



PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS HERMAN BOLLAERT

An interview profile by Jeremy Brooker

I first became aware of the magic lantern on the day I received one from St Nicholas, but I was still too young to comprehend its true value. For me, it all started much later. It was on a sunny Sunday morning in the mid-seventies. My son and I were visiting the Brussels flea market. At a certain moment, we stopped at one of the stalls. I took my son by his arm and said: 'Look there ... a magic lantern!' It was one of those little toy lanterns by Planck and I continued, 'That, my boy, was the first form of projection, the forerunner of the modern cinema.'

We returned home, in the possession of that little lantern and a box of long small slides. The tinplate at the bottom was a bit damaged and here and there the black paint was gone, but what else could you expect? That little thing must have been almost one hundred years old. Having arrived home, we couldn't wait to install it. Where an oil-lamp would once have been found, I now placed a candle. That evening the TV remained off, and in the flickering light we performed our first magic lantern show. I'll never forget how that little thing impressed me.

My early childhood strongly influenced my future career. Born in Antwerp, as the son of a school principal I was brought up in a spirit of education and art. My father was an intelligent and wise man, very handy. He was an accomplished



Etienne Mortier

Herman, assisted by his wife, during the making of a documentary film in 1970



Herman the actor, (at right), in the play "Die Geliefden" ("The Lovers") by Hugo Claus (Studio '50)

painter and a good amateur musician who played the piano and flute fluently. I remember the many evenings my parents were at the piano singing songs together. They regularly visited the opera and the theatre and very often I was allowed to go with them. As a boy of ten, I had already seen famous dramas by Ibsen, Molière, Goethe and many others. The big scenes, the lighting, the costumes, that wondrous world from behind the curtains, made a great impression on me. In the days after seeing the plays, I very often replayed them in my own way in the stable behind the house, in the company of the chickens and rabbits.

My other favourite pastimes were the arts of conjuring and puppetry. My father made me several puppet theatres. The performing arts, as a whole, had a huge impact on me and would greatly determine my future life. I was sure that I would become an actor later.

After the Second World War we moved to Ghent. There I got my first chance to play in real theatre. I started as an amateur in a local theatre group. From then on it progressed. I studied at the Royal Theatre School of Ghent and obtained the degree of actor with 'Great Distinction'. In 1950 we founded Toneelstudio '50 (Theatre Studio '50), an experimental group, later called ARCA Theatre. After my studies I was engaged as an actor and later a producer at the New Dutch Theatre, a Flemish travelling company. I also became involved in television plays and made several documentaries and short fiction films. From there my interest was awakened for pre-cinema and the magic lantern.

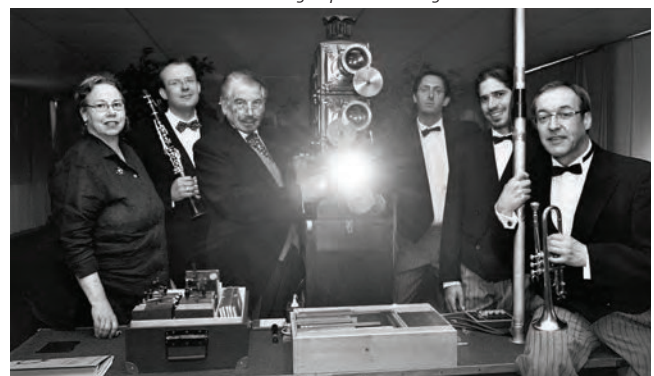
I recall the day when I first attended a magic lantern performance. It was on a small canal boat that lay at Little Venice in London. Earlier that day I had met Douglas and Anita Lear, and they had invited me to come and see their evening show. When I arrived at the boat, the house was full. There were only 12 to 15 seats! Doug said that I could watch the show from behind the screen, as they used back projection. It was a unique opportunity to see how they worked. Anita cleverly manipulated the slides, while Doug played an American organ, simultaneously producing the appropriate sound effects. They were great artists and I was very impressed by their skilful work. In the following days, my mind kept going over what I had seen and I decided to do something similar.

I became more and more captivated by the magic lantern. From then on I regularly went abroad, looking for slides and projection equipment. England and France were my favourite places to go.

On one of my purchasing tours, I became acquainted with a bizarre gentleman. He kept a bookstore in the centre of Paris. In addition, he had a large stock of old prints for decorating fronts of shadow theatres and other kinds of pre-cinema material. I did good business with him.

A few months later I visited him again but the store was closed. A neighbour told me that he had moved to Tancarville, a small village located in the north of France. I decided to go and visit him there. I found out that he lived, together with a friend, in a little church on the edge of the woods. He was happy to see me and invited me in. With pride he showed me the interior of his home. He possessed a large collection of fairground attractions. When we entered his office, I fell back in surprise. The entire wall was covered with phenakistiscope discs – certainly a hundred.

