

REVIEW: MODERN ENCHANTMENTS

Mervyn Heard

Simon During

Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic
Cambridge, Massachusetts,
and London: Harvard University
Press, 2002

336pp, ill. Hardback £23.50,
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'This book has been almost a decade in the writing, and in that time I have gathered a harvest of debt ...'

Anyone who has ever embarked on an epic piece of research will warm to these opening words of Simon During's excellent history of stage conjuring and its impact on modern culture. Having combed archives in Australia, the USA and Britain, During has produced an extensive study of the history and development of what he calls 'secular magic' (that is, stage magic) from ancient times to the present. No matter how tangential your interest in conjuring, you will find this fascinating stuff – not least because it devotes a significant number of pages to the development of magic lantern entertainment. It is undoubtedly During's fresh angle of approach which has led him to uncover much that has not been brought to light before: he is neither a film historian nor a practising magician, but a Professor of English, at the University of Melbourne, and draws many of his references from the worlds of the prose classics and poetry.

The book provides both a chronological history of stage magic and a number of thought-provoking essays. One such, which may be worth the price of the book alone, appears in the final chapter, entitled 'Spiritualism and the Birth of Optical Technologies'. Here During explores the close friendship between Christiaan Huygens and the celebrated philosopher and sceptic, Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1633–77). Like Huygens, Spinoza was also a lens-maker, and During suggests possible philosophical and religious arguments which may have taken place between the two men over the lantern and its possible 'theological' misuse.



In addition to new literary references and During's own theories, there are newly discovered historical references to lantern shows. One important one is a newspaper account of a performance in London in 1774 by the actor Robert Baddeley (1733–94), at Le Beck's Head tavern and again at Marylebone Pleasure Gardens. This must be one of the earliest descriptions of a lantern show staged by a famous performer in a formal venue, and is worth quoting in full:

The exhibition consisted of a variety of different caricatures, painted on glass and exhibited in the rays of light cast upon a blank sheet through the focus of the lantern; about each of these caricatures, Mr Baddeley either told a laughable story, or made some satirical remarks on them.

The entertainment continued an hour and was divided into two parts; in the former was given the character of a modern widow, who upon the death of her first husband, by whom she had three children, erected a superb monument to his memory, affected to be inconsolable, adopted for her motto, 'Lover lies a bleeding', and nevertheless in a very short time went off to France with a Horse Grenadier. In the second part, an old Jew and his son Isaac were shown and a humorous catechism between them was recited. Besides these, a great variety of figures were produced some of a general tendency, others which would bear a peculiar and personal application. In the course of the entertainment, several strokes, levelled at known foibles and remarkable persons were introduced, most of which had a good effect. This species of exhibition affords an ample field for ridicule and satire. Mr Baddeley deserves credit for the thought, and will doubtless meet with encouragement.'

The book does have its problems. A few sections are quite 'academic' and theoretical in tone, although the more historical portions are on the whole clearly expressed. There are few illustrations and, perhaps for this reason, they often seem somewhat arbitrary. And the author's attempts to impart technical information as speedily as possible are often confusing or inaccurate – witness the following sentence which attempts to deal with the significant developments of the Choreutoscope and Chromatrope: 'These exploited the "persistence of vision" phenomenon, notably (in the case of the chromatrope) to show a wave breaking, which was also a favourite of early cinema.'² But these are really minor quibbles. The book's importance is that it is the first work which puts the magic lantern at the core of the history and development of stage illusion.

NOTES

1. Unidentified newspaper cutting, British Library Theatre Cuttings collection, in During, *Modern Enchantments*, 100–01.
2. During, 145.

REVIEW: POOLE'S MYRIORAMA!

Richard Crangle

Hudson John Powell

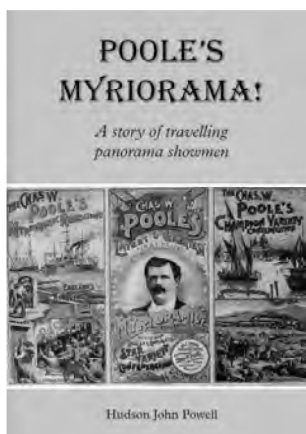
Poole's Myriorama! A Story of Travelling Panorama Showmen
Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire:
ELSP, 2002

Paperback, 224pp, ill. £15.00,
ISBN 1 90334182 5

This book is a remarkable achievement: a one-man labour of love which sets out to cover every possible aspect of a specific, but wide-ranging, subject. It is superbly produced, with a high-quality finish and lots of illustrations, including eight pages of colour. As described in a recent *MLS Newsletter*, it covers the complicated history of the Poole family and their associates, who travelled throughout Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with entertainments based on the moving panorama.

At one level, the book easily achieves its aims: it's very comprehensive, and there's a lot of detailed information about the various Pooles, their lives and shows, venues and itineraries. But ... well, it's not very easy to read. An editor *would* say this, wouldn't he, but if ever a book needed the services of a good editor, this is it.

It's hard to be critical of a work that shows so much love and effort, but the presentation of the information could use a bit more



structure. This is especially so for an interwoven history in which branches of one family present similar-but-different shows: it's easy to become confused about who was related to whom and which show is which. There's rather too much quotation from playbills and reviews; it's not always clear which parts of the text are quotations and which aren't; and there's a tendency to jump-cut back and forth between different locations and moments in time. There are excellent appendices presenting clear documentation of the Poole shows, and detailed footnotes which, if anything, are clearer than the main body of the text, but the body text itself at times reads like a stream of information rather than the structured story implied by the book's subtitle.

Poole's Myriorama! is certainly the definitive account of an interesting and important area of British optical entertainment, and while that's meant as a considerable compliment, at the same time it highlights the difficulty faced by a book like this. Nobody else is likely to write another account of the Poole family businesses, which gives the definitive account a responsibility to live up to. There's no doubt that this is a must-have book for anyone with a serious interest in the travelling panorama show, but there's also the feeling that it could have been something more.

A really well-written historical book opens its subject up, as well as giving the definitive account: it presents factual information, but interprets it and makes it relevant to a wider range of readers. The best way of doing this is through narrative, especially human narrative: a good history can take readers into areas beyond those they already know by engaging them with the people whose story is being told. This book doesn't quite do that, which is a pity because there's a fascinating and entertaining story in there somewhere. It is, however, a great achievement to produce a book like this from one's own resources, and John Powell is to be congratulated – but this cynical reviewer can't help asking for a bit more.