

DICK BALZER (1944–2017)

John Townsend

A shining light in the world of magic lanterns and peepshows went out with the death of Dick Balzer in December last year but memories of him and the legacy he has left behind will live on forever.

I feel lucky to have known him for just under 40 years. As one of my best friends, I am hugely saddened by his passing. I treasure the times we spent together scouring the markets in Portobello Road and Bièvres, trying to outdo each other in finding some new treasure – but always in a most amicable way – which usually ended up with yet another trade.

We spent time in each other's homes – we in Brookline, Boston and he in Wandsworth, London – and our two families became very close as a result. I will be forever grateful for the kindness he showed to my late wife Sally with whom, sadly, he shared this most awful of illnesses, and the way he embraced the new love in my life, Jacqueline. He was like a brother to me and a kindly uncle to my son Harry. We miss him and his wise counsel enormously.

But Dick had that rare characteristic of being considered a friend by countless people with whom he came into contact throughout the world via both his collecting and his professional life as an executive coach. He was a consummate showman and many of us were lucky enough to witness his hilarious performances at various magic lantern meetings both in the US and over here. Combined with his extensive knowledge of the subject and the twinkle in his eye, these captivated audiences worldwide.

Dick was born in May 1944 and was brought up on Long Island in Great Neck, New York. He graduated from Cornell University and Yale Law School. His early years were spent as a student activist working with youth gangs in New Haven and he took advantage of his photographic skills to publish a book *Street Time* in 1972 with photographs of the Hill neighbourhood of New Haven.

Further books followed – *China Day by Day* with photographs from a 1972 road trip; *Next Door, Down the Road, Around the Corner: An American Family Album* a photographic journey though all 50 states; *Clockwork: Life In and Outside an American Factory* drawn from his many months working at Western Electric in the Merrimack Valley with photographs of his co-workers. He moved onto more familiar territory for us in the Magic Lantern Society with a limited-edition publication in 1987 *Magic Lanterns* and then, in 1998, *Peepshows: A Visual History*. Dick contributed enormously to our Magic Lantern Society and provided his wise counsel to plan for the future.



Dick showing visitors around his collection



If it wasn't for our shared interest in magic lanterns, our paths are unlikely to have crossed and I am sure the same can be said for everyone else in the Society. We are all richer for having known him and as Professor Paul Reville of Harvard University said: "I think of Dick as a magic lantern himself. He was constantly illuminating aspects of character and of people and of life that you wouldn't ordinarily see."

But the people who will miss him the most will be his family: his beloved wife Patti, his two children from his first marriage, Julie and Matthew, and his two step-children Jordan and Isabella. A memorial service was held for him on 10 December 2017 at Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox of whom he was an ardent fan.

He has left behind an enormous hole for us all, but by achieving so much and packing into his life far more than any of us could possibly imagine, we can reflect that it was a life extremely well led. The memory of him will live on forever and we are all immensely fortunate to have played just a small part in his quite remarkable life.

BILL BARNES WRITES:

I always looked on Dick as more of a European than an American when in fact he was a cosmopolite.

My first acquaintance with him occurred sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s when he came to my stall in Chelsea's Antiques Market in the King's Road and purchased – I think I am right in saying – his first magic lantern slides. He being 'a poor scholar' at the time, apparently, out of sympathy for him, I greatly reduced their cost – a favour he never forgot and often thanked me for long after the event.

Little did I know then that one day he would become one of the foremost collectors of pre-cinema with a collection to rival our own. He always strove for quality and his prime pieces were those of a connoisseur and person of culture. He had many interests beside 'collecting', including theatre and modern literature, but always first and foremost mankind and its social betterment.

Dick was one of those special people about whom you have warm memories long after meeting him. A personality not easily forgotten and very much cherished. I will miss him not as a 'collector' now departed but as a valuable human being and friend.

PHANTASMAGORIA IN BOSTON

The *Phantasmagoria* exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston USA is based on the Richard Balzer Collection and was Dick's final project. It runs until 28 May in the Henry and Lois Foster Gallery (158). You can find out more at: www.mfa.org/exhibitions/phantasmagoria. The exhibition opened on 3 March under the auspices of Dick's wife Patti and is proving very popular. You can still view the Richard Balzer Collection online at www.dickbalzer.com.



Dick's stepson Jordan Badia-Bellinger, India Richter and other visitors at the exhibition