily available at the local druggist.

Yet, theatrical powders and paints were not merely used to brighten the cheeks and highlight the lips. English theatrical guides of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries highlight other, problematic cosmetic practices that were, until quite recently, common in the Anglo theatre tradition. White actors dominated the profession and relied on makeup to “transform” into characters of different ethnicities. Theatrical guides from the period foreground this history, offering detailed instructions on “making up” the Othered face. Guides included step-by-step processes for creating “the distinctive colourings of the English, Italians, Japanese, Indians, or Africans,” simultaneously eliding race, nationality, and ethnicity.

Cosmetic recipes and techniques were key to fashioning these stereotyped “national” looks. To create “Indian” characters, for example, actors mixed lard with a pigment known as “Mongolian” to produce a light brown colour for the face and hands (“Mulattoes may be treated in the same matter,” suggested one American author). To portray black characters, actors used lumps of burnt cork “as large as a hazel nut,” which were reduced with water and applied to the face with both hands. By the early twentieth century, the racial underpinnings of theatrical makeup were codified in commercial greasepaint sticks; the lightest shade was known as “No. 1: Very pale flesh colour,” while Nos. 18 through 20 were characterized as “East Indian, Hindoos, Filipino, Malays, etc.,” “Japanese,” and “Negroes,” respectively.

Ultimately, theatre functioned as a site of fantasy in the modern Anglo world, whisking audiences away from the drudgery of daily life. Theatrical makeup was central to the construction of this fantasy, and actors became masters at creating illusion via powder and paint. At times, such illusions had the potential to challenge dominant social and gender norms, as in the case of the late-Victorian dame with her pencilled brows. However, as the creation of “national” looks suggests, theatrical makeup also functioned to reify essentialized notions of race and nationality circulating in the Anglo imperial world.

panto	mim (slang)
requisite	nezbytný
overdrawn	přehnaný
gaudy	křiklavý, nevkusný
emblematic	symbolický, typický
embellished	ozdobený, zkrášlený
greasepaint	divadelní makeup
endeavouring	snažící se
to conceal	zakrýt
seam	šev
concoction	směs
vermillion	rumělka
lard	sádlo
to moonlight	pracovat v noci/ na černo/ druhou práci

ubiquitous	všudypřítomný
complexion	pokožka
run-of-the-mill	obyčejný
safflower	saflor
mucilage	klih
burnt umber	pálená umbra
alumina	kysličník hlinitý
unguent	mast
to foreground	zvýraznit
eliding	opomínaný
lumps of burnt cork	hrudky páleného korku
underpinning	podstata, základ
respectively	v tomto pořadí
drudgery	dřina
to reify	zkonkrétnit
essentialized	základní