

DICKENS' OTHER GREAT CHRISTMAS CLASSIC, REVAMPED!

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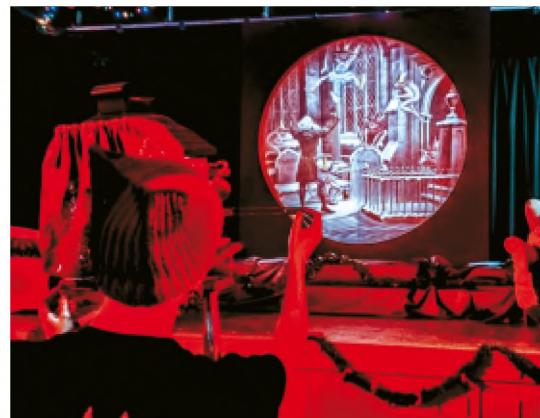
I had never heard of *Gabriel Grub and the Goblins*, until now. The Duston Players had previously staged a lively magic lantern performance of *A Christmas Carol* (TML 36), quickly followed by *Alice in Wonderland* in the summer, with a whopping 21 actors, puppets, live music and sound effects. Audiences, though modest, always enjoyed themselves and I would stay to answer questions about the magic lantern. So, what next?

We have a fond tradition in amateur dramatics – the 'director's gifts'. Towards the end of a production, the cast search far and wide for small tokens (usually in-jokes or relevant to the play) to give their long-suffering directors on the last night. At the end of *A Christmas Carol*, they gave me a book of Charles Dickens' collected Christmas stories. Eh? Other Christmas Dickens tales? How had I made it this far having never heard of all the others? Could there be a good reason they haven't become as beloved as dear old Scrooge or the Cratchit family? Eagerly I ate up each and every one (stories, not Cratchits), desperately hoping at least one might have cracking magic lantern show potential.

In my talk at a recent MLS Birmingham meeting (TML 39, p.16), I described the process of illustrating new magic lantern slides. So, for the right project, I wouldn't have to worry about necessarily finding an existing set, and truth be told I was quite keen to practise my new-found knack for drawing. So the idea of illustrating an all-new slide set was quite exciting. Back to the story options at hand then... I'll spare you a review of the others, which ranged from cosy-but-confusing to unadaptably maudlin, but one certainly stood head and shoulders above the rest.

'The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton' is a festive chapter from *The Pickwick Papers*, featuring a proto-Scrooge type character, some fantastic little set pieces (the vision of a grave-digger up to his shoulders digging in the snowy soil, peering up to find the Goblin King leering at him atop a nearby gravestone, makes a haunting image). The lessons come in the form of 'pictures from the goblins' great storehouse' cast upon a wall of smoke (sound familiar, anyone?) – that seemed recognisable enough to fans of *A Christmas Carol*, but with the funny imagery of a goblin mob kicking Gabriel Grub into becoming a kinder (if sorier) man!

Here was my next project! I loved the idea of making this a light-hearted follow-up to our *Christmas Carol* production, but



wholeheartedly embracing the silliness of Dickens' early work, and going one further. This, I thought, could be our 'A Christmas Carol's sillier younger brother' – a tongue-in-cheek riff on Dickens' characters and tropes, but all coming together in the redemption of Gabriel Grub. Because of how short the original chapter was, I had my work cut out expanding it to 44 pages, which a cast of eight would perform as if it were a live radio play, complete with more percussive sound effects than you could shake a swanee whistle at, and a couple of catchy musical numbers. Using the surrounding *Pickwick* chapters as a framing device, the cosy setting of Manor Farm, and a side-plot concerning the redemption of Mr Wardle, who in the course of hosting the evening has been overzealous about family Christmas traditions, and has to learn to let his daughter Emily enjoy Christmas in her own way, I then got to work on the 24 illustrations. In fact an original York & Son set of *Gabriel Grub* popped up on eBay for a very reasonable price. After much thought, I decided to commit to drawing the rest of the slides but purchased the York set to rehearse with (and as a backup) while I worked on the illustrations.

We had three weeks' rehearsal time. "This isn't going to be complicated" I said. "We will sit in comfy chairs, you'll be on changing the slides, I'll play the keyboard, everyone give it our all, and let the slides tell the rest of the story." We took the time to build a rather good plywood screen (or should I say 'wall'?) at the theatre, adorned the stage with electric candles, garlands, the whole nine yards. The slides were printed on clear acetate, and duly assembled between squares of thin clear acrylic. The cast took to the format incredibly well, given this was only a quarter of the turnaround time they're used to, and how alien the idea of voice acting completely in the dark was to them. One cast member asked in rehearsal, "What are we doing for costumes?" I replied, "Whatever you like, but don't go all out buying Victorian suits and petticoats, because you'll be in complete darkness, reading off Kindles." "Can I wear pyjamas?" "Go for it." Next rehearsal, they all turned up in festive pyjamas!

After several full-on, complex and tiring shows that year, I realised this was my cast's way of asking to be let loose, to let their hair down and not have to fret about getting it 'right' *per se*. So I encouraged them to try out anything, anything, they thought might feed into the magic lantern show format, and keep what works. The whole team became as close-knitted as a Christmas jumper. We ad-libbed, even swapped our characters we voiced around from one performance to the next, and delivered four incredibly spirited performances (each wildly different from the last) which at first took the audiences completely off guard, but once they warmed up and gave themselves over to the experience, we had people in stitches. All around, for a budget of under £100 and only a few short weeks to prepare, this turned out surprisingly slick, and though the audiences were small, much merriment was had by all.

