

# "WHAT IS A MAGIC LANTERN?"

Faveola Kett

My journey started around a year ago with a university project brief, a YouTube video about Charles Dickens and the question: *What is a Magic Lantern?*

Let's start from the beginning. My name is Faveola Kett, a young stage designer from Germany, in my third year at University of the Creative Arts in Rochester, Kent. During the 2017/18 academic year, our second term project was dedicated to Charles Dickens and his Christmas story *The Seven Poor Travellers*. The brief asked us to propose an indoor performance concept that tells the story in an 8 x 8 x 8ft (2.4m) space, within the framework of the annual Dickens Festival hosted in Rochester. Furthermore – and most challenging – we had to pick the central prop for our performance and build it full size.

After a few days of research, now knowing the close connection between Dickens and the magic lantern, I came up with the idea of designing an immersive and partly interactive storytelling event for ages 16 years and above. It would aim to encourage the audience to learn, in a magical and diverse way, about the rich history of Rochester, as well as awaken their interest in the history of the projected image. Therefore I placed in the centre of my performance concept a historic magic lantern show, performed by a Charles Dickens character.

This meant building a working magic lantern that stayed as true to the Victorian archetype as possible. Still, I had to apply a few changes including the use of a modern electric light source and the choice of copper instead of brass. I also implemented some major changes to the design of the lantern that were motivated by the idea of further connecting and integrating the magic lantern into the story of *The Seven Poor Travellers*. Furthermore I developed a backstory for my magic lantern, which also explains my performance concept. It goes as follows:

*In the year following his Christmas at the Watts Charity (1854), Charles Dickens had worked hard on developing his newspaper Household Words as well as on writing the story of Little Dorrit. Yet, besides his main occupation of writing, he found the time to pursue his passion for the magic lantern and went on a trip to the town of Nuremberg in Germany, famous for its toy makers. During this trip, he learned the art of slide painting and visited a small metal toy manufacturer. On the day before he set off back for England he came across a small market where you could buy all sorts of things. And in a corner, away from the turmoil, he spotted a boy of about 16 years, who was selling metal toys that he made in the backyard of his father's metal company. They were of surprisingly high quality and years later, just before his death, Charles Dickens would find out that this boy had become the founder of the Ernst Plank manufacturing company 11 years later.*

*On the small table that the boy had set up in front of him, a special magic lantern caught Dickens' eye. It was in the shape of a golden-red pitcher with many colours shimmering on its surface. Of course it was not a professional lantern, like they used in the town halls to entertain the people, nor did it have multiple lenses. But it reminded Dickens of his previous Christmas with the six poor travellers when he had made the wassail. An experience that had stayed with him. The form of the lantern was so similar in shape and size to the pitcher he used that night, as well as the nature-based design, that he could not resist the temptation. Furthermore he thought it would make a great Christmas present for his three daughters. And so he made his way back to England with a unique magic lantern.*

*It was a long few days journey and Dickens passed the time by painting his first set of glass slides that could accompany the lantern. As a narrative he choose to illustrate the story of Richard Doubledick, inspired by the French landscape through which he was travelling.*



*After crossing the channel and one day's journey from his home, he stopped once more in Rochester. It was the week before Christmas and he decided to sit down for a hot drink in the traveller's tavern. There it was, that he had his first chance to test his magic lantern with the handmade slides in front of an audience, before presenting it to his daughters on Christmas Day.*

As you might now guess, the 26 slides that I made illustrate the story of Richard Doubledick – a tale embedded in *The Seven Poor Travellers*. On its own the tale is relatively short and tells how a down-and-out young man joined the British Army and fought in the Napoleonic Wars, finding friendship and redemption.

When making the slides I didn't hand paint them myself due to their small diameter of around 3.5 cm. Instead I digitally designed the images and then printed them, in the right scale, onto overhead transparencies. Afterwards I placed the individual images between acrylic slides and framed them with laser-cut MDF wood.

In contrast to the modern technology-based method of making the slides, the making of the lantern was far more traditional. As a starting point I used optical calculations to identify the right measurements. Later on in the process, I received help from the silver- and goldsmithing tutors, who taught me basic cold-forging skills and with this new knowledge I was able to build up the lantern from a single flat piece of copper. However, to finally connect the pieces of the lantern, I chose the modern way of using a rivet gun. However some parts are riveted in the traditional way or silver soldered for constructional reasons.

After two months of intense work, I was rewarded with being able to present my work in two exhibitions within the Rochester area and I feel honoured to be part of this edition of *The Magic Lantern*. Thank you to the MLS for all the support and the great advice I received! I hope to keep in touch in the future and maybe some day I can integrate the magic lantern into a commissioned stage design job.

