

THE MAGIC LANTERN IN 18TH-CENTURY THEATRE

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BARRY CLARKE (former curator of Pollock's Toy Museum, London) has brought to my notice two scholarly works containing material which will no doubt interest members of the Magic Lantern Society, namely *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* by Roger Fiske, and *Georgian Scene Painters and Paintings* by Sybil Rosenfeld, published by the University Presses of Oxford and Cambridge respectively. Most, if not quite all the information for this article has been gleaned from their pages.

According to Rosenfeld the earliest recorded instance of a magic lantern being used on an English stage was in 1792, although there is evidence of it having been used for back-projection much earlier in Europe. According to H.C. Wolf in his article 'Laterna Magica – Projektionen auf dem Barocktheater' in *Maske und Kothurn*, Heft 2 (Vienna 1969) it had been used for this purpose by Ledvard in Hamburg in 1726 and 1727, and in Poland and France before that, but there is no earlier English example. The magic lantern had of course been employed in Phantasmagoria from 1801, which could be described as a theatrical performance.

There had been numerous occasions when transparencies were employed in stage productions. In fact Philippe de Loutherbourg has been credited (erroneously) with inventing transparent scenery.

Inigo Jones (1573–1652) in *Oberon* had used transparent scenery, and *The Fairy Queen* (1692) included a transparent prospect of a Chinese garden. *The Virgin Prophetess*, produced in Drury Lane in 1701 had a scene of Hell with 'fires and flames' using transparent scenery.

Edmund Kean (1789–1833) who had witnessed a performance of de Loutherbourg's *Eidophusikon* at Spring Gardens, insisted that something like it should be used at his theatre in Drury Lane. But none of these effects was produced with the aid of a magic lantern. That is until Marinari, by means of a rotating magic lantern, made by W.A. Holland, used it to project coloured light on to the stage for a storm effect. Although most effective in this particular instance, it came in for some criticism when the changing colours shone on Kean, and *The Times* of 25 April 1820 reported 'one instant a beautiful pea-green and the next sky blue, and in the event of a momentary cessation of the rotating motion of the Magic Lantern, his head would be purple and his legs Dutch-pink'.

The first known work for the English stage to use the magic lantern as part of the plot and not for effects was the opera *The Pirates* by Stephen Storace (1763–96) (fig. 1). Though he was born and died in London he was an Italian who had studied in Naples and visited Vienna, where two of his operas were performed, and became a friend of Mozart. His English opera *The Pirates* was performed in Drury Lane in 1792, and though the plot was attributed to Cobb, it is assumed that it must have been devised by Storace as it is set in and around Naples and shows many signs of local knowledge.

The plot of *The Pirates* involves two characters, Don Altador and the woman he is in love with, Donna Aurora. He has had to flee from Spain because of a duel, whereas Donna has come under the protection of Don Gaspero, a pirate operating in the Naples area who wants her to marry his nephew.

It is in Act III that a plot is hatched to rescue Aurora. In the great hall of the pirate's castle the unsuspecting Gaspero is told there is a troupe of savoyards at the door who offer a magic lantern show about Hero and Leander (fig. 2). The audience has no difficulty in penetrating the disguise of the rescuers, but not Gaspero, who even allows Aurora to be present at the entertainment. Luckily there exists a manuscript libretto in the British Museum (Add.25913) that appears to have been used by whoever was in charge of the lights, which contains the stage



1. The title page of *The Pirates*, an opera in three acts, composed by Stephen Storace, 1792. The first English stage production to include a magic lantern as part of the plot. (Courtesy of Oxford University Press and Roger Fiske)

directions when the lantern show is given: 'Alt. places lantern on table – lights it up – turns it towards the flat – two servants enter OP and take candles away – lamps sink – stage dark – part of scene draws up and discovers a circular transparency.'

Of course the development of the magic lantern at that time did not allow a real lantern show to take place because of the poor nature of the illuminant. Instead the lantern image was faked by having the circular picture represented by a piece of stage scenery with a transparent disc in it so as to appear as a lantern image, and real actors would have performed in an illuminated space behind it.

When the lights come up, the hall is full of the King's sailors; the pirates are seized, Aurora is rescued and all ends happily.

According to Roger Fiske the magic lantern at that time was not exactly a novelty as the actor Robert Baddeley (1732–94) had been giving humorous lectures with the aid of it as early as 1775.

2. A typical company of savoyards of the 18th century, with magic lantern, hurdy-gurdy and in this case a clockwork puppet, as would have been presented in the opera *The Pirates* by Stephen Storace of 1792. (Hand-coloured copperplate engraving by Grignion. (Barnes Archive))



REFERENCES

- Fiske, Roger: *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Rosenfeld, Sybil: *Georgian Scene Painters and Painting*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Wolf, Hellmuth Christian: 'Laterna Magica – Projektionen auf dem Barocktheater', in *Maske und Kothurn. Vierteljahrsschrift für Theaterwissenschaft*, Herausgegeben an der Universität Wien, 15 Jahrgang 1969, Heft 2, pp 97–104. Verlag: Hermann Böhlau. Wien. (Copy in Barnes Archive)