

OBITUARY

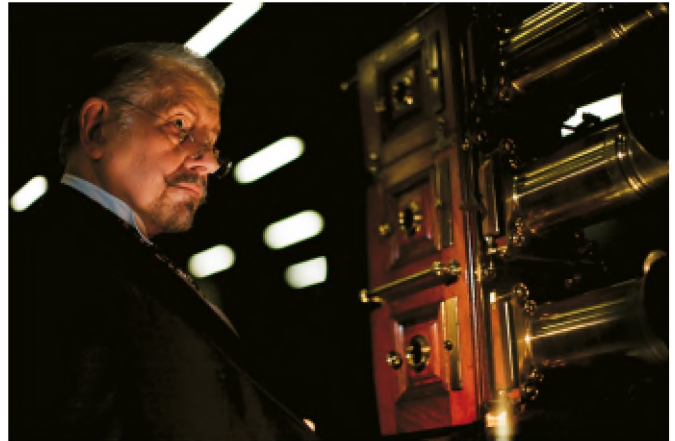
HERMAN BOLLAERT (1929-2021)

Herman Bollaert passed away on 8 April in Ghent at the Care Centre where he spent the last two and a half years of his productive life. The transition in moving there had been great. But it seemed to give him peace of mind as he prepared as thoroughly as he always did for everything, and with great clarity of mind, for his last big step. He had to accept the setbacks of being very old and did this with exemplary resignation. With his son Ditmar, who was by his side in every situation, he was able to visit his house now and then.

It was strange for me to find him without his beloved collection around him. But during the few visits that I was able to make, we had so many rich experiences and golden memories to look back on. The focus was on all aspects of the magic lantern, including our solutions to restoration problems, new historical discoveries, the rehearsals, the long journeys, the performances we were or were not satisfied with and much more. Not to mention the MLS and its members who had a valued place in his life.

From the beginning of the Galantee Show Herman put his shoulder to the wheel and invested enormous energy in this chosen task. To my surprise, I observed somebody who managed to master every part of the challenge. He easily worked until 3:00 am, day after day, and then would rise at 7:30 am as fresh as a daisy and fit as a fiddle. I should record that he was well cared for and supported by his wife Hilde.

Herman had acting and directing training as well as a great deal of theatre experience and he had made films. He assembled and repaired the glasses from Hilde's shop. But the magic lantern brought all these talents together, supplemented by his great skill of invention and his craftsmanship in manufacturing things. A cube that you could turn over without spilling a drop of milk from the glass you put in it? Herman made it and sold it! His room was filled with little finds and devices to



Herman Bollaert and his triunial lantern (photograph © Roger Laute)

improve life, such as a small hidden crescent-shaped shelf that he could fold out from the front of his desk to set up his mini television so he could watch the news from his easy chair. He could build the world from cardboard and fashioned invisible, foldable structures to support his Engelbrecht multi-layered theatrical scenes and so much more. There was always something new to see and experience. Everything that came his way was tested for usability and found an imaginative reuse or a surprising new role.

Once we had survived the stress from the early days of the *Laterna Magica Galantee Show*, we could put things into perspective and have a good laugh at our sometimes wonderful adventures. Since I firmly believe that it is best to remember someone at their greatest moments, I give you this story.

We were invited to perform at a conference for ophthalmologists – big business, big occasion. We were asked to put on our show between the courses of the dinner, just as we did at an MLS Convention. After some initial confusion and chaos, finally the lantern was set up and was waiting for us in the dining room. The guests were approaching. In our changing room Herman opened his suitcase – and stared into it in disbelief. As silence fell we all followed his gaze and then we watched expectantly. Slowly, and with calculated effect, Herman picked up something and held it up in front of him. It was a shirt for a ten-year-old boy – a terrible mistake by the laundry! We all burst out in nervous laughter, but what to do? Half a solution was offered by Jan Desmet, our trumpet player. He had brought an extra shirt, oversized for himself and certainly larger than the shirt Herman still held up, but far too small to cover our Director properly. Our dressing time was almost over and the musicians hurriedly helped Herman into Jan's shirt but the lower buttons proved impossible to fasten around our Director's ample frame!

What next? We looked around quickly to see if there was anything that could save us from this disastrous situation. Somebody pointed to the curtains. The curtains? There was a hanging sash at the edge of the curtain, in the same fabric, with a hook at the top and a tassel at the bottom, about a metre or yard long. Herman immediately understood and was very pleased with this ad hoc solution. Quick! A table near the window, a chair on the table, and the hands of a musician unhooked the sash. Down came the sash, we wrapped it around the Director, tucked the tassel in his trousers at the back and some safety pins did the rest. We were just in time for the introductory words of the chairman.

Now that Herman was on the starting blocks for his opening words, what would happen next? Would he be exposed with his cummerbund of the same fabric of the curtains? It was set quite high and, given his girth, was fairly prominent. Would the safety pins stay closed now that they had so much pressure? We watched nervously wondering how this tour de force would end. As Herman later said haughtily: "Why were you all so anxious? After all I am an actor, am I not?" Indeed he was. With great grace and panache he delivered his



Herman performing in Ghent (photographs © Koen van Loocke)



*The Laterna Magica Galantee Show takes a bow in Paris
(photograph © Cinémathèque française)*

words, his performance enthralling everyone present and no one had an eye for the strange coincidence that Mr Bollaert matched the curtains extraordinarily well. Herman was the unsurpassed master as the inimitable Director of the Laterna Magica Galantee Show!

Shortly after Ditmar's phone call to tell us that his father had passed away, I picked up an arbitrary book from the pile that seems to roam around our house and opened it at random. The book was Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *I Racconti* (*Stories*, 1961) and my eye fell almost immediately on this sentence: "Let us make something beautiful out of it." It could be no coincidence.

This was Herman's adage or mantra, spoken so often after all his efforts to collect, to prepare, to write, to rehearse, to manage us, to manage his life and everything that comes with a performance. It recognises, with some humility, the creative powers that can suddenly take over and it shows awareness that at the end you may or may not entirely succeed but you make the very best of it. This was Herman too. "This is it, let us now make something beautiful out of it." So he did and I hope that from somewhere he is looking back with great satisfaction.

Annet Duller