

# The Magic Lantern

## DR MERVYN HEARD (1948–2017)

Mervyn first became acquainted with magic lanterns in 1969 while at college in Watford, England, raising money for local charities. He came across collectors Joe Milburn and Jo Stevens – and together they created a Victorian-style show. This was so popular it led to several more shows and a regular company of singers and narrators called The Victorians. At this time Mervyn embarked on a career of theatre and arts management. In 1973, long before the new Globe Theatre was built, he was working with Sam Wanamaker on the Bankside Globe summer season and found himself unexpectedly in sole charge (Sam having gone to Australia) – when the tent blew down! He rescued the situation and this did not deter Mervyn from performing in large tents.

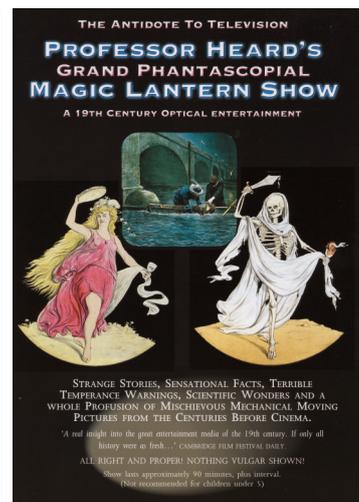
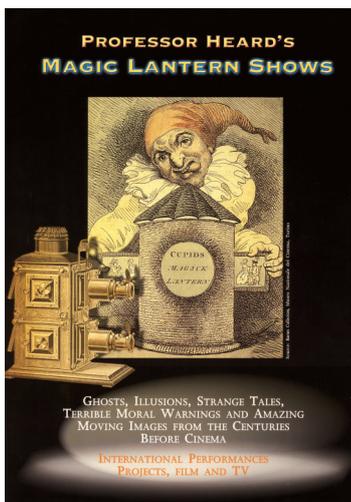
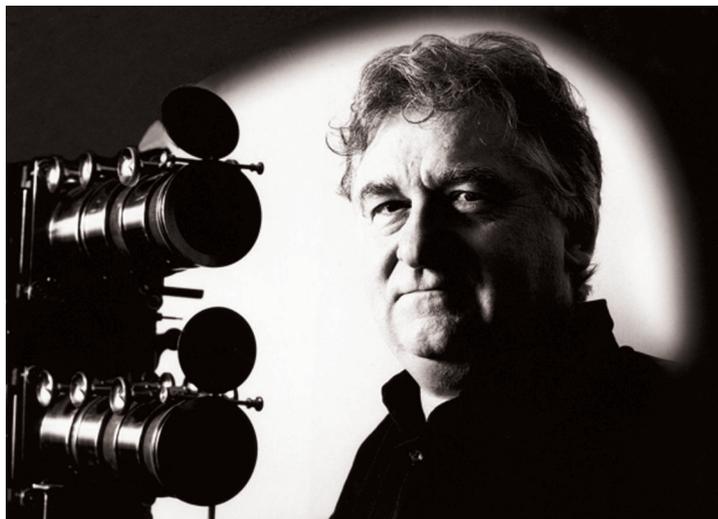
In 1977/78, while living in Cardiff and with Welsh Arts Council funding, he researched the work of itinerant fairground showmen and lanternists during the late 19th and early 20th century. Now working and writing for theatre he formed White's Wonders in 1978 – a company specialising in recreating magic lantern shows using Mervyn's own small collection of slides and simple lantern. Given the modest nature of the collection there was much emphasis on byplay and humour, with the inclusion of many curious orphan slides. This remained the mainstay of most of his shows for the next 40 years. White's Wonders continued until 1988, to be replaced by Professor Heard's Magic Lantern Shows, under which banner Mervyn continued to give shows in the UK and around the world.

In 1983 he was approached by the Orchard Theatre Company of Barnstaple to create a piece based on his continuing interest in turn-of-the-century fairground showmen. The result was *Wild Beasts and Living Pictures* which toured the South West of England

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and South Wales for ten weeks, in a fairground tent. The show resulted in a publication of the same name and led to TV spin-offs and BBC Wales commissioning an award-winning film drama – *A Penny for Your Dreams* – drawing on the show and Mervyn's extensive research material.

Mervyn advised on, appeared in or provided the magic lantern show for many more television programmes and feature films. Highlights included BBC2's *Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (1996) and *Mysteries of Magic* (2005), Michael Winterbottom's *Jude* (1996) and Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* (1999). He took part in or helped organise numerous festivals and touring events such as the Cambridge Film Festival (1995), BFI's *Living Pictures – 100 years of cinema* tour (1996), *Lumière Festival* (University of Westminster/ Smithsonian Institute) (1996), and the Oxford Literary Festival (1998/99). He gave lectures, performances and workshops in the UK and around the world. Venues in the UK included the Museum of the Moving Image (1995), Hayward Gallery's *Eyes, Lies and Illusions* exhibition (2004/05), Tate Britain's *Gothic Nightmares* exhibition (2006) and the Royal Opera House's *Wagner's Ring Cycle* with *Illuminago* (2007). Overseas he appeared at the Filmmuseum Amsterdam (1988), Hankyu/British Exhibition (V&A Museum) Osaka Japan (1989), Museo Nazionale del Cinema Torino (1996, 1997 and 2007), and Cinemateca Portuguesa Lisbon (2004). These are just a very small selection.

Mervyn's acclaimed book *Phantasmagoria – the secret life of the magic lantern* was published in 2006. He contributed to several Magic Lantern Society books and published many articles in the Society's Newsletter (of which he was editor), *Journal* and, more recently, *The Magic Lantern* – and numerous other publications. Mervyn's wide research into many aspects of magic lanterns carried out for over 40 years has impacted on fellow showpeople, academics and countless others. Mervyn had a PhD in the history of phantasmagoria from the University of Exeter and his research material is being given to their Bill Douglas Collection. He was a member of the Magic Circle and, of course, he was Chairman of the Magic Lantern Society from 2006 to 2011. A great – and greatly missed – magic lantern figure indeed.