

THE GHOST ILLUSION ON THE BIRMINGHAM STAGE, 1863–1900

PART 2: 1875–1900

Allan Sutcliffe

THE ORIGINAL PEPPER'S GHOST COMPANY

After the end of Silvester's season at Holder's Concert Hall on 8 June 1867, the Ghost Illusion does not seem to have been produced in Birmingham again until 26 April 1875, when the 'Original Pepper's Ghost Company' began a short season at the Exchange Rooms. This company made frequent visits to Birmingham until 1900.¹ Apart from a visit in February 1900 when it appeared at the recently opened Tower of Varieties on Hurst Street, the company, like that of Gompertz in 1867, used the Exchange Assembly Room.

For 14 of the 16 visits about which I have information, the company was managed by Fred Smith, and from 1877 onwards was usually known as 'The Original Pepper's Ghost and Spectral Opera Company'.² According to a report in 1877, Smith 'travelled for some years with Professor Pepper's "Proteus"' before commencing with his own company. F.W. Montague was the manager in 1887–8. In 1889–90 one Harry Smith, who was not named in reports of any other season, managed the company, though it was not suggested that he was related to Fred Smith. Reports of these two visits to Birmingham do not mention any of the regular members of Fred Smith's company.

The company combined the use of spectral illusions with acting, singing, dancing and, sometimes, an item of variety entertainment. The performance was usually in three parts. First there was an adaptation of an opera, or an adaptation of a well-known story into which suitable music was incorporated. Spectral illusions were used in all these adaptations. A short selection of other items followed. The programme always ended with a 'laughable spectral farce'. During the first three visits the intervening selection included tricks, such as locked-box escapes or the Cabinet of Proteus, but after this usually only musical and dance items were performed. A piano was used for the musical accompaniment, with an American organ in addition in 1882–3. In 1893–4 there was a full band. Performances began at eight o'clock and lasted for two hours or a little more, so that the main feature, whether story or opera, must have been condensed considerably.³

From time to time a topical item was included in the programme. For example on 18 February 1878, in addition to the usual entertainment, 'three magnificent Dioramic Scenes of the War' were introduced. This was the Russo-Turkish War, then attracting much publicity amid fears that Britain might be drawn into it. In February 1885, a 'new Political Sketch' entitled *Zig-Zag; or, A Little Game at Nap*, was included, and the advertisement on Saturday 14 February exhorted people to 'Go and See Gordon and all the Celebrities of the Day'. General Gordon's death at Khartoum had been reported on the previous Wednesday.

The main pieces performed were Gounod's *Faust* and 'Barnett's celebrated Scotch Opera' *The Mountain Sylph*, performed during the first visit; *A Christmas Carol*, introduced during the second visit in 1877; Schiller's *Storm of Thoughts*, introduced in 1877–8; Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, first performed at Christmas 1881; *Shadows on the Snow*, first performed at Christmas 1882; *The Lancashire Witches*, at Christmas 1886; Balfe's opera *Satanella*, at Christmas 1888; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in 1888–9; Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, in 1892–3; and *The Corsican Brothers*, in 1893–4. *Faust* was performed during every one of the company's visits. All the other pieces except *The Corsican Brothers* were performed on more than one visit. During the 1887–8 visit, managed by Montague, *The Norse King* was one of the main pieces performed. The 'spectral farces' included *The Haunted House*, *Muddlehead in a Fix*, *Ajax and Hercules*, and *Ajax Defying his Mother-in-Law*.

Many of the opera and story adaptations performed by Fred Smith's company were reported to have been made by Smith himself, and he was probably responsible for all of them. A January 1883 advertisement for *A Christmas Carol* in the *Birmingham Daily Mail* included the following 'mission statement':

The special attention of the Clergy is particularly invited to this Entertainment. There can be no reasonable doubt that within the last few years much that is demoralising has found its way into Public Entertainment of almost every class. Mr Fred Smith wishes it to be emphatically understood that his desire is to improve the public taste by providing (in conjunction with Pepper's Illusions) a class of Entertainment which, while it amuses, will also refine and elevate.

