

# DEVILISH CONJURINGS IN THE CITY OF ANGELS

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As an animator with an interest in the macabre, when I was introduced to the world of magic lanterns and phantasmagoria by friend, classmate and lanternist Melissa Ferrari while studying at the California Institute of the Arts's Experimental Animation department, I was immediately entranced. My interests in horror, theatre, animation and museums all seemed to intersect at the magic lantern. I desperately wanted to see a phantasmagoria show in person and not just the magic lantern portion. I wanted the entire experience from walking through a foggy cemetery, to participating in salons that discussed the scientific and the supernatural, to being surrounded by screaming demons in the darkness. However, 19th-century horror theatre is easy to find these days, modern magic lantern shows in general are almost nonexistent in Los Angeles, where I live. So if there was none to go to, I had to conjure up one myself – and in February 2020 that's what I did.

*Here the Birds Burn: A Phantasmagoria Revival* was an immersive multi-sensorial hour-and-a-half play held at the Heritage Square Museum in Los Angeles. It ran for 11 nights, three performances a night, with around 450 guests in attendance over the course of the run. I directed, wrote, acted in and co-produced the play, while Melissa Ferrari directed and performed the magic lantern portion, also creating all the slides that were used in the show. *Here the Birds Burn* centred on 'one of the very last phantasmagorias being held in the US in the late 19th century'. The structure of the show was a type of 'play within a play', where modern guests (a group of 13 or 14) were able to mingle and interact with Victorian guests (actors) while experiencing the phantasmagoria all together. As the night progressed, modern guests were able to learn more about their historical counterparts, discovering their backgrounds, beliefs and motives for attending an evening of unearthly conjurations. The historical guests acted as intermediaries between the audience and a theatrical experience they were most likely not familiar with.

From the very beginning, Melissa and I knew that we didn't want this phantasmagoria to be seen as a re-enactment but rather a revival. Phantasmagorias themselves were a constantly evolving medium, changing to fit the needs of the showperson and the tastes of their audiences as the show travelled from city to city. Our venue, the Heritage Square Museum, is an open air museum which houses multiple Victorian homes and structures that were moved from their original location in the mid-20th century in order to be restored and saved from demolition. Since we had Victorian homes at our disposal, as well as costumes that the museum was kind enough to lend us, we knew we were going to have to push forward the time period of the play to the latter half of the 19th century, over 80 years after the golden age of phantasmagorias. Interpreting the past for a modern audience can sometimes feel like translating text from one language to another. With a direct translation you can get stuck in the details of grammar and miss

the wordplay, the subtext and metaphors, the things that made the text exciting and fun to read in the first place. Our goal was to stay true to the spirit of the phantasmagoria, using its themes and objectives to guide us in our decision-making, rather than stressing over absolute historical accuracy. However we did try to make sure that everything we used technology-wise in the show was achievable through some means in the phantasmagorias of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Each of the play's four acts took place in a different house at the museum. Guests walked from house to house with the aid of lanterns in the cold night air with the occasional burst of fog emerging from the shadows, similar to the treks through cemeteries and catacombs in phantasmagorias of the past. We also offered mulled wine to guests before the show as a nod to the use of questionable substances being taken by guests before phantasmagorias of the past to aid with the 'seeing of ghosts'. The structure of the evening was as follows:

1. *Prelude in the Parlour*. Guests, both modern and period, gathered in a candle-lit parlour to await the start of the evening's entertainment. Guests were given general instructions while hearing rumours and a little history about the show from the Victorian guests.

There were four period guests: Emily Cole (Shoshanna Green), an inquisitive journalist reviewing the show, unsure about the veracity of ghosts and the afterlife; Thomas Blackton (Sam Chan), a depressed man seeking guidance from his deceased family; Lottie Sinclair (Rene Lovit), a socialite hungry for a night of fun and excitement; and Arthur McCay (Drew Lipson), a sceptic and architect, dragged to the show by his friend Lottie. A bell eventually rang signalling the start of the evening with the Showman (myself) arriving to walk the group to the first act.

2. *A Lecture with Puppets*. Upon entering the next house, guests had to make their way through a 'white out' room – a room filled entirely with (water-based) fog making it impossible for people to see an inch in front of their noses. Upon exiting, the disoriented group entered a parlour set up as a small lecture hall with a puppet stage at the front. While sitting on the floor before the stage, guests were witness to a blasphemous lecture from the ghost of a (fictional) French philosopher executed during the Reign of Terror, Phillippe Reynaud (Ryan Leslie Fisher). With the aid of a macabre hand puppet show, he ruminated on the aesthetics of murder, based in part on the 1827 satirical essay *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* by Thomas



Victorian guests and the Showman in the Salon du Physique parlour



Practising with the tank slide



Set up for the magic lantern show

De Quincey. Eventually, Death, in the form of a life-sized two-person horse skull puppet, arrived to forcibly return the philosopher back to hell. Reynaud's character and lecture was a nod to the French Revolution and Age of Enlightenment as both played such important roles in the development of phantasmagoria.

3. *Salon du Physique*. Upon entering the next house, guests were treated to a parlour decorated with scientific and pseudo-scientific displays such as medical books, semi-precious rocks, test tubes of different organic materials, a praxinoscope, a bird automaton, microscope and even a dead frog mid-dissection. As guests sat in their seats passing around stereoscopes and kaleidoscopes, the Showman projected slides of galvanism and other examples of scientific wonder. Seated in a circle, the guests were able to witness their Victorian counterparts engage in a discussion, moderated by the Showman, about the nature of ghosts, debating their value in a society increasingly obsessed with calling itself rational, logical and scientifically objective (regardless of whether those descriptions were true or not). The Industrial Revolution, the 'conquering of the dark' through gas-lit homes and streets, and the ramifications of using séances to support political causes were some of the topics addressed in the salon. Audiences hopefully enjoyed a moment of fun self-reflection as they witnessed 150-year-old versions of themselves struggle with questions around life and death that we still have today.

