
FURTHER ADVENTURES OF THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

David Robinson



1. 'Mr T.P. Cooke as William in *Black-Eyed Susan*.' Print published by W. West, London, 9 September 1829

IN AN EARLIER ARTICLE¹ I described the sensational production of Edward Fitzball's spectacular 'Serio-Comic Burletta' *The Flying Dutchman*, which opened at the Adelphi Theatre, London on 1 January 1827. New research reveals that a year or so after this production the play was to feature in a curious piece of theatre history which appears never to have been recorded until now.

The Flying Dutchman! or, The Phantom Ship, to give it its sonorous full title, successfully combined two genres then at the peak of their popularity – the nautical drama and the gothic tale of the supernatural. The story tells how the other-worldly Vanderdecken, condemned to sail for eternity on his ghostly ship, abducts a beautiful Dutch maiden, Lestelle, who is rescued in the nick of time by the heroic Mowdrey. The production has a particular place in magic lantern history, however, since the appearance of the Phantom Ship – one of the show's many spectacular effects to thrill the London audience – was achieved by means of projection from a magic lantern. The credit for this idea, apparently the first time the magic lantern was so used for scenic effects within a dramatic stage production, was claimed by the dramatist, Edward Fitzball (1792–1873). As I recounted in my previous article, Fitzball recalled that when he took *The Flying Dutchman* to Daniel Terry and Frederick Yates, two actors who were then managing the Adelphi Theatre, they were alarmed at the costs of the scenic effects demanded by the play, until he reassured them with his ingenious 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.²

Henry Langdon Childe (1781–1874) was, in fact, no stranger to the Adelphi. The theatre had first opened in 1806 under the name of the Sans Pareil. It was built by John Scott (1752–1838), a colourman who had made a fortune out of a special brand of washing blue, ‘Scott’s True Blue’, and had premises at 417 Strand. Scott’s quixotic decision to take over the derelict onetime premises of Charles II’s dairy, neighbouring his shop, and erect a theatre holding more than 1000 people, seems to have been inspired by his twin passions. One was his talented daughter, who for more than twelve years was to star in and write many of the theatre’s entertainments and songs. The other was the magic lantern: Scott had been marketing lanterns and slides from his shop since 1797.³ According to William Jerome Harrison’s biography of Childe in the 1887 *Dictionary of National Biography*, Scott employed the young lanternist from the opening of the Sans Pareil to devise the phantasmagorical entertainments that figured in its early programmes. The theatre changed its name to the Adelphi in 1819, and by 1827, more than twenty years after his first association with the establishment, Childe was back, presenting dissolving views that included the eruption of Vesuvius and a view of Newstead Abbey with moving swans. Who else, then, would the management have called in to create the Phantom Ship?

The Phantom Ship was not the only attraction of the Adelphi production. The leading role of Vanderdecken was played by T.P. Cooke (1786–1864), then the idol of the melodrama audience. A former sailor, Cooke was a strapping fellow of enormous energy, given to large gestures and with burning black eyes. The production was a huge success: ordinarily the London theatres presented a nightly-changing repertory, but *The Flying Dutchman* had to be repeated every evening until the season ended in March.

Meanwhile Robert Elliston (1774–1831) was trying to revive the fortunes of the Adelphi’s rival across the Thames, the Surrey Theatre, originally built in 1782 as the Royal Circus. Elliston had the good luck or judgment to pick on a new nautical play, *Black Eyed Susan; or, All in the Downs*, by a 26-year-old dramatist and former sailor named Douglas Jerrold, who had been writing for the stage since he was 18.⁴ The role of William the sailor hero (1) gave T.P. Cooke his biggest triumph, and the play went on to be one of the greatest hits of the era. By 19 October 1829 it had already been performed 115 times, and a Surrey Theatre playbill of that date proudly announced:

In consequence of the still-increasing desire of the Public to witness
BLACK-EYED SUSAN!

Mr T.P. COOKE has consented to give up all his Engagements, and will
remain at this Theatre during the unprecedented attraction of that
popular Nautical Drama.

Elliston instantly began to look for other roles to exploit Cooke’s box-office appeal, and naturally decided on a revival of *The Flying Dutchman! or, The Phantom Ship*, which was ready for the stage, complete with Mr Childe’s effects, by mid-September 1829. The management of the Adelphi – now Charles Mathews and Frederick Yates (Daniel Terry having died overwhelmed by personal debt) – were furious. The Surrey had stolen not only their biggest star, but also their most vaunted production and its associated effects. After fifteen performances, Yates, Mathews and a certain Mr Cumberland (presumably the publisher of ‘Cumberland’s British Theatre’) applied for a court injunction to prevent the performance of what was now styled *The Adelphi Flying Dutchman*.

