

MOVING PANORAMAS AND THE MODERN PHANTASMAGORIA

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I was struck by Mike Smith's lead article in the last edition of *The Magic Lantern* (TML 43) about moving panoramas, as it brought to mind my various experimentations with the form over the last decade or so.

A while back, I decided to create a show about the wonderful music hall artiste Dan Leno (1860-1904), following my successful radio series about him for BBC Radio 4. As part of my research, I learned that Dan had been a keen painter and, in his later years, he had painted a large panorama in his shed (Fig. 1). I used this as inspiration for the backdrop to



1. Dan Leno's panorama

my one-man show about Dan and set about constructing a full-sized, moving stage panorama, which showed various moments or images from his life story and which scrolled across to change the backdrop for each scene. Fig. 2 shows the first sketch for the painting of the finished scrolling scenery cloth, which was 30 feet long and 8 feet high (9 x 2.4 m). You can see the mechanism that was created by Simon Pell to hold the canvas in Fig. 3 – it was all built in a barn and featured a steel box frame, with two large plastic sewage pipes as the 'rollers'! Once mounted in place, the mechanics were hidden by a



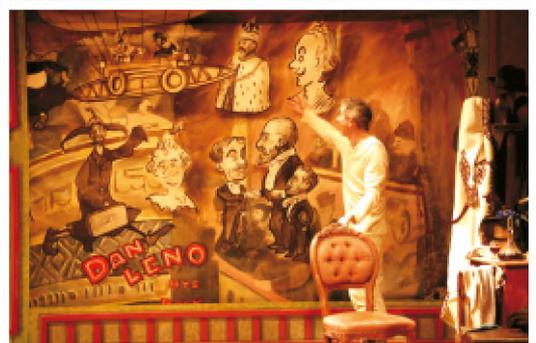
2. First sketch for the scrolling scenery cloth



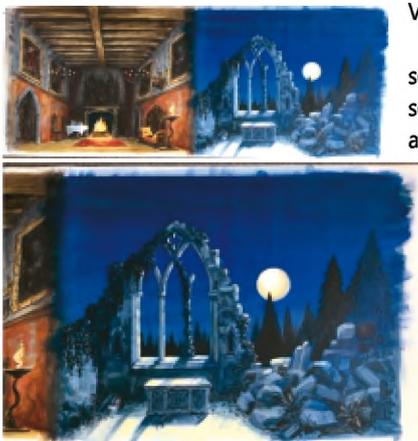
3. The mechanism to hold the canvas

painted frame which matched the false proscenium arch of the set, creating a sense of receding perspectives on stage, rather like a paper peepshow (Figs 4 and 5).

As I am based in South Devon, I am fortunate enough to live close to the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum on the University of Exeter campus, with their fabulous archive of pre-cinematic devices and resources. It was here that I did most of my research on a stage production of Bill Douglas's film *Comrades* and collaborated with Peter Jewell – the sadly recently-deceased script editor of the original film and friend of Bill Douglas (see TML 43, p. 2). In so doing, I was brought into contact with the potential of the moving panorama form once again, and how it had been used in peepshows and raree shows of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. I was commissioned to create a new peepshow by Professor Kate Newey as part of her AHRC project on 'Visual Culture in the Long 19th Century'. This show was to be based on J.R. Planché's *The Vampyre, or The Bride of the Isles* (1820) and again I wanted to feature moving panoramic scenery as a way of exploring Victorian stage mechanics for the 21st century.



4. and 5. The Dan Leno moving panorama on set with Tony performing



6. Painted cloth for scrolling, showing the Gothic interior and the ruined church scene and, below, the final version of the church enlarged

Once again, we devised scenery which could scroll across the model stage to offer different scenes, although this time the aim was to offer two alternative backdrops, rather than any sense of movement. Many MLS members have seen my peepshow box at previous magic lantern events, but for those who have not, it is basically a model Georgian theatre with working scenery, into which up to nine viewers can peep at any one time. We developed a cassette system for the scrolling scenery in my peepshow box, so that, for different shows, we could slot in different scenery by simply lifting out one set of scrollers with canvas attached and sliding another one in its place with a different show's moving scenery. For the 'Vampyre' peepshow, we wanted a grand hall interior and a ruined Gothic church at night – these can be seen in Fig. 6 as painted together on the original cloth. This was then slotted into the back of the stage and wound using an ingenious device based on the winding mechanism from a car window! The ruined Gothic church can be seen *in situ* in Fig. 7 overleaf. You can see a complete

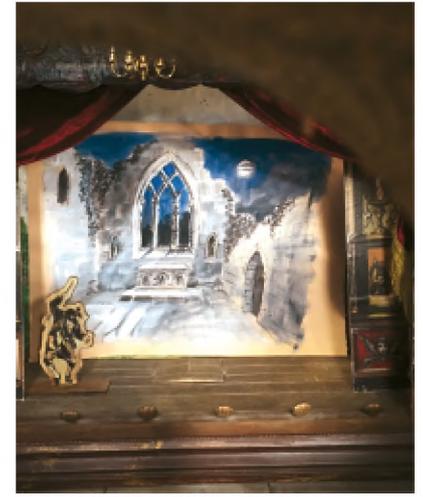
video of my 'Vampyre Peepshow' at bit.ly/TheVampyrePeepshow and you can also see a short 'Peepshow TEDtalk' about its making at bit.ly/PeeshowTEDtalk.

Another usage of the form came to my attention as I started to research a pre-cinematic and digital live performance version of *Don Quixote* (a project that I have yet to realise due to lack of commissioning funds – but I am always available to offers!). I was looking at how early sound recordings had been synchronised with visual imagery in a pre-digital, mechanical age. In so doing, I came across the Edison Bell 'Pictogram' – an ingenious contraption which played a story recorded on a 78 rpm shellac gramophone record, which was in turn geared and connected to scrolling scenery across the back of the

soundbox lid. This amazing combination of sound and image was intended to be a plaything for young people in the home and predates Disney's *Steamboat Willy* by at least five years (see Fig. 8). In addition, over the past four or five years, I have noticed a resurgence of storytellers using what are colloquially termed 'crankies', where stories or songs are told while the performer cranks a scrolling picture from one side to another. In Devon, there is a whole set of performers who are starting to use this low-tech device as part of folk-related, low-impact, contemporary storytelling, with regular showcases and events to demonstrate their work.

Mike Smith's article in the last *TML* reminded me of my fascination with such early forms of mechanisms which combined visual art and contemporary technologies with oral and aural material. In a digital age, we often take this linkage to be obvious, even inevitable, but artists are still exploring the disjunction between sound and sight, perception and illusion – the fascination with lip-synching as epitomised by the contemporary work of Dickie Beau, or even the queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, challenge and play with the reality or artifice of who is doing what and how that changes meaning. Artificial intelligence (AI) can now make avatars of us all – there is ever-more confusion about authenticity, the ventriloquised voice and how deep fake hauntology can make us see, hear and feel those things that are artificial, or at least depersonalised ... such supernaturalism is

the new Phantasmagoria of the age!



7. (right) The ruined church scene framed within the peepshow stage, with a Pollock's-style, toy cut-out of a character



8. Edison Bell 'Pictogram'