

## **Creation processes in contemporary shadow theatre**

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**Figure 1** - *Donna di Porto Pim* (*Lady of Porto Pim*). Direction and staging: Fabrizio Montecchi. 2013. Co-production: Teatro Gioco Vita (Italy) / Theatre de Bourg en Bresse (France). Photo: Serena Groppelli.



**Figure 2** - *Donna di Porto Pim* (*Lady of Porto Pim*). Direction and staging: Fabrizio Montecchi. 2013. Co-production: Teatro Gioco Vita (Italy) / Theatre de Bourg en Bresse (France). Photo: Serena Groppelli.

**Abstract:** Is there a particular form of stage writing and direction for contemporary shadow theatre? What are the processes involved in creation? What is the director's role in designing and directing in shadow production? These are some of the questions that are dealt by Fabrizio Montecchi, according to his theatrical practice and his directing work and which falls within the merits of the most characteristic features of the shadow theatre.

**Keywords:** Creation processes. Direction. Director. Shadow. Shadow Theatre. Transmission.

## Preamble

What are the processes that underlie the creation of a contemporary shadow theatre production and how are they transmitted? I can answer this question as an artist / director or as a pedagogue. Which is the difference between these two positions? Which of the two is more effective from a transmission point of view?

The artist's testimony always has a certain interest because it represents the attestation of a journey made through years of work and life experiences, experiences that are stratified and consolidated in a practice, where the boundary between technique, language and poetry is difficult to distinguish.

From this point of view the answer I give relates to my personality. My creative processes are today based, inevitably, on forty years of experience and they draw inspiration, from an enormous tank of accumulated memories. Whatever the procedure I adopt now is positively conditioned by my personal and artistic history and this makes it useless to others. Take an idea that is affirmed in my mind thanks to an intuition I had thirty years before and that I never developed. How can that be a transmissible model of procedure? Or an idea that takes shape thanks to colleagues I have worked with for more than twenty years. How transmissible can that be? Surely this story of oneself and one's "personal" creative

processes can be very exciting and cause a sort of fascination that can lead to positive forms of emulation. But can it really be useful for the transmission of effective creative processes? I strongly doubt it.

The personality of a director, like any other artist, is not transmissible: too steeped in biography and a subjective view of the world. However, I think his practice as a director, like any other artistic practice, can be. Certainly, a separation must be made between directing and I-directorial practice and being able to filter what can become a method that can be transmitted “to others”, a procedure applicable “by others”. The artist himself sometimes accomplishes this synthesis, sometimes by followers or scholars.

I have always found pleasure and interest in understanding the theoretical implications of my work, the reasons that move it and the principles that govern it. This led me to assume the position of the pedagogue. The answers I can offer from this position are independent of my personality and are the result of an effort to rationalize my creative work obtained by distancing myself from the directorial ego. I started from the procedures I normally use and tried to filter what can be shared and assumed “by others”.

In the shadow theatre, as in the whole theatre, one can do without a director but not a direction. It may be anonymous or collective, but it is always there. Because the theatre, and therefore also the shadow theatre, cannot do without some organization of time and space, of an implementation of actions and movements, of a composition of images and sounds, of a development of scenic and dramaturgical structures.

It is true that the direction can coincide entirely with the demiurge director, to be an individual authorial act; but this is not what interests me because, as I have already said, a personality is not transmissible. What interests me instead is: the direction intended as a set of procedures and methodologies used to conceive and realize a show. Direction as a process (and not as a result) that accompanies all the phases of creation: from conception to design, from stage setting to rehearsals. So I'm only interested in: the director as the

main interpreter of a process. There are directors who have invented procedures, others have applied them by modifying them, others have only applied them. Choosing to “act as” the director (and not “being” a director) means proposing to a group of collaborators a design process among the many possible and, through this, trying to obtain certain artistic results.

This is why I am convinced that directing can be taught.

### A process for contemporary shadow theatre

Having said this, I am now trying to prove it. What can be a process that accompanies us and guides us in creating a contemporary shadow theatre production? I put the accent on “contemporary” because if we talked about traditional forms, nothing of what I will tell you would have value. In the different traditions everything is codified and therefore the questions that I will propose to you already have answers that are never questioned.

