

## PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS

An interview profile of Terry Borton by Jeremy Brooker

Terry BORTON received a doctorate in Education from Harvard University, and for many years was active in that field as a teacher, administrator, curriculum developer and writer. In 1977 he became the Editor in Chief of *Weekly Reader*, a national newspaper for children with a circulation of nine million. In 1992 he formed The American Magic Lantern Theater, a professional touring magic lantern company. He is the author of two books in the education field, and most recently, with his wife, was co-author of *Before the Movies*.

**JB:** *When were you first aware of the magic lantern?*

**TB:** Probably at about age five or six. My great-grandfather was the family and neighbourhood showman, and his lantern and slides were passed down to my father, so one of my earliest memories is of a smoking kerosene lantern and a man eating rats. (For a description of great-grandfather Carter's shows, see <http://www.magiclanternshows.com/road/ml.htm>.)

**JB:** *How was your interest sustained in those early days? Which individuals or organisations helped to deepen your interest?*

**TB:** In those early days? Every rat was fascinating! Then I inherited the lantern, and when my kids came along I gave little shows for them. It was just another weird thing our family did. What moved me to another level was again the rat-catcher. Our local historical society heard about the lantern and asked for a show. I just did what my father and great-grandfather had done before me. People were appreciative. But afterwards, being of a historical bent, someone who asked questions, I was embarrassed to say that I knew nothing about the lantern. After the show, a man came up to tell me that he had seen the rat-catcher before, in Sunday school. I was amazed. He explained that if the kids were good, their Sunday school teacher would show them some comic slides after the Bible lesson. Suddenly, I realised that the lantern wasn't just a peculiarity of my family; it was widely used, in ways I had never imagined. So I began to do some research, and discovered the magic lantern societies, which have been major sources of help and support ever since.

**JB:** *Can you describe some of your earliest magic lantern performances? Can you recall any errors of judgement or problems you encountered, and perhaps describe how you developed and refined your craft?*

**TB:** My biggest problem was myself. I was so incredibly self-conscious that I could barely squeak. I forgot all the fun that I had had with the magic lantern as a child and as a parent. I didn't trust the lantern or myself to hold an audience. And so of course it didn't, and I didn't. But bit by bit I began to relax. I developed a persona, a character showman, and that helped me reach beyond myself, and then into myself to bring the words and the slides to life.

**JB:** *How did your background – as a performer, historian or educator, for example – prepare you for a career as a magic lantern showman?*

**TB:** I started out to be an English professor, and in those days they stressed 'close reading' of texts. As a performer today I often spend a long time trying to unlock a poem or story – trying to understand the flow of emotion within and beneath the words. But close reading aside, an academic career began to look pretty dry, and it was the activist '60s, so I became a high-school teacher in a difficult school. I quickly learned that I could not survive with my retiring graduate-student manner, so I developed a more outgoing teaching persona, which I was to draw on later when I took to the stage. Over the years I've taken a lot of drama classes, and they have helped loosen me up too. I had done a lot of writing about education in the course of my career in that field, so when it came to preparing scripts for stories that had none, I had resources to draw on.

**JB:** *Perhaps you could describe a typical show. Do you use special costumes, music or sound effects? Is your dialogue improvised or scripted? Do you perform alone or with a group? What type of lantern and other equipment do you use? What kind of publicity material do you distribute?*



**TB:** We operate as The American Magic Lantern Theater, a two-person troupe – myself as promoter, showman and lantern operator, and a freelance female singer/pianist who provides musical underscoring, sings solos, and leads the audience in sing-alongs. We've been operating for twenty-two years as a professional company, competing with every other entertainment group in America, booking primarily into theatres, fairs and historic venues. The US is a big country and we have covered a lot of ground – thirty-eight of the fifty states, plus six foreign countries. Before the recession, we were doing about 100 performances a year. National Public Radio calls us 'a living national treasure'. We offer a dozen different shows, have elaborate promotion materials, attend the major booking conferences in New York and regionally, maintain a website, etc.

The singers I work with are all operatically trained, and add a tremendous amount to the show. I've worked with my lead singer, Nancy Stewart, for about thirty years – about a quarter of the way back to Queen Victoria's time, as I tease her. She, and her colleagues, will not allow me to sing in the show, except in a few songs where my total inability to carry a tune can be considered comic.

We perform in costume, miked, using a biennial lantern. Our shows are all scripted, and very carefully scripted at that. After every show I go back through the script and revise as needed. In the early days there was a lot of revision; today it's minor, but I'm always looking for a better slide, or a better way to make a slide work. That said, I don't necessarily follow my own script. I improvise quite a lot during shows, and like to try out new things 'in the moment'. If they work, I revise the script accordingly. If they don't, well, I had fun messing around, and improvising helps keep the shows fresh.

An important part of our shows is the fact that we have a wonderful collection of the slides of Joseph Boggs Beale. Beale was America's foremost magic lantern artist, and had a unique ability to tell stories on screen. (My wife Deborah and I have built up an extensive collection of Beale's slides, master drawings and related materials, and have just published a book on Beale: *Before the Movies: American Magic-Lantern Entertainment and the Nation's First Great Screen Artist, Joseph Boggs Beale*.) All of our shows use Beale slides, and most of the shows are organised with a holiday or seasonal 'hook' – a Christmas Show, a New Year's Show, a Halloween Show, a Valentine's Show, a Spring Show, a Sea Show, a Bible Show, a Civil War Show, an American History Show, etc. We also do illustrated lectures on lantern history, and book talks.

