

The Magic Lantern

POSE SLIDES: THE SELLERS-RAY COLLECTION

Mervyn Heard

Back in 1962 when the actor Peter Sellers was interviewed on BBC television's Michael Parkinson talk show he recalled his parents' stage act during the golden age of variety in the 1930s.

My mother wore white tights and stood in front of a plain white screen ... (while) ... a magic lantern cast slides of different costumes onto the screen. The result was that my mother would appear as all kinds of women in history or mythology, from Britannia to Joan of Arc, and yet never really change. My mother's act moved me in a way that I still can't explain...

The act that Peter's mother 'Peg' and her husband Bill presented had its origins in the spectacular performances of the American Serpentine dancer Loie Fuller in the 1890s. *La Loie* famously explored the effect of throwing colour and projected imagery onto the billowing silk of her all-encompassing white dress in the USA, London and most notably Paris, at the Folies Bergère. Images of her frenzied dancing in cascades of silken fabric were to become part of the iconography of the art nouveau period.

Unable to patent her dance routines, Loie attracted many copyists in America, Europe, Australia and other parts of the world. In the



Clockwork chromatope

1890s there were often as many as three Serpentine dancers appearing on the same bill. For the owners of theatres it was an ideal act to promote the fact that their auditorium was now fully lit by electricity.

Although Loie Fuller was the primary inspiration for Serpentine routines it would be a mistake to assume that her imitators did not add ideas of their own. During the first two decades of the twentieth century established commercial lantern slide producers and creators of electrical stage effects were also offering their own inventive slide material to professional and amateur performers. Some of this was quite bizarre and far removed from the kind of imagery used in the artistic, modernist dance routines of Loie Fuller.

The projection-based speciality acts encountered in continuous vaudeville programmes, pantomime, German and French cabaret and musical comedy were based more on the tradition of tableaux vivant or poses plastiques. These, combined with more picaresque imagery, make up the 'pose slide' act.

THEME AND VARIATION

For collectors, identifying slides used by Serpentine dancers and in pose slide acts can be difficult. I suspect that many slides have been ignored or lost from collections because they appear to be incomplete images and/or have no obvious context or purpose. Flags, butterflies, a flight of birds, an abstract shape or something resembling a sheet of wallpaper do not immediately suggest incorporation into a lantern show. Anyway, here are three basic classifications of Serpentine/pose slide activity which may help.

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SERPENTINE SLIDES

Early reports suggest that Loie Fuller and her imitators employed basic colour wheels and chromatropes, but it soon became clear that the Serpentine dress – essentially a moving screen– could be used to convey any projected image. In large theatres this might be bright and very colourful images of butterflies, flowers and birds, although the routine usually culminated in something patriotic. Ending with an image of the American flag, the American eagle, a message of good will or even an image of the incumbent president was sure to provoke loud applause or a standing ovation, even if the act itself had been somewhat uninspiring. Images used were usually painted against black backgrounds, very much in the style of phantasmagoria slides. There may have been commercial examples available before 1900.

Later, film was sometimes incorporated into Serpentine dance routines: significantly, although largely undocumented, during the performances of the dancer La Pia in the very first Royal Variety Performance (aka the Royal Command Performance) on 1 July 1912.

CLOAK SLIDES

During the first decade of the twentieth century the cloak act put in an appearance. This was in part inspired by the magician's 'black art' technique and was a move away from dance to a more static form of representation. The artist no longer made her entrance in a flowing white sheet but was initially 'invisibly' swathed in a black velvet cloak. Beneath the cloak she was dressed provocatively in a white leotard or fleshings. Standing on a specific spot and in a surprising series of revelations she would open the cloak to reveal an image, often with supernatural or Gothic associations – a spider, a snake, a dragon, a witch, a fairy – or some strong abstract design. The picture would appear on the white lining of the cloak and flow over the contours of the performer's body for maybe twenty or thirty seconds. Then the cloak would close and reopen a split second later with a different representation – a transformation achieved by a swift slide change.

Since it was necessary to keep the smaller image in sharp focus the artist was usually confined to a fixed spot, but possibly she was able to manipulate the cloak to give some semblance of flapping wings, a writhing serpent and so forth.

Supernatural images were often preferred when used in the context of a magician's stage act. However, various themes can also be found incorporating circus imagery and abstract shapes.

Cloak slides are identifiable in two ways: specifically from the presence of a white semicircle at the top of the slide, which was there



Fairy (cloak slide)



Snake (cloak slide)

to frame and illuminate the artist's face, which is almost always in evidence. The other indicator is the shape of the image itself, which tends to follow the semi-circular hem of a cloak when held open at shoulder level or with slightly raised arms. Famous exponents of this style of performance were the magician Adelaide Hermann and the exotic dancer and model Mademoiselle Lotty.

