

RAISING THE DEAD

A report from our European Correspondent
JOHN JONES

When I told David Francis that I was going to visit a friend in Salzburg he said, "Ah, you'll be able to look at the collection of that chap who has all the magic lanterns."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Oh, it's...," David said, "He published that book...".

We were standing in the scrap-paper drive I call my library. I fumbled efficiently through nearby shelves and, to both our surprise, my hand fell on the very book. It was still in its plastic vacuum wrapper. "That's it," said David, "Ernst Something". Impulsively I put the book back and resolved to make a note of the details before I went abroad.

I was actually in Salzburg before I remembered I'd forgotten. I phoned Ron Morris in England. Before I could put my question, he said: "You know that message you left on our answering machine. Well, we aren't going to *Amsterdam*, so we *shan't* see you there. *We're* going with the rest of the Society to THE HAGUE." He said the name in audible capital letters with spaces.

"Of course!" I said, "Oh, how silly of me... I meant... well... anyway... what I want to know now is the name of the Society member with a large collection of lanterns in Salzburg. He published a book about them... Ernst something..."

"One minute", said Ron.

... (I was on a friend's phone) ... "I had to go and find the book in my library; it's here... It's Vienna". "What?" "It's not Salzburg... it's Vienna!"

That might have been the end of this bit of reporting had I not, in the pouring, all-day, Austrian rain, prowled the streets of Salzburg for some crumb of interest for the Society. I found it in the Salzburger Museum-Carolino Augusteum Spielzeugmuseum (Sammlung Folk) (don't switch off) which is full of dolls and toys AND, just before the rooms full of delightful toy miniatures, there are several showcases with optical this and that, lanterns and slides, and one very special lantern which, though there wasn't much light, I managed to photograph.(1)

My eagle-eyed (chip-off-the-old-block) daughter, holidaying in the Paris cemetery, Père Lachaise, spotted the grave of E. G. Robertson (not Edward G. Robinson -- Étienne Gaspard, if you please, who with some well placed smoke and back projection, deceived people into believing he was recalling from recent death the aristocrats the guillotine was dispatching just down the road.) Like a shot she had taken a photograph of it for her ancient parent but (a chip-off-the-old-block) had a bit of trouble with the exposure and the photograph didn't come out. That's why, after Salzburg, I made my questing way to Paris.

I'd like to say that I went straight to the cemetery but I first spent the morning in the Musée D'Orsay where, among several hundreds of masterpieces of French art (which you can easily skip by going directly up the right-hand escalator) there's some pre-cinema stuff.(2)

One set of slides tells the story of Geneviève de

Brabant, who was the subject of the slide set that Proust wrote about in his "Remembrance of Things Past". They were showing early films by Georges Méliès, among others. In Père Lachaise cemetery, that afternoon, I found a bronze bust of him.(3) It appears to be on a tomb belonging to someone else, and shared with several others, called the Sepulture Genin. After years of obscurity he was recognized by someone in 1928 who helped to set him up in a kiosk selling toys near the Gare St Lazare. When he got too old to do that the Chambre Syndicale Française Cinématographe (which he founded in 1897 and of which he was president for ten years) arranged for him to live in a home for destitute actors, where he died in 1938, and the cost of his funeral was met by English and French film workers. The bust wasn't placed on his grave until 1954, it seems.

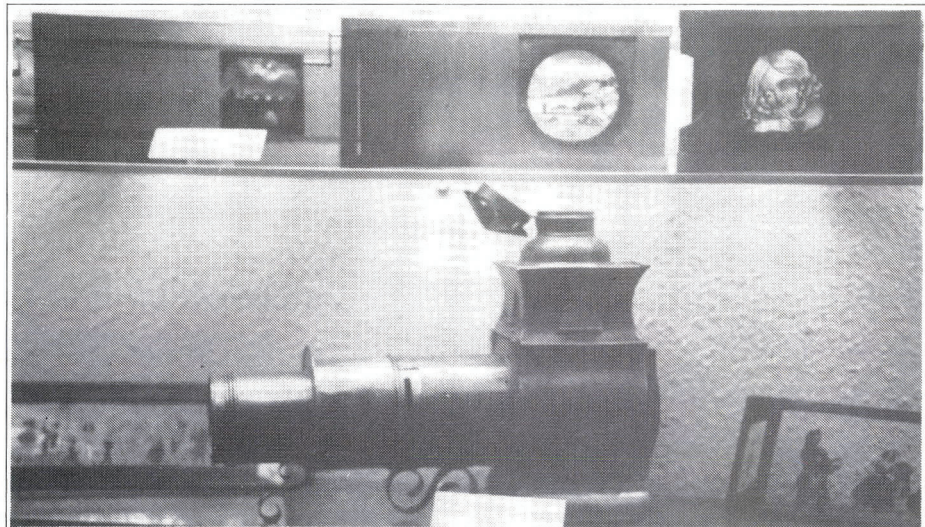
There's a map of Père Lachaise cemetery on which the locations of 200 defunct celebrities are marked. Robertson isn't among them. The place has over 100,000 tombs and buried there are over one million souls (well, bodies actually). Numbers of important people aren't listed. Proust is and Piaff, Oscar Wilde, Jane Avril, Modigliani, Yvette Guilbert and a host of other



