

"THEY SEEK HIM HERE; THEY SEEK HIM THERE . . ."

PAUL DE PHILIPSTHAL

&

THE PHANTASMAGORIA IN ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND

MERVYN HEARD

Part One: Boo!

THE PROLOGUE

Our knowledge of that elusive German Pimpernel, Paul de Philipsthal, is such that one might be led to imagine that when he first appeared with his astonishing 'Phantasmagoria' exhibition at the Lyceum Theatre in London on Monday, 5 October 1801, he had suddenly materialised out of the ethers. One minute there is no Philipsthal: the next moment, a great showman stands before us, centre stage, fully formed, complete and with a retinue of assistants. Even in his own time those who chronicled his activities seemed to have treated him as an unapproachable phantom. If phantom he be, then he was surely one with an impeccable sense of timing.

In 1801 London was wallowing in a grand Gothic revival. The Gothic influence was everywhere. It had pervaded popular romantic fiction, drama and art for over a decade. One recent masterwork of the genre had been Matthew Lewis's licentious novel *The Monk*, published in 1796. Set in a Capucine monastery in Madrid, it is filled with hauntingly theatrical concepts and characters, not least that of 'Agnes, the Bleeding Nun' – destined to become one of the most popular of all phantasmagoric images. In 1797 Lewis was able to give further reign to his dramatic ideas when his play *The Castle Spectre* was presented on the London stage, to similar popular acclaim. It was a success matched two years later by the staging of George Colman the Younger's hit melodrama *Feudal Times*, described by the *Morning Chronicle* as an exhibition of music and dialogue, pantomime and dancing, painting and machinery, antique dresses and armour, thunder and lightning, fire and water. The description highlights the other great preoccupation of the times – a passion for all things mechanical and sensational.

The 'Phantasmagoria' exhibition couldn't miss. It was Gothic, mechanical, sensational – and better still – designed to appeal to both die-hard romantics and new age rationalists alike.

It had achieved prior notoriety in Paris, under the direction of the Belgian showman Etienne Gaspard Robertson, who had introduced it at the Palais Royale some four years previously. Indeed, the accompanying news of its origination in that rebellious and godless city must have added a certain frisson to the advertised experience for the London audience. Part seance, part science, sensation-seekers were invited to partake of a terrifying 'gathering of ghosts'. That is to say, not simply the appearance of one actor-phantom as in existing Gothic dramas, but a whole back-catalogue of spirits – these, summoned from the air by an ingenious foreign professor of natural magic.



Title page of 'Magie, oder, die Zauberkräfte der Natur' – one of the seminal works of the phantasmagoria period. Illustration showing projection onto smoke. Compare this with design for Philipsthal's Lyceum bill.

Moreover, the show promised one other sensational, theatrical innovation – a public spectacle shown in a completely darkened auditorium. This was an amalgam, if you will, of the Gothic drama, the conjuring show and the old, itinerant magic lantern exhibition – but one with undoubted 'cult' potential. The phantasmagoria was the X-Files of its day: Georgian science fiction.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Although the 'Phantasmagoria' or French 'Fantasmagorie' is most strongly associated with the Belgian showman Robertson, the notion that he was its inventor is now known to be a myth, reinforced by Robertson himself. In his weighty self-seeking two-volume autobiography,¹ he credits many previous inspirations, save one, the name of the showman who had presented the 'Phantasmagorie' in Paris some five years prior to Robertson, and from whom he had stolen the idea. No doubt Robertson felt that he was safe in his

neglect, for the showman in question had mysteriously disappeared, swallowed up and sunk without trace in the chaos of the Revolution.

Thanks to Françoise Levie² and, more recently, Laurent Mannoni,³ this original showman has been rediscovered and identified as a German, operating under a possible *nom-de-plume*, Paul 'Philidor'.

The first newspaper advertisements for Philidor's 'phantasmagorie' performances, at the Hôtel des Chartres in the rue de Richelieu, began to appear in December of 1792. This show promised an evocation of spirits, ghosts and the shades of celebrated persons but in the form of a rational exposé, debunking the techniques recently used by pseudo-priests and the grand wizards of secret societies such as the Rosicrucians, the Illuminati of Berlin, the Theosophists and French Martinists, of which they were many forms in Europe in the mid- to late-eighteenth century.

From reports published in French and German newspapers of the time, Laurent Mannoni outlines a typical Philidor performance. The audience assembles in a chamber hung with black, and adorned with tombs, spectres and images of death. In the midst of a wild storm, amid flashes of lightning and bursts of thunder, figures rise from the floor, from their graves, appear and then disappear, emerge from distant pinpoints of light, rushing forward and back, dance upon the walls, then finally vanish.

Given the prevailing political situation, with all its attendant blood-letting, one might imagine that the people of Paris would have had their fill of death, and yet Philidor's show drew audiences twice nightly for almost five months. Until, suddenly and mysteriously, they ceased at the height of their popularity.

Why did they cease so abruptly and, more to the point, why spend so much time discussing Philidor when the subject of our thesis is Philipsthal? To resolve both of these problems we need to go back a stage further still, for we also need to be aware of the timing of Philidor's show in relation to the Revolution. To begin with, just a few months prior to Philidor's debut the capital had seen the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the new revolutionary government under Robespierre, declaring Year One of the First Republic. Within weeks of the opening of the show, on 21 January, Louis XVI had been executed. By February, France was at war with England, and by the following month with Spain too.

It is difficult to ascertain just where Philidor's sympathies lay in all of this, but his shows do seem to have included certain elements of satire. Laurent Mannoni cites a newspaper report published by

one particular German journalist who attended one of Philidor's shows on 22 March. In it he recounts that the showman was inclined to enhance his final image – that of a cloven-hoofed red devil, with the face of Robespierre, Danton, Marat, even the divine spirit of Egalité herself.

