

# A Step Back in Time

## TO EXPERIENCE AMERICA 100 YEARS AGO

During the late 1800s, magic lanterns thrilled Victorian-era theater audiences around the world. After 130 years of relative obscurity, the entertainment form is making a comeback.

by Jeffrey B. Roth



At the apex of the popularity of magic lantern theatre in the late 1800s, more than 100,000 toy magic lanterns were purchased as gifts for children. By 1895, as many as 60,000 traveling magic lantern showmen traversed the United States performing up to 150,000 shows a year. That love affair ended with the introduction of movies in the early 20th century, according to Brad Igou, president of the magic lantern shows at the Amish Experience's Plain & Fancy Farm, Lancaster County. Smaller versions of the theater projectors served as home entertainment devices, in the same way home movie projectors were later used.

Mark Sullivan, aka Dr. Phineas T. Firefly, with the Triunial projector.

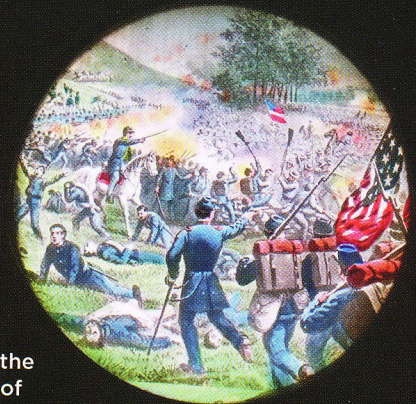
An image of a lantern from an old book (1800s).



Hand-painted magic lantern slides depicting Christmas morning...



... and the Battle of Gettysburg.



### THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

By the 1930s, the last magic lantern theaters had vanished, according to Mark Sullivan, former artistic director of the Pennsylvania Renaissance Fair who dons the garb and persona of Dr. Phineas T. Firefly, showman narrator. After 130 years of relative obscurity, the magic lantern entertainment form is making a comeback.

The Magic Lantern Theater is currently the only permanent magic lantern show operating in the world, said Sullivan, who also serves as the cast, crew, stage manager, music coordinator and lighting director for the theater, which opened its first show, "This Is My Country," last July.

A precursor to movies, the magic lantern's development, in the 1850s, is often attributed to Dutch scientist, physicist and astronomer Christiaan Huygens, after whom the European Space Agency christened its space probe that, in 2005, landed on the surface of Titan, the largest moon orbiting Saturn.

"In the 1800s, the magic lantern was basically a projector using a candle, and later a kerosene light, to project images onto a screen," explained Sullivan, who performed street theater and audience participation shows for SAK Theater at EPCOT Center's Italian and England pavilions for over five years. "The performance was normally accompanied by live music and narrated by a showman. We are modernizing it, but we're basically bringing back what was the most viable entertainment format of the 1800s. It was quite stunning to the Victorians, who had never seen anything like it—images appearing on the screen, sometimes moving and sometimes they had mechanical effects. The largest magic lantern show drew more than 7,000 people."

### THE SCIENCE BEHIND IT

Later magic lanterns, known in America as stereopticons, were powered by a Drummond light, commonly referred to as lime-light, a bright light used for stage lighting. The intensely bright light was produced by subjecting a cylinder composed of calcium oxide (quicklime) to an oxyhydrogen (hydrogen and oxygen mixture) gas flame—the origin of the phrase "being in the lime-light," Sullivan explained.

Magic lanterns were sometimes used by fake mediums in

séances to project "pepper ghosts" or phantasmagoria—images of ghosts, demons and skeletons—onto smoke, mirrors or transparent walls. Sullivan, who directed at Disney and created the Congo Comedy Corp. at Busch Gardens, likens the effect to the ghost projections in the Haunted Mansion at Walt Disney World.

The earliest American magic lantern show was held in 1743, in Salem, Mass. The name magic lantern "comes from the experiences of early audiences who saw devils and angels mysteriously appear and disappear on walls," explained Sullivan.

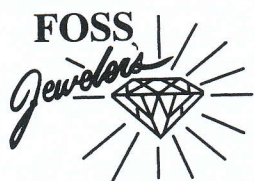
### ARTISTIC LICENSE

Prior to the introduction of photography, the images were hand-painted upon glass slides, which could be flipped and manipulated to create simple movements. Popular mechanical special effects included a figure's jaw going up and down or a monkey snatching a wig off of a woman's head. Igou said one of the most famous effects depicts a man sleeping in bed who inadvertently swallows a mouse.

Different types of effect slides include dissolves and fades. An unusual effect is accomplished by putting drops of red dye simulating blood into a tank slide, which allows liquids to be projected. Tank slides often projected images of fish and small animals swimming in pond water.

While movement was limited, the mechanical effects are the earliest known form of projected animation. Sullivan said Philadelphia native Joseph Boggs Beale was the premiere artist of magic lantern slides. Images were put on glass slides using an emulsion which, when dry, were hand-painted. Beale illustrated popular songs, Bible stories and poems.

A number of original Beale slides used by the theater are part of the collection of Terry Borton, a fourth-generation lanternist who grew up watching magic lantern shows. Borton founded the American Magic Lantern Theater (AMT) in Haddam, Conn., a traveling theater company which has been operating for more than 20 years. Sullivan said Borton makes the slides available for productions by the Lancaster County theatre, which is co-producing shows with AMT using a rare 1890, restored, three-tiered brass and mahogany lantern capable of projecting three images simultaneously.



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Other popular shows included travelogues, science and history. Audience favorites were the history of the world, adaptations of the novel *Ben Hur* and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

The patriotic show, "This Is My Country," which ends in September, features Beale's original slides, archival photographs depicting the Wright Brothers' first airplane flight, American women suffragettes working to attain the right to vote, the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad and modern replica slides created by Lancaster County artist Mike Abel, co-founder and creative director of Abel/Savage Marketing & Communications.

## FUTURE VISION

Currently, the shows are accompanied by recorded music by the Reese Project (Tom and Laurie Reese). In the future, the plan is to incorporate live musical accompaniment, silent movie-style, by the couple.

The appeal of the shows for modern audiences, according to Sullivan, is the chance to experience the America of more than 100 years ago, and glimpse into the minds of people from the 19th century.

"We feel that it is a truly unique entertainment format," Sullivan said. "Audiences are treated to a live, interactive, charming show that makes you feel good." ★



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Jeffrey B. Roth is a correspondent for Thomson-Reuters and writes for magazines in Pennsylvania and Maryland.