**JB:** *Do you have a philosophy of performance? Is your intention primarily to inform? Or to entertain? In other words, do audiences need to understand what they are seeing, or should the entertainment stand or fall by its own merits? I also wondered what role historical research plays. Should magic lantern performance echo historical practice?*

**TB:** We make a distinction between a demonstration and a performance. We begin the show with a short demonstration (done in character), showing how the lantern works, and a little about how the slides were made. After that, it's a performance, meant to entertain by not only showing people what an authentic lantern show was like (as closely as we can), but also helping them to experience it as people would have experienced it 100 plus years ago. We don't, for instance, stand back from the Victorians and



make fun of them; we try to help the audience be Victorians. A lot of our pre-show and introductory work is designed to ease a modern theatre audience into the more participatory style of the time.

**JB:** *Can you recall some career highlights? Unusual venues, film or TV work, or perhaps some humorous stories?*

**TB:** Career highlights include several performances at Lincoln Center in New York, and at the Chautauqua Institution Amphitheater, a huge old hall where we had 3,000 in the audience. We've appeared in a number of national TV or film depictions or discussions of magic lantern shows, and a film about us has just been released called *A Magic Lantern Life*. (We'll be appearing at the Polish premier shortly.) For a while I was writing up some of the funny things that happened to us on the road. They're available on line at <http://www.magiclanternshows.com/road.htm>.

**JB:** *What do you think audiences make of your shows?*

**TB:** Well, I think they love them. They feel they have been transported to another world of joy and wonder, and I feel I joined them there.

**JB:** *Have historical research or particular publications informed your performances?*

**TB:** I've spent a great deal of time studying magic lantern performance and building up a collection focused on Magic Lantern Performance in America, and have been writing about it for the last five years. I don't think that study has changed my performances much, but it has confirmed that we were on the right track. There was just an incredible variety of lantern performance out there. My stance has been, 'If they could have done it 100 years ago with their technology, then I can do it, whether or not I have evidence that they did, because if they could, they probably did.' So, for instance, I decided to try out using a prism in front of the lens to create multiple images on screen. I had never read about a showman doing that, but they certainly could have, so I figured why not. I liked the effect. And sure enough, I read a few years later about a Victorian showman who did exactly that.

**JB:** *I wanted to finish this interview by discussing your future plans or ambitions. How do you see your show developing in the future? Can you outline some current projects?*

**TB:** I'm seventy-six now. Still going strong, but at that age you can't help be aware that the future is not limitless, and at this point another booking is more or less another booking. So I'm trying to focus more attention on writing, where I can make a new contribution. I have written a draft of another book, a more popular biography of Beale, though it will take several years to finish it. I've been trying to lay out the broad landscape of American lantern performance with articles in our American research publications that compile information on the top 500 lanternists in America, and document their professional life – their background and education, their competition, their advertising vehicles, their performance subjects and style, their colourists, their critics, etc. I'd like to see those articles combined with the work of other scholars on the American lantern scene to make a book on the subject. And then I think there is a related book, based on our collection, on 'Magic Lantern Performance in America'. So there's plenty to keep me busy in the research end of things.

Right now, however, I'm focused on performance. This spring, we're

collaborating with The Amish Experience, a tour company near Lancaster, PA, in the heart of Amish country, a major tourist destination. (The Amish, a religious group, adhere to a nineteenth-century lifestyle, so it's common to see horses and buggies driving by.) In the little town of Bird in Hand, we will open the world's first full-time magic lantern theatre since the Poly in London 130 years ago. The Amish Experience traces its lineage back to the '50s and for the last twenty years has operated a 150-seat theatre on an hourly schedule, 10.00–5.00, seven days a week, ten months a year. They offer a pre-recorded, multi-media show about the Amish, catering to individual visitors, schools and bus groups; and book about 1,000 buses a year into their associated theatre, tours and restaurant. We'll be running lantern shows, by request, on the same schedule, using half-hour versions of our existing shows, live showmen trained by me, and recorded music. After-dinner and school shows are also a possibility. Pulling all this together has been a lot of work, so not much academic writing has been going on here for the last month or so, but I'm very excited about the prospect of seeing The American Magic Lantern Theater blossom into a permanent home that could, if all goes well, reach tens of thousands of people a year.

**JB:** *This might feel a little morbid, but since we are dealing with historical material made before we were born and which will hopefully outlive us all, what do you see as your legacy? For example, would you like your collection dispersed or preserved? What kind of archive would you like to leave behind?*

**TB:** This is a subject that Debbie and I have had a lot of discussion about. We have several different collections. We'd like to see the collection of Beale material and the American Performance material go to major research institutions, since we see them as collections of national importance. We'd like to see the collection of show slides, which includes photographic copies of Beale's slides, go to an active performer who could carry on The American Magic Lantern Theater's touring schedule when I'm no longer up to it.

**JB:** *On a lighter note, what advice would you give a lanternist starting out today, perhaps with a very limited collection of slides? What do you see as the pitfalls and common errors of judgement in lantern performances?*

**TB:** I spend a lot of energy encouraging and teaching younger collectors, academics and performers, as that is the only way this medium will continue to live. Though it's hard to do full-length paid theatrical performances without a good collection of slides, many other venues – schools, historical societies, retirement communities, etc. – are not nearly as demanding, as long as the performance itself is good. I point with great pride to a group I've mentored, The Wonder Show (<http://thewondershow.wordpress.com/>), a company of young performers that combines limited archival material, a small 'cranky' panorama and modern media to create really entrancing programmes. They're on the road with their own 'mini house' that provides their living quarters and opens into a screen. They won the coveted 'Red Cabbage' award at our Convention in Boston last summer.