Maybe such touches, playing to the gallery, were somewhat misplaced given the pervading mood of paranoia. In April Robespierre's notorious Revolutionary Tribunal was established. French Government spies were everywhere, looking for any signs of treasonable behaviour, however slight. Even citizens who referred to chess-pieces and playing cards by their royal titles were looked upon with suspicion.

So did Philidor go too far? Was his exhibition viewed as a possible breeding ground for dissidents and closed down?

In her Memoirs, published in 1838, the famous wax museum proprietor, Marie Tussaud, recalls an undated incident, but one which we can establish must have occurred after Robespierre's rise to power (late 1793) and prior to the death of her guardian, Philippe Curtius in the autumn of 1794. It transpires that one evening the German-born doctor had received a visitor from the distraught wife of a fellow showman who had fallen foul of the authorities. Marie identifies the showman not as Paul 'Philidor', but a certain Paul de Philipsthal.

The story is translated by Anita Leslie and Paul Chapman in their modern biography of Marie Tussaud.⁴

He [Philipsthal] was a showman, running a kind of magic lantern show known as the 'Phantasmagoria', which depicted moving likenesses of people on a screen. While Philipsthal was giving a demonstration in a crowded hall, one of his employees had inadvertently inserted a slide of Louis XVI. On realising his mistake, the man drew it up to remove it, but not before some hysterical loons in the audience started to shout that it had been done on purpose to depict the King's rise into heaven.⁵ An uproar ensued. Philipsthal was arrested and taken to prison. His wife tried frantically to get him released. In desperation she had finally come to Curtius, and begged him to exert influence on the men he knew – Sieyes, Marat, Danton, even Robespierre might listen to him. Curtius cautiously agreed to try; he was a realist and knew that bribes often got people out of trouble. Robespierre the incorruptible was supposed to be above palm-greasing but Curtius decided that it was worth trying. He could explain that, after all, Philipsthal was a very important prisoner and that his crime had obviously been a mistake. 'Your husband is rich and lives in grand style', he explained. 'Three hundred louis might help.' Madame Philipsthal willingly produced this sum to be passed to Robespierre as 'the gift of an admirer'. Curtius made his way to the great man's office and outlined his plea; he did not mention the money, but simply left it on the table. Robespierre listened to the story very impassively, then handed out an order for Philipsthal's release. Curtius left the room without mentioning or even glancing at the silver on Robespierre's table. Not a word was spoken, nor was the money returned.

Accepting that this anecdote may have been somewhat embellished in the telling, is it nevertheless possible that there could have been two showmen with such similar names presenting phantasmagoria shows in Paris during 1793/4? It seems highly unlikely. Could Marie Tussaud be confused about her showman's name? Unlikely again, for, as we shall see, Philipsthal was later to loom large and villainously in her life.

So, more to the point, are we to conclude from this single anecdote that the mysterious Paul Philidor was in reality Paul de Philipsthal, and the true inventor of the phantasmagoria?

In 1805, when the German doubt-act of Schirmer & Schöll presented their 'improvement' to the phantasmagoria, the 'Ergascopia' at the Lyceum in London, they produced a booklet to accompany

this exhibition.⁶ In it they constantly refer to 'Philidor alias Philipsthal', and give some account of his beginnings before Paris.

They assert that Philipsthal introduced his entertainment about 1790 in Vienna where he had been influenced by the activities of Schropfer, the café-shop proprietor of Leipzig, who had become notorious in the 1770s for his private seances. During the course of the ritual he had frequently employed lanterns in combination with smoke, thunder and other enhancements as the basis for extorting money and amassing a pseudo-mystical following.

Several years after Schropfer's eventual lapse into religious mania and eventual suicide in 1774, his activities and methods were being widely analysed, explained and discussed in works produced by various of the new 'scientists' – in particular, Wiegleb, Funk, Halle and Guyot.⁷ Just as with the phantasmagoria shows which followed, the authors claimed their primary purpose in producing such reference books, was to dissipate the long-held beliefs in supernatural magic. However, they were also, in effect, producing handy guides for new-style showman-practitioners.

Almost as a backlash against this form of rationalism, romantics in England, France, Germany and elsewhere, began to indulge their taste for Gothic supernaturalism. Some prominent writers dealt with the subject directly. In 1785 the German playwright and novelist Schiller commenced publication of his story *The Ghost Seer* in periodical form.⁸ The story, although very romantic in spirit, centres on a Sicilian magician who employs hidden lanterns to fleece his victims. From the 1770s onwards Goethe too had been obsessed by the subject, through the writing and re-writing of his great work *Faust*, although by 1789 only a fragment had been published.

Schirmer and Schöll say that in 1790 a form of 'phantasmagoric exhibition had been staged in Vienna by a certain 'Mr Cavello, an Istrian gentleman', which they describe as a form of 'Optical ballet, in which several grotesque, comic and caricature figures were made to appear and disappear, by means of stained glasses, skins, or

paper, sliding back and forward through Magic Lanterns'.

So, given all of the above possible contributory influences, was 1790 or thereabouts the year in which M 'Philipsthal alias Philidor' originated the phantasmagoria.

Certainly Vienna seems an ideal place to have pioneered such an exhibition, given the preoccupations of the Austrian ruler, Prince Joseph with all manner of new scientific inventions and also with death. These joint interests manifested themselves in several exotic and mechanical forms of funeral equipment.⁹

Even if we accept such explanations about the origins of phantasmagoria, we are still left with vast gaps in the early life of our subject. Philipsthal's place of birth remains vague.¹⁰ Of his activities prior to 1790, we know nothing.

