The Development of Contemporary European Shadow Theatre

Traditional and Contemporary Shadow Theatre

It is a well-known fact that in the field of shadow theatre we must differentiate between two types: traditional shadow theatre and contemporary shadow theatre. The traditional form is much older and has its origins in Asia (China, India and Indonesia) and is still performed there today, although (unfortunately) less and less often. Experts cannot agree about either the place nor the time when shadow theatre was first practised. Especially in Indonesia and India traditional shadow theatre has both cultural and religious traits. The impressive and ornamental pergament puppets used in this form of shadow theatre are on display in many museums and are therefore known throughout the world.

Contemporary shadow theatre has its main centres in Europe, North America, Japan and Australia. It is more down to earth and its purpose is to entertain – it is “theatre”. This contemporary shadow theatre has three distinct forms:

Shadow theatre with puppets and objects (this is very widespread), shadow theatre using only the hands (very rare), shadow theatre using the human body (becoming more and more popular).

In contrast to the traditional Asian shadow theatre, this contemporary form is not very well known. Until just a few years ago it – quite literally – stood in the shadow of other forms of puppet theatre. It was not until the 17th / 18th centuries that shadow theatre was brought to Europe from the lands in Asia in which it originated. The fact that it did not become firmly-established in Europe until the middle of the 20th century lies in the different philosophy in Europe. The European life style is based upon reason, intellect and rationale. The more comprehensive way of looking at life of the people of the Far East, for whom dream, meditation, transcendentalism and spiritualism are regarded as just as important as reason, is unknown in Europe and is, therefore, rejected. The European cannot come to terms with the
non-existence and lack of physical reality of a shadow, nor with its position between dream and reality. The European is much more at home with tangible, three dimensional figures (glove puppets, marionettes etc.).

With only a very few exceptions such as “Théatre Séraphin” (1770) and “Cabaret du Chat Noir (1887) – both in France – and in the 20th century the Schwabinger Schattentheater of Otto Kraemer and Lotte Reiniger in Germany, Jan Malik in the Czech Republic and Frans ter Gast in the Netherlands, shadow theatre was not regarded as an art form. For centuries a rectangular screen and an everyday light bulb were the prerequisites for shadow theatre. In order to retain a sharp definition, the puppets were kept very close to the screen. This was really “silhouette theatre”. Both the puppets and the backgrounds were usually made of cardboard and were naturalistic and simple. It was their task to illustrate a story. This kind of shadow theatre could have no future.

**The Turning Point**

The turning point came between 1970 and 1980. As is so often the case with new developments, new types of shadow theatre came into being in various countries at the same time. These new forms were revolutionary. Here we must mention three artistic personalities in particular: the physicist Dr Rudolf Stoessel (Switzerland), Luc Amoros (France) and Fabrizio Montecchi (Italy). Quite independently from each other but at the same time, they carried out experiments with halogen lamps (lamps with low voltage), which had been developed in the USA in 1958, in order to see how these could be used in shadow theatre. The special quality of these lamps is that they emit a punctiform light. This offered the shadow theatre fantastic new possibilities:

1.: Whereas in the past the shadow player (because of his diffused light source) had been forced to manipulate his puppets right in front of the screen so that a sharp definition could be maintained, the halogen lamp now made it possible to move the puppet away from the screen and to let it perform all over the room without losing its sharp definition! Depending on its distance from the lamp, the figure could become as big as a giant or as small as a dwarf.

2.: The further development of movable halogen lamps made it possible for the figure to change its shape at any moment. This demanded utmost concentration on the part of the player but made it possible to create new shadow forms in the course of the play. The expressiveness of the shadow play increased dramatically.

3.: Through the halogen lamp the iron rule of two dimensionality forced upon the earlier shadow theatre was removed. The third dimension could
now be introduced. This conquest of the third dimension and what it meant for shadow theatre cannot be praised highly enough. A new dynamism could now be achieved.

These fantastic new possibilities spurred on the innovative European players and they began to make further experiments.

The Screen:

The normal rectangular screen fixed to a frame which had been in use for hundreds of years, gave way to other geometric forms and triangular, trapezoidal, oval and semi-circular screens began to appear. In his production “Schattenrisse” the Swiss Hansueli Trueb used sail-like screens which could be moved back and forward on rollers during the performance. The Meininger Puppentheater (Germany) performed in a circular tent and used the entire tent as a projection area. Projections on to buildings were also found to be good (Theater Anu/Germany).

Screens were created which – with the help of ropes and pulleys – could be changed during the performance (Amoros et Augustin/ France, Teatro Gioco Vita/ Italy) and so allowed the spectator to see the events from different viewpoints. In addition experiments were made with the size of the screen. In Japanese shadow theatre enormous screens of 5 x 10 metres were used (Kageboushi, Japan). Tiny screens stretched over a deck-chair were also employed (Figurentheater Paradox, Germany).

