

HOW THE MAGIC LANTERN (BASICALLY) SAVED OUR DRAMA GROUP

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Theatre "was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt about that." – to borrow from the opening lines of *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens. After two years in isolation, the thought of any large gathering seemed "as dead as a door-nail". But as restrictions began to lift in December 2021, and appeared likely to stay lifted, my local drama group asked the question – how can we start up again, with a jolly favourite for the fans, a shoestring budget, safe distances and the ever-present risk of last-minute closure? We didn't know it yet, but we needed a magic lantern show!



1. From the original set of *A Christmas Carol*

One problem: if these were to be the sole visuals in our show, then 27 slides could make for a thin evening's entertainment. Worse yet, upon checking the set, three slides were plain black, and another two were duplicates, bringing the total down to 22. Perhaps in 1900, when an illustration per chapter was the norm, and home entertainment was far more limited than today, that would have sufficed for an evening. But whole sections of the story were missing altogether, including iconic imagery and pivotal points of the tale, which I felt were too important to omit. But the magic lantern show must go on, so I accepted the inevitable, and learned to draw ...

First, a brief introduction to our group. I chair Duston Players, a friendly and inclusive theatre group in Northampton. We put on three stage plays a year, across a range of genres – from family pantomimes to ghostly horror, and everything in between. Whatever we raise goes into the next show, so we depend on the interest of the public to continue doing what we love. Unfortunately, following a cancellation in March 2020 and 18 months of radio silence, public interest had hit a low point. When talks of reopening began, we floated the idea of performing *A Christmas Carol*, in some minimalist form. Who doesn't enjoy a cosy bit of Dickens at Christmas time?

Some MLS members may remember my grandparents, John and Thelma Burgess. I have been to a few MLS meetings myself, though not for a good many years. Despite owning a lantern for at least 15 years, with a small assortment of slides, the idea of hosting a performance of my own was a leap I had never felt ready for. So when John passed in 2018, I regretted not having had the chance to make good use of the lantern he gave me. But sorting through his slide collection (a twisty-turny maze of cupboards and drawers, not unlike something out of Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*) I found a set of slides marked 'Christmas Carol – 27 slides'. Excellent. Suddenly the answer was simple! We would host a magic lantern show, with a lively cast of voice actors and some ambient sounds. Quick, easy and effective.



2. Scrooge peering around the doorway



3. Marley's ghost



4. At work on the scanned illustration (above)

5. The acetate used to sandwich the images (right)



First a picture of Scrooge, candle in hand, peering around the doorway (Fig. 2). Then Marley's ghost, lamenting his own cruelty in life (Fig. 3). I used colouring pencils and a fine black liner pen, trying to imitate the style of the existing slides. It was a bit of an uphill climb, but with some help from YouTube I gradually became more confident illustrating the missing parts.

The next step was to scan them onto the computer, convert each to a PDF file with black mask border added (Fig. 4), then print onto clear acetate (two layers for better depth of colour) and finally sandwich each



6. Ghost of Christmas Present rounds on Scrooge



7. From the 'Christmas Future' segment of the story: Ignorance and Want clinging to the Spirit's robes (left) and Old Joe's where Scrooge's belongings are sold off (right)



between thin acrylic squares (Fig. 5). All in all, I made 16 new slides, and found another nine 'just-about-suitable' slides among the rest of the collection. If you looked hard, you might have noticed the businessmen in the 'Christmas Future' segment were Mr Pickwick and his friends – but if anyone noticed, certainly nobody minded!

For clarity, I don't think all of these 'lost' scenes necessarily even featured in the first place in the original set. Some of the readings for this story in the MLS Readings Library are heavily abridged, and omit many of the same scenes, particularly in the 'Christmas Future' segment. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come appears, poor Scrooge mentions Tiny Tim briefly, and the next thing he's staring at his gravestone. Talk about a breakneck pace!

What I came to enjoy most about drawing the new slides was experimenting with the subjective lens. For example, when the Ghost of Christmas Present, formerly jolly, rounds on Scrooge to chastise his ignorance of the 'surplus population',



8. Panoramic slide of the graveyard in the 'Christmas Future' section with the figure of Scrooge who passes through (top) and how it appeared in the show (bottom)

and the consequences upon Tiny Tim, I made him large enough to fill the frame, dwarfing Scrooge who cowers in shame (Fig. 6). Some characters appeared bathed in shadow, to represent cruelty, or sometimes deep sadness. Chains may hang above the heads of the 'baddies', a reminder of Scrooge's fate if he doesn't mend his ways. I found a slightly surrealist approach yielded the best results.

On 8 December 2021, we opened the show at Duston Community Centre. I'd managed to expand the set from 22 slides to 48, with a slide change every 2-3 minutes, which kept a good visual pace throughout. The cast and narrator, delighted not to have to memorise their lines for once, came along in Victorian garb, and gave it their all. We played to

around 120 people, across six performances. For a traditional stage production these numbers would have been disastrous ... but in this case, thanks to the simplicity of the magic lantern show, it raised enough money to fund the following spring show, and see us back on our feet!

White Cobra Theatre company, also Northampton based, picked up the show in the following December for a tour around Delapré Abbey, Moulton, Hoby, and more. I'm delighted to say that it has proven a hit with audiences, regardless of how our culture differs from that of 1900. If anything, I have found that the



9. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come visits

younger members of the audience are even more intrigued by it, perhaps because it's such a curious change from today's speedy media. I hope to show that the magic lantern not only has a place in today's fast-paced entertainment (perhaps as a reaction to it), but that as a fully-formed 'show in a box', it is fast becoming the Northampton theatre circuit's best friend. We have just recently produced our second full-length lantern show *Alice in Wonderland* with a whopping cast of 20 voice actors, plus puppets, ragtime piano, and live Foley sounds. Perhaps the subject for a future article!