Even more crucially, we are left with the enigma of what happened to the 'fugitive' Philipsthal during the 'lost years' between 1794 and his sudden reincarnation in London in the Autumn of 1801? Did he return to his own country to lick his wounds during these lost years? Or did he reside for a time in Bath among the various other well-off European refugees who settled there? (Although this may sound like a long shot, the son of the Dublin optician E. M. Clarke, with whom Philipsthal was later to have dealings, suggests that he did indeed live there for a time.)¹¹

We shall return to this and other areas of speculation anon. But, for the moment let us move swiftly on to 1801, and Philipsthal's most famous show-place.

PHILIPSTHAL IN LONDON

The building known as the Lyceum, situated in Wellington Street just off The Strand, and a stone's throw from Drury Lane, was originally designed and built as a two storey gallery for the Royal Incorporated Society of Artists. However, shortly after its opening in 1772, it was eclipsed in usefulness by the setting up of the Royal Academy. Eventually the premises passed into the hands of a Mr Lingham, a breeches maker, who let out various

Bill design used by Philipsthal regularly from c. 1803 onwards showing the classic conjurer operating within the 'exclusive' magic circle. Note also the crown of wormwood, traditionally worn by magicians of Teutonic origin.



PHANTASMAGORIA.
THIS and every EVENING,
AT THE
LYCEUM, STRAND.

rooms for musical recitals, lectures, and an upper lecture theatre, with its own stage, 'The Great Room', for regular use by a debating society.

A contemporary description says that the decor and arrangement of the seating in 'The Great Room' bore a marked resemblance to the layout of the House of Commons, although the Lyceum chamber was 'infinitely more elegant'.

In October 1782 a certain Mr Walker exhibited his Transparent Orrery here. In 1788 there was an intriguing display of 'Philosophical Fireworks' by Mr Diller who described himself as 'Professor of Natural Philosophy from Holland'.

In 1794 there was even a makeshift circus erected at the rear of the building which became home to Philip Astley for a while, whilst his own theatre was being rebuilt after a fire.

Other notable showmen who used the theatre were Mr Lloyd with his Dio-Astro-Doxon or Grand Transparency Orrery in 1798, and in 1799 Mr Wilks of the Theatres Royal, Dublin, with an entertainment comprising the unpublished works of the humorist George Alexander Stevens, illustrated with 'transparencies'.

But it was in 1801, as John Timbs described, that 'a foreigner gained a large fortune by exhibiting here the first phantasmagoria seen in England.'¹²

Although we know little about Philipsthal's character and background at this stage, it is clear that in 1801 he was either well-off, or well-connected, or at least in possession of some not inconsiderable investment capital. For, in occupying the Lyceum, he opted not to go for the upper Lecture Theatre, but instead to build his own, purpose-built 'Lower Theatre', which thereafter permanently occupied the former exhibition area to the left of the main entrance on the ground floor. It was described as being of 'elegant' design and complete with its own stage, pit and boxes. Furthermore, it took some building, for a prior press announcement, dated 4 September, still a month away from its opening, stated, 'workers have been engaged for a month past in its construction'.

The title given to the piece - 'No More Ghosts!' - suggested that London theatre-goers had had its fill of Gothic spectres. Indeed, the established dramatic press, as we shall see, were pretty snuffy about the phantasmagoria. However, this opinion could not have been further from the hearts and minds of the public at large. In fact, for the rip-roaring bloods, women of easy assignation and other sensation-seeking sorts who frequented the public theatres at this time, the prospect of a Gothic horror in a darkened room offered a whole range of unspoken opportunities.

Philipsthal himself must have been well aware of the dangers, for even in his earliest advertisements he offered those of more genteel sensibility an alternative service - special daytime exhibitions at their own 'private addresses'.

The exhibition opened on Monday, 5 October 1801 and offered, together with the phantasmagoria, a museum of complementary optical and mechanical curiosities, including a very fine collection of automata.¹³ From various advertisements and a single eye-witness report, we can build up a picture of a typical evening at the 'Lower Theatre' - although the repertoire was constantly changing - in part under-rehearsed and chaotically presented. This, as we shall see, may have provided its primary appeal.

During the first few weeks, the audience were invited to enter the simple front door of the Lyceum building at 7 p.m. for an 8 p.m. start. From 8 to 9 they were introduced to the showman's collection of automata, some of 'life-size proportions'. These may have been presented in an ante-chamber, or possibly on various pedestals set up in the auditorium.

This overture to the main event would, no doubt, have allowed the fashionable Georgian audience the opportunity of socialising - wandering in, taking

Under the Sanction of His Majesty's Royal Letters Patent.

PHANTASMAGORIA,

THIS and every EVENING till further Notice,
AT THE
LYCEUM, STRAND.

As the Advertisement of various Exhibitions under the above Title, may possibly mislead the unsuspecting Part of the Public (and particularly Strangers from the Country) in their Opinion of the ORIGINAL PHANTASMAGORIA, M. DE PHILIPSTHAL, the Inventor, begs Leave to state that they have no Connexion whatever with his Performances. The utmost Efforts of Imitators have not been able to produce the Effect intended; and he is too grateful for the liberal Encouragement he has received in the Metropolis, not to caution the Public against those *spurious Copies*, which, failing of the Perfection they assume, can only disgust and disappoint the Spectators.

M. DE PHILIPSTHAL

Will have the Honour to EXHIBIT (as usual) his

Optical Illusions and Mechanical Pieces of Art.

At the LYCEUM, and at no other Place of Exhibition in London.

SELECT PARTIES may be accommodated with a MORNING REPRESENTATION at any appointed Hour, on sending timely Notice.
To prevent Mistakes, the Public are requested to Notice, that the PHANTASMAGORIA is on the Left-hand, on the Ground Floor, and the *ΚΟΥΡΤΙΑΝΑ* on the Right-hand, up Stairs.