### The specificity of contemporary shadow theatre

So let's get into the specifics of the shadow theatre and the questions we can and must ask to determine a process that will lead us to create a shadow production. This process consists of two phases: the conception phase and the implementation phase. By conception (or design) I mean everything that happens before the beginning of the rehearsals, with the development of all the individual materials that will then contribute to the construction of the final work. By implementation (or preparation) I mean the construction and final assembly of all materials, rehearsals included. Coinciding the direction with the action of the demiurge director often makes us forget that these two phases can be carried out by different subjects. This practice is very frequent in the cinema but rare in the dramatic theatre. In shadow theatre, as in puppet theatre in general, it is used by many companies. In the case of shadow

theatre I believe that a director who does not know its techniques and practices cannot conceive a show, while he can direct it in the realization phase. In fact, a contemporary shadow show, even if it comes from a written text, cannot be based exclusively on textual dramaturgy, because too many are the “other” elements that influence the definition of its final form. For its staging, any text absolutely has to be adapted and this can only be done by those who know the mechanisms. It is necessary to go beyond traditional dramaturgy and activate processes capable of guaranteeing the control and management, at every level, of the entire creation process. Process that take into account all the practices of the stage and allow the simultaneous implementation of all aspects related to the design of a show. Even the lights, the manipulation techniques, the music, just to name a few, actively participate in the definition of a text. If, for example, I use shadows obtained both with shapes and human bodies in the same show, I have to give them different dramaturgical roles. When and why do I use one or the other? The same applies if I use opaque or colored shadow puppets, or if I decide to use projective apparatus in front of or behind the screen. Any choice I make during the whole creation process reflects on the writing and conditions it because it is difficult to separate the choices and proceed by compartments. For this it is necessary to activate a process that takes into account all these contributions. Only in this way will we be able to manage the complexity inherent in the creation both in the conception and in the implementation phase.

What I'm going to talk about now refers to the initial phase, the one I called the conception phase, because I don't have enough time here to expose the whole process.

I divided it into passages that correspond to as many questions:

- 1) Which is the text? (be it a written text, an idea, a music, etc.)
- 2) Which are the dramaturgical “assumptions”?
- 3) Which is the function of the shadow?
- 4) Which are the roles of the shadow, the performer and the object?

5) Which are the projective apparatuses; and what are the animation techniques?

6) Which are the roles of the other materials put in place (set design, costumes, lights, music, etc.)?

I will focus on questions 3, 4 and 5, which concern specific aspects of shadow theatre. The answers we will give to these questions will constitute the fundamental principles on which we will build our production. It must be said, for the avoidance of doubt, that a creative process is rarely linear, that is, it always carries out the steps in the same order. Sometimes it may happen that the starting point is prejudicial, such as the choice of a projective apparatus or a specific performer idea and that this affects the attribution of roles or the function of the shadow.

This does not mean that these questions are unavoidable and that we have a duty, sooner or later, to ask them.

### **Example of a process: *Donna di Porto Pim***

To make you better understand how these can become the engine of a creative process, I propose you to start from a precise example: the production *Donna di Porto Pim*.

*Donna di Porto Pim*, is based on short story of about ten pages, by the Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi, included in this collection by the same name. A small book entirely dedicated to the Azores Islands, with stories of shipwrecks and whales, loves and betrayals.

What were the dramaturgical assumptions?

I decided to take the text in its entirety and to respect its narrative structure.

What does it mean? The text is written in first person: the protagonist tells the story of his life to the writer, about what happened to him the first twenty years of his life, about 35 years before.

Thus in the story the “present” exists in which Lucas tells the writer about his life and the “past” in which the narrated events took place. There are also various spaces, although all of them are in Fajal, an island in the Azores. The tavern, where the protagonist

and the writer meet in the present, and then there are the places where the events took place: the sea, the bay of Porto Pim, the tavern, his house, etc...

It is obvious that when one comes into contact with a text, one's head is filled with images and suggestions, ideas and sensations. Furthermore, very often, there are forced production conditions which in this case were: no more than one performer. The text responded well to this limit and I had chosen it also for this reason.

Any process we use must combine obligatory conditions and ingrained ideas and help translate them into a coherent idea for a production.

### The function of the shadow

The first question we must always ask ourselves is: what is the specific and peculiar task we attribute to the shadow? What is its scenic function?