At the Surrey, Elliston was in no way disconcerted. He instantly commissioned his favourite dramatist, Douglas Jerrold, to write a revised version of the story; and accordingly, on 15 October 1829, T.P. Cooke rampaged over the oceans in ‘a new Drama’, *The Flying Dutchman! or, The Spectral Ship!* – naturally with optical effects by

Mr Childe. It was received

by an Audience overflowing in every part, with the most unbounded
applause, and given out for repetition by Mr T.P. Cooke, after his
performance of Vanderdecken, amid the unanimous cheers of the Public.⁵

The day after the premiere, Elliston attended a hearing of the case for injunction, at which

after a long discussion on the merits of the case, the Master of the Rolls
distinctly stated, as his opinion, that Messrs Yates and Mathews had not
the slightest title to the exclusive right of performing Mr Edward Fitzball’s
Burletta of *The FLYING DUTCHMAN*.

Elliston had meanwhile decided that in any case he preferred the new version, and it was *The Flying Dutchman! or, The Spectral Ship!* that was to remain in the Surrey repertory for the rest of the season. However, simply to assert his moral victory, he decided to give one last performance of the Fitzball version:

In the satisfaction which Mr Elliston experiences in this, and the previous
announcement, of the Injunction being refused, he is most anxious to avoid
any unseemly expression of triumph: – It is the principle that he has been
advocating, influenced by no consideration of the value of the Piece, which
indeed was of no essential consequence to the general interest of the Surrey
Theatre; his main object being, to convince his Friends, and the Patrons
of this establishment, that he is incapable of any aggression on the
property of another party. He intends, however, (**MERELY TO
ESTABLISH HIS RIGHT**) notwithstanding the extraordinary success
of the **NEW Drama**, to present the

OLD FLYING DUTCHMAN

On Monday next, after **BLACK-EYED SUSAN**.

Luckily, in the prominent playbill announcements of this final, one-off showing, Elliston gave more detail of the scenic effect of the Phantom Ship. The end of the second act is described as:

Sea View off the Cape – Haunted Chamber – Rocky Pass – Romantic
View near Cape Town – Exterior of Fortress by Moonlight.

RISING OF THE SEA MIST!

The Scene enveloped in Darkness.

THE PHANTOM SHIP IN FULL SAIL

On the open Sea. Gigantic Cliff.

INUNDATION OF THE DEVIL’S CAVE!⁶

A further note not only informs us that two of the most prominent London suppliers of optical equipment were associated with Childe, but clearly confirms that the production was the personal responsibility of Cooke:

THE OPTICAL ILLUSION of the PHANTOM SHIP IN FULL SAIL,
that terminates the Second Act, will be conducted by Mr T.P. COOKE,
from expensive Apparatus, executed for him, by Mr DOLLOND,
Optician to His Majesty, St Paul’s Church-Yard; Mr JONES, High
Holborn; and Mr CHILD.⁷

The Flying Dutchman was to go through a number of reincarnations over the next six decades, including Richard Wagner’s opera *Der fliegende Holländer*, first produced in Dresden on 2 January 1843. Few, though, were so fraught with acrimony or, from all accounts, so brilliant as the Surrey’s 1829 revival.

David ROBINSON is an internationally renowned collector, critic and scholar of the cinema and all related visual media. He is a past Editor of *NMLJ*, was previously film critic of *The Times*, and has held numerous other distinguished posts.

NOTES

1. David Robinson, ‘Magic Lantern Sensations of 1827’, *NMLJ* Vol. 8 No. 4 (December 1999), 14–15.
2. Edward Fitzball, *Thirty-five Years of a Dramatic Showman’s Life* (London: 1859).
3. See Stephen Horbert, David Robinson and Richard Crangle (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern* (London: Magic Lantern Society, 2001), 274.
4. For more on Jerrold, see Mark Butterworth, ‘The Story Behind the Slides: Caudle’s Curtain Lectures’, *NMLJ* Vol. 9 No. 3 (Winter 2002),

45–6. A recent full-length biography is Michael Slater, *Douglas Jerrold: A Life (1803–1857)* (London: Duckworth, 2002).

5. E.L. Blanchard, ‘History of the Surrey Theatre’, in *The Era Almanach 1876* (London: 1875). See also E.L. Blanchard, ‘History of the Adelphi Theatre’, in *The Era Almanach 1877* (London: 1876). Other references here are from *The Theatrical Observer; and Daily Bills of the Play* (London: 1827), and from playbills and prints in the author’s collection.
6. Surrey Theatre playbill, 19 October 1829.
7. *Ibid.*