The OPTICAL PART of the EXHIBITION

Will introduce the PHANTOMS or APPARITIONS of the DEAD or ABSENT, in a way more completely illusive than has ever been offered to the Eye in a public Theatre, as the Objects freely originate in the Air, and unfold themselves under various Forms and Sizes, such as Imagination, which has hitherto painted them, occasionally assuming the Figure and most perfect Resemblance of the Heroes and other distinguished Characters of past and present Times.

This SPECTROLOGY, which professes to expose the Praedices of artful Impostors and pretended Exorcists, and to open the Eyes of those who still foster an absurd Belief in GHOSTS or DIMEMORISED SPIRITS, will, it is presumed, afford also to the Spectator an interesting and pleasing Entertainment; and in order to render their Apparitions more interesting, they will be introduced during the Progress of a tremendous Thunder Storm, accompanied with vivid Lightning, Hail, Wind, &c.

The MECHANICAL PIECES of ART

Include the following principal Objects, a more detailed Account of which will be given during their Exhibition: viz.

Two elegant ROPE DANCERS, the one, representing a Spaniard nearly Six Feet high, will display several astonishing Feats on the Rope, mark the Time of the Music with a small Whistle, smoke his Pipe, &c.—The other, called *Pajanos*, being the Figure of a young sprightly Boy, will surpass the former in Skill and Agility.

The INGENUOUS SELF-DEFENDING CHEST—The superior Excellence and Utility of this Piece of Mechanism is, that the Proprietor has always a Safe-guard against Depredators; for the concealed Battery of Four Pieces of Artillery only appears and discharges itself when a Stranger tries to force open the Chest.—This has been acknowledged by several Professional Men to be a Master-piece of Mechanism, and may with equal Advantage be applied to the Protection of Property in Counting-houses, Post-Chaises, &c.

The MECHANICAL PEACOCK, which so exactly imitates the Actions of that stately Bird, that it has frequently been thought Alive. It eats, drinks, &c. at command, unfolds its Tail in a brilliant Circle, and in every respect seems endowed with an intuitive Power of attending to the Thoughts of the Company.

The BEAUTIFUL COSSACK, enclosed in a small Box, opens it when ordered, and presents herself to the Spectators in a black Habit; which, as soon as desired, the changes with astonishing Quickness, into a most elegant Gala Dress, compliments the Company, and dances after the Manner of the Cossacks; she will also resolve different Questions, &c. &c.

The SELF-IMPULLED WINDMILL, which is put in Motion, or stands still by the most momentary Signal from the Spectators, and in a Manner which apparently does away the Idea of all Mechanical Agency.

The whole to conclude with a superb OPTICAL and MECHANICAL FIRE-WORK, replete with a Variety of brilliant and fanciful Changes.

* * * Doors to be opened at SEVEN o'Clock, the Commencement at EIGHT,
BOXES, 4s.—PIT, 2s.

YOUNG, Printer, Br-1st Street, Covent Garden.

Text of handbill used by Philipsthal subsequent to the establishment of his Royal Patent on 26 January 1802. Note the detailed list of automata, and his warning to the public of the works of spurious imitators, the first of many appearing in December of 1801. (from Harry Houdini, The Unmasking of Robert Houdini, London, 1909).

a look around, making assignations, or maybe wandering off to another venue if the society was not to their liking, as was the custom. However, at 9 p.m., undoubtedly in a dramatic and certainly unprecedented fashion for London theatres at this time, the doors would be closed, forbidding further entry. The audience would be ushered to their seats, and they would await the rise of the curtain, the unveiling of Philipsthal's terrible 'cavern of the dead'.

I have discovered only one certain eye-witness account of Philipsthal's early exhibition of the Phantasmagoria at the Lyceum. It is that of the mathematician and chemist, William Nicholson, who took a party of students to the exhibition during the Winter of 1801-2.¹⁴ In his published account of the display which appears in *The Journal of Natural Philosophy* of February 1802 he recalls that, after the audience were seated, all the lights were ceremoniously extinguished, save for one hanging lamp. Then, in a gloomy and wavering light, the curtain was finally drawn up, presenting to the spectator the scenery of a cave or place exhibiting skeletons, and other figures of terror. These figures were represented in relief and also painted, on the sides or walls. After a short interval the one remaining lamp was raised up so that its flame became perfectly enveloped in a cylindrical chimney, or opaque shade. With the audience in total darkness, a storm of thunder and lightning commenced. Nicholson says that this 'last appearance was formed by a magic lantern upon a thin cloth or screen, let down after the

disappearance of the light, and consequently unknown to most of the spectators'. (In one press announcement Philipsthal also offered 'hail'.) The resultant storm continued throughout the appearance of the apparitions, which Nicholson describes as those of 'departed men, ghosts, skeletons, transmutations, etc.'

The majority of these were effected by the use of figures drawn on glass, but with innovative use of black surrounds so that when back projected (another innovation) onto a screen or onto smoke they would give the appearance of floating alone in the ether.

Nicholson explains the effect as it appeared to him:

... these figures appear without any surrounding circle of illumination, and the spectators, having no previous view or knowledge of the screen, nor any visible object of comparison, are each left to imagine the distance according to their respective fancy. After a short time of exhibiting the first figure, it was seen to contrast gradually in all its dimensions, until it became extremely small and then vanished. This effect, as may easily be imagined, is produced by bringing the lantern nearer and nearer the screen, taking care at the same time to preserve the distinctness, and at last closing the aperture altogether: and the process being (except as to brightness) exactly the same as happens when visible objects become more remote, the mind is irresistibly led to consider the figures as if they were receding to an immense distance.

Several figures of celebrated men were thus exhibited

with some transformations; such as the head of Dr. Franklin being converted into a skull, and these were succeeded by phantoms, skeletons, and various terrific figures, which instead of seeming to recede and then vanish, were (by enlargement) made suddenly to advance, to the surprise and astonishment of the audience, and then disappear by seeming to sink into the ground.

