My first theatrical experience was an excellently vulgar affair. I can't exactly put my finger on what it was I learnt from the North Country comedian Norman Evans, whom, of course, I never met. He so precisely held the mirror up to the manners and essential nature of the majority of the people in his audience; they recognized themselves and laughed. So, life was a comedy after all! Maybe that's what I learnt – not just the distant life of fairy tale and fable, of lords and ladies, princes and princesses, but the life of the streets I lived in. There might even be a happy ending.

I was seven when my parents took me up the long, echoing, gaslit flight of stone steps, which led to the balcony of the Bradford Alhambra, and we found places just behind the limelight man, who operated from the aisle in the middle of the front row. I was soon aware that there were more privileged positions. The two ladies of Kirby's Flying Ballet, who were picked to fly out into the auditorium, only tossed their bunches of violets into the orchestra stalls, and, of course, the pantomime dog couldn't be expected to climb our stone steps and cavort on our perilous heights as he did on the broad, royal blue upholstered ledge of the dress circle below. I imagined that the families who sat on gilt chairs in the eight stage boxes, four boxes on either side, were the owners of 'Brown Muffs' or Busby's, Bradford's two department stores. Or maybe they were happy, well-off families such as the one featured in the Peek Frean's Biscuits poster, enjoying tea (and biscuits, of course), the boy and girl sitting on the carpet before the fire, which blazed in a modern tiled fireplace, always an icon of prosperity and elegance in my mind. They owned a parrot, which sat on a perch in the corner behind an armchair, eyeing the biscuits.

Nevertheless, my gallery seat afforded me the best view of Bradford, and indeed of life, I'd ever had – not counting a magnificent range of hills and

mountains bathed in pink and golden light, which had revealed itself one evening a year or two earlier, down the cobbled road at the corner of our street of back-to-backs, soaring up on the other side of the railway lines and beyond Bowling Park. I fully expected to be reaching the foothills next morning and exploring the streets and lanes, where, I imagined, donkeys pulled carts up through quaint mountain villages. I was thrilled that, after all, the great and beautiful world I'd become aware of by repute had turned out to be only a tram ride away. But no; the journey was impossible, as my mother explained when I persuaded her to come out to the corner and look: 'It's only made of clouds and sunset, Edward.'

There was no mistaking the landscapes of the pantomime for reality. Obviously the hills and villages were painted wood and canvas, and so much more magical for that. However, the inhabitants, who talked and danced and sang for us down there in theatrical sunshine, were real enough, and from then on, apart from a day when I wanted to be a plumber, I never wavered in my determination to become one of them.

The plumber's visit deserves a mention, if only because of the potent urban myth that the plumbing profession leads to happy-ever-after prosperity as surely as the plot of a pantomime. When the plumber came, my head and the kitchen sink were on a level; one of those large, shallow glazed-stone troughs it was. Our sole plumbing arrangements were a small, very modern I thought (until it started to leak), chromium gas geyser and a brass cold tap. It was the lead pipe, rising to this tap, that I remember the plumber coming to repair, spreading his tool bag open on the oilcloth covering the stone flagged floor. Watching him use the blow lamp, as he smoothed the new bulbous silvery joint, I thought that maybe I could do such a job one day. This role, for a few days, seemed possible, even desirable. Perhaps there was something *dramatic* in his visit; certainly it

had a beginning, a middle and an end, and good effects – fire and noise and smells – and he left our kitchen changed – a transformation scene, if you like.

I think I must have accepted the curious conventions of pantomime as ordained by God, and still do; failures to honour them disappoint me as much as substitutes for the Authorized King James Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, or guitars and tambourines in place of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. I could never understand why a proper reverent hush failed to descend for the rhyming prologue spoken by the Good Fairy in front of the blue velvet curtain with its great elaborate fringe of heavy gold tassels – what a curtain that was! It was in the civic colours like the buses, but such swank, and in the era of the 'Utility Mark'. It was pre-war, of course; to buy such a curtain new would have taken the entire town's clothing coupons. What, I wondered, could the other children have to chatter about now that the violins were atremble in the dark and this shining creature in white sequined tulle, diamond tiara and ballet shoes, silver wand held aloft, was speaking to us.

The pantomime dog must have been played by an amazingly agile dwarf with excellent timing, but neither he nor any pantomime cow I ever saw was so crass as to unmask and step out of character for the walk-down at the finale – no mere curtain call, but rather a ritual procession ending with the good arrayed in splendour and receiving their reward here on earth. Clad in his tin hat and carrying his rifle, and with his gas mask in a cardboard box slung over his shoulder on a piece of string, the dog practised his Home Guard drill under the supervision of the Dame (played by a man, of course). When he bumped into the gilded proscenium arch and fell back on his bottom with the tin hat over his eyes, naturally the dinner-jacketed man on the percussion, in the right-hand corner of the orchestra pit, accentuated the mishap.

