

ROBERTSON PHANTASMAGORIA SHOW

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Since 2006 I have directed the Sax International Film Festival (Alicante, Valencian Community, Spain). This is a qualifying event for the Goya Awards, the most important film awards in Spain, and at the XVth Festival in July 2021 we premiered a phantasmagoria show based mainly on those made by Étienne-Gaspard Robert (born in Liège 1763 and died in Paris 1837) a.k.a. Robertson, forerunner of cinema and audiovisuals, lanternist and master of phantasmagoria shows, professor of physics, illusionist magician, scientific artist and pioneer in aeronautics.

At the festival we paid tribute to this genius. We presented for the first time the *Obras Completas de Robertson (Complete Works of Robertson)*, until now unpublished in Spanish, and we exhibited original



Part of the exhibition, with phantasmagoria lantern

objects connected with Robertson such as phantasmagoria magic lanterns, slides, diaries, documents, illustrations, translucent optical views, etc. We also premiered our show in which we recreated part of his phantasmagoria show.

The show was based on Robertson's memoirs – a record of his phantasmagoria shows in which he reveals parts of his script, his programme and his methods. The actor Eduardo Patón played the role of Robertson, reciting his original words. The music was provided by a glass harmonica performed by Tsvetelina Lyubenova Avramova. The magic

lanterns and phantasmagoria slides came from my collection, and we included animations from the feature film project *El Arte de la Luz y la Sombra (The Art of Light and Shadow)* in which the François Binetruy collection and the Spanish Film Library, among others, collaborated. Several assistants also participated: Fran Moreno, Pilar Vidal Amoraga, Sofía Herrero Gil and Laura Nolasco Vidal.

In the show we used both original magic lanterns and current projectors with which we managed to give more dynamism at various times. In this way we carried out, like Robertson, double or triple projection, projection on smoke, movement, projection on actors, such as death with a reproduction of a translucent phantasmagorical mask, etc. Robertson in essence recreated a ritual of necromancy and they really were precursors of the audiovisual media. Robertson, thanks to reason and science, could demonstrate the tricks of the magicians, the sibyls and the priests of ancient Egypt who gained prestige through unknown arts.



Actor Eduardo Patón as Robertson



The author's phantasmagoria show



Robertson phantasmagoria show in the remains of the Capucine convent, Paris, 1797

However we should remember that the phantasmagoria show was only part of Robertson's repertoire. He went much further. Previously, you could create recreational physics effects in your own cabinet with optical boxes, peep shows, translucent views, distorting mirrors, anamorphic images, effects with electricity, hydraulics, fire, etc. Robertson performed classical magic alongside an assistant like the magician Cossoul, balancing acts and so on. He also used automata and rooms prepared with illusions such as 'The invisible woman'. On another day Robertson could teach a physics course for women or make a balloon ascent!

In our show we did not have the budget for the balloon ascent – although that would have been very good – and nowadays galvanism using a frog is not seen as ethical, but we were able to make a recreational physics cabinet with translucent optical views, anamorphic images, mirrors, etc. The public could see this, together with objects associated with Robertson from the collection, before the phantasmagoria show. Seen from the present day, phantasmagoria shows are fascinating, inspiring and original gothic horror dramagic audiovisual works, dating back more than two centuries! And just as Robertson signed off, we also ended with his words:

"I have gone through all the phenomena of phantasmagoria. I have revealed to you the secrets of the priests of Memphis and the enlightened ones; I have tried to show you the most hidden of physics, those effects that seemed moments of terror, here is the only truly terrible spectacle, the one that really makes us tremble: strong men, weak, powerful, and subject, credulous or atheistic, beautiful or ugly, here is the fate that is reserved for them, here is what will be one day."



The audience at the author's phantasmagoria show in July 2021



Reproduction of a translucent Robertson phantasmagoria mask



Poster for Robertson's phantasmagoria show in the Capucine convent

The aeronaut Margat riding the deer Zéphyr under the direction of Robertson, 1817

OBRAS COMPLETAS DE ROBERTSON



Étienne-Gaspard Robert y Eugène Roch

Traducción por Gisela Fabre Averós
con la colaboración de Antonio Martínez Galindo

Edición y diseño por
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Eduardo Patón, as Robertson, with the book

The book contains the complete works of Étienne-Gaspard Robert (1763-1837), better known as Robertson, including his memoirs ghostwritten by Eugène Roch, correspondence, other documents and images, many relating to his famous phantasmagoria shows. Robertson was a fascinating, multifaceted and restless personality who became well known for his shows, balloon ascents and scientific lectures. An essay by the editor Miguel Herrero Herrero on the artist and scientist together with colour images from his collection and that of François Binetruy are contained in the book.