

MAGIC LANTERN SENSATIONS OF 1827

'In this hobgoblin'd and be-spectr'd age,
'Where all that's wond'rous occupies the stage'
T. J. Dibdin, *Of Age To-morrow* (1800)

DAVID ROBINSON

This article, with its additional information on M Henry and Henry Langdon Childe's theatrical enterprises, serves in part as a footnote to Mervyn Heard's study of Philipstahl.

In the season of 1827, the theatre-goers of Regency London were exposed to the latest technological developments of the magic lantern. The thrills commenced on 1 January, with the première at the Adelphi Theatre of Edward Fitzball's spectacular 'Serio-Comic Burletta' *The Flying Dutchman*.

Tales of terror and the supernatural were at the peak of their popularity, and Fitzball boasted that *The Flying Dutchman* 'was not by any means behind even *Frankenstein* or *Der Freischütz* itself in horror and Blue Fire'. The story told how a beautiful Dutch maiden, Lestelle Vanhelm, in love with the brave Mowdrey, is carried off by the other-worldly Vanderdecken on his ghostly ship. She is fortunately rescued by Mowdrey in the nick of time, before she can be carried away on Vanderdecken's eternal spectral wanderings. As a contemporary commentator noted, the author 'wisely catered for all palates; for those whose taste inclines them to the terrible, he has provided thunder and lightning in abundance, thrown in grotesque of water imps and served up a death's head'; yet at the same time 'mirth and moonshine – murder and merriment – fire and fun, are . . . happily blended'. The fun was provided by comic characters with names like Peter Van Bummel, Toby Varnish and Mynheer Von Swiggs.

The play was full of magical appearances and disappearances and letters that explode in people's hands. The stage directions call for spectacular scenic effects.

In Act I: Vanderdecken, with a demonic laugh, rises from the sea in blue fire, amidst violent thunder – at that instant the Phantom Ship appears in the sky behind. . .

Later in the play: A mist begins to rise, through which Vanderdecken is seen crossing the sea in an open boat with Lestelle – the storm rages violently – the boat is dashed about upon the waves – it sinks suddenly with Vanderdecken and Lestelle – the PHANTOM SHIP appears (à la phantasmagorie) in a peal of thunder. – The stage and audience part of the Theatre in total darkness'.

The last two sentences are of particular interest to us. The direction to lower the house lights in a London theatre was then unprecedented. Until the end of the nineteenth century, auditoria were kept fully lit throughout the performance. (Five years before *The Flying Dutchman*, Daguerre had caused considerable alarm to Londoners by darkening the rotunda in which they sat to watch his

Diorama). In 1827 even the practical possibility of lowering the lights was new, thanks to the very recent introduction of gas for lighting in the most progressive theatres (the Haymarket was still using candles and oil lamps as late as 1843). The reason for lowering the lights however is implied in that intriguing parenthesis 'à la phantasmagorie'.

Edward Fitzball (1792–1873) was not only a prolific dramatist but also it seems a man of great ingenuity: among his other inventions was the 'vampire trap' which became a popular piece of stage apparatus to effect sudden appearances and disappearances. When he took *The Flying Dutchman* to Daniel Terry and Frederick Yates, two actors who were then managing the Adelphi Theatre, they were alarmed by the scenic effects demanded, estimating that £200 would be required merely to buy the timber for the phantom ship.

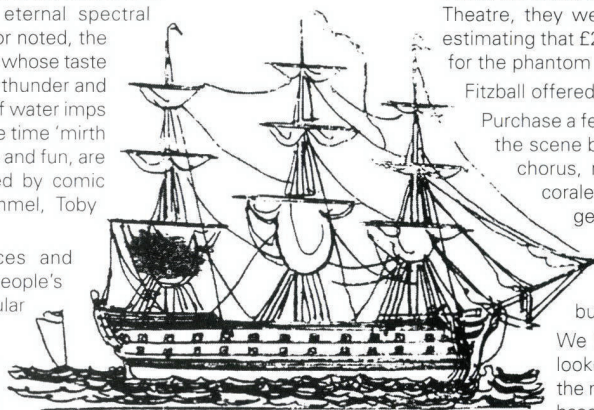
Fitzball offered a bold solution:

Purchase a few yards of union [a sort of glazed calico], darken the scene by turning off the gas, then, while your invisible chorus, rendered invisible by the darkness, sing their corale [sic], draw off the flats, and Mr Child [sic], a gentleman that I can recommend to you, will throw, with his magic lantern, on the invisible union, a better phantom ship, than all the ship carpenters in Woolwich Dockyard could build, with Peter the Great to assist them.

