

HOPPETY BOB'S CHRISTMAS TREAT

By a City Man

Earlier this year a member of the public contacted the Magic Lantern Society asking about a picture of a magic lantern show in an online picture library. Within hours Stephen Herbert and Lester Smith had fully answered the question. Stephen provided the story as it first appeared in The Sunday Magazine of 1 January 1869 and Lester had a coloured copy of the picture within the article. The publishers of The Sunday Magazine (Strahan & Co of Ludgate Hill, London) also appear to have published the story in a book Friends and Acquaintances "by the author of 'Episodes in an Obscure Life'" in 1872 (our contact believes the author is Richard Rowe, a Methodist minister – see his article on www.london-overlooked.com). We thought members might enjoy the original story too, taking up the theme of Philip Banham's article on page 1.

As one gets old, present Christmas festivities are chiefly enjoyable as reminders of merrier Christmas meetings in the past – unless there are children amongst the guests, in whose unblunted fun one can get child-like enjoyment by proxy. As I sat at a childless table during the just past Christmas, with middle-aged and old people about me making-believe to be merry in a languidly elephantine fashion – "joking" over mince pies which they could only nibble like mice, through the dread of dyspepsy – I remembered, half-regretfully, a Christmas night I once spent in Raymond's Folly.

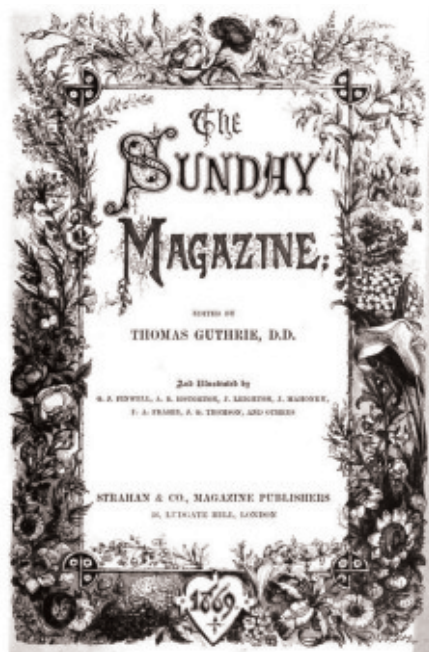
Our common friend the curate had told me that Hoppety Bob intended to give a Christmas treat to his pupils, and I had obtained Bob's permission to be present at it. The independent little fellow, however, stipulated that I should be present only as a guest. I might help him wait upon the children, if I would be so kind, but I must not contribute, pecuniarily, to their entertainment. He had saved up a few shillings for his feast, and wished to have the pleasure of playing sole Amphitryon. "Some of the fathers and mothers," he added, apologetically, "will look in, perhaps, and they'll take it kinder of you to look in like one of themselves, than if you come to help to pay. Poor folks – some poor folks, that is – like to have money giv'em, but they like, too, to feel as if those who've got a bit more money than themselves didn't come amongst 'em jest to giv'em money, as you might give a hungry dog a bone. We're all children of the same God, ain't we sir? And if He's giv' more to some than to others, that's no reason why they should look down on them as is worse off, as if they wasn't the same flesh and blood. You'll excuse me, sir – I know you don't think the worse of me because I don't make much and live in a place like this – but you'll understand, sir, that I'd rather give the little uns their feed myself, an' that we shall all on us be very proud if you'll come an' take you tea with us."

Six o'clock p.m. was the hour at which Hoppety Bob had invited his Christmas guests to assemble. Of course, I took care to get to the Folly at six sharp. It was one of the dreary Christmas nights so common in London – cold, with a marrow-freezing drizzle. In spite of cork-soles and brisk walking, the sticky mud on the pavement turned one's feet to ice. The blazing public-houses were the only bright things to be seen, and, crammed as they were with half-drunken brawlers, theirs was a very dismal brightness. Quite drunken unfortunates were howling snatches of song, and cannoning off from almost every foot-passenger they passed as they waltzed with one another on the rainy side-paths. Rogues were loafing about, rejoicing in the thickening fog. Tall black policemen were standing at corners, glancing up and down; and stolidly meditating, perhaps, on the small amount of merriment to be found in a London constable's Christmas.

