

Technician of Which Year!

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It would be generally agreed, I think, that the stage lighting equipment used by today's lighting designers does not exude the personal touch of the hand-made. The lanterns seem to invite being called luminaires. It is difficult to think of applying this engineer's term to the dear old Pageant, Acting Area or 17-inch Sunray of times past, the days of short runs in the factory: when one man, and one man only, made nothing but large wing floods all his working life. Even switchboards today are mass-produced. No longer does the one man go to the store draw out the angle and channel iron, cut it up to make a frame, paint it, mount the shafting, clutches, relays and so on & on: then make up both high voltage and low voltage wiring and finally, after test, dismantle and re-assemble in the theatre.

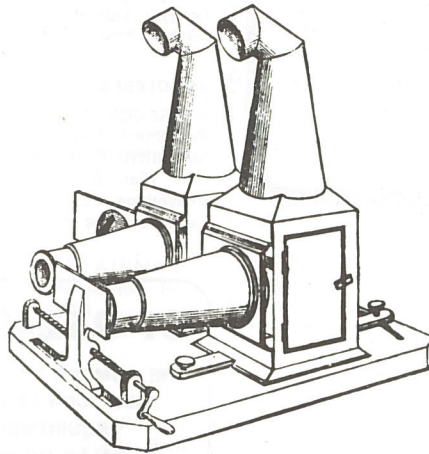
Curiously, what the new equipment is used to light upon the stage—the scenery, the props, the armour, the costumes and wigs—remain in spite of modern materials and tools, obstinately hand made; the work of craftsmen. In this Savoyard Autumn when we ought to be celebrating one hundred years of the first theatre to be lighted throughout by electricity but are unlikely to do so, let us look around and see if any ancient lighting craft of those times does survive. In the year 1881 everything for those first electric battens, including the holders for the Swan incandescent filament lamps, had to be specially made.

There is just one such craft and it was old even then. Furthermore it seems all set to continue for decades yet. It is the craft of making optical effects. And great though the output these effects has been, few are those who have been called upon to practice the craft. The optical effect is the true survivor of the great age of the magic lantern. In this context, such effects must be kept quite separate from the projection of slides as scenery. What Optical Effect (Sciopticon in the States) means to us in theatre is a moving picture and for that role the cinematograph has proved no challenge at all.

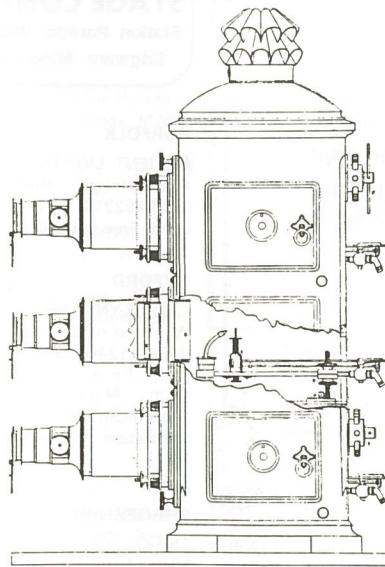
The old magic lantern should not be thought of as one still slide replacing another on the screen while a lecturer drooled on about the Holy Land or The Wars of the Roses. It was an entertainment and thanks to the fanatical enthusiasm of one man and our extensive if rapidly decaying canal system, with which it is contemporary, people up and down the country can savour what this predecessor to the cinema was like. Doug Lear has converted a 70ft narrow boat into a thirty-seater theatre. It has a rake contrived of a combination of shallow steps and the sizing up (or down) by his wife Anita of the members of their audience. Add to this a back-projection area complete with authentic period bi-unial lantern, a vast collection of slides and a Mustel organ.

What has the show itself to offer? Above

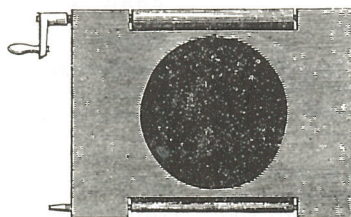
all it is a display of dexterity on the part of the operator of the bi-unial lantern and on the part of the original painters of the slides. Photography was not available for most of the reign of the magic lantern but this was no deterrent to the portrayal in detail of armies and other crowd scenes. And remember, these $3\frac{1}{4}$ inch square slides have to appear vastly blown up in size on a screen. To apply movement there are crossfades from one slide to another or



Dissolving views; two magic lanterns
(*Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas—Terence Rees*)



Patent triple or tri-unial lantern (1886)
(*Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas—Terence Rees*)



Mechanical slide for snow effect (1854)
(*Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas—Terence Rees*)

superimposition of one upon another to give sunsets, moonlight, changes of weather or season and so forth. Part of Doug Lear's show is devoted to compound slides which consist of fixed and moving glasses to animate the picture. The most obvious use of these is for comic clowning.

I have a feeling that our Laser and Disco enthusiasts would receive a surprise from the fantasia for solo chromotropes which ends the show. Using one of today's pop electronic compositions as accompaniment heightens the effect. With the light patterns beating and twisting away in rhythm to the music it seemed quite impossible that just one bi-unial lantern fitted with a pair of 20-watt lamps was responsible. The changing of slides to add variety of pattern to the sequence was perfectly done and all this in the most cramped of quarters. It completely put to shame the Lightshow practitioners of 'our' time.

Chromotrope is a word which means everything to the initiated but nothing whatever to the majority. The slide consists of a wooden frame with at least two circular glasses, one or more of which are rotated through gearing from a small handle at the side. On the glasses are painted highly-coloured geometric patterns which interact to produce movement on the screen. One obvious example draws the viewer inexorably through a spiral tunnel but many other kaleidoscopic effects can be produced. As a matter of history it was a modern chromotrope slide without colour which produced the sinister halo around the Flying Dutchman's ship as it approached out of the clouded storm tossed sea in the classic production of the opera at Sadler's Wells theatre, back in 1959 and in the repertoire for very many years after.

We could not have a better example of the ancient lighting craft of optical effects in action. Charles Bristow who lit the show would have, like so many theatre people before and after, automatically consulted Eddie Biddle then at Strand Electric. In doing so he was dealing with the one man who was not only responsible for the making of the traditional effects like waves and clouds but who would design and invent *any* new one to cover whatever the particular production demanded.

The discussion would have been a friendly affair for both were well-known to each other and in any case Eddie with one half of him involved in the traditional was quick to seize the opportunity to dream up something new in terms of his craft. And he himself would be making and painting the effect—equally he would soon think up something else if it turned out not to be just what was required. In this he was the exact opposite of his predecessor and one time master, Frank Weston. It needed a lot of courage to suggest to Frank that perhaps we might try this or that.

The first assistant allocated to Frank in the twenties was Jack Madre. Since both