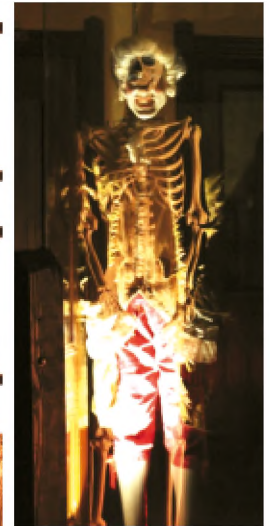
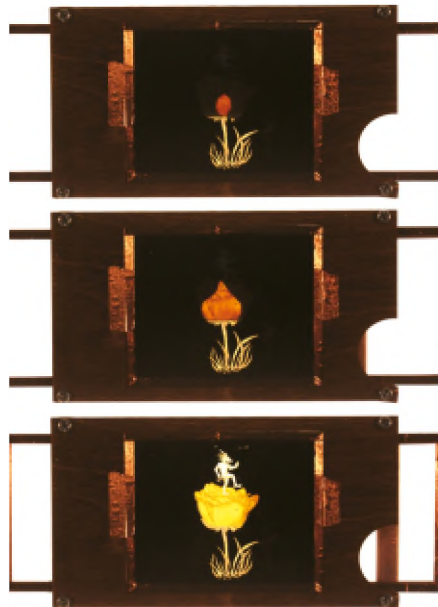
As guests exited, they were treated to a Pepper's Ghost in the hallway. This was Reynaud, as a human and skeleton, desperately warning of the conjuring to come (the magic lantern show).

4. *Magic Lantern Show*. The outline of our magic lantern show was described by Melissa Ferrari: "the show used a biunial lantern as well as a single lantern on a moving cart to achieve the classic 'z-axis' motion (toward and away from the audience) found in phantasmagoria lantern projections. Beginning with visions of graveyards, stormy forests and the waning moon, the show transitioned into a brief séance. Subject matter primarily dealt with intersections of folklore, the supernatural, and science – ranging from the spiritualists, including the Fox Sisters, table tipping and ectoplasm, to the Jersey Devil and incorruptible bodies such as Saint Victoria and crying religious statues, before ending with a barrage of demons flanked by a luminous tank slide. The finale included the resurrection of the skeletal horse of Death – the two-person horse skull puppet seen earlier in the play – who walked through the audience and descended behind the screen, transforming into a magic lantern slide and travelling into the distance 'back to hell.'" A crew member hidden among the guests used a hand-held lantern to project demons and winged skulls that flew over the heads of the audience during the finale.

The séance portion of the magic lantern show entailed the Showman conjuring up the spirit of Thomas Blackton's deceased father. Though Thomas was able to gain closure and comfort from talking to his father once more, it was heavily implied that the Showman created his father, as both a custom slide and a voice behind the screen using context clues and the photograph sent in Thomas' initial letter of inquiry (which naturally included the Showman's fee for a 'specific conjuring').

The second part of the seance conjured, to his horror, Arthur's own mother despite her being alive and well. Lottie too had sent a letter of inquiry to the Showman before the show, similar to Thomas, but instead used the opportunity to carry out a practical joke on Arthur.

The slides used for our show were, as Melissa states: "primarily created using laser-cut wood and laser-cut acrylic. The design of the components was based on the mechanisms of antique slides – including levers, geared slides and slipping slides. The illustrations for the slides were drawn with pen and ink, and pastel. These drawings were photographed and printed smaller on transparency film at the



An original slide used in the show (left). Pepper's Ghost in the hallway (above)

correct size for the slide, and are then additionally inked for any necessary matte. All of the slides used in the show were original – there were no antique or photographic images used in order to maintain stylistic continuity."

Sound-wise, apart from some glass harmonica recordings, everything was generated in-house behind the rear projection screen. The instruments we used consisted of a death knell, two metal plates, a piano, bells, tambourine, a violin and a thunder sheet. There was also plenty of screaming, crying and unearthly vocals created by fellow animators and musicians Sam Gurry and Allegra Jones. Aside from Melissa, we had about five other people behind the screen creating the magic lantern show. Lastly, we used fog and 'graveyard' smelling scent packets (attached to a small fan to fill the space) to further immerse the audience into a space of horror and wonder. Once the show ended we opened the door to the room behind the screen so that audiences were able to see our set-up and appreciate both the magic lanterns and our hard-working crew. We also wanted to showcase that our production both behind the scenes and in front was overwhelming by women – an impossibility in the phantasmagorias of the past.

While I learned of magic lanterns from Melissa, she was introduced to them after hearing lanternist Laura Minici Zotti of the Museo del Precinema in Padua, Italy, talk about phantasmagoria at the 2017 Society for Animation Studies Conference held in Padua. Melissa saw the potential of magic lanterns in her work as an experimental animator with a focus on animated documentary and the intersecting histories of pseudoscience, the supernatural, religion, belief and politics (particularly in contemporary cryptozoology).

In the end, we both learned a great deal through our phantasmagoria production, me as a writer, director and producer and Melissa as a lanternist and slide creator. It was honestly a stressful experience with a steep learning curve as it was the first play that I had written and directed. Despite this, I'm so glad that I was able to make this show a reality with the help of my talented cast and crew. It was a great experience and it was inspiring to see guests leave with the same wonder and excitement for magic lanterns as I have. Hopefully in the future, we can put on another show even better than *Here the Birds Burn*.

Death as a two-person horse puppet

