

Evolution of a Shadow Master by Larry Reed

I have been an actor since kindergarten working professionally since high school. In college I studied film, photography and languages. I can't remember when I first noticed shadows, but it was very early on. Growing up I spent a lot of time in the woods, imagining things. Once I woke up from a nap and found myself watching the shadow of a bug on a leaf, inches from my nose. My first photographs were of shadows in the snow.

In the early seventies I traveled to Indonesia. I wanted to go someplace that wasn't being ravaged by war or tourism. I had just graduated from film school, and I set off to the Far East, camera in hand. Within weeks my camera was stolen and I found myself in a small village, revising my plans.

I didn't understand a word I heard. I was in audio space, watching energy flow around the room as people were talking. One night everyone set off in the dark through the rice paddies with flashlights blinking like fireflies. There was a cacophony of frogs, and distant music. We came upon a clearing filled with people crowded around a small screen with a flame behind it making flickering shadows. A single performer was manipulating scores of puppets, creating incredible sounds with his voice, leading the orchestra with a mallet in his foot, and making the audience laugh and cry.

Four years later I was back, sitting behind the screen next to the shadow master night after night, watching him perform, studying with him all day long. I began to understand how powerful mythology can be when it is alive to somebody. I learned music, singing and dance. I used a tape recorder to study the rhythms and inflections of the various characters, and once in a while I would be allowed to handle a puppet.

I found out that an Indonesian meaning for "shadow" is close to our idea of "imagination," and that shadows are a link between the small world inside us and the larger outside world. In fact mythology functions as a kind of public dream that goes back to the beginning of humanity. It is a repository for deep information about the psyche. The language of mythology is close to the language of nature and has to do with reading signs and seeing relationships. When you bring a myth to life it has a power that goes beyond mere storytelling.

Since 1974, I have been studying and performing Balinese shadow theater. The plots are drawn from a Hindu myth about five brothers who are pitted against one hundred jealous cousins in a struggle for power involving gods, demons, magical weapons, and the inevitable beautiful princess. Performances are improvised following traditional strategies. The main characters speak an ancient language,

which is translated for the audience by servants and clowns. Popular performers continually invent new episodes and reframe old ones in contemporary terms.

Since the early 1990s, I have begun to try to rediscover what I had learned by applying myself to the creation of new works. I like the idea of working in a continuum that embraces the most ancient of forms and its modern permutations.

The first several projects were difficult collaborations. I was making a transition from being a solo performer who improvised, to being a director working with numbers of people in a highly technical art form that we were inventing on the spot. I didn't know what I was doing. I had some idea of what I was after, and no idea of how to get there – except by watching the shadows on the screen.

Our first work *Dream Shadows*, was inspired by the kind of dreams one has while learning to dance. The gestures become obsessive and dominate both sleeping and waking life.

I worked with two Javanese dancers and photographed their hands in all kinds of dance postures. These were then projected onto cardboard and plastic and cut out to form various positive and negative images about one meter wide and half a meter high. We used three halogen lights to project these images onto a giant screen. The dancers then moved within a forest of their own hands, dancing around and through them. They told a story which seemed to be a strange take on *Fatal Attraction*: A refined young woman meets a dangerous man. They flirt. He gets too forward with her. They fight—he with a club, she with a bow and arrow. She kills him.

We had twelve gamelan musicians, two dancers, and four lighting technicians. I realized at a certain point that we were deconstructing the movies. It was like taking apart a film projector and replacing all mechanical parts with humans.

In fact, though, we were going back to a pre-cinematic moment in time, and then taking a great leap forward. In order to project sharp shadows it is necessary to have a single point light source. The smaller the light source, the sharper the shadow. The principle has been known since the nineteenth century when Adolph Linnebach invented a scenic projector which was a high intensity lamp inside a deep black box, with no lens and no reflector. Once the focal point is determined, at a certain distance from the lamp, everything from that point on to the screen is in focus.

I was interested in three planes of action: a scenic element close to the lamp; a puppetry element in front of the scenery; and a human element in front of that. I also wanted to incorporate ideas from the world of film: to be able to make cinematic cuts from one scene to another, or within a scene, from one perspective to another.

For twenty years, I had been using a flame as my light source, pressing the head of a puppet against the screen so that it is sharp, and pulling the body slightly away so that it gains dimension from the moving flame. By contrast, an electric light is steady. It bothered me, using electricity, to see the sticks on the puppets so clearly. I decided to use the shadows of actors since people are, theoretically at least, self-controlled.