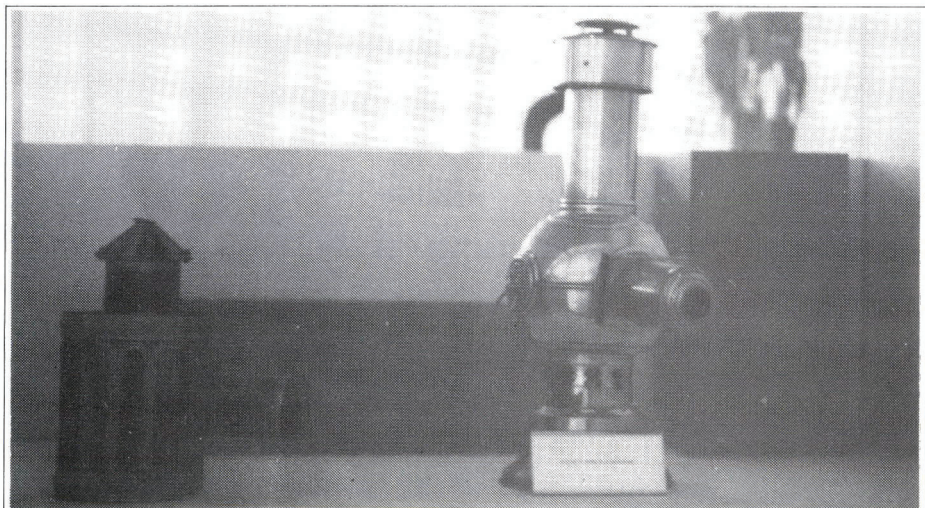
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drunks, tarts and junkies. Artists abound; they even have a sort of honorary Christian section for notable Jews like Camille Pissarro. A Rothschild qualified too and Singer, Isadora Duncan's chum, whose sewing machine gave form to the Pathé Kok 28mm amateur projector.

Anyway, unless you have help, finding a tomb that's not on the map is a month's work. I asked



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at the place where the maps are sold and got the hump-backed, glum grimace, but at the back-stage office where they actually arrange to bury people and keep the place looking as if it wasn't lived in, they told me they could find the grave if I provided the full name and exact date of death. I didn't have them on me.

"But, madame, he's not one of my family", I cried out, Frenchly. "He's the well-known magician who invented the phantasmagoria in 1789!" A girl at the enquiry desk recognised him from my outburst. "He's just near here", she said.

They put a blob on a section of the map and with it I found the tomb.(4)

Robertson was also an aeronaut, a balloonist, and this is illustrated on one of the two sculptured reliefs.(5) The other, which shows the phantasmagoria, is not so well preserved. Something, probably quite sinister, has tried to erase this image of someone pretending to raise the dead.(6)

It occurred to me that, on behalf of the Society, I should leave flowers in homage to this fellow lanternist, but not having thought to bring some, I waited until I was sure no *living* person was looking and stole a rose from a nearby mausoleum. As I laid it down I was (not very) tempted (shades of Billy) to say, "Robertson, here's your rose."(7)

After I'd photographed it, I felt guilty and had a lot of difficulty returning it. It's the work of a few seconds to yank a rose from a well-constructed wreath, but there's a lot of skill goes into fitting it back in again.