This part of the exhibition, which by the agitation of the spectators appeared to be the most impressive, had less effect with me than the receding of the figures; doubtless because it was more easy for me to imagine the screen to be withdrawn than brought forward. But among the young people who were with

me the judgements were various. Some thought that they could have touched the figures, others had a different notion of their distance, and a few apprehended that they had no advanced beyond the first row of the audience.

According to Nicholson, the transition between apparitions was largely 'effected by moving the adjusting tube of the lantern out of focus, and changing the slider during the movement of the confused appearance'.

The effect, as advertised by the proprietor in the newspapers, states another feature of the image, somewhat prosaically: the different subjects are 'made to appear, freely originate in the air and unfold

themselves under various forms and sizes - from a star-like point of fire'. This probably indicates that the audience could see the optic lens through the screen. (Normally oiled fabric would dispel the effects of this. Philipsthal here 'sells' it as a special feature.)

Nicholson also recalls that some of the images were equipped with 'moving eyes, mouth, etc.' produced by the well known contrivance of two or more sliders'.

The inclusion of the flower emphasises that not all of Philipsthal's images were those of 'departed men'.

Amid the profusion of ghosts Philipsthal also offered 'semblances of several great heroes and other distinguished characters'. This rare review for 7 November confirms this: Mr Philipsthal's performances are not wholly confined to 'men that were'; he occasionally introduces great and distinguished characters of the present day. The compliment paid to our gallant Admiral Lord Nelson in crowning him with laurels being particularly well conceived.

Although Philipsthal was clearly trying to play to the proletariat as well as to the more refined patrons with his broad choice of images, neither his skills as a showman nor as an artist seem to have impressed Nicholson - nevertheless he tries to be gracious.

As I have given this account of an exhibition on which an ingenious mechanic in part depends for his support, it will not be impertinent to my present and future readers to add that the whole, as well as certain mechanical inventions, were managed with dexterity and address, and that his gains in London have been very considerable. The figures for the most part are but poorly drawn, and the attempt to explain the rational object or purpose of the exhibition was certainly well intended; but unfortunately for the audiences his English was unintelligible.¹⁵ His lightning too, being produced by the camera, was tame, and had not the brisk transient appearance of the lightning at the theatres, which is produced by rosin, or lycopodium powder, thrown through a light, which in Mr P's utter darkness might easily have been concealed in a kind of dark lantern.

Despite Nicholson's reservations about the show audiences continued to flock to the Lyceum. Although there is a suggestion from another source that this may have been for reasons other than those publicly advertised.

A publication called *The Portfolio*,¹⁶ published in January/February of 1825, offers us a collection of no less than six serialised articles on Philipsthal's show, which the editor states have 'long laid on the shelf'. Although no author's name is given there is some indication that these pieces are from further notes made by Nicholson.¹⁷

In addition to some interesting technical information on the nature of Philipsthal's lantern and mode of use, with illustrations (see Appendix 1 and 2), the writer leads us into the final stages of the show: beyond images of 'spectres, changing pictures &c. of the German Illuminati and the portraits of the dead of the famous Cagliostro', to the penultimate spectacle. This preceded the obligatory 'artificial fireworks' dedicated to the King, which seems to have formed the explosive finale to many shows of the period.

This particular penultimate 'artificial and terrific spectacle' was allegedly conceived by a black-magician and even more notorious than Schropfer, the Count de Cagliostro, who had allegedly used it to frighten the inhabitants of the German capital. Philipsthal calls it the 'Red Woman of Berlin'.

This was not, strictly speaking, an optica effect, but rather a giant framework, shrouded in black, with a hideous transparent red mask set at the front, and the showman, carrying a small hand-held lantern, hidden at its heart. At first the audience perceive nothing, save a strange black shape beset by an eerie red face. Slowly the operator, without shoes or wearing woollen slippers, tiptoes towards the audience. Then, within a few feet of the front row,

Title page of *The Portfolio* featuring Philipsthal's 'Red Woman of Berlin' effect. Note the lantern-chimney at the back. Also, in the text at the bottom reference (yet again) to Philipsthal's poor command of English.

The Portfolio,

Comprising

- I. THE FLOWERS OF LITERATURE. II. THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES,
- III. THE WONDERS OF NATURE AND ART.
- IV. THE ESSENCE OF ANECDOTE AND WIT. V. THE DOMESTIC GUIDE.
- VI. THE MECHANICS' ORACLE.

No. CVIII. [Or No. 24 of Vol. IV.] FORMING ALSO No. 125 OF THE **HIVE**.

LONDON, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1825.

[2d.]

PHILIPSTHALS PHANTASMAGORIA.



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THE CONVERSAZIONE OF THE EDITOR.—No. 5.

PHANTASMAGORIA.

I HAVE already stated that De Philipsthal made the RED WOMAN the second part or act of his exhibition; her appearance was, as far as the exhibitor's imperfect acquaintance with the English language would allow, intended.

VOL. IV.

ed to explain by a striking example, the facility with which spectral appearances of the most astounding, and seemingly inexplicable character might be manufactured! His management of the figure was thus:—A mask of linen formed on a mould of any required form in the usual way, made of fine linen, or even of muslin, is, instead of being stiffened in the common way with glue

& A

he suddenly extends his carrying arm, causing the face to fly at the spectators with a faint scream, and then sink instantly to within two feet of the ground. At which point the face entirely vanishes. The effect may be imagined as being virtually a three-dimensional form of the phantasmagoria.