Information about the members of Fred Smith's company is incomplete. Press

NOTES

1. The Birmingham visits of this company known to me are: 26 April to 26 May 1875; 17 February to 14 March 1877; 14 December 1877 to 16 March 1878; 24 December 1878 to 15 February 1879; 27 December 1880 to 26 February 1881; 24 December 1881 to 11 March 1882; 23 December 1882 to 10 March 1883; 14 to 26 January 1884; 24 December 1884 to 21 February 1885; 27 December 1886 to 5 February 1887; 26 December 1887 to 18 February 1888 (F.W. Montague); 26 December 1888 to 9 February 1889; 24 December 1890 to 21 February 1891 (Harry Smith); 26 December 1892 to 18 February 1893; 23 December 1893 to 24 February 1894; and 3 to 24 February 1900.
2. Except for one item mentioned below, all the information in this account is drawn from contemporary reports and advertisements in the following Birmingham newspapers, held on microfilm at the Birmingham Central Library: *The Birmingham Daily Gazette* (published Monday to Friday); *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* (published Saturday); *The Birmingham Journal*; *The Birmingham Daily Post* and *The Birmingham Daily Mail*.
3. Evening performances started at eight o'clock and many advertisements refer to 'Carriages at Ten'. Also some reports of the shows refer to a length of about two hours.

reports frequently named individuals but never gave a complete list. In some years there were 20 participants, and this may have been the usual number. Many members stayed with the company for several years. Fred's daughter Emily played Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* as a little girl in February 1877, and was still in the company in 1894 when she was described as 'principal dancer and burlesque actress'. Fred Smith Junior was a member for a number of years, frequently playing Bob Cratchit.

REVIEWS AND REPORTS

It is clear from newspaper reports that the Pepper's Ghost Company provided entertainment that attracted the public and drew good audiences during all its visits to Birmingham. However, newspaper commentators became progressively less interested in reporting performances in detail than they had been when the ghost entertainments of Silvester and Gompertz were performed in the 1860s. While there were usually fairly detailed reports of *A Christmas Carol*, productions of other pieces were often reported in the most general terms or not at all.

The *Gazette* described the opening of the visit of the Original Pepper's Ghost in April 1875:

This is in many respects a remarkable and truly novel entertainment. Spectres are blended with music, dancing with music, and throughout mystery hangs over all. Startling metamorphoses take place, the spirits coming no one knows whence, and disappearing equally mysteriously. The entertainment opened with a spectral drama, adapted from Goethe's Faust. In this adaptation the principal music of the popular opera is retained, and is executed with considerable skill by a company of vocalists. [...] The principal incidents in the opera are brought out [...] In addition to appearing on the stage, the shades of the demon and the heroine come before the audience in a marvellous manner, the spirit of Marguerite in the last scene being borne away by angels, the effect of which scene is very pleasing.

Fred Smith played Mephistopheles and *Faust* was performed during every Birmingham visit of his company. In January 1878, the *Mail* commented that 'the chief attraction is, of course, the spectroscope which [...] is employed with exceptionally brilliant results'. In January 1881 the *Gazette* reported that

the bewildering illusions produced by the aetherscope and phantoscope are most ingeniously adapted to illustrate the German legend, which by their aid has a most vivid and startling representation. The fullest force is given to the introduction of the supernatural element, and the mysterious appearance and disappearance, the sudden and complete changes of scenery, are managed with swift practised skill that makes the performance apparently without flaw and considerably deepens the impressiveness.