Another important realization was that the screen represented an insurmountable barrier between the audience and the players. There was no direct contact with the spectators. The simplest solution to this problem was to let the players perform in front of the screen and not behind it (“Offene Spielweise”). And so, for example, the actors of the Teatro Gioco Vita (Italy) and the Theater des Schatten (Germany) began to perform on the side of the screen facing the audience. The spectators could now look over the players’ shoulders. The Dorftheater Siemitz (Germany) came up with a different but equally convincing solution to this problem – the player’s shadow was shown working with the puppets behind the screen.

The Teatre Tenj (Russia) and the Puppet Players (Germany) removed this barrier by making the players perform sometimes behind the screen as shadows, sometimes in front of the screen as real people. Hansueli Trueb (Switzerland) very impressively and symbolically made the conquest of this barrier visible when – at the end of his production “Schattenrisse” – he stepped through the paper screen, tearing it into pieces. Much to the surprise of the audience!
The Puppet:

Nor was the puppet left out when it came to new experiments. All possible materials were used in the construction of puppets: newsprint, cardboard, wood, tin, textiles, parchment, wire, and all kinds of synthetic materials. The influence of modern pictorial art is obvious in the way the puppets are made. The previous beautiful and often simple figures gave way to figures with a convincing expressiveness such as those we know from Luc Amoros, Jean-Pierre Lescot, Tadeusz Wierzbicke and Herta Schönewolf. As shadow theatre and pictorial art are very closely related it is no wonder that many shadow theatre players have come from this art form.

The Lighting Technique:

The whole range of possible light sources was, of course, closely examined. As well as halogen lamp, experiments have been made with slide and movie projectors, with overhead projectors, all kinds of spotlights, flashlights and candles.

The Spiritual Roots of Shadow Theatre:

Just as important as the technical innovations was the discussion about the spiritual roots of shadow theatre. The spiritual pervasion of the shadow was of special importance to Fabrizio Montecchi (Teatro Gioco Vita / Italy). There were very few people who realized as clearly as he did that "nothing is farther from the western world than the culture of shadow". He found out that the early European shadow theatre pursued a course which ended in a blind alley. The sole purpose of this early shadow theatre was to satisfy a need for pictures in a society which soon afterwards discovered photography and the cinema. So, through error, it became a predecessor of film and the art of illusion, Montecchi maintained – "an anthropological anomaly of the theatre". For this reason it is necessary “to look more closely at our own cultural traditions and reason for being”. He incorporated these thoughts into his production “Il corpo Sottile” (1988) in which he tried to find new meaning in the basic elements of shadow theatre – light, screen, the human body, space and even the shadow itself. Montecchi gave the “misunderstood and oppressed shadow” its own language again. These liberated shadows were no longer a vehicle for the telling of stories. They told their own story and spoke their own expressive language.
Just how much Montecchi’s opinions have been successful can be seen in the innovative performances of Theater 3 (Switzerland), of the Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté (Belgium), La Cornice (Spain), the Laboratory of Appearances (Poland) and Poesie Polar (Germany). These fundamental reconsiderations have not led to the disappearance of narrative theatre. They have, however, liberated the shadows, given them new life and returned to them their original power of assertion.

Cross-over:
If we look at the latest developments in the realm of shadow theatre then we can see it being exposed to other art forms. In fact we can see more and more shadow theatre not only opened up to other art forms but we can actually experience a direct involvement of these other art forms in shadow theatre. We can see at the International Shadow Theatre Festival in Schwaebisch Gmuend every three years that this so-called “cross-over” of film, opera, drama, pantomime, music, pictorial arts, dance and shadow theatre is in full swing. At this point it should be noted with gratitude that shadow theatre has profited and made qualitative gains through its contacts with other forms of puppet theatre.

In summary it should be said that there have been a number of shadow theatre players who for three decades have been working on a renewal of shadow theatre, on a particularly European type of shadow theatre. As a result of their work a unique form has emerged more and more clearly which is distinguished by expressive dynamism and artistic wealth. Shadow theatre includes areas which other types of theatre do not or do not adequately cover. There is no doubt that the strength of shadow theatre lies in its presentation of myths, fairy tales, ballads fantastic and dreamlike stories. The heart-warming and pointed productions of the Australian Richard Bradshaw show us that humour is not forgotten, despite all of the work involved.

Many puppeteers throughout the whole world have long recognized the special possibilities offered by shadow theatre and have enriched their repertoire through this beautiful variation of puppet theatre. The popularity of shadow theatre is undoubtedly growing. We can say with joy that the shadows are stepping out of the darkness and into the light.

Rainer Reusch
(Director of the UNIMA International Shadow Theatre Centre in Germany)

Translated from the German by Colin McDougall