The author informs us that, The effect was electrical and scarcely to be imagined from the effect of a written description. I was myself one of the audience during the first week of its exhibition, when the hysterical screams of a few ladies in the first seats of the pit induced a cry of 'lights!' from their immediate friends, which it not being possible to instantly comply with, increased into a universal panic, in which the male portions of the audience, who were ludicrously the most vociferous, were actually commencing a scrambling rush to reach the doors of the exit, when the operator, either not understanding the meaning of the cry, or mistaking the temper and feeling of an English audience, at this unlikely crisis, once more dashed forward the Red Woman. The confusion was instantly at its height which was alarming to the stoutest; the indiscriminate rush to the doors was prevented only by the deplorable state of most of the ladies; the stage was scaled by an adventurous few, the Red Woman's sanctuary violated, the unlucky operator's cavern of death profaned, and some of his machinery overturned, before light restored order and something like an harmonious understanding with the cause of alarm. I need scarcely say that this accident spread the astonished Frenchman[sic]'s fame over our wondering City like magic; he had made his exhibition in Paris during an entire winter, without any remarkable impression, and without sufficient remuneration. The Red Woman's dash into the pit of an English theatre, mainly by his ignorance of our language, from that eventful night crowded his little theatre to suffocation, and before the close of four months, produced to his treasury the actual sum of eight thousand pounds!

All things considered may be it was as much as anything the unpredictability of Philipsthal's performances – a certain promised element of danger and chaos – which helped swell attendances at the Lyceum during the winter of 1801.

Whatever the reason, the show had grown so successfully by 9 December, that the showman was forced to publish an apology to those patrons who might have 'experienced disappointment for several evenings past, for the want of room'. This being occasioned by less considerate patrons hogging entire boxes, and not allowing strangers to

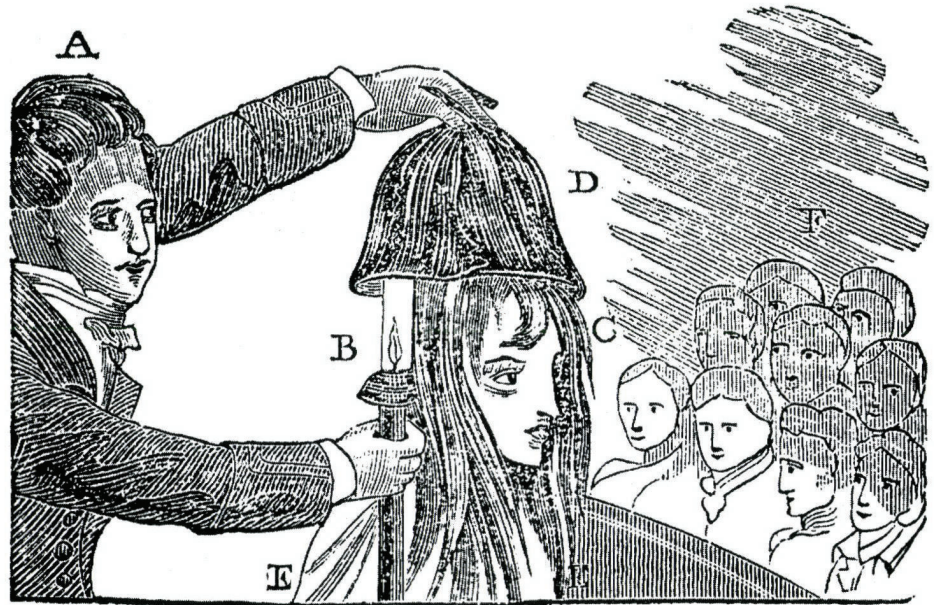
break up their exclusive parties. Philipsthal's solution was to advertise additional morning shows for the 'nobility and gentry'.¹⁸

However, new problems were looming. Within ten weeks of Philipsthal's London debut, rival Phantasmagoria entertainments were beginning to appear at some of the other major London venues.

End of Part One

In Part Two: Philipsthal's further adventures in London, Edinburgh and Dublin, Madame Tussaud, rival showmen and 'Phantasmagoria fever'.

Possibly the only artist's impression in existence of Philipsthal himself seen demonstrating part of the effect of the 'Red Woman' to his audience. From *The Portfolio*.

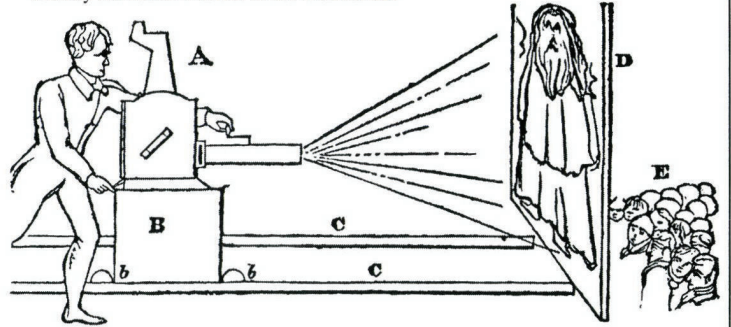
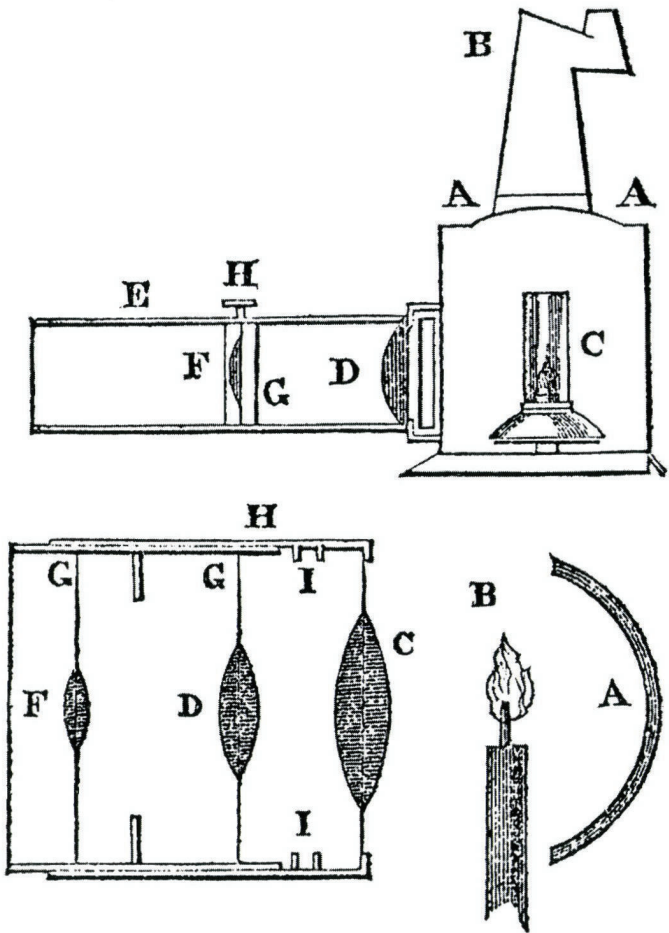