The group "Laterna Magica - Galantee Show" in 2007

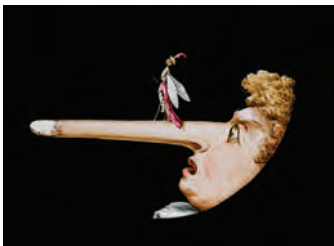


Olivier Belarert



Herman with his Triunial lantern during a performance in Ghent in 2010

After lunch, we chatted for some time. At a certain point I asked him if he had ever seen painted erotic slides? 'Yes', he said 'and I possess some.' 'For sale?' I asked. 'Non, monsieur ... pas à vendre' (not for sale). We maintained a good relationship and a few months later I went to see him again, but found the church empty. From a young man who was inside, I learned that he had recently died.



A year or so later, at a photographic fair near Paris, some magic lantern slides caught my attention. They showed a man with a long nose, and in his hair were flies playing music. On one of the slides, the paint on the tip of his nose was gone and it looked a bit like a phallus. A female fly was standing on it. The label mentioned: 'Le Bal des Mouches' (The Flies' Ball) and written beneath in pencil: 'pas à vendre'. I immediately recognised my deceased friend's handwriting. The chap from the stall told me that they were for sale and I bought them. The slides were in average condition, some were broken, others had parts missing and here and there the paint was chipped, but in general the paintings themselves were excellent. I was kept busy repairing and restoring them for a long time and I also had to invent an

appropriate story for them. I left the missing paint on his nose as it was and made some allusions to it in my commentary.

Finally, it became a most curious set and it is now one of the highlights of our show. I called it 'Le Rêve' (The dream) or 'A Funny Story'.

I became a member of the newly founded Magic Lantern Society. There were only about thirty members at that time. One day, with the help of a friend, I was fortunate to find a W.C. Hughes triple magic lantern – that was my lucky day! I wasn't going to wait any longer and went into action. At a fair in Holland I met Annet Duller who agreed to cooperate and, together with my son Ditmar, we began preparing our show. Many days were spent sitting together viewing slides and writing texts. Everything was scripted – the tasks were divided. As a stage actor I would read the words, while Annet would operate the lantern. Ditmar would take charge of the songs. For the musical accompaniment my preference was for live music and all electronic tools and recorded music were rejected. We started with just a pianist. To emphasise the nineteenth-century atmosphere, we used candlelight to illuminate our scores and we performed in costumes from the Belle Epoque.

Our primary aim has always been to entertain but also to instruct. The show takes the form of a journey through the history of

the magic lantern, starting with a Savoyard showing a series of amusing images. We continue with a range of different comical scenes and finish with a set of chromatropes. The second and third parts show more sophisticated scenes with dialogues and musical arrangements. These include 'The Elves and the Nymphs', 'Macao', 'Napoleon and the Burning of Moscow', 'The Death and Burial of Cock Robin', etc. The show ends with a series of photographic song slides where the audience is invited to sing along. We've always tried to involve the audience as closely as possible with the action, letting them play and sing with us, provoking responses and getting them to help us to make the sound effects. After the performance, the audience comes and stands around our table, asking questions, looking at the slides and making comments. They are constantly amazed by what they have seen and say what a pity more people can't see the show.

My great interest is the history of the Royal Polytechnic; their techniques, the amazing quality and beauty of their slides. I am aware we can never reach the high standards of performance of that institution, but I see it as a challenge and an example to follow.

Over the years we've made a lot of changes and improvements technically as well as artistically. The orchestra has increased from one to six musicians. Several new series of the very best quality have been added. Some older slides are always shown because they are so remarkable that it is a pleasure to see them again and again.

One of our most recent shows was quite exceptional. It took place in a church with a full orchestra and a choir of forty singers. That was a very grand occasion. We have been invited several times by the Magic Lantern Society for their Conventions, the last time being in 2009 in the University of Westminster, the building of the old Polytechnic. That was the 'cherry on the cake', and fulfilled my deepest wish: to one day give a performance in that prestigious place.

We have been to so many different places in the world and I hope to continue for a while longer. But there is a time to come, and a time to go. A travelling theatre requires great effort. I hope someone will take it over and give it a fresh new start, showing the world the enormous power that goes out from the magic lantern. My collection of devices and images keeps me very busy. I hope they will eventually fall into good hands and will be preserved for the future.

My advice to performers is this. The magic lantern is primarily a visual art, and great care should be given to creating a smooth projection without too many hitches. Commentary and songs come as a major addition, but not at the expense of the projection. Even with a limited collection one can give good shows. It comes down to quality, rather than length. Some performers prefer to do everything with great accuracy, leaving nothing to chance, while others have the talent of improvisation: both can be good, each to his own!