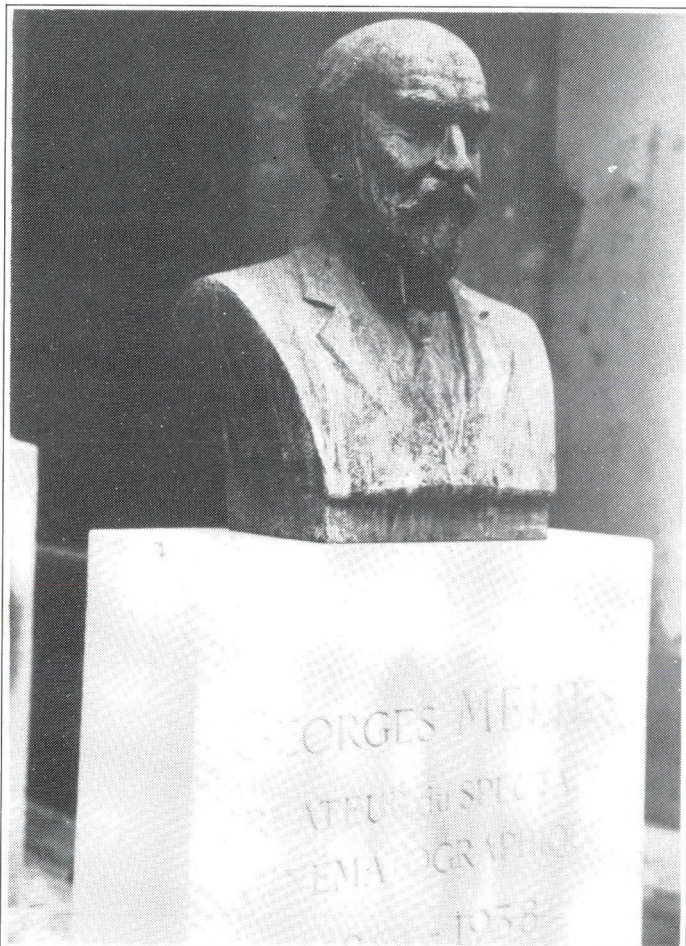
Appropriately, it turned out to be one of those flowers made of wire and cloth – the kind magicians use.



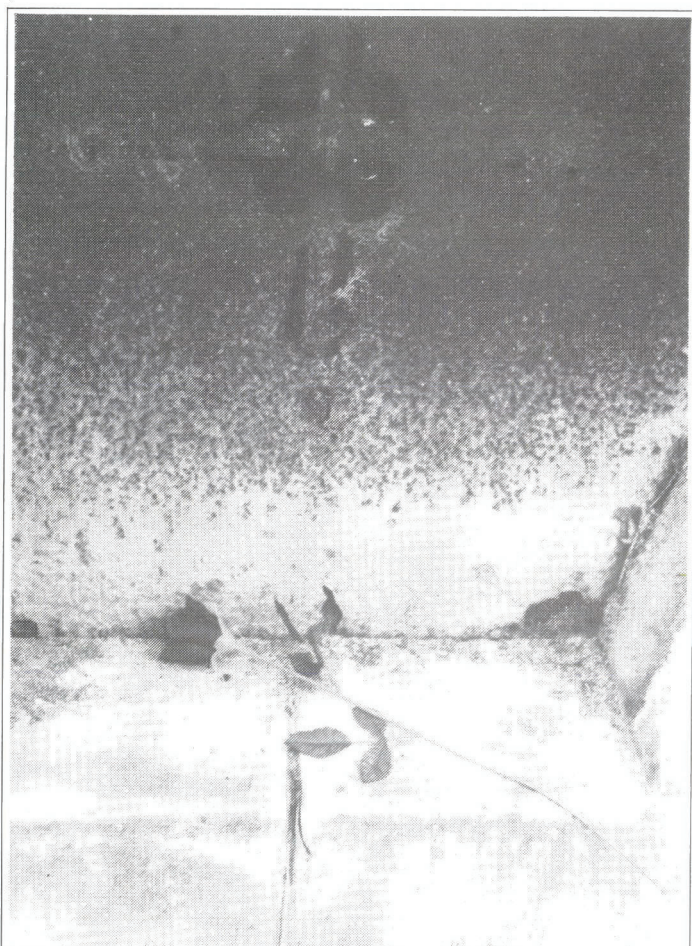
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