

WHITES WONDERS

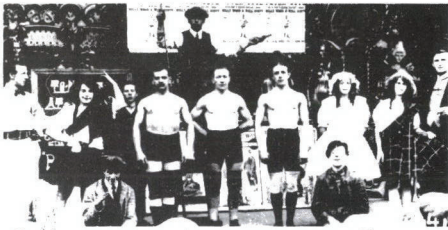
MERVYN HEARD AND COMPANY

★ THIS IS IT ★ SOMETHING WORTH SEEING ★



The Orchard Theatre company presents their fabulous tented show. . .

WILD BEASTS AND LIVING PICTURES



Spectacular and refined
entertainment for all the family!

Travel back in time to the turn of the century and experience all the thrills, spills and unparalleled attractions of Diamond's famous ALL ELECTRIC PALACE OF VARIETIES

See

- ★ Dancing Girls ★ Clowns and acrobats ★
- ★ Dramatic re-enactments of fairground life ★
- ★ Music Hall turns ★ Rampaging Wild Beasts ★
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Amazing Magic Lantern Illusions!

Plus! Plus! Plus! the great, rare, mysterious and magical
Early Cinema Classics

Comedy! Drama! Up-to-date News and Events (circa 1910!) Including:

"The Terrible Tragedy off the Cornish Coast"

"Boxing Fever"

"Murderous Life and Just Execution of Charles Peace"

"The Fatal Sneeze"

— one long scream of uncontrollable laughter from beginning to end

Atmospherically enhanced throughout!

Don't miss this colossal entertainment!

Seeing is believing!

Laugh and dodge the doctor!

This article is in response to Mike Simkin's piece in the December 1984 edition of the *Journal* — 'and a jolly belated response too,' I hear you cry.

It's just that now seems the most apt moment to log this history of 'Whites Wonders'; for two reasons — firstly, because 1987 has been a particularly active and interesting year for the company and, secondly, because, as from the end of November 1987, the name 'Whites Wonders' will pass into legend. Future shows will be billed simply as — 'Mervyn Heard and Company'.

But to begin at the beginning. . .

Although 'Whites Wonders' was formed about ten years ago, my own interest in the lantern and involvement with staging lantern shows, goes back almost twenty years, to 1969, when I was a spotty college student living in Watford. I'd always been interested in theatre, cinema and the history of popular entertainment in general, and was therefore aroused by an article in the *Watford Evening Echo*. This concerned a man who owned a strange device called a 'Magic Lantern', and who spoke of the weird and wonderful public exhibitions once given with such an apparatus in days of yore. Being a somewhat impetuous youth with an inquisitive mind — unencumbered, as yet, by thoughts of love — I determined to find out more. I sought to track this man down — little realising that this was no ordinary man, but none other than Mr Joe Milburn of Hunton Bridge, a founder member of the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain — a weaver of spells — an evil temptor. Indeed, having fallen into his clutches, I was straightway borne up unto an high place — (his front bedroom, I think it was) — where he proceeded to lay before me the riches of his kingdom. That evening, Mr Milburn and his accomplice, Miss Jo Stevens, mesmerised me with whirling patterns, moving-eyed gremlins and magical, miniature windows onto lost worlds of long ago.

Responsible for organising events for the College Rag Week, I invited Joe to produce a Victorian lantern show, which we staged in the College hall, for the edification of the general public. So much enjoyed by all concerned was this entertainment that we promptly embarked on a series of regular shows (at approximately 6 monthly intervals) designed specifically for local OAP clubs. These were ostensibly nostalgic 'picture-concerts' featuring illustrated songs, the tear-jerking ballad-stories of George R. Sims, plus a liberal helping of Music Hall style 'lantern-coolers'.

As time went by, Joe brought together a stable of local performers who came to be known as 'The Sciopticons'. Shows were staged in the Watford area and at the National Film Theatre in London.

I joined in whenever possible, though I was also working as a theatre administrator in London, so

PROGRAMME

THE VICTORIANS

present

A VICTORIAN MAGIC LANTERN SHOW

and

PICTURE CONCERT

at

THE WATFORD COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY

on

MAY 8th 1970 — 7.30 p.m.

PRODUCED BY J. MILBURN

most of my interest had to be left to simmer on the back burner — until 1978.

By then, I was living in Cardiff, married to a professional actress and doing some creative writing for the theatre on my own account. After two plays, I was smitten by the idea of writing a dramatic entertainment centring on the exploits of the kind of old lantern showman who might have operated in the temperance halls and village halls of South Wales in the 1890s.

The character created was 'Norris White' — hence the origin of the title 'Whites Wonders'. The show had a cast of three — my wife Chrissie, another actress, Cherry, and myself — portraying the seedy old reprobate lanternist in question — a part requiring almost no characterisation study on my part at all.

We opened at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff and toured for ten weeks into arts centres, theatres, and — under the patronage of the Welsh Arts Council — into some interesting community venues, such as original miners' halls in the 'Valleys'.

When the tour ended, Chrissie and I realised that if the production were re-written as a two-hander, we could continue to accept bookings in theatres — when not engaged in other work — for base financial gain.

