

## PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS

### LAURA MINICI ZOTTI

An interview profile by Jeremy Brooker

I found my first magic lantern and a box of slides, amongst the most beautiful I have ever seen, in the attic of my home in Venice. For a long time this lantern had remained on top of a cupboard and I never used it until one day, intrigued by this strange instrument, I thought I'd see how it worked. I have no idea who this lantern belonged to and none of my family had any memories of seeing it, but it probably belonged to one of my ancestors. The first image that I projected was the 'Woman with Candle'. I was so impressed that even today this slide is the symbol of my Museum and it has never been omitted from my magic lantern shows.



This early experience made me want to know more but at that time nobody in Italy knew much about magic lanterns. Then I thought about going to the Museum of Cinema in Turin, whose director, Maria Adriana Prolo, showed me some books on the subject. There I found out the name of my own lantern and who had built it, and for me this was a great discovery! It was a Pamphengos lantern, built by W.C. Hughes. Later I went to the National Library in Paris, which held many books on the subject. I remained there for almost a week, reading everything I could about the magic lantern and pre-cinema.



At that point I started to buy other slides to complete my original collection, and other magic lanterns to help me understand the differences between those manufactured in America, England and Germany. Here in Italy there was nothing much to learn on this subject as there were no important manufacturers.

A friend told me about the Magic Lantern Society which had recently been formed in London. My son Alberto and I soon joined.

On that occasion I met Janet Tamblin and Mike Bartley, who invited us to the Magic Lantern Theatre in Monmouth to attend one of their shows. They gave a private performance just for us. I have never seen such a wonderful show, so complete and done with so much effort. I was so impressed that I thought I might start doing it too. Bill and John Barnes and other dear friends introduced me to a lot of ideas that have proved fundamental in setting up and directing my own shows.

In those early days I started with home entertainment. In the evenings I would invite friends to my home and proudly show them my collection of slides and my magic lantern. I really enjoyed giving these shows. Then I went to London where I found a biunial lantern, and bought a triunial lantern at an auction, and in a very short time my collection began to grow into what it is today: the Museo del Precinema in Padua. My first show for the public was in 1975 at



the Teatro del Giglio in Lucca. The theatre was full of people because it coincided with the city's first Animated Film Festival.

I developed my skills by trial and error. Almost from the start, I used a biunial lantern made by J.H. Steward. At first I had trouble making dissolving views but I overcame these initial problems because I practised and practised again every day. I have always been guided by what the public wanted to see. How many seconds should an image remain on the screen? What sort of text would they like to hear?

I graduated at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice but my schooling as a painter didn't help me much. What helped me most were my years of researching the history of pre-cinema, and my own imagination. The performances of other lanternists also suggested ways to change and improve the shows.

Typical of my approach was an entertainment based on the life of Casanova. My intention was to represent the main events of his life through the magic lantern. I read the biography of Casanova and many of the books that he wrote. Next, I looked among the thousands of slides that I have in my collection to select 140 images which would help to recreate that period and tell my story. The text was written by me and read by a professional actor.

Casanova was chosen because of his close association with Venice. Throughout my career I have tried to share my fascination for the beauty of this unique city. It is no coincidence that I have amassed the largest collection of Venetian slides. Besides Casanova I have created other shows dedicated to the Grand Tour in Italy, Princess Sissi, astronomy, and a very complex performance that reconstructed Robertson's Fantasmagoria.

My shows were not those of an itinerant showman. I could never talk during the shows because I was so focused on the succession of slides and dissolving views. Everything needed to be perfect. I was so engaged that I didn't even notice when I had a headache! A theatre actor read the original texts of the stories but I never wanted to use live music. I have done on occasions, such as my last show, given in 2010 for the Silent Film Festival in Pordenone, but in general I always







preferred to use recorded music. I felt that the presence of live musicians might distract the public from the images.

I had a costume designer create appropriate clothes for me to wear. For Casanova I used a special costume of the eighteenth century, while for all other performances I wore typical Victorian dress. The shows were carefully written and rehearsed and absolutely nothing was improvised. After the screening the whole audience would come closer to see the lantern and to understand how I created the moving projections. I didn't need any publicity material because as my reputation grew and people came to know me, I was invited to give shows worldwide.

Among the more unusual things I did was to use insects and fish for projection. I remember going round London searching for fish to use in my show for the Magic Lantern Society. You can't imagine what I went through! In the end I found them in a shop near Paddington. In the USA, I went in search of ants in the park of George Eastman House.

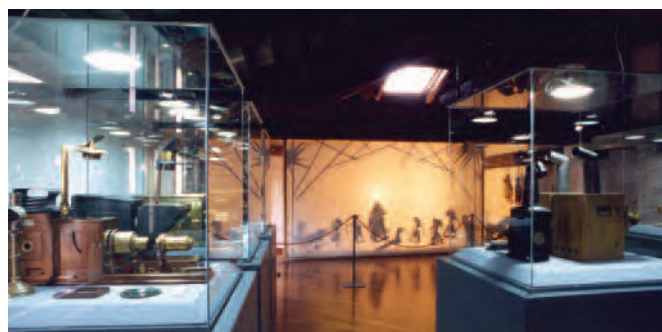
During my performing career, I was invited by all the most important film festivals and embassies. I've been around the world with my shows: from Europe to the United States, from Japan to Singapore. I also received many awards, including the Award for Culture from the President of the Italian Republic in 2009 and the Jean Mitry Award in Pordenone during the Silent Film Festival in 2008.

I stopped giving shows five years ago. The main reasons were the demands of performance (my shows lasted an hour and a half), conservation of the slides and the complications of air travel with all the equipment. I have performed for forty years and one day in 2010, not without feelings of regret, I gave my last show at the Silent Film Festival in Pordenone. My work still continues, however. Eighteen years ago, I founded the Museo del Precinema in Padua. I have no time to give shows now because I am involved with its direction every day. This year we have two projects in the Museum: an exhibition about Charles Dickens's travels in Italy that I will present for the Expo Veneto, and a project for the International Year of Light. I also continue to give lectures and arrange exhibitions.

I see the Museum as my personal legacy. My dream would be for it to become the largest museum in my hometown, Venice. I'm 80 now and one day my son Alberto, Professor of Cinema and Photography at the University of Padua, will take on this commitment and preserve my collection. I would like it to be kept intact and would prefer that it is never sold, though perhaps one day it might be acquired by another museum.

I have a clear philosophy: the shows must be made only with original lanterns and slides. I cannot conceive of anything different. The only thing I have changed in my lanterns is the lamps. I use halogen lamps with a filter to prevent the deterioration of glass paint. My main advice to any magic lanternist is to use only original magic lanterns and original slides. Modern reproductions will never give the poetry of the true magic lantern show.

With thanks to Elena Dekic.



**LAURA MINICI ZOTTI** is director of the Museo del Precinema, Collezione Minici Zotti in Padua which she founded in 1997, and has given magic lantern shows in many countries. In December 2007, she was awarded the Seal of the City of Padua, and in 2008 she received the prestigious Jean Mitry award at the Silent Film Festival of Pordenone. In 2010 she received the Vittorio De Sica Award for Culture from the hands of the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano.