

Proscenium of the shadow theatre at the Chat Noir, drawn by Phil May (1890).



Entrance to the Chat Noir on the rue Victor-Massé.

THEATRE DU CHAT NOIR

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The Society's *Newsletter* 32 included a report on an exhibition, held earlier this year at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, devoted to the 19th-century Parisian cabaret Le Chat Noir and its legendary shadow shows. An important catalogue, compiled by Mariel Oberthur, accompanied the exhibition.

Some impressions of this close relative of the magic lantern, recorded by a notable English visitor to the Chat Noir, appeared in an obscure ephemeral publication of 1890 and seem to have been forgotten until now; Madame Oberthur's catalogue makes no mention of them. This visitor was Phil May, whose drawings of the cabaret appeared in a folio-size, paper-covered booklet, 'The Parson and the Painter, Their Wanderings & Excursions among Men and Women, written by the Rev Joseph Slapkins... illustrated by Charlie Summers'. Although 'Charlie Summers' does not attempt to conceal his identity – the illustrations are all clearly signed 'Phil May' – the identity of the Rev Slapkins, who provided the amusing text, has so far eluded detection.

Credit for invention of the 'artistic cabaret' belongs to a colourful bohemian called Rodolphe Salis. Salis arrived in Paris from the provinces in 1871 and endeavoured to make his mark by establishing a new art movement. When neither 'l'école vibrante' nor 'l'école iriso-subversive de Chicago' took the town by storm, he gave up painting in disgust and instead established a locale for artists.

The first Chat Noir opened in boulevard Rochechouart in 1881. Salis attracted the members of the oddly named 'Cercle des Hydropathes'. In turn other intellectuals and bohemians flocked to drink his 'bière philosophale' and to read their poems, sing their songs and take part in debates on art and life.

Success soon obliged Salis to find larger premises – he was already calling himself the King of Montmartre and styling Montmartre 'the intellect of the world'. The new building in rue Victor-Massé was decorated inside and out in the style of old mediaeval Paris which had so recently been eradicated by the urban improvements of Baron Haussmann.

After some preliminary experiments with puppet shows, Salis built a shadow theatre in the upper room; and there, between 1882 and his death in 1897, fashionable Paris saw a series of shows of unprecedented sophistication and technical elaboration. The most notable of the artists who designed and devised them were the caricaturist Caran d'Ache and the painters Henri Rivière and Willette.

As the Chat Noir grew famous, a host of imitators sprang up in the neighbourhood; several, including the Lyon d'Or, La Bodinière and Les Quat'z Arts, also offered shadow entertainments.

The proscenium at the Chat Noir was a near-circle, four feet high and four-and-a-half wide, decorated with grotesque masks and prancing, grinning cats. Across the proscenium arch was stretched a translucent canvas screen, illuminated from behind by a powerful magic lantern. Between the lantern and the screen, articulated zinc figures and coloured glasses to project the scenic background were manipulated by as many as a dozen operators. Sound effects were produced backstage, while a pianist sat at an upright piano facing the screen.

The Chat Noir entertainments exemplified the odd ambiguities of the *fin-de-siècle* artists. Alongside their hard drinking, high spirits and noisy pranks, they were capable of phenomenal dedication to work. Rivière or Caran d'Ache might spend up to a year, and a great deal of money, in the preparation of a shadow playlet that lasted only 10 or 12 minutes.

The repertory, too, bewilderingly mixed the sacred and the profane, not to say scatological. The most famous productions were Rivière's exquisite *La Tentation de St Antoine* and *La Marche à l'Etoile* (a Nativity show); yet throughout the cabaret's career the favourite prologue was a rude little joke, *L'Eléphant*. In this sketch a black man crossed the screen dragging a rope behind him. After this the screen remained empty, except for the much-knotted rope which continued to pass until the audience was near-hysterical with anticipation. Then came the elephant, which paused – to let fall 'an odoriferous pearl'. From this – 'especially for the ladies' – grew a rose.

Pierre Pornographe on the other hand was a high-minded morality exposing civic guardians

of propriety who arrest Pierrot for painting a nude portrait of Colombine, while privately plotting to seduce her on their own account.

Not the least of the attractions of the Chat Noir was Salis himself, whose patrons delighted in suffering his insults. He would address the humbler guests with exaggerated titles, while on one occasion he persistently affected to mistake an admiral for a cook. He would assume regal airs and bestow the Légion d'Honneur and other spurious honours on his friends and staff. He would convince the gullible that he was a real baron.

His commentary on the show, delivered in a stentorian voice, was full of political and satirical jokes. Occasionally, he would favour special guests with a chanson of Swiftian impropriety. This then was the establishment which Phil May and his friend visited in 1890. 'This extraordinary cafe or "brasserie", as it is called', (wrote the pseudonymous Slapkins,) 'is in the rue Victor-Massé. When we entered we were saluted by a tall hall porter, in gorgeous livery, who announced our arrival by striking the floor with his silver-headed staff three times. We then entered a room full of chairs and little tables, at which men and women of all sorts – the women looked like ladies – were sitting talking excitedly and drinking beer, which was served to them by waiters dressed in the costume of members of the Institute.

'We were scarcely seated when a gentlemanly-looking person, well-built, with fair hair and beard, came up and addressed Charlie, saying "Monseigneur. I am delighted to see you. Where have you been for so long."

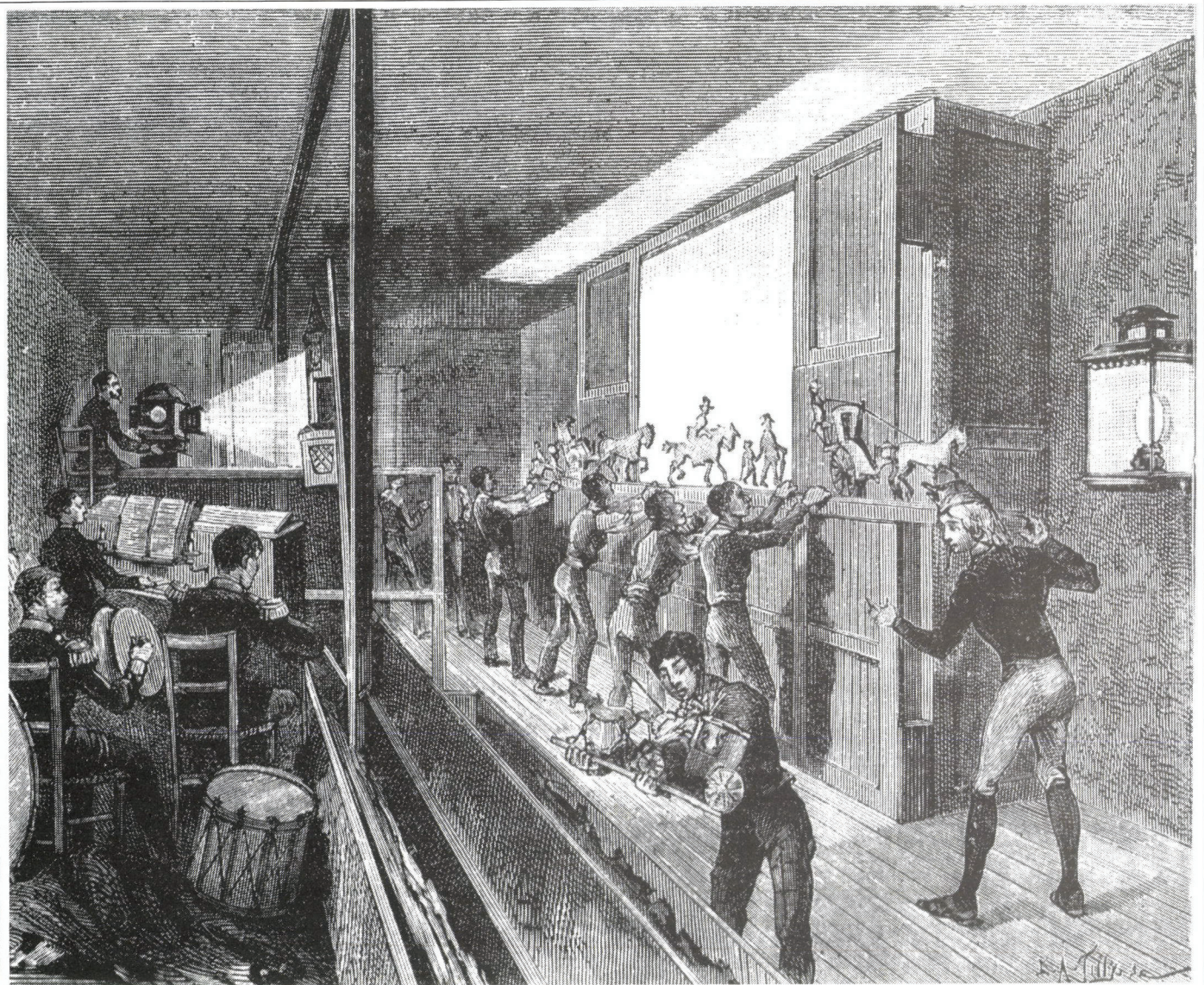
'Charlie and he jabbered in French a few seconds. At the conclusion I was introduced to "M. le Baron de Salis", the proprietor of the Chat Noir. We shook hands, and M. de Salis invited us to go upstairs to see his little theatre, as the performance was going on just then. One thing I particularly remarked was that he addressed me always as "Monseigneur" and Charlie the same. As I knew that the title of "Monseigneur" is only given to princes of the blood in France, I was a little ill at ease, for I suspected that Charlie had misled M. de Salis as to his true social position, and mine. This I afterwards learned was not the case, as M. de Salis addresses everyone that way, being very mediaeval in his sympathies. I may also mention that this gentleman is a real baron and an artist by profession, but as he believed he would make more money in this commercial age as a tavern keeper he started the most artistic tavern in France, which assuredly the Chat Noir is.

'The rooms are all in the 13th century style. On the walls are the most extraordinary and weird pictures imaginable. In most of them the black cat takes a prominent place. We have pictures of a terrorising character descriptive of war, famine



A waiter at the Chat Noir, drawn by Phil May (1890).

Behind the scenes at a Parisian shadow show, from Albert Hopkins's Magic (1897). The presence of a piano back-stage suggests that this may not actually be the Chat Noir, where the pianist sat in front of the proscenium arch.



and the allurements of drink and women. Villon, the robber-poet, is the presiding genius of the place, and in the inner-room on the front floor there is his full length portrait.

'The theatre, which is upstairs, is the quaintest in the world. The effects are produced on a sheet by silhouettes and a magic lantern. The pieces we witnessed were *La Marche à l'Etoile*, *True for Life* and *Noah's Ark*. The first was one of the most poetic things in its way I have ever seen, and (May says) the most artistic.

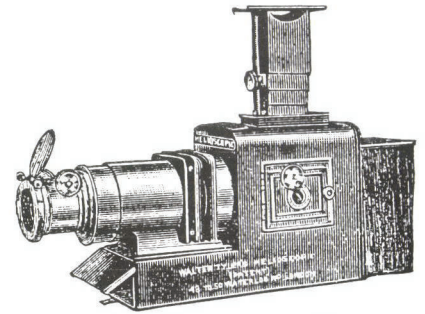
'M. de Salis makes a witty, semi-satirical, and political comment during the performance. Then there were, interspersed with the dramatic performance, songs and recitations as at the Savage Club on a Saturday night. I shall never forget my visit to the Chat Noir, for I enjoyed myself as I have never done before.'

After the show they met habitués of the place, including 'the eccentric French poet' Paul Verlaine. 'Paul Verlaine is a strange-looking poet, like, I should imagine, Walt Whitman. As he spoke to me in English – broken though it was – we got on very well. We talked of Pope, Byron, Shelley and Shakespeare. I mean to see the curious place again after I have seen the Folies Bergères, where Charlie is going to take me next.'



Rodolphe Salis

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