We could also ask ourselves, simplifying, why do we use the shadow? The question may seem trivial and the answer obvious, being a shadow theatre, but it is not. For two reasons:

1) The shadow theatre is used not only by those who, like me, have decided to make it a lifestyle choice and to express themselves only with it but also by those who adopt it for a precise and contingent need.

2) The functions that the shadow can perform in a show can be multiple and concern both the staging and the dramaturgy.

It is necessary to understand the specific function attributed to the shadow in order to better orientate the work of writing and identify the techniques and practices to be adopted in the staging.

A) There are shows in which the shadow is used with the exclusive function of being the *techniques* of representation. The shadow is chosen because its techniques and its practices offer excellent solutions to complex representative problems or to particular

dramaturgical situations (a dream, a memory, etc.). If a text, for example, concerns a mythological topic, or a fairy tale, the techniques of the shadow can help me give a scenic form to a universe full of changes of time, place and characters.

It is the most common and most widespread case in shadow theatre and among those who use shadows in other theatrical genres.

B) There are also shows in which the shadow, as well as the *object* of representation, is also the *subject*. Shows where shadows are used to talk about the shadow, where shadow techniques serve an ontological purpose rather than a narrative one, where they are themselves the content of the narrative. This category usually applies to, radical experiences and performances (such as *Il Corpo Sottile* and *Preludes* by Teatro Gioco Vita or *Light* by Moussoux-Bonté) and are a reflection on shadow theatre practices.

For this reason it is a rarely frequented category, both for the objective difficulties it involves and for the risk of falling into a sort of shadow solipsism that is rather limiting for the shadow theatre.

C) Then there are shows where the shadow, used as a representation technique at the service of an “other” story, is also adopted for its ontological and metaphysical dimension, which serves the dramaturgy and interpretation of the text. If I put *Alice in Wonderland* on stage, for example, the fantastic world of Lewis Carroll finds an adequate translation both in the techniques and in the metaphysics of the shadow (for example when Alice changes size).

This is a type of approach where there is no rigid or a priori attribution to the function of the shadow, but this is subordinated to the needs and suggestions of the text that we want to represent. The shadow can therefore vary in function from show to show, becoming, in addition to being a technical tool, also the expression of a concept, memory evocation, a dreamlike presence and much more.

I am convinced that it is precisely what concerns the function assumed by the shadow within a show that the renewal of shadow theatre lies, with the discovery of new and original dramaturgical paths and new staging prospects.

If we think of these three categories that I have briefly described, to which does a show like *Donna di Porto Pim* belong? Certainly the third. The shadow is the technique used to represent the characters (excluding the protagonist) and the places in the story, but also has the dramatic task of giving form, “evoking them”, to the memories of the protagonist. The shadow, being itself absence, serves to witness on stage the “what is no longer, because everything has already been”, of which the text speaks. The shadow makes Lucas’ ghosts, his obsessions, visible.

### The roles of the shadow, the performer and the body-object

If an exclusively evocative function is assigned to the shadow, it cannot be she who tells us the story. So who among the other two presences that share the scene with her: the performer (animated body) and the object (inanimate body) will it be?

This is another important question: who does what between shadow, performer and object?

We must get used to thinking of shadow theatre as a stage acted by three different qualities of actors who compete for the main roles. When I talk about a role I mean “the part” that they play in a dramaturgy: who tells us the story, who takes charge of interpreting the characters or who, in the absence of a story, sends the action forward.

It may seem obvious that it is the shadow that plays the main role, followed by the performer and the object, but, as we will see in *Donna di Porto Pim*, we must not take this hierarchy for granted because the balances among these three qualities of presence is very delicate.

If we decide to stage a text, be it dramatic, poetic, epic, or literary, it is important to decide who should take charge of it. Is it the narrator performer or the character performer? Is it the shadow of a silhouette character behind the screen or in front of it? Is it a body shadow? What kind?

Each type of text poses different problems that can be solved by using the appropriate techniques: each animation technique, from body shadow to shape, interacts differently with the acting, with the spoken text and with the work of the performer. We must therefore always ask ourselves when designing a show: who do we call on to speak among the three different actors on the stage?

Returning to *Donna di Porto Pim*, what was the answer to this question? It is the performer-actor who plays the main character here that tells us the whole story. We will talk about the implications of this choice, as well as the role played by the object, after having introduced the projective devices and animation techniques.

