

PROJECTIONIST EXTRAORDINAIRE: ANITA SANCHA (LEAR) 1950-2017

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In October last year one of the key figures in the revival of interest in magic lanterns died. Anita Sancha (then Anita Lear) set the standard for projecting slides in the modern era. She will forever be linked to the fabulous Steward triunal lantern used by Lears Magical Lanterns in their ground (or water) breaking shows.

The daughter of artist Carlos Sancha, Anita was brought up in the Holland Park area of Kensington and Chelsea, London, in a house on Melbury Road, almost opposite the famous Tower House. She grew up something of a tomboy, playing on the bombsites of post-war London. An exceptionally talented artist and craftsperson, she attended Maidstone College of Art before going to Manchester College of Art and Design in 1970 to study wood, metal and ceramics. As a 'holiday job' she helped animator and cartoonist John Ryan and his wife Priscilla cut out the characters and paint the backgrounds for *Captain Pugwash*. Animation remained a strong interest of Anita's throughout her life.

While in Manchester Anita quite literally bumped into Doug Lear who was studying graphics there. Together they moved to London in 1971 when Anita won a scholarship at the Royal College of Art to study furniture design – a first for the RCA. Meanwhile Doug, whose thesis on 19th-century photography had led him directly to the world of magic lanterns, began collecting slides and equipment with Anita. In 1974 Anita was



Anita with Stephanie Smith at an MLS summer meeting (photo: Lester Smith)

awarded a Masters Degree and the Lears, now with young son Elwyn, moved to Yorkshire where both took up teaching posts in art colleges.

The river down the road from where they lived in Rawmarsh, near Rotherham, gave Doug the idea of taking a magic lantern show on the waterways. In 1976 they bought a hull and then built the boat themselves drawing on Anita's extraordinary craft skills. Their maiden voyage was to York in 1977, navigating the treacherous Aire and Calder rivers. And so a legend was born – although the start was inauspicious as their first audience was one elderly lady who was hyper-critical of their projection technique!

In the early years they went to Skipton and Shropshire where the attraction of the far less dangerous narrow canals won through. In 1978 they bought a second boat (built in 1936) to tow, thereby increasing their audience capacity from 12 to 35. Altogether they spent five years living on the boats, giving around 2,000 shows. They usually spent part of the year moored up in Little Venice welcoming capacity audiences on

board – Doug presenting the shows and playing the music, Anita operating the lantern with breathtaking skill. They appeared on several TV programmes – including BBC's *Blue Peter* – radio and local media, and could count magician Paul Daniels and Muppet creator Jim Henson among their devoted fans. Many longer-standing MLS members remember their shows from this time with great admiration, warmth and nostalgia.

With a growing family, in 1982 the Lears moved to a more stable base, mooring at the Arts Centre in Milton Keynes. At this time they began to take to the road rather than the waterways. Their first trip was to the Spanish Film Festival in Barcelona – by Reliant Robin. Here they performed over 30 shows and became a very popular attraction at the event. In subsequent years, and with a more spacious Volkswagen camper van, they travelled widely across Europe performing to great acclaim in places such as Amsterdam, Cologne and Vienna. They drove an estimated 250,000 miles, gave shows in around 800 theatres and were featured extensively in the media often alongside other British luminaries including Peter Ustinov.

Their next move was to north Wales and the dream of setting up a hands-on museum for all ages featuring the magic lantern, optical toys and more. This proved a more difficult challenge, even when re-located to Llandrindod Wells in mid-Wales. Sadly in 1991 this extraordinary partnership broke up and in later years Anita ran a successful business focusing on laser-cut marquetry. Her customers included Viscount Linley and Stella McCartney. In April 2012 Anita gave a final presentation at a MLS quarterly meeting on the story of her association with the world of magic lanterns.

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