I built a screen four times larger than any I had used before but, when I stood in front of the light, I realized it was way too small. I used to joke about doing a drive-in movie sized shadow play, but now I found myself wanting to work on a giant screen, limited mainly by the size of the rehearsal spaces I could find. I have ended up using a ten by five meter screen, and I wish it was bigger. The shadows of three people can fill this screen.

The key to working with shadows is to be able to see what you are doing. If you don't watch the screen, you are lost. I couldn't act in profile, and see what I was doing, until I pasted a nose to the side of my face. At that point I became a shadow character, but I could only look in one direction. It was then that I discovered the double masks that have become a feature of our work.

These are two oversized silhouettes, set like a criss-cross hat on an actor's head. They allow the performer to look left and right, yet constantly see the screen. They also allow the character to be doubled by a puppet. The result is that someone can be there meters high one minute and, with the flick of a switch, centimeters high the next. Combine this with scenery, and changing lights, and we create a kind of theater that combines the power of cinema with the immediacy of live theater.

It was at this point that I founded **ShadowLight Productions**, a non profit 501(c)3, organization, with the intent to make theater and video which would contribute to cultural understanding around the world. I started to envision new works, and to search for new technologies. The scope of our projects was going fast.

Inspired by Italo Calvino, I began to investigate the life of Marco Polo, one of the first Westerners in Asia. Remembering the poem by Coleridge, I became interested in Kublai Khan. Looking into his life, I discovered that his wife was just as interesting, and *In Xanadu* was born.

I began working with friends, and friends of friends, to develop the play. *In Xanadu* is a Mongolian fantasy about empire building. Kublai Khan and his wife, Chabui, are truly equal partners. When she dies, he is devastated and wants to get her back. The Buddhist priest can't help. The Shaman tries; he brings the Khan to the underworld, but has to turn back. Kublai Khan barges forward and grabs his wife. It is only when she shows her face of death that he realizes: he

has to let her go.

The play combines Chinese and Tibetan influences. It needs to be epic in scope with large vistas and larger than life characters. We used Chinese shadow puppets as inspiration for the outline style of the masks. We also built new lighting units with Xenon-arc lamps, which allowed us to work very close to the light and achieve the layered effect we were after. We designed thirty different backgrounds, one hundred shadow puppets, and fifteen masks.

After *In Xanadu*, I wanted to do something American, and I began to investigate film noir, because of its obvious link to shadows. I looked at at least thirty different movies, and discovered that film noir is about a kind of gritty realism that doesn't translate well to shadows.

I was haunting bookstores looking for material, when I happened on *The Wild Party*, a poem written in the twenties with stark black and white illustrations. It had a noir feeling, but the rhyme scheme gave it a fantasy element that I found appealing.

It also presented a completely different set of challenges than *In Xanadu*, with its grand vistas and sense of distance. *The Wild Party* takes place in an apartment, not in the wilds of nature. We used puppets as super close-ups, not distant figures on the landscape. We evolved different types of backgrounds to represent interior space. We played with focus and contrast, and we struggled with time.

Three kinds of time are involved: visual, musical and poetic – and they are all in conflict. Visual time is compressive. Musical time is expansive. Poetic time is personal. To create the right balance is a juggling act. When you read a poem in a book, you read at your own speed. When you hear a poem read out loud, you can close your eyes to see it. When you interpret a poem visually, with shadows, descriptive passages have a tendency to become redundant. We have brought *The Wild Party* to life in four places with four different casts. It has been exciting to rework the material each time, to try new things, and see them evolve.

Following *The Wild Party*, we joined forces with five Balinese artists and Sekar Jaya, the Berkeley based gamelan group, to create *Sidha Karya*, the story of a king and a forgotten relative. The action took place on both sides of the screen, with thirty musicians and dancers in front, and seven shadow casters behind the screen.

We were then asked to collaborate as designers on a major American Conservatory Theater production of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. We invented the storm in shadows on billowing sails, and the world of Prospero's magic on a curved crumpled paper screen that filled the stage behind the actors. Some of them felt we overshadowed their performance.

I have had a life-long involvement with *the Tempest*, beginning as an actor in high school. Later, as a young dalang I learned the entire text and performed it as a traditional Balinese shadow play in festivals around the country. Memorably, at an outdoor performance during the storm scene, the sprinklers went off.

I sense that the archetypal characters in Shakespeare have almost exact equivalents in Bali. That synergy keeps bringing me back to the story. In 2005, in San Francisco and San Jose, we mounted a full scale production of *A(Balinese)Tempest* with original Gamelan Angklung music by I Made Tripp. Two years later we remounted the production at the University of Hawaii with Gong Kebyar music by I Nyoman Sumandhi.

