

The Magic Lantern

THE TWO FACES OF GABRIEL GRUB in the Christmas performances of the Dutch Dickens Theatre

Else Flim and Adrian Kok

In our lecture *Charles Dickens and The Magic Lantern* we explain that the set of slides *The story of the goblins who stole a sexton* – alias *Gabriel Grub* – from *The Pickwick Papers* is a favourite set for lanternists. During Dickens's life (1812-1870) this story had already been presented as a magic lantern show at The Royal Polytechnic Institute, London, in the year 1860.

Charles Dickens wrote, as part of *The Pickwick Papers* (published between March 1836 and October 1837), a Christmas story about the grumpy sexton Gabriel Grub, who hated Christmas and its associated merriment. As he is digging a grave on Christmas Eve in his rural churchyard, Grub is visited by goblins who pull him underground to meet their king and show him a series of pictures that change his mind. It turned out to be a pre-study for *A Christmas Carol* (first published in December 1843) where the world-famous Ebenezer Scrooge, just like Grub, turned from a cold-hearted miser into a warm and friendly human being.

In our lecture on Dickens and the magic lantern we explain to the audience that Gabriel Grub is the *darling* of lanternists not only because of the dissolving slides but also because Dickens described in almost magic lantern terms the changing of the pictures in the cave of the king of the goblins: "Show the man of misery and gloom a few of the pictures from our own great storehouse!"

Lanternists love to show it and get to work: a cloud in the back of the cave is "rolled gradually away" and the prisoner Grub is forced to see pictures from the lives of other people in sadness as well as in joy and how they overcome their problems and celebrate the good things of life (see family in slide below).

About ten years ago we established the Dickens Theatre together with lanternist Annet Duller. She showed her wonderful set with the "ill-conditioned, cross-grained, surly fellow – a morose and lonely man, who consorted with nobody but himself". A man who was happy digging a grave on Christmas Eve . . .

Let's be honest, we didn't like this Grub at all! In 2014 during the



Convention in Birmingham we had the chance to buy a completely different interpretation with illustrations by Thomas Nast. These funny illustrations by the so-called 'Father of the American cartoon' appeared in 1867. The German-born Thomas Nast arrived in the USA at the age of six with his parents and later became famous because between 1864 and 1884 his cartoons had a profound effect on the outcome of every presidential election. Nast was referred to by President Abraham Lincoln as 'our best recruiting sergeant'. Nast's iconic drawings of Uncle Sam and Father Christmas are widely credited as forming the basis of popular depictions used today. Additional contributions by Nast include amongst others the Republican



Images courtesy of Gwen Sebus and David & Lesley Evans

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Examples from the Thomas Nast set of slides – an undertaker who enjoys life; grumpy Grub on Christmas Eve; goblin on a tombstone; and two of the slides in performance, including the king goblin on his throne



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Party elephant and the Democratic Party donkey.

Thomas Nast changed in his drawings the “deep scowl of malice and ill-humour” of Grub, and thus the whole story. We were surprised at hearing the audience laugh many times during this mostly sad story! But perhaps you will smile as well if you see some of Nast’s drawings, starting with a punch-loving ‘colleague’ of Grub.

Back to Charles Dickens: “Undertakers are amongst the merriest fellows in the world, and mutes, when off duty, will crack jokes and sing comic ditties that would make a bishop dance, in spite of his dignity.”

Of course we always wished to have the opportunity to buy the well-known set of slides with the cave effects. In July of this year there was a possibility, albeit with sad feelings. Many pre-cinema objects of Mervyn Heard’s collection were offered for sale at the SAS auction in July. Dutch MLS friends attended the auction and the hand of Gwen Sebus was raised many times with our bid while we were, nervously, looking on the iPad at home. It is emotional to have Mervyn’s set in our theatre and we think of him whilst showing his slides. This December we feel proud to hold his slides in our hands and from now on we are able to present both faces of Gabriel Grub.

When we, hopefully much later, grow too old to perform and have to close the doors of our theatre we will donate our collection of Dickens slides and biunial to the Charles Dickens Museum in London. Our Magic Lantern Society (MLS) chairman Jeremy Brooker wrote: “A brilliant idea, but not too soon I hope!”

The donation will be made with the intention that every year magic lantern shows will be organised by the Museum and the performers will be members of the MLS, or by an MLS-member trained lanternist. Carolyn and Jeremy Brooker have already paved the way – in October they were the first MLS performers at the Charles Dickens Museum with their Halloween-based show!

So in the future the Gabriel Grub set of Mervyn Heard will return to England. But for now the Dutch Dickens Theatre wishes you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!



Else Flim – dramatist and lanternist (bottom left) and Adrian Kok – Charles Dickens actor (above and bottom right)