APPENDIX

Illustrations with descriptions of Philipsthal's lantern and mode of projection from *The Portfolio*, 1825. (Refer to main text.)

The lantern with which Philipsthal exhibited was of the construction depicted in the upper figure of the annexed cut, in which AA is a tin case or box, with a close fitting chimney B to convey off the smoke and heat from an Argand lamp C. D is a lens of four inches diameter, and plano convex, of eight inches focal length, between which and the lamp is placed the painting to be exhibited. A long tube E (say of 18 inches) proceeds from the large lens, and a smaller lens F of about two inches in diameter, and seven inches focal length, is fixed in a short cylindrical frame G, which is covered on its flat and circular edge with a cloth and is moved or adjusted back and forwards in the tube E by a rack H, as the figure is required to be produced larger or smaller.

If the dimensions of the phantom or figure exhibited are to be increased, the whole instrument is gradually drawn from the screen on which the figures are thrown, while, at the same time, and at a corresponding rate, the smaller lens F is by the rack H drawn nearer to the painting. If, on the contrary, the figure is to become smaller, or seem to recede, the whole instrument is made to advance towards the screen, while, at the same time, the small lens F is made gradually to increase its distance from the lamp, and advance towards the outer extremity of the tube. It should be understood that in this experiment, that the phantasmagoric lantern is fixed on a small and firm table of various dimensions, which either slides silently in grooves [sic] on the floor of the apartment or stage, or runs on a smooth floor on small solid wheels, covered with thick cloth, and that the whole apparatus is enclosed in a bag or covering of dark covered cloth, in order to present an accidental escape of light, which would greatly injure, if not totally destroy the illusive effect of the exhibition.



A is in this view the instrument itself . . . B the small stand or table on which it is supported, bb the small wheels or rollers on which it is made to move backwards and forwards with respect to the space between the grooved guide pieces cc. D is the semi-transparent scene itself . . . and E is the wondering audience.'

NOTES

1. E. G. Robertson: *Mémoires récréatifs scientifiques et anecdotiques du physicien-aéronaute E. G. Robertson* (Paris, 1831).
2. Françoise Levie: *Etienne Gaspard Robertson* (Bruxelles, 1990).
3. Laurent Mannoni: *La Grande art de la Lumière et de L'Ombre* (Paris 1995).
4. Anita Leslie and Pauline Chapman: *Madame Tussaud – Waxworker Extraordinary* (London, 1978)
5. A detail which may suggest the use of vertical slides. There are various extant examples of such slides. Some of the earliest are in the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Torino.
6. Schirmer and Scholl: 'Sketch of the Performances and a short account of the Origin, History and Explanation of the Ergoscopia, Phantasmagoria, Pantascopia, Mesoscopia, &c. and the Invisible Girl' (London, 1805) (BM).
7. J. C. Wiegleb: *Die natürliche Magie* (Berlin und Stettin, 1782–6). Christlieb Funk: *Natürliche Magie* (Berlin, 1783). Johann Samuel Halle: *Magie, oder der Zauberkraft der Natur* (Berlin, 1784–6). E. G. Guyot: *Nouvelles Recreations physiques et mathématiques* (Paris, 1786).
8. Frederick von Schiller: *The Ghost Seer* (ed. publ. London, 1873).
9. These included disposable coffins with trapdoors fitted in the bottoms, and most bizarre of all, an underground system which would enable the despatch of bodies to provincial cemeteries by 'torpedo-tube'.
10. Although we know little of Philipsthal before 1790, he refers to his 'native Germany' on a number of advertising bills. Furthermore, a quick trawl through the International Genealogical Index identifies two pockets of Philipsthal in the Hanover and Brandenburg areas. There is also a small town called 'Philipsthal' near Hessen. A similar trawl of neighbouring countries reveals no surnames resembling Philipsthal.
11. *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, Vol. No. 7 (London, 1842).
12. John Timbs: *Curiosities of London* (London, 1855).
13. These may have been of German or Swiss origin, although by 1800 there were a number of foreign makers of automata resident in England. Requiring some substantial investment on the part of any showman, Philipsthal retained them throughout his career as a public entertainer in England, right up until the time of his death in 1829.
14. It should be noted that, although the most widely cited description of a Philipsthal exhibition is that of Sir David Brewster, in his *Letters of Natural Magic* of 1834, this was almost certainly copied from Nicholson's earlier account, which it closely resembles in phraseology, detail and even critique.
15. In an *OMLJ* for 1893, W. R. Hill, the famous Polytechnic lanternist, offers a colourful memoir from the 1820s of Philipsthal creeping about the stage and in broken English entreating his audience to attend with the plea, 'Hush, hush, de ghost. Hush de ghost'.
16. *The Portfolio* (London, January/February 1825), Bill Douglas Collection / University of Exeter.
17. Nicholson died in 1815 in 'indigent circumstances'.
18. *Theatre Cuttings 44–46 – Lyceum Theatre* (British Library).