In the Folly, as elsewhere, the inhabitants had taken more beer than was good for them (however they might have fared for beef), but Bob's little entertainment was acting outside as well as inside as a promoter of good-will. "There's a swell come to Hoppety's tea-squall," said the bricklayer's labourer with a grin, but he said it with less than his usual crustiness. His own poor little ones were going to take tea at the dwarf's, and, since the treat would cost him nothing, he was graciously pleased to regard their unwonted enjoyment with as much complacency as if he had given it to them.

Bob's room was crammed with youngsters: far more had come to his tea than generally came to his teachings. The guests had brought their own seats. The majority squatted wherever they could find sitting room, like a swarm of frogs. The

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Folly had also contributed a curiously composite tea-service of cracked mugs, cups and saucers – the last also to be used as drinking-vessels. Tea had been made in the big black kettle – another loan – that brooded on the glowing fireplace like a black swan upon its nest. The "cheeks" of the grate had been taken out, but still the kettle covered the whole fire. Bob had just finished cutting bread-and-butter, and sat at his table between two piles of it that almost overtopped his head. He smiled a welcome as he sat there like a ticket-clerk at his pigeon-hole, and beckoned me to a seat of honour which he had reserved for me at his right hand.

"Now then, children," said Bob, "stand up, an' let's sing a blessin'." Up the little things jumped, and managed to stammer after him, in often-extemporised tune and time, and syllables also, –

"Be present at our table, Lord
Be here and everywhere adored;
Thy creatures bless, and grant that we
May feast in Paradise with thee."

"Now then," Bob went on, "here's the grub; so come an' help yourselves an' let the littlest uns come first. Don't be shamefaced; p'r'aps I can find some more when that's gone. And now, sir, p'r'aps you'd kindly help me pour out the tea, an' then we'll have a cup ourselves. I'd have had my pot out for you, but I thought you'd like to take it with the kids."

So Bob put the brown sugar and the blue milk into the motley equipage, and I poured in the tea, and the children nearest the table passed it on to their fellows, and for some minutes the room was like a stable – there was such a loud champing of fodder, and horse-like drinking. Tea over, greasy little lips gratefully sung, –

"We thank thee, Lord, for this our food,
But more because of Jesus' blood;"

And then the table and tea-things were pushed into a corner, and Bob proposed a game of blind-man's buff. Bob volunteered to be blinded first, and pegged about on his crutch like a parched pea. Some of the children had never seen the game played before, but they soon entered into it, and pulled away at the dwarf's coat-tails merrily, taking care, however, not to pull too hard. He caught them by the armful



every minute, but always let them go again, because the little man had made up his mind to catch me. I was soon hemmed in a corner, and bandaged. I was spun round, and my coat was almost pulled off my back; for, as soon as the youngsters had got rid of their shyness (and they were not long in doing that), they exulted greatly in having found so big a play-fellow, and buzzed about me like bees about a bear.

Then we had a game at hunt-the-slipper, in which Bob again delighted the children by his agility and cleverness, catching the slipper in mid-air, and dragging it out of the slyest hiding-places.

An interval of five minutes for a refreshment of an orange a-piece followed, and then came the treat of the evening. "Now, children, I'm going to show you what I expect you've never seen afore," said Bob, with consequential mystery. (He had borrowed a cheap magic-lantern from the shop for which he worked.) "P'r'aps, sir, you'll be kind enough to help me up with the sheet?" When it was up, and the candles were out, and the fire had been shaded, and a mystic circle of light, with dim figures chasing one another, through what looked like gaslit fog, began to bob up and down on the sheet, the children sat with hushed breath, and the grown-up neighbours crowded the window and doorway. A rumour had run like wildfire through the Folly that "Hoppety was a-makin' ghosteses."

