

Clarkson Stanfield and the Spectacularists

ANTHONY PUGH

Clarkson Stanfield died, full of honours, in 1867. He got his first retrospective at the Royal Academy only three years later. It was accorded him, one supposes, more for his fame and respectability as an easel-painter of great moody seascapes, romantic battle scenes and melodramatic mountains than for his remarkable contributions to the English theatre, which began some fifty years earlier, and whose effects certainly didn't end when we got to Cinerama and laser-painting on clouds.

In a most scholarly and sometimes tantalising way — because the fate of theatre scenery has always been to be cannibalised directly — the impressive exhibition of the works of Stanfield and some of his contemporaries at the Sunderland Museum (the admirable catalogue by Pieter van der Merwe and Roger Took is still available) records our many debts to his fecundity and versatility.

Stanfield was a man of many parts who turned up in the history of the theatre at exactly the right time. In the period of the Regency, when the population of London rose joyfully from one million to three, the passion of a new kind of mass-audience to be entertained, tantalised and titillated and generally astonished was happily matched to a passion of 'showmen' to invent and exploit. Wonder followed wonder. Not only in theatres (there were, by decree, only three *legitimate* theatres where tragedies and comedies could be staged, Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Theatre Royal), but in every kind of exhibition hall, arena or booth. Visual surprises were all the rage. It became a matter not so much of the play being the thing but the scenery and scenic effects themselves. Thus, as early as 1781, the scenic director at Drury Lane, Phillipe de Louthembourg, introduced his *Eidophusikon*, a sort of moving picture machine which 'animated' romantic views in a stage area 6ft wide, 8ft deep, 3ft high. Not to be outdone, the Irish portrait-painter Robert Barker 'invented' his — the first — *Panorama* in 1794. Erected in its own building near Leicester Square, the Rotunda, this virtually enclosed its gaping audience in a vast circular oil-painting (283ft in circumference) and tromped their eyes with a 360° aspect of the country or the town. A refinement, the *moving Panorama*, in which the picture moved from the sides by means of rollers, appeared at Drury Lane in 1800. Surprisingly it was not till the middle of the century that the Panorama reached its apotheosis (now moving up and down as well) under the direction of the celebrated Albert Smith who used it to deliver improving travelogues at Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly to an audience of thousands.

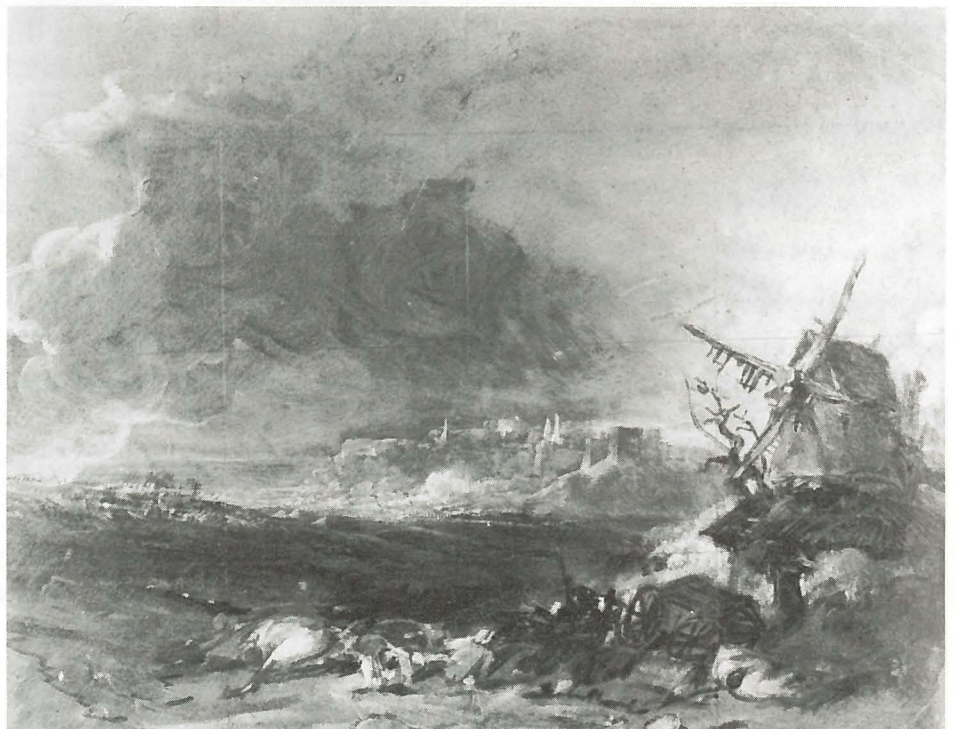
Clarkson Stanfield himself began to

make *his* name as a spectacularist with the technique called *Diorama*, which had been brought to London by 'the Professor of Light', Louis Daguerre, in 1823. Here the trick was to paint your scene with translucent pigment so that, as if by magic, it

changed in form or mood, depending on whether it was lit from the front or the back. With the new and wonderful gas-lighting, introduced at Drury Lane as early as 1817, a whole new spectrum of special effects was possible — and Stanfield, in his



As a painter of marine subjects, Stanfield has been compared not unfavourably with Turner. This watercolour (about 1835) suggests well the dramatic effects he also achieved in his scenic painting.



Stanfield's design for 'Agincourt' in Macready's Henry Vth produced at Covent Garden in 1839. The design appears to be scaled at 1/2 in: 1ft was probably realised on stage as a pair of flats 21ft high and 28ft wide.