The following year, the *Gazette* reported that the story of *Faust* has been treated by musicians, story-writers, and dramatists in a variety of ways, but it can safely be averred that no method of rendering the story is so capable of effectively producing its marvellous supernatural aspects as is this of Mr Smith's, in which the ordinary stage machinery is supplemented by, or rather made subservient to, the ingenious scientific apparatus which made the name of Professor Pepper so famous. In spirit-stirring effect and sudden apparitions calculated to make one's hair ape the quills of the fretful porcupine, the *Faust* of the Pepper's Ghost Company is peculiarly rich [...].

The other main piece performed during the 1875 visit was an adaptation of an opera by John Barnett (1802–90), *The Mountain Sylph*. According to the *Mail*:

[the] great feature is the management of the ethereal being, a spirit of air. Although the intrinsic merits of the music of the opera [...] have long been known to the public, yet when produced with all the powerful appliances at the command of the Opera House, London, there appeared a want of aerial beauty in the mysterious appearance and flight of the Sylphs, which baffled all the skill of the machinists, and must have lain dormant had not science within the last few years made colossal strides by the introduction of that powerful apparatus and marvel of the 19th century – the spectroscope.

In February 1879, the *Gazette* recorded that the story *absolutely revels in wizards and mysterious powers, both for good and evil, and the opportunities they presented are made the most of, until the audience is perfectly bewildered by the startling effects by which the tale is adorned, and depart lost in astonishment at the entertainment, bordering so closely on the supernatural, by which they have been agreeably diverted for a couple of hours.*

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

In February 1877, the company commenced its visit with an adaptation of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, in which Smith played Scrooge.⁴ The *Gazette* reported that

the merit of the production, of course, depends almost entirely on the rapid and bewildering changes effected in the various scenes. The appearance of the ghost of 'Christmas Present' is an astonishingly ingenious contrivance, and the make-up of that seasonal spirit is of the highest standard of excellence. This jovially inclined ghost is impersonated by Mr W. Hogarth, who is possessed of a remarkably fine voice, and the several songs he sings constitute a feature in themselves. Adhering strictly to the text of the story, Scrooge accompanies the ghost of 'Christmas Present' to various scenes of Christmas pleasantries and jollifications until his penitence for his previous selfish churlishness is forcibly demonstrated. The ghosts of 'Jacob Marley', 'Christmas Past', and 'Christmas to Come' are surprisingly realistic. The piece is presented in two acts, and its success is to a great measure attributable to the excellent scenery [...].

The following December, the *Mail* declared that

in no other way could 'the finest charity sermon in the English language', as Dean Stanley has called it, be presented to so great advantage as in this manner. More especially is this the case when the aid of the spectroscope is brought to bear in giving realisation to the Miser's dream. [...] It is not in the acting that the merit of this result lies, although the characters of Ebenezer Scrooge [...] and Bob Cratchit [...] are represented with more histrionic ability than one has any right to expect in an entertainment of this class, nor is it in the staging, which is far better than the acting. It is in the accessories, whereby the various stages of Scrooge's dream are depicted with the rapidity of change that can only be equalled by the changing of the dreamer's thoughts as they rise up before him. [...] The changes are effected by mechanical stage arrangements and the spectroscope, and their effect is both admirable and startling.

The *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that 'the piece extends over nine scenes, and the transformations from one to another, together with the appearance and disappearance of some of the characters is marvellous to all who are ignorant of the means whereby the effect is produced'. Ancient carols and 'a few modern compositions' provided the music for the adaptation. In January 1882 the *Gazette* noted that 'the spectral illusions take a somewhat larger scope in this piece than generally and picturesque scenes such as the "Home of King Christmas" and the "crypt of the Holy Sepulchre" are shown with minuteness and wonderful reality'. In January 1894 an advertisement declared that Fred Smith had played Scrooge over 5,000 times.⁵

OTHER PRODUCTIONS OF THE 1880S AND 1890S

Schiller's *Storm of Thought; or, The Woodcutter*, 'abounding with startling effects depicted in wild forest scenery', was performed during the last few days of the 1877–8 visit. This was not performed again until January 1891, when it was described as being in 'Thirty Beautiful Tableaux'.