He got his focus at last, but at no time were the figures free from blurred outlines; they were clear enough for recognition, however, ere long, and then it was hard to say which were the more pleased, the men and women or the children. The roared equally over the funny slides, which Bob illustrated with a quaint running comment. He had chosen those that were specially adapted to Christmas – in fact his opening one represented a vigorous hand-shaking on the part of two old men – and

he preached pretty little sermons on them, as he pushed his gaudily painted texts across the sheet.

"That's the star in the east a shinin' up above them palms. The oil's bad, an' I can't make it shine as I should like. My talkin's somethin' like that. I want you to love what's right; but, you see, Hoppety's oil ain't first-rate, an' so he can't make you see things as plain as he would do. That's the star, an' them in the long beards an' the blue an' red an' yellow gowns with the things like sheets twisted round their heads, is the wise men as have come all the way from the East to see if they can find Jesus. If wise men like them wanted Him, an' took all that trouble, you may be sure you want Him; for you ain't wise men, are you? But little boys and gals that might be a deal wiser. An' yet He'll let you find Him without a bit of trouble, if you only want to. He loved everybody as nobody ever loved them afore, but He seems to have been partic'lar fond of little boys an' gals. Some on ye has read about that with me – 'Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not,' you know – an' now I'll show you a picture about it. That's the disciples shovin' the kids away; they meant well, but they didn't know no better, though they was such good men. An' that's the Blessed Jesus smilin' so sweetly, with that sun like round his head. It 'ud be a poor picture of His dear face, if the light was ever so good. But that don't matter much. There's some beautiful faces of Jesus you can see, when you get a bit bigger, in the Nashnal Gallery – out West End way; but there ain't one that won't seem but what it could be beautifuller if you've got to love Jesus. Do you read about Jesus in the Testament, an' try to copy what He said an' did. That's the best picture of Him anybody can dror. It'll be a poor thing, after all, like this here; but you can keep on rubbing out, an' tryin' to make it a bit more like.

"An' now I'll show you the stable where Jesus was born, an' put into the manger for a cradle. It looks pretty in the picture, with the hay, and the donkeys, and the bullocks, an' the smart dresses; but I expect it was only a poor sort of place. If the Prince of Wales had been born in the Folly, folks wouldn't ha' believed as he was the Prince of Wales; so it ain't much to be wondered at that them as expected Christ to come into the world with a crown on His head, like, wouldn't believe there could be much in a poor carpenter's son, born in a stable. But yet there He was – just as you might find a sovereign in the mud, an' fancy it only a farden, till you come to change it – that is, if the folks you took it to was honest. If they was honest, though, p'r'aps they'd think you wasn't an' wouldn't give you change. It ain't like that with Jesus Christ. The poorest child as ever was has got a right to lay hold of Him, an' can get full vally for Him.

"An' here's Joseph and Mary an' Jesus, agoin' down into Egypt. They went there, you know, because Herod wanted to kill Jesus afore He'd done what He was sent to do. Don't that sound silly? An' here's Herod's soldiers killin' the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under; an' the poor mothers cryin' as if their hearts would break. That's hard, ain't it? But, p'r'aps, some of them poor little kids would ha' called out 'Crucify Him,' if they'd been left to grow up; an' God loved 'em so that He wouldn't giv' 'em the chance to go wrong. Though I'm fond o' you, an' I think you like me a bit, I know I'd rather see you dead as you are, than gettin' big boys and gals to learn bad ways.