It was Norman Evans as the Dame who unified all the elements – the transformation scenes and Tiller Girls, the Twelve Little Sunbeams, the glamour and dash (and legs!) of Marjorie Manners's Principal Boy. Evans's Dame Trot took them all – and us, stacked in reflected glory from stalls to balcony – as part of the same bothersome motley collection that made up her workaday world. I can see her now, far below in a circle of white light (our man adjusting the hissing limes saw to that), leaning over a bit of painted wall and looking out towards us, talking to an imaginary neighbour.

An exaggerated figure from a child's picture book, larger, more highly coloured than our local life but recognizable as the very stuff of it. Many a time her sisters and cousins had dropped their so similar voices to protect my young years when I passed them, as they gossiped on the corner – ''As she … did she?' I'd seen them calling to one another as they pegged out their washing across the width of the cobbled street. Like her, they talked about cats and custard and Yorkshire pudding, and the price of things. Evans's lines were hardly immortal prose; often they mentioned food and ration books – we only laugh about important things – 'Oo, these grapes are sour, I'll be glad when I've 'ad enough' (I had never seen a grape). And there was always the moment when he slipped and caught his bosom on the top of the wall. 'Oo', he would say, rubbing it, 'that's twice in one week on the same brick!' But how to describe what it is that makes a great clown's slapstick seem to portray something profound about the human condition. His act must have had something universal as well as parochial about it, or how could he have got three rave reviews on Broadway in 1949.

Evans linked the fairy-tale world of the pantomime with the realities of back-to-back houses, washing day, coal-fired coppers and cold taps, and the join

was as seamless and smooth as the well-crafted repair the plumber gave to our rising main. Come to think of it, Norman Evans's work was the genuine popular drama of the kitchen sink, before it achieved 'higher' intellectual status at the Royal Court in Sloane Square a decade later. And why should bags of beans and beanstalks, Aladdin's caves and coaches made from pumpkin seem an incongruous background? The whole centre of Bradford was a cultural architectural fantasy in itself. The Alhambra Theatre may have borne no resemblance to the famous Moorish Palace at Granada, but it had three domes and was entirely faced, top to bottom on its three exposed sides, with washable white terracotta tiles, so as to glow in the soot-black town. In fact it had to be painted mud-colour in the war for that very reason. The mayor, the town clerk and all the humbler clerks worked in a Victorian town hall with a two-hundred-and-twenty-foot clock tower, based on the Campanile of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. The Florentine palace, begun in 1299, had bells in its tower that were rung in differing ways, whether to signify a citizens' call to arms, to make pubic announcements or to summon councillors to meetings. After World War II, Bradford's clock tower had a set of bells less prosaically functional. I used to hear them on my way home across town from grammar school, from one tram stop to another, playing a wide repertoire of tunes, including 'On Ilkla Moor Baht 'at' (something never attempted in Florence). Mind you, they had to stop these musical interludes as the vibrations were endangering the structure, which had been lit by limelight in the week it was officially opened in 1873. Our Wool Exchange was a Venetian Gothic palace, and I'd taken it for granted that my elementary school had medieval motifs in its stonework. Some of the teachers certainly had medieval methods. Torture, mental and physical, was part of the syllabus.

In contrast, the Bradford panto was entirely benign; it was all for our delight, which is what education, in an ideal world, should be. I suppose I thought I had discovered an ideal world, and wonder now how I got through the long year before our next visit to hear those jokes featuring local street names, cracked against fabulous backdrops. Amongst the microscopic patterns in my grey matter, there's one particular trace left by vivid colours. I look down from that gallery seat again and see yellow snakes emerging from a basket, and hear, is it an oboe in the pit? – I still don't know how it was done and I've forgotten why, but I see my mother and father looking down and smiling, and feel the whole audience suffused in the absurd magic of the moment. We were held in the crucible in which the odd elements of our workaday lives were tested and synthesized. The rags-to-riches redemption, symbolized in the glittering costumes worn by our heroes and heroines – our representatives – in their finale walk-down, was the necessary catharsis of comedy.

The price and position of our seats became irrelevant and I still remember the fun and glow of it all – and Evans – as vividly and intimately as any child who might have watched from a gilt chair in a stage box. I wouldn't be surprised to find, on meeting such a child now, sixty-odd years on, vestiges of the sense of kinship and belonging that Evans conjured up between us all so long ago, with the whiff of carbolic and back-street credibility he brought onto that enchanted stage, from which Kirby's Flying Ballet fairies rose in flight and swung towards us, dropping their bunches of violets into the orchestra stalls far below.