The Flying Dutchman opened the season at Christmas 1881. The *Gazette* reported that

4. For a more detailed account of performances of the adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* than is possible here, see Allan Sutcliffe, 'Pepper's Ghost and *A Christmas Carol*', in *The Dickensian*, Vol. 101, Part 1, No. 467 (Winter 2005), 225–32.

5. *Birmingham Amusements and Souvenir of the Stage*, No. 30, 29 January 1894 (copy in Birmingham Central Library).

to present the drama which he has framed upon the story, Mr Smith has had new and splendid scenery painted by the best artists of the day, and various dioramic effects specially painted and arranged by Mr M. Gompertz, who is perhaps the greatest of all dioramic painters. There are several charming pieces of scenery, such as is the approach of the phantom ship, in which a fine dioramic effect is introduced; and a view of the phantom ship in full sail; the whole concluding with a denouement, which is truthfully described as terrifically impressive.

The *Mail* reported that

the scientific appliances at command, together with the vocal abilities of a more than usually strong company of 'mortals', combine to produce a most interesting performance. The claim made by Mr Fred Smith that ordinary ghost exhibitions sink into insignificance compared with the phenomena under notice is well sustained. Apparently living beings perform what would to them of course be impossibilities. Floating in mid-air, walking up walls and on ceilings are ordinary occurrences and the spectator is thoroughly mystified by the living becoming spectral and the spectral assuming the appearance of the living.

An adaptation of B.L. Farjeon's story *Shadows on the Snow* was performed at Christmas 1882. The *Gazette* reported that the piece 'while aiming at imparting lessons appropriate to Christmas is conspicuous in sensational and romantic incidents and surprises, while the spectral illusions are most complete and surprising. The story is disclosed in a series of Christmas episodes, and the parts are well taken, the singing of most of the members of the "Spectral Opera Company" being exceedingly good.'

The Lancashire Witches, based on Harrison Ainsworth's novel, was introduced to open the season at Christmas 1886. The *Post* reported that 'the plot gives ample scope for the introduction of spectroscopic and scenic effects, and no trouble or expense has been spared to make the production the most perfect of its kind'. The *Post* also commented that 'the piece is played upon a much more spacious stage than is ordinarily provided for such entertainments'. The *Gazette* reported that it was 'excellently staged, and there is an admirable accompaniment of sparkling and tuneful music. In addition there are sufficient "ghosts" introduced to render the drama highly realistic'.

Satanella; or, Love's Magic Power was performed for the first time at Christmas 1888. The *Post* described this as

a dramatic rendering of a legend in which figure demons (male and female) and in which *Satanella*, one of the latter, becoming enchanted of a count, whose ruin she has been sent forth to accomplish, is so wrought upon by the influence [of] love as to sacrifice herself upon its altar, with the result of being transformed into an angel of light. [...] The mechanical effects are marked with surprising effect, and are really a conspicuous feature of the entertainment.

The *Gazette* reported that 'the vocal parts of the performance generally are of a superior order, and the acting is also good'.

Towards the end of the 1888–9 visit, Fred Smith's company gave one performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It does not seem to have been repeated until February 1893, when the *Gazette* reported that it was produced 'with freed slaves in the company to render the representation thoroughly realistic. The horrors of slavery were forcibly illustrated [...] and old hymns and plantation dances were introduced at appropriate intervals'.

In January 1893 Fred Smith's company performed *The Colleen Bawn*, described by the *Gazette* as 'adapted so as to suit the exigencies of this particular and really interesting class of entertainment. [...] Boucicault's delightful sketch of Irish life was charmingly represented, and the songs and incidental music introduced were not only appropriate but most agreeably rendered'. The enjoyment of the drama 'was considerably enhanced by the stage appliances which form the distinctive basis of the Ghost Show'.