### **Animation techniques and projective apparatuses**

To translate these first ideas into a concrete form of shadow theatre we must begin to ask ourselves questions like: which projective apparatuses to use? Which animation techniques? Now I would like to digress for a moment to clarify what I mean by projective apparatuses and animation technique.

As I mentioned earlier, if we are interested in a form of traditional shadow theatre, we will adopt the projective apparatus of that tradition along with its animation technique and corresponding performer. If, on the other hand, we move into the area of contemporary shadow theatre, then it is up to us to decide which projective apparatus to use and how we relate to it with the animation techniques and the performer. Moreover, unlike traditional forms, in a contemporary show many different apparatus and animation techniques can be present.

How do we choose a projective apparatus or an animation technique? We can do it prejudicially, that is regardless of any other consideration. Or we can start from the ideas on dramaturgy, on the function of the shadow and on the roles and from there, make

our choices.

In any case, it is important to make these choices at the beginning of the path because the shadow universe that you want to create and the show you want to produce depend on them. It is important that at least the main projective apparatus chosen is set up, even if in a provisional form, from the beginning of the rehearsals. It is not possible to start rehearsals for a shadow show without the light sources, the screens and the bodies/objects.

For this reason it is difficult to think, in the case of shadow theatre, of creative processes totally based on improvisation. It is always a good idea to have a conception phase that allows you to identify the minimum tools needed to start the work on stage. Unlike other theatrical forms, where the rehearsals can be carried out even in the absence of the set and the light sources, the shadow theatre simply cannot function without them.

Before deciding exactly which apparatuses and animation techniques to use, it is worth comparing them with the scenographic and dramaturgical choices and the role we have attributed to the three presences on stage.

Two general considerations:

- 1) The apparatuses must always consider the scenographic space and the scenography must allow for the existence of the apparatuses.
- 2) The apparatuses, as well as the animation techniques, must be the scenic translation of our dramaturgical intentions and the choices made regarding the function of the shadow and the roles attributed to the various actors on stage.



**Figure 3** - *Donna di Porto Pim* (*Lady of Porto Pim*). Direction and staging: Fabrizio Montecchi. 2013. Co-production: Teatro Gioco Vita (Italy) / Theatre de Bourg en Bresse (France). Photo: Serena Groppelli.

In the case of the production *Donna di Porto Pim*, the set was not abstract, but it represented a specific place: the tavern, where Lucas and the writer had met.

In this case we have apparatuses in front of and behind the screen. Those behind do not require the intervention of the performer and represent a practical support for the action while, with regard to the meaning, they are linked to the figure of the woman and the whale.

Down stage we have apparatuses designed to be used to project objects. The latter become in the shadow, what they are not in reality: table - crag, guitar - woman's body, chair - father, etc.

The animation techniques, as you can see, are not conventional because the performer moves objects and not shadow puppets. Why make this choice? Because the performer is a character and, as such, he cannot animate like any other animator. The role allows him to do some things but not others. Why should Lucas, a char-

acter, manipulate lights and shadow puppets? I also asked myself this question and, not finding a sensible answer, I had to invent a meta-theatrical statute that partially legitimized him to act on stage as a manipulator.

The dramaturgical solution I adopted was to bring the writer onto the stage. It is he who leads us into the story and, before our eyes, he disguises himself and impersonates Lucas. As in the act of writing, it is the writer who makes us believe that Lucas is speaking, so we do on stage. Thanks to this expedient, Lucas acquires a meta-theatrical status and can carry out actions on stage that would otherwise be difficult to justify.

### Conclusion

As this last example clearly shows, where the dramaturgy gave us the answers to the problems related to animation techniques, it is difficult to force any creative process into a procedural cage. True artistic creation does not come from formulas or recipes. We all agree on that, I think.

However, this does not exclude versatile processes being put into play which are capable of adapting to a certain practice or a personality. It does not mean giving answers but conveying the importance of asking questions.

In theatre, and in art in general, it is thought that asking questions limits the creative inspiration. Creativity, like talent, must be nourished, and what is sometimes believed to be an intuition of the moment, is often the fruit of a long process of preparation and elaboration that takes place in our mind.

I believe the secret lies precisely in the questions. Questions that help you choose the path to follow, to question everything, to understand that a road has no exit or that there are other possibilities to develop. It is from the questions that we must always start.