I have been inspired by the way directors from around the world have used Shakespeare as a canvas for their own visions. Mine is: "A" *Tempest* because there are many other versions I like and admire; It is "*(Balinese)*" in tribute to the culture that has inspired me so deeply all my life; finally it is an offering, in an age of violence, to the non-violent healing power of music, dance, and theater.

In the process of developing modern projected shadow theater, I realized that there are certain strong values that I wanted to carry over from my Indonesian training: The music is always live and able to respond to nightly differences. The target audience is a village. Imagine old people with children on their laps and teenagers at the edges of the crowd. The story is often told in more than one language, and there is, simultaneously, a respect for tradition and a contemporary point of view.

Every performance we have ever done has featured very distinguished composers and musicians playing live. We have done projects with Native Elder Charlie Thom, Cascada de Flores, Miguel Frasconi, Bruce Forman, Hsiang-hao Hsu, and Gamelan Sekar Jaya with composers Winda, Tripp, Bratha, and Sumandhi. Live music always has an ebullient effect on the performers and the audience alike. It lifts the production to new levels.

An equally significant part of each show is visual design. We like for each show to be designed by different leaders and teams, specific to the culture we are featuring: Kris Kargo, Margaret Hatcher, Hugo Martinez, Dewa Bratha, Made Moja, Victor Cartegena, Favianna Rodriguez among many others. Each of these talented artists brought a unique visual vocabulary to our performances

I continue to collaborate with Balinese groups in the US and Indonesia with projects such as *Kawit Legong, Ambrosia, and Mayadanawa*. Yet I have realized that I also want to communicate with audiences that have no affinity with Indonesian culture.

One day it dawned on me that I had always done projects based in far away places. I took a look at San Francisco, the Gold Rush, and California history. I started to imagine a California Trilogy and then discovered that there was very little good information on living Native and Latino cultures.

I began to seek out creative people from Indigenous and Latino communities who would work together with ShadowLight to create a truly unique body of work. For seven years I worked with Klamath River tribes, in a series of projects, which culminated in *Coyote's Journey*, an epic creation story, told in Karuk and English by Charlie Thom, an elder from the Karuk tribe. In the ancient language, the word for spirit and the word for shadow are the same.

Coyote is both the creator of the universe, and its undoing. He is the ultimate trickster whose exploits and adventures define the culture and the countryside. Working on the project gave us all a deeper view of California and a new understanding of powerful relationships with Nature. We are encouraged by the ongoing revival and reinvention of Native culture through out the state.

Although Mexico does not have a shadow theater tradition, we have discovered that our imagery matches up well with the celebration and honoring of Ancestors known as the Day of the Dead. Working with playwright Octavio Solis, we have created two projects examining Latino culture in the US. *7 Visions* is a love story set in the days of the Spanish missions, in which a boy discovers his true identity through a series of dreams. *Ghosts of the River* is a *Twilight Zone* kind of treatment of immigration on the Rio Grande spanning many years.

Looking towards other cultures, we are continually growing our audience and expanding our vocabulary and capability. Every time we do a project, part of the audience comes as fans of ShadowLight, and part to see whichever culture it is that we are representing.

We spent several years developing a project in Taiwan with *The Puppet and It's Double* theater group. The result was *Monkey King at Spider Cave*, a contemporary treatment of an ancient story told in English and Mandarin. The masks were inspired by traditional puppets, and the sets by ink drawings. It was performed in Northern California and throughout Taiwan. It is another classic trickster story that has been told in many ways at many times but never as a live movie in giant shadows.

Our theater is inspired in part by film, but it has its own distinct vocabulary, which we are learning by trial and error. The screen is our teacher. Watching the shadows, we learn how to make them work. We play a lot with relative size, and have discovered ways of rewriting the laws of perspective to make them apply to the shadow world.

Where film has its stereotypes, our theater has masks. Any number of people can and do portray the same character. Backstage, seven to fifteen people are constantly in motion, changing scenery, grabbing a puppet, donning a mask and watching the screen. In performance, the screen becomes a magical membrane that unites everyone.

We have created a legacy DVD series called *Explorations of the Shadow World* that brings our work full circle, back to its roots in cinema. To date eight projects have been completed with several more ready to be edited. Two of them have won prizes at film festivals. The performances are edited for video and include interviews and archival materials. Together they provide a unique look at our extraordinary adventure and its evolution over time.

It has been a true privilege to create a body of work that spans both cultures and technologies. It's fun to think that our performances began with a single flame and have spread throughout cyber space.