The Corsican Brothers was introduced in February 1894. The *Gazette* commented that 'the innovation promises to be as successful as any of the plays which have preceded it, for under the excellent management of Mr Fred Smith, the whole performance was accomplished most successfully'. An adaptation of *East Lynne* was performed once during the 1892–3 visit and on a few occasions in the following visit.

When the Pepper's Ghost Company came to Birmingham on 26 December 1887, the *Post* reported that

Mr F.W. Montague has taken the place of Mr Fred Smith, former proprietor, the performance has been materially altered, and the stage arrangements vastly improved. An extravaganza entitled *The Norse King* is now being produced, and with wonderful success. The piece contains about a dozen leading characters, and offers enough scope for high-class acting, pretty scenery, and clever spectroscopic effects. These opportunities are taken full advantage of by a good all-round company; and from first to last, while everything tends to please the eye and ear, there is absolutely nothing to mar the pleasure.

The Norse King was not performed during any other Pepper's Ghost Company visit, and this was the only season during which Montague managed the company. He was possibly the F.W. Montague who sang in Smith's company in 1882–3.

'SPECTRAL FARCES'

The impression given by reports is that the most impressive displays of the ghost illusion were found in the spectral farces, which as their name suggests were shorter pieces of a comic nature. Unfortunately very little information is given and usually not even the titles were printed. In 1875 the *Gazette* reported that during the performance of *The Haunted House*

the audience was constantly moved to laughter. Mr Fred Smith represents Leander Shakewell, a nervous gentleman, whose apartment is infested by ghosts and hobgoblins. The latter perform some very strange antics, and the situations are exceedingly amusing.

The *Post* reported that 'some marvellous and comic ghost illusions were introduced'. In 1877 the *Gazette* commented that in 'this short piece the many wonders of the spectroscope are presented with startling effect'. The other most frequently named farce was *Muddlehead in a Fix*, featuring a haunted police sergeant. In December 1884 the *Post* commented that this item included 'some puzzling and extraordinary effects'. The *Gazette*, describing Harry Smith's production of it at Christmas 1890, commented that he 'made an amusing Sergeant Muddlehead, and the introduction of fifty lightning transformations served to provide unstinted merriment'. Gompertz had presented both of these farces in 1865.

A piece described as 'Dickens's *Haunted Man*' was advertised as an afterpiece on 19 and 22 January 1891. However, a report in the *Mail* a week earlier described *The Haunted Man* as it was performed that week in terms that suggest it was actually *The Haunted House*.

During all the company's visits to the Exchange Rooms prices remained unchanged, with three rates of two shillings, one shilling, and sixpence. At the Tower of Varieties in 1900 the prices were one shilling, sixpence and four pence. A reminder of harsher economic realities is provided by a report in the *Gazette* on 3 February 1882:

During his stay here Mr Smith has shown his interest in the town by entertaining the inmates of several institutions, and yesterday afternoon the inmates of the Birmingham Workhouse enjoyed his hospitality. All the children and adults who were able to leave the workhouse, numbering upwards of 300, attended the Exchange Rooms, and the pleasant faces of the old folks and the plaudits of the young were sufficient to prove that the entertainment was thoroughly enjoyed.

A *Christmas Carol* was the main piece on that occasion. Again, in January 1888, the *Post* reported that Montague had arranged for 'some 500 of the Workhouse children' to be admitted to the performance of the Carol that afternoon.

I am not aware of any visit by Fred Smith's company after the brief season at the Tower of Varieties in February 1900. It is a pleasant thought that this theatre, having accommodated possibly the last of the Spectral Opera performances on the Birmingham stage, is still (in a rebuilt form) an important Birmingham theatre, and that now, as the Birmingham Hippodrome, it is visited twice a year by the far from spectral Welsh National Opera Company.

Allan SUTCLIFFE is a retired Finance Director and collector of material related to adaptations of Charles Dickens's writings. Part 1 of this article appeared in our previous issue.