"An' now I'll show you my last picture, and I think it's one o' the prettiest in the lot. Here's the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, that the wild beast mayn't get hold on 'em. There's the little lambs snugglin' up to their mothers as natural as babies. An' there's the angels up in the sky, with their white wings and goold rings round their heads, and them branches like rhubarb-stalks in their hands – palms they're meant for. An' they're singin' jest as you may hear the singers up in the gallery at church, only a deal sweeter, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.' Them was the first Christmas Waits. It'd be nice to hear music like that now in the cold mornings, wouldn't it? But now we'll have our supper, an' sing a verse, an' then we'll say good night, for it's time the little 'uns was in bed."

A bun a-piece for the children was the supper with a sip of elderberry wine, warmed in a vessel like a hollow horn (which the bricklayer's labourer, stirred up to abnormal activity and benevolence, borrowed from the public). And then we sang "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," and the little party broke up; everybody wishing everybody else – our host especially – "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." Custom has dimmed and chilled those cordial words; but the grateful heartiness of the young Folly folk made them leap out again into warm light.

REVIEW

SOMA OR IMAGINING THE BODY

Oona Libens' Scientific Shadow Theatre

Nele Wynants

Oona Libens was the first recipient of the MLS Dick Balzer Award (see TML 21) for Soma that is reviewed in this article. See www.oonalibens.org for more about Oona's work.

Soma is the final work in Oona Libens' trilogy of poetic-scientific performances. It was premiered in Brussels on 30 November 2018, at Working Title Festival, Workspace Brussels and is performed in English.

With *Nausea* (2014), the artist used primitive projection techniques to explore the wonderful and mysterious underwater world. In a style reminiscent of a somewhat dated nature documentary, a radio voice led the audience along the glistening water surface to the dark ocean floor. Along the way, we were told about the most bizarre of marine lifestyles. *Celeste* (2012) offered a journey through the universe. In this work, Libens' shadow theatre was an observatory in which suns, moons, planets and other celestial bodies passed before the telescope. The foundation of this work was at once simple and ultimately refined. In a type of exaggerated marionette theatre, she crafted a fairy universe held together with wires and projection. The result was a complex construction of fragile mechanisms, wheels, ropes, shells, fish hooks and pieces of paper and cardboard. The soundtrack was provided by an old-fashioned tape recorder. As a result, she broke away from the two-dimensional screen to create an analogue virtual reality that occupied the middle ground between an educational documentary and an abstract animation film.

In her latest work *Soma*, the object of study is the micro-cosmos of the human body. The anatomical lecture opens with the skin – 'that touch screen of the human body' – the boundary between inside and outside. Libens visualises the sense of touch literally through the magnified projection of her own hand. Together with her assistant, the shadow actor then dives into the self-made theatre machinery – a team of engineers descending gradually deeper into the human body. We follow the path of a piece of cake that is brought to the mouth by her projected hand, thus beginning its descent through the 'digestive system' – in the laconic words of the artist, 'a live stream through the blood stream'. In several episodes, the eloquent radio narrator informs us about the respiratory system, the immune system, the nervous system and the cognitive system.

The various stages are visualised in real time, based on historical and more recent projection mechanisms, from shadow theatre (as the most primitive form of moving images) to many other analogue projection media and techniques including 16mm film, slide projections and episcopes, which Libens manipulates on stage. She also uses a self-made magic lantern, as it was an exceptionally important instrument in education and entertainment. All these types of early visual media constitute an important source of inspiration for Libens, who uses them once again in dialogue with modern visual techniques and integrates them into her live theatre.

We see this imagery emerge in the combination of analogue techniques. It is at once poetic and instructive, like Libens' 19th-century predecessors who produced scientific theatre that was both educational and spectacular. It is no coincidence that Libens' company is named *Teatro Dondolo*, a reference to a 19th-century company of travelling puppeteers. Libens thus positions herself within a longer tradition of travelling artists whose spectacles introduced scientific experiments, new technologies and a changing visual culture on their travels through towns and cities.

Just consider the many anatomical cabinets that travelled to European fairs, informing audiences about human anatomy and its deviations.¹ These wax-figure cabinets were initially intended to be used for the