POSE SLIDES

Unlike Serpentine or cloak slides, pose slides offer complete scenes that are designed to be thrown onto large, flat, white screens in a traditional way. The most common images tend to be picture-postcard-like representations of familiar foreign landmarks or exotic destinations. Each slide will have a central figure represented in costume only; that is to say, missing all facial features (the entire

Eskimo (pose slide)



Butterfly (pose slide)



Fan (pose slide)





Fountain (pose slide)



Mermaid (pose slide)



Plate (pose slide)

head), sometimes arms and legs and in the case of classical nude figures the entire body. All human elements were to be supplied by the pose artist, who stands on a white plinth on an exact spot, centre stage. These images, when found, naturally appear incomplete.

The application of such pose slides within the context of a performance might vary, although commonly they were designed to be shown in rapid succession, transporting the hapless girl on a musical, whistle-stop tour of the world and on occasion even to the outer cosmos, the sea-bed or even the fiery pit. All this before returning home to the good old USA or the cradle of the British Empire, represented by the appropriate nation's flags and the playing of the national anthem.

Pose slides such as these are the primary form of the Sellers-Ray Collection.

COMMERCIAL SUPPLY

After initially emanating from the USA at the turn of the nineteenth century, Serpentine, cloak and pose slides soon became available internationally. The early US manufacturers and distributors included established lantern slide producers, notably McAllister & Co, and the new creators of electrical stage effects, notably Kliegl Brothers. Chicago seems to have been a major centre for the production of this kind of material, perhaps unsurprisingly since this was also a strong centre for the production of song slides in the first decades of the twentieth century. Examples also exist of extensive material produced in France, Germany (Liesegang) and Britain. The British material is invariably lacking any makers' labels, so is identifiable only by format (3¼ inches square) and subject matter.

The excerpts from pages shown here, taken from various US catalogues, demonstrate the range of material available by c. 1910. Note that battleships seemed to be a particularly popular motif for Serpentine dancers, as well as 'wallpaper', the effect of which is just as imagined.

THE SELLERS-RAY POSE SLIDE COLLECTION

Showbusiness ran in the blood of the Sellers family. Legend has it that the distaff side of family was of Portuguese-Jewish descent, related to the flamboyant eighteenth-century bare-knuckle boxer, Daniel Mendoza. Peter Sellers' maternal grandmother had been gifted with the glorious name of Welcome Mendoza, although she changed it several times, first to Marks, her married name, and then to Belle Ray, when she became a vaudeville impresario managing forty companies – including the main, family company Ray Brothers. Also known simply as 'Ma', she had eight sons and two daughters, Cissie and Agnes. Agnes was Peter's mother, who was always referred to as Peg.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the introduction of revue style entertainments. Novelty was everything. Ma's first and most successful revue, *Splash Me*, featured a bevy of young ladies in revealing swimwear, frolicking in a giant water tank. This toured throughout



Harbach catalogue cover

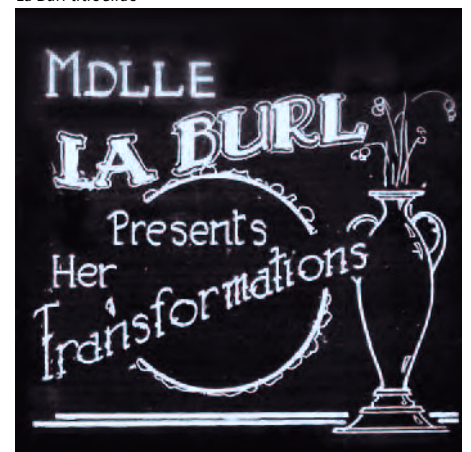


Harbach catalogue inside page



Peter Sellers and his mother

La Burl title slide





Shell (pose slide)



Snake (pose slide)



Dick Turpin (pose slide)

Vesuvius (pose slide sequence)



Britain and generated enormous publicity: chiefly as a result of local Watch Committees complaining about the semi-clad nature of the young mermaids, but also on a couple of occasions when the tank burst and drowned the orchestra.

The pose slide act offered an ideal complement to the Ray Brothers' style of revue, which concentrated on glamour, sensation and sparkle. 'Peg' was the pose artist. In 1923 she met and married Bill Sellers, a multi-instrumentalist, and together they polished the performance, with Bill operating the twin dissolving-view lantern unit from the pit. The act continued until the 1950s, with other younger members of the family taking over aspects of the performance as time went by.

I first encountered the slides and the original projection equipment that had been acquired by Peg and other members of the family, in 1996. The BBC was producing an Arena arts programme on the life of the actor Peter Sellers, who had died in 1980. The programme makers were keen to try and recreate the act that had had such an apparent impact on him as a young boy. In 1996 everything was in the possession of Peter Sellers' cousins Dick Ray and Ray Marks, who had been actively involved in presenting the act in its heyday.