A LATE FOOTNOTE

More than three and a half years ago, *The New Magic Lantern Journal* (Volume 7, No 1, January 1993) published a photograph, from a lantern slide, of the despatch room of a magic lantern supplier, c.1890. John Taylor was able to supply the identification that was lacking. he wrote,

'It so happens that I have just acquired one of the gas generators which are lined up in front of the table. The oval brass plate on the front of mine reads:

CHURCH ARMY, Lantern & Cinema Dept.
14 Edgware Rd London W1

'Hope this helps'.

It does, and we are very sorry to have taken so long in publishing the information. John also adds, 'Any offers for the generator?'

NEW BOOKS

Joachim Castan:

Max Skladanowsky oder der Beginn einer deutschen Filmgeschichte

(Stuttgart, Füsslin Verlag).

264pp, 41 illustrations.

Magic Lantern Society member Georg Füsslin continues to add to his invaluable series of books on cinema pre-history. Max Skladanowsky has been particularly remembered during the year of the cinema centenary as having shown motion picture films to a paying audience eight weeks before the more publicised Lumière première of 28 December 1895. Before their cinema days however the Skladanowsky family were Germany's most prominent magic lantern showmen, specialising in dissolving views and using large-format lantern slides – still preserved in the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Berlin.

Joachim Castan deals only briefly with this period of their career, but reproduces some evocative pictures of the brothers Eugen, Emil and Max and their father Carl as travelling showmen – at one period of their career billed as 'The Hamilton Brothers'. (German text).

Georg Füsslin (ed):

Der Guckkasten – Einblick, Durchblick, Ausblick.

(Stuttgart, Füsslin Verlag).

120pp, 92 illustrations, mostly in colour.

Another excellent Füsslin publication, this time dealing with the peepshow in all its manifestations. The contributors include Werener Nekes and Wolfgang Seitz, the outstanding authority on vues d'optiques. (German text).

Stephen Herbert (ed.):

Victorian Film Catalogues

(London, The Projection Box).

48pp.

A collection of facsimiles of catalogues of films by Edison, Lumière, Paul, Méliès, Gaumont and others, interesting to magic lantern enthusiasts on account of the similarity of many of the subjects to the slide repertoire.

Laurent Mannoni:

Le Mouvement Continué.

Catalogue illustré de la collection des appareils de la Cinémathèque française.

(Paris/Milan: Cinémathèque française – Musée du Cinéma/Mazzotta).

444pp, more than 1500 illustrations.

This remarkable catalogue describes and illustrates 1465 items from the collections of the Cinémathèque – representing between 60 and 70 per cent of the total holdings. Many of the items, including the treasures of the Will Day collection, acquired by the Cinémathèque some 35 years ago, have remained unknown till now.

The catalogue has sections on shadows, anamorphoses, peepshows, miscellaneous optical toys, persistence of vision, photography and stereoscopy, the recording and reconstitution of movement by chronophotography, projection (magic lanterns and moving picture machines) and lighting equipment. Almost 60 magic lanterns are illustrated, ranging from a John Scott instrument of c.1790 to a Lapierre Eiffel Tower model, made one hundred years later, which sldo decorates the cover of the book.

(French text)

Laurent Mannoni:

Trois siècles du Cinéma

(Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées nationaux/Cinémathèque française/Fondation Electricité de France).

272pp, numerous colour illustrations.

The superb catalogue of the exhibition 'L'Art Trompeur' organised by Laurent Mannoni for the Cinémathèque française and the French Electricity Foundation to celebrate the centenary of cinema. Many of the items illustrated in black-and-white in Mannoni's catalogue *Le Mouvement continué* can be seen here in full colour, along with prints, documents and lantern slides which do not appear in the catalogue. Among these are two hitherto unpublished watercolours of the interior of the Royal Polytechnic, and a selection of the Cinémathèque's superb collection of Polytechnic slides, including the panorama from Gabriel Grubb – possibly the largest lantern slide ever made.

(French text).

Laurent Mannoni, Donata Pesenti Campagnoni, David Robinson:

Light and Movement

(Giornate del cinema, Pordenone/ Cinémathèque française, Musée du Cinéma/ Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino).

470pp, numerous illustrations, full colour.

This handsome quarto volume, assembling facsimiles of more than forty of the key texts and documents of pre-cinema history, sets out to be a standard source for all students of the development of motion pictures. The commentary by the three editors in itself provides a comprehensive survey of the whole pre-history and invention of motion pictures. The magic lantern section includes texts and illustrations from the original editions of Hooke, Kircher, Sturm, Zahn, Benjamin Martin, Robertson, and Philip Carpenter. Other sections deal with persistence of vision, photography and chronophotography and peepshows. The text is in English, French and Italian versions.

David Robinson:

From Peepshow to Palace

(New York, Columbia University Press in association with the Library of Congress).

209pp, numerous illustrations.

Although this is described as dealing with 'the birth of American Film', and covers the period 1893–1913, the first four chapters deal comprehensively with the prehistory of motion pictures. The illustrations include many hitherto unknown images – among them some fine lantern slides – from the Library of Congress and the the David Francis collection.

Christopher Williams (ed.):

Cinema: The Beginnings and the Future

(University of Westminster Press, London).

This collection of 23 essays, designed for the centenary of cinema, discusses the prehistory, beginnings, present and future of cinema. Some of the writing suffers from the pretentious verbosity (and slim research) of contemporary 'film studies', but other essays are lively and well-illustrated. Mervyn Heard writes on 'The Magic Lantern's Wild Years', David Robinson on '300 Years of Cinematography' and Joost Hunningher, John L.Fell, John Barnes, Richard Brown and others on the first Lumière shows. Other Magic Lantern Society members who contribute include Stephen Bottomore and Stephen Herbert.