This we did for about four years, until Chrissie and I eventually split up — whence Chrissie got custody of the cats and I got custody of the lantern.

Having parted on amicable grounds, Chrissie and I have continued to give shows, on occasion — though I now use other performers too, constantly changing the style and format to incorporate new ideas and new material.

The lantern has also been an inspiration to me in my other theatre work. In 1983, for example, I produced a play for the Orchard Theatre Company in the





Chrissie & Mervyn

South West of England, which took the form of a tented, fairground Bioscope show – based on the kind of canvas rigs which brought rural audiences their first taste of cinema at the turn of the century.

It featured both outside boardwalk turns and a variety of inside attractions, including archive film and the lantern used to accompany (with chromotropes) Lois Fuller's Skippy Dance and to project illustrated songs of the period. This show, called *Wild Beasts and Living Pictures* toured in the West of England and Wales for eight weeks.

Recently, in March 1987, I put together a show for the New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth, tracing the history of entertainment in the City over the last 100 years. The project was done under the auspices of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama at the Barbican, London, using second-year students. We used lantern images as scene-setters, backdrops and also as an intrinsic element in the dramatic action of the play (whatever that means?).

All in all, over the last ten years, we have devised shows for theatres, arts centres, community centres, schools, colleges, universities, museums, bars, cinemas, tents and cellars.

Some of the more notable organisations we have worked with or for have included the Old Vic, the International Conference on Alcoholism, the Deutsches Filmmuseum and other community cinemas in West Germany, the Welsh Arts Council (researching the early days of cinema in Wales), the Orchard Theatre Company (see above) and the trustees of Bicton Park in East Devon, where we have run three summer seasons of shows in our own little purpose-built lantern theatre.

We've also done quite a bit of work for television, most of which can be divided into two categories: Firstly – short spots on magazine-type programmes. These are always the same. I'll write the interviewer's part for you:

And this is Mr Mervyn Heard who is a magic lanternist. So tell us Mervyn, what is a magic lantern exactly?... (*It's pose this'll fill 3 minutes*)... Super! (*I don't know what he's talking about and don't care*)... Fascinating! And this is all your own collection is it? (*Another crazy*) ...Well, I'm sure we could talk about this all afternoon Mervyn (*Thank God that's over*) ...but unfortunately we have to

leave it there because it's time now to go over to Mr Woo and the 'Fun with a Wok' spot. (OFF AIR) Thank you Mervyn, that was super!

Secondly – there is 'technical advising'. To the uninitiated, this is where someone is directing a tele-play with a lantern in it. Can you cast an eye over the script or, better still, turn up when they shoot the scene and just tell them whether everything is technically and historically correct? You agree to go along, tell them things are definitely *not* right, and you say, 'well, I'm sorry, but it's too late to change things now and, anyway, it looks better this way "on camera"'. They put your name on the credits and you end up with all the irate letters. (Watch out for *A Penny for your Dreams* – soon to be screened on Channel 4).

On the other hand, we have also had two good half-hour TV specials made about us over the years, namely *You Left Me for a Penny* for TSW and a version of *Wild Beasts and Living Pictures* for HTV. If I were being invited to give advice to other showmen – No, I know I'm not, but you'll get it anyway! – I'd say always go for the straight forward, simple approach. The more shows I do the more I'm convinced that the real *magic* for an audience lies in the naive nature of the material, and that humour lies in the constant realisation that what is being presented is dependent, for its success, upon the hands and 'devious' mind of the showman. Remember, it's easy to impress an audience with fabulous slides but the real art is in trying to make a 'star-turn' out of a simple, single-action slipper, or something remarkable out of an unremarkable 'view'. This, to me is far more in keeping with the spirit of original travelling lanternists of a hundred, or even two hundred years ago.

Finally, in our new guise of 'Mervyn Heard and Company', we shall be launching a brand new show for 1988, which we hope will tour to arts centres and theatres around the world and is to be entitled *Ill Lit By Limelight*.

Also next year we shall be making a concerted effort to invade the United States – an old man's dream.

Mervyn Heard

deutsches
filmmuseum
frankfurt am main

Laterna-magica-Schau

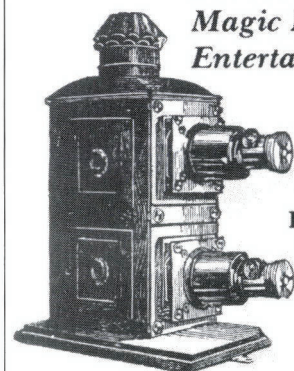
White's Wonders
mit Mervyn Heard and Company, England

Abendvorstellungen am
Samstag, 29. 11. 1986, 21.00 Uhr
Sonntag, 30. 11. 1986, 20.30 Uhr
und für Kinder am
Sonntag, 30. 11. 1986, 15.30 Uhr
Deutsches Filmmuseum
Schaumainkai 41
6000 Frankfurt 70

Shedding Some Light on...



19th Century Magic Lantern Entertainments



MERVYN
HEARD AND
COMPANY