Although the original dissolving view lantern was still in existence it needed attention so I used my own biunial with the original slides. Filming took place at the Wimbledon Theatre in south London and the pose artist was Peter's second cousin, Rachel, a professional dancer. The family had already made a selection of scenes from the original act. The slides were all British made and set in wooden frames.

When holding the slides up to the light prior to inserting them into the lantern they appeared as a pretty unimpressive succession of unconnected images of so many headless women. It is only when the slides are placed in the lantern and dissolved as a transforming sequence that the viewer can fully appreciate the surprising impact of these images in relation to the small facial and other body movements made by the live performer. Much of the effect is based on the viewer's own natural inclination, on viewing any figure, to first concentrate attention on the face. Rather eerily when the face moves, it seems to convince the brain that the entire picture is a moving picture and not a frozen lantern image.

The brief televised sequence is on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yolgqnal9Dc>). It's about 6.3 minutes into the film, but it's impossible to appreciate the true effect from this, and the quality of both the images and sound is very poor. However, the preceding footage does carry images of Sellers' mother and other members of what was an established showbusiness family.

When, in 2004, a feature film was released of Sellers' life, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, starring Geoffrey Rush, the original intention was to include a semblance of the act with Miriam Margolyes, who played his mother, Peg. But in the end the sequence was dropped from the film.

Last year I acquired the entire collection, complete with the original carbon-arc operated lanterns, in a large black carrying box with the legend 'La Burl. Glass' written boldly across the front.

Although dating from around the First World War period, the dissolving unit is of a much more ancient style than the mahogany and brass biunial or triunial lanterns of the late nineteenth century. This unit takes us back to the side-by-side type of the 1820s, with its hand-operated 'angels wings' system, by which one lens is exposed and the other shielded by turns.

There is a good reason why a more up-to-date double-deck system was not employed. The unit needed to sit on a shelf placed over the footlights and to be operated by Bill, standing low down in the orchestra pit.

The entire collection of slides numbers around 250, of varying quality. Some are designed for a 12-foot-high screen and other images for an approximate 9-foot screen. This can be estimated from the size of the figure, the height of the pose artist being critical. It seems that there was a favoured selection of around twenty-four images. A 'cue sheet' written in pencil on a small plank of wood confirms this, and these are clearly the images of the highest standard of draughtsmanship and colour effect.

OTHER SPECIAL EFFECTS

There were a few other interesting specialised items to be found in various boxes: a colour wheel, fountains and a few chromatropes, including a clockwork version with a big key attached, which may be unique. Although I have never encountered such an item before it seems to me a development which would have proved very useful for any lantern operator who was required to turn the handle of one chromatrope whilst endeavouring to load and then operate a second one and to effect a dissolve all at the same time. The Sellers' clockwork chromatrope has various brand names on it, which suggests that the parts came from a well-known manufacturer of bicycle parts in Birmingham.

A fountain slide effect has been adapted for pose slide work, taking a traditional nineteenth-century dissolving pair and scratching out an area on the fountain pedestal to accommodate the pose artist.

A series of three 3¼ inch slides offers three views of Vesuvius – dormant, by night and finally in full eruption – all designed around a single pose slide figure.

OTHER EXTANT POSE SLIDE COLLECTIONS

There are a number of other significant pose slide collections in both private and institutional hands worldwide. The largest known is the Joel E. Rubin Collection at the Thompson Library at the Ohio State University and is accessible online here: <https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/handle/1811/56638>.

Other significant private holdings include images dating from the 1920s and still being incorporated into performances by the German artist *Visiona*; the Lesley and David Evans collection of images originally used by the German cabaret star Pola Nery (not to be confused with Pola Negri), much of which relates to her shows at the Folies Bergère, and the series of cloak slide images recently featured in the book *Dutch Perspectives* by Annet Duller, Margreet Wagenaar-Fischer and Willem Albert Wagenaar.

ONGOING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Recently I have written articles based on research gleaned from a



Dissolve unit on the La Burl Glass box

fellowship at the Ohio State University last year. The original appeared in the US publication *Theatre Design and Technology* (Fall 2014) with a further version in the Hungarian journal *Szinpad* (June 2015). A further German version is due later in the year. There is a much longer downloadable PDF treatise on my website: www.mervynheard.com. It's free. Help yourself.

An eventual aim is to stage some kind of performance work using the Sellers' pose slide material if I can find funding for the technical and artistic development of the project. To this end I'm happy to discuss and talk with anyone who might be interested in helping with such an event, either technically, financially or just for fun.

POSTSCRIPT

Whilst preparing this article I learnt of the death of Dick Ray, who had been my close contact with the family and arranged for me to purchase the slides. He had presented the show with his brother and his wife, also known as Peg, in the 40s and 50s. He went on to become a theatrical impresario in his own right, running the Opera House on Jersey and with various other showbusiness interests. This article is dedicated to his memory.