We have shadowy evidence of what the scenery looked like in the set of sheets published for use in the model theatre by J. K. Green in 1836, and directly based on the Adelphi production. Here are illustrated Green's versions of the two scenes in which the

phantom ship made its appearance, and, separately, the vessel itself. (It is notable that the titles of other plays also appear on these scenes, reflecting stage practice of the times and the convenient interchangeability of scenery in the repertory system then prevalent).

The Flying Dutchman was performed numerous times during 1827 and subsequent seasons. The story, which seems to have originated in German legend and was given literary form by Heinrich Heine, was subsequently adapted for the stage for at least seven further and quite distinct London productions between 1839 and 1883, though the most famous manifestation remains Wagner's opera *Der fliegende Holländer*, first produced in Dresden on 2 January



The Pirate ship from The Flying Dutchman

GREEN'S SCENE IN Blackboard the Pirate, S^c 7 N^o 8
Red Rover S^c 3 N^o 5 \ Flying Dutchman, S^c 4 and 10 N^o 8



London, Pub. April 4. 1836 by J. K. GREEN, 5, George Street, Walworth New Town.

Price, 10s. 6d.

Sold by J. REDDINGTON, 208, Holborn Old Town.

GREEN'S SCENE IN Harlequin St. George, back of Set Piece, Fig 1 & 2. N^o 3.
Red Rover, back of S^c 4 N^o 8 \ Flying Dutchman, back of S^c 9 N^o 12



London, Pub. April 4. 1836 by J. K. GREEN, 5, George Street, Walworth New Town.

Price Halfpenny

Sold by J. REDDINGTON, 208, Holborn Old Town.

1843. So great was the success of Fitzball's original play that it was followed within a few weeks by an anonymous production entitled *The Flying Dutchwoman*.

The success of this experiment led Fitzball on to later lantern experiments. Hermann Hecht tells us that

On 19 February 1851 Fitzball staged *Azael the Prodigal*, a version of Auber's opera *L'Enfant Prodigal* at Drury Lane. 'Fitzball has here turned to dramatic account the best currently available lantern techniques'.

Unfortunately contemporary reviewers are so carried away by the De Mille-like spectacle of the staging that they fail to mention how the magic lantern was used. Most probably however projections were used to represent the visions experienced by Azael, cast out into the desert.

Fitzball was a favourite author at the Adelphi, a theatre which specialised in the sensational and spectacular. Opened in 1806 as the Sans Pareil, it was renamed the Adelphi in 1816. The theatre has been rebuilt three times, in 1858, 1901 and 1930 (the present building). In 1895 one of London's Kinetoscope Parlours occupied the adjacent shop.

Two years before *The Flying Dutchman* the Adelphi had already taken a place in magic lantern history, when the conjuror and ventriloquist Mr Henry presented the first of his six successive London seasons there. The leading authority on magic history, Professor Edwin Dawes, believes that Henry was a Scot called Galbraith and that he had first appeared, billed as 'Professor of Natural Magic' at the Lyceum and Astley's Amphitheatre as early as 1788. A collection of playbills in the British Museum traces his tours through the provinces, mostly East Anglia, between 1817 and his first London season in 1824.

At the Adelphi, Henry's shows included conjuring tricks and performances on the musical glasses, though he was most famous for his demonstrations with laughing gas (nitrous oxide gas) whose curious physiological effects had first been described by Humphry Davy in 1799. More intriguingly his 1824 bills promise 'Phantasmagoria, &c.' and

Mr Henry's Celebrated OPTICAL ILLUSIONS, in the course of which, will be introduced STRIKING LIKENESSES of Miss STEPHENS as Rob Roy, Miss M. TREE as Viola in Twelfth Night, Mr YOUNG as Roscius, Miss PATON in The Marriage of Figaro, Mr MACREADY as Virginius, Mr KEAN as Sir Giles Overreach.

