

# PROMINENT MAGIC LANTERNISTS DAVID FRANCIS AND JOSS MARSH

An interview profile by Jeremy Brooker  
Part 2

In 2005, some time after I lost my wonderful wife Maggie, I was lucky enough to gain a new partner in life – Joss Marsh, who had been a friend since the time I participated in the research seminar she organised at Stanford University, California, a decade before. It was designed to try and bridge the gap between film archivists and film critics, who sometimes seemed to speak different languages. Joss has a deep-seated interest in the relationships between visual

and verbal storytelling. In 1995, she organised a celebration of film's centenary, called '1895: The Culture that Made Cinema', which brought top scholars together to give really accessible public lectures (attended by 700 people), with archival screenings, on subjects like film's repressed theatrical inheritance. It was a grandstand event – the only thing missing was the magic lantern. Which was where I came in, as it were.



In 2006 I was invited to give a lantern show at the Cinemateca Portuguesa in Lisbon, and asked Joss if she would collaborate. As well as an interest in the medium, she has a background in acting – including playing Scrooge, in male drag, in a professional theatre! – and she took to lantern lecturing like a duck to water. But, of course, being a Victorianist, she also wanted to dig deeper into the research. And so it came about that we performed increasingly complex shows at the Academy of Motion Pictures, Arts, and Sciences, in Los Angeles, and at the 'Dickens Universe', a wonderfully esoteric public conference held every year in Santa Cruz, California – driving across America with the trunk and slides in the car boot, which led to some bizarre adventures in places like Cody, Wyoming (where we intersected with a rodeo and the Harley Davidson convention).

Joss had moved to Indiana University, Bloomington, in 1998, and in 2006 I followed her, becoming a research associate of the university in the process. The neighbours laughed as my removals truck arrived at the house I was to make a sort of private museum until 2013, since the truck was bigger than the house. Very soon after, Joss and I applied for a grant from IU's 'New Frontiers'



foundation, to allow us to spend a year working on lantern research and performance. We were lucky enough to get it, and in 2008/09 we developed two big shows which you could say characterise our lantern work and performance together.

One show, at the Harvard Film Archive, was on George R. Sims – not only an extraordinarily important 'Multi-Media Victorian', but the kind of figure Joss was also working on in the context of her work on Dickens and the histories of celebrity and adaptation. The other, our favourite show to date, concerned Victorian virtual travel. This was commissioned by the Vienna Filmmuseum, to accompany a major exhibition on the subject at the Vienna Museum.

Naturally, we asked the Museum for information. Then we asked again. And again. When it was clear *no* information would be forthcoming, we put our heads together and tried to imagine what logically *ought* to be in the exhibition: the sights of Europe and the Eiffel Tower, said I; voyages up the Nile and the sights of ancient Egypt, said Joss; Arctic exploration and the Franklin expedition; the new phenomenon of railway travel; and journeys to completely imaginary places, in stories like *Gulliver's Travels* and *Aladdin*. Joss wrote the script around those themes, compositing together original lantern readings and period materials to produce a continuous text that could hold a large audience (in English!), and slipping in research information on the sly. When we presented the show, the Viennese were amazed that it 'fitted' so exactly with the exhibition – which we knew nothing about! But which indeed picked up all those themes, and even included many of the same slides we had projected. My funniest moment, however, came when I found myself standing beneath the poster for the show I had given in the very same (wonderful) Filmmuseum in 1969 – almost 40 years before.



We were now on a roll, and Joss was as hooked on the lantern as I was. A second fellowship followed, at IU's Institute for Digital Arts and Humanities. Digitisation had become important to us, since it allowed us to develop our shows, and study our images, without







the need constantly to handle the slides. During this period, we developed a major show called 'In the Childhood of Visual Story-Telling', for the opening of the Greek Film Archive in Athens. Joss turned to texts like eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century chapbooks to find versions of our stories that had the flavour of the 'Gallantee show' and oral storytelling, and we developed a particular interest in fairy tales such as 'Cinderella'.

We gave many other presentations in the States: at Yale, the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, Eastman House (twice, the second time with a no-holds-barred show about Booze and Temperance), the Museum of Modern Art (a show for 'children', who turned out to have an average age of 56, but delighted most especially in making the noises for 'Man Swallowing Rats'), and the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley.

In 2010 Joss hosted the Convention of the Magic Lantern Society of the United States and Canada in Bloomington. It was the first American-based conference thrown open to non-members of the Society, and what particularly cemented the goodwill between the academics and the collectors were four terrific public events, the most ambitious of which Joss produced – a 'Magic Lantern Spectacular' at the beautiful local vintage theatre, in the form of a 'variety show', with the 'acts' provided by a wide variety of very talented Society members – an experience which has left us with a real liking for the format. A good press release and some calls got the show previewed by the local press, in a full-colour article by local writer Joel Pierson, and the result was a queue round the block before doors opened. Joss had to go on stage to apologise for delays in seating, and was met with 'three cheers for nineteenth-century multi-media! It gave you heart for the future of this past medium.

The following year, we came to the hard decision that, if we were to realise our dream of building a museum, Joss would have to retire from her job at IU. And if she were to retire, why stay in America? We were homesick, though we also loved America. We already had a summer home in Deal. We began the slow process of extracting her from her commitments.

We pass over with a shudder the laborious task of bringing the collection and ourselves back to the UK – suffice it to say the collection arrived intact, to a slide. Our first presentation in the UK involved an old collaborator, Frank Gray again – a show for the Domitor (early cinema) conference in Brighton, 2012, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens (one of Joss's passions), entitled 'Dickensian Light and Magic', an exploration-through-entertainment of the impact the lantern of his childhood had on his imagination and of the lantern's adaptations of Dickens.

No local museum can survive without a local audience and local friends, and we feel strongly about giving back to our town, which has welcomed us home. Hence our last three Christmas shows at Deal's lovely Astor Theatre – two with Stephen Horne at the piano, and one with cellists Jeremy Brooker and Nathan Jones taking the musical helm.

They have given us a confirmed preference for doing fewer and bigger shows (besides demonstrations, of course), for putting more 'performance', by more people, into all of them, and for insisting (as we have almost always done) on live music, by top musicians. In the States, we have been lucky enough to collaborate frequently with Phil Carli; in England (and Ireland), so far, with Stephen. Both are silent film musicians and composers of note, though very different: Phil has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the silent film; Stephen is a multi-instrumentalist, who swings round from the piano, when the moment calls, to produce Tibetan bowls or a silver flute. Collaboration with actors has become an equal pleasure: our Christmas shows at Deal's Astor Theatre, and a recent presentation on the Lantern and the Railway at University of Kent's Gulbenkian Theatre, have been strengthened by some wonderful voices, from professional and gifted amateur actors willing to give their time and talents to the lantern.

What about the future? I am now 80, and sight, hearing and concentration are starting to fail. (What rubbish! Says Joss. Just turn up the hearing aid, and start cleaning your glasses.) Joss is younger, but is just as interested in passing



the torch, especially as regards singing yet more Temperance songs (though she has a sneaking liking for 'Father, dear Father', and became addicted to the Victorian railway songs we found to accompany our U Kent show, to the degree we had to sit on her to shut her up).

We don't know how frequent future lantern presentations will be. We will have a museum to run from April next year, unless the heavens fall. However, when we got hooked on the lantern, we both also got hooked on performance: you can't take the two apart. Shows will never disappear from our plans and we hope they will continue to expand the performance ideas we have developed in our ten years together.