Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No.7

Pip Clayton

Juvenile Drama and the Toy Theatre

One of the delights of the 1800s for children and adults alike were the toy theatres complete with sets and characters for opera drama and pantomimes, which were popular not only in England but also in a number of European countries and in North America. But where did the idea originate - these minatures come from?

For this we must cross the Channel where in the small town of Epinal in north-eastern France a printing shop was opened by M. Jean-Charles Pellerin in 1796. At first he produced sheets of paper with wood-block prints of fairy tales, fashion and during the Napoleonic period prints of the Emperor and his life. Later he was joined by a M. Grivel who brought with him the new lithograph process and the idea of cut-out models on card. They produced scenes and characters for five theatres. The first four were the Théâtre Guignol, Francais, Lyrique and Opéra the fith was much larger a Grand Théâtre Nouveau produced in 1889 for the Paris World Exhibition. Other printers followed mainly in Nancy, Metz and Paris. Possibly the last toy theatres produced in Paris was in a magazine called "Mon Théâtre" between 1904-05. Published fortnightly it included an extensive series of plays, scenery, characters and a strengthened stage.

Somehow the idea came to London where in 1811 a young man named William West aged twent-eight opened a shop in Exeter Street just off the Strand. With the theatres of Drury Lane Covent Garden and the Lyceum close by he had the opportunity for his ideas. He sent people to the theatres to sketch the artists the costumes and scenery for an engraver to replicate on copper plates. He employed carpenters, and wooden stages with trap doors and machinery for moving side wings in and out were built. He once said that he sold about fifty of these frames a week so great was the demand. Elaborate prosceniums were printed complete with drop curtains, stage boxes, orchestra pit and musicians. Unfortunately West had a young appretice naned Green who gained access to the copper plates and printed them under his own name and keeping one step ahead sold them from different addresses during the years 1811-1814 then between 1832-60. He mysteriously dissapeared during the intervening years. In England alone in the next hundred years there were at least fifty other printers who published and sold these little theatres,far too many to list.

The best known were John Redington 1850-76, Skelt family 1835-72 and Benjamin Pollock 1876-1937 then his family until 1944.

These little theatres now took a hold on mainland Europe. The earliest was probably published in 1820 by Carl Kühn in Berlin followed ten years later by Joseph Scholz in Mainz whose catalogue listed over 300 plays, melodramas and operas. During the 1920s all the existing stock was pulped making surviving sheets very rare. Luckily this did not happen to the stock of J.F Schreiber of Esslingen. It was announced in 1960 that everything was to be pulped but a lady from Pollock's Toy Museum in London managed to save most of it before it happened.

Denmark also had its publishers from 1850, but the best known person concerned is Vilhelm Prior who from 1930 re-printed all the early models and sold them at his bookshop in Copenhagen. The shop was eventually sold but under its new management continued to sell the toy theatres until about 1986. Is it still there?

In the United States the earliest publisher was Scott and Co. of New York who from 1870 under the title of *Seltz's American Boys Theatre* printed plays such as *"The Red Skeleton"* and *"The Fiend of the Rocky Mountains"* Two newspapers the *Boston Sunday Globe* and the *Baltimore Sunday Herald* also published characters and scenery in their art suppliments.

The operas chosen for the toy theatres were those that were popular at different times ie, *'The Magic Flute, Don Giovanni, The Maid and the Magpie The Baber of Seville La Muette de Portici, Robert le Diable, Faust, Oberon, Der Freischutz, Hansel and Gretel, Lucia di Lammermoor, Anna Bolena, La Fille du régiment'* and many more.

In the last quarter of the 20th century scale models which you could cut-out and build took the place of the toy theatre. Models such as the Palais Garnier, with Chagall's painted ceiling, even down to the underground lake, or the enchanting Tyl Theatre in Prague where you can enjoy your own performance of *"Don Giovanni"* You could even stay in England and build a model Theatre Royal, Covent Garden where you have two performances for the price of one, *La boheme"* and the *"Nutcracker"* ballet.

My print is of an original sheet of characters from *"Der Freischutz"* published by M & B Skelt of London between 1840-1850.

SKELT'S CHARACTERS IN DER FREISCHUTZ. Plate 1



SKELT'S CHARACTERS IN DER FREISCHUTZ. Plate 2



Pub.d by M & B. SKELT, 8, Swan St. Minories, London.