Previous to which, THE DANCE OF DEATH!!! With Several Laughable Figures, &c. &c.'

Curiously – perhaps because as 'scientific demonstrations' they were considered less profane than regular theatricals – Henry's shows were presented during Lent.

In 1827, perhaps in consequence of a change in the management at the Adelphi, where the Lenten presentation was a one-man entertainment by the new co-proprietor Frederick Yates, Henry appeared instead at the larger and more prestigious Haymarket. The bill reproduced here is for 10 April. The Laughing Gas now plays a less significant part in the entertainment, while the PHANTASMAGORIC DISPLAY is saved for the grand finale.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of this bill is Henry's announcement of his 'Series of beautiful DISSOLVENT VIEWS'.

This use of the term predates by six years its mention (as 'dissolvant') in a playbill for Brighton Theatre Royal, discussed at length in a letter addressed by Edmund H. Wilkie to *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal* in November 1893. John Barnes follows Wilkie in distinguishing the terms 'Dissolvent' and 'Dissolving':

The [Brighton] playbill states that 'Dissolvent [not Dissolving] Views' will be exhibited, and that the views 'will be dissolved from the sight of the spectators in a manner truly astonishing'. This statement is highly revealing for from it it is possible to deduce the true nature of the exhibition. The

'Dissolvent' here implies that the light was gradually lowered in the lantern, the view changed for that of another, and the light again increased. The views were not dissolved one into the other, but merely dissolved 'from the sight of the spectators.' In fact this was not a true exhibition of Dissolving Views in the accepted sense . . . We can . . . infer that the dissolving of one picture into the other in the true manner of Dissolving Views, was invented by [Henry Langdon] Childe sometime between September 1836, and February 1837'.

For the moment, we must give Mr Henry credit for the first use of the term 'Dissolvent Views', almost a decade earlier.

SOURCES:

The Theatrical Observer; and *Daily Bills of the Play* (London, 1827).

Edward Fitzball: *Thirty-five Years of a Dramatic Showman's Life* (London, 1859).

E. L. Blanchard: 'History of the Adelphi Theatre', in *The Era Almanach* 1877 (London, 1876).

Edmund H. Wilkie. Letter in *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, vol. IV, no. 54. (London 1893).

John Barnes: *Catalogue of the Collection*, Part 2, Optical Projection. (St Ives, Cornwall, 1970).

Edwin A. Dawes: *The Great Illusionists* (Newton Abbott, 1979).

Hermann Hecht: *Pre-Cinema History* (London, 1993).

Theatre Royal, Hay Market. M. HENRY'S Whims and Wonders

In which he will introduce his
Magnificent Spectacle
Of Illusion, Combination, Transformation, &c. &c.

Song—"Nothing Worth Seeing."

Song—"Doubtful Facts." Song—"The Funny Club," and
"BUY A BROOM," (in character)

In the course of the Evening, M. HENRY will attempt several Airs on
'THE MUSICAL GLASSES.'

After which, he will administer

The Laughing Gas!

To conclude with,

A PHANTASMAGORIC DISPLAY.

Also a Series of beautiful

DISSOLVENT VIEWS!
THE THEATRICAL PICTURE GALLERY

Comprises Likenesses of

Mrs. SIDDONS, YOUNG, Miss STEPHENS, MACREADY, Miss
PATON, KEAN, Miss FOOTE, GRIMALDI, TALMA, and
Mr. LISTON, as Paul Pry, will drop in!!

The Monkeys' Fandango!!

The Music of

The Macgregor's Gathering, sung by Miss Paton,
And the Bavarian Girl's Song,

Buy a Broom,' with a Portrait of Mad. Vestris,
(In Character) is published by MAYHEW & Co. 17, Old Bond Street.

The Music in Oberon, The Oracle Peveril of the Peak, and The Death-Fetch,
Is published at The Royal Harmonic Institution, 216, Regent Street.

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