

# **Breaking the Fifth Wall**

Enquiry Into Contemporary Shadow Theatre

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**Post Grad Dip. Ed, B.A.**

*To practice Shadow Theatre in Western countries nowadays is to accept to live into a solitary and unrelated dimension regarding the existing theatre languages as a whole. The Shadow Theatre represents an artistic and cultural experience restricted to this theatre itself: nothing is more alien to Western culture than the culture of the Shadow. To choose to practice this kind of restrictive theatre means to continually look into the reasons of the why.*

Teatro Gioco Vita

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## **Keywords for Cataloguing**

The following is a list of keywords that appear within this thesis or are associated with the thesis topic. These keywords have been listed for cataloguing purposes.

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Shadow Theatre, puppetry, electronic media, screen, performance, live performance, cinema, lighting technology, mediatized and non-mediatized performance, performance as research, creative practice, Western genre.

# Abstract

## Breaking the Fifth Wall

### Enquiry Into Contemporary Shadow Theatre

Practising Shadow Theatre in the West today means to subvert the predominantly negative view of shadow in the Western psyche, to transcend the faintly racist notion of shadow theatre as the quaint practice of traditional people of the East and to contend with the dominant influences of the electronic media on this once powerful and popular art form.

This research is through creative practice in the form of the production, *Cactus*. This performance investigates the use of the screen in contemporary Shadow Theatre and the optimisation of the live theatrical experience. The performance also seeks to integrate mediatized and non-mediatized performance through the combination of live performance and projected images.

My research is a social constructivist process to creative practice as research using a pluralistic approach including elements of action research and autobiography. The literature included for review in this study includes work by Brook, Grotowski, Auslander, Sontag, and Schechner. The literature analysis and previous training with Italian company, Teatro Gioco Vita, served to inform the application of my theories as praxis.

The central question of this research project is:

How can I break the fifth wall (which is the screen) in shadow theatre performance?

Subsidiary questions are:

How can we harness the advantages of both mediatized and non-mediatized performance to produce a contemporary shadow theatre form catering to the needs of a twenty-first century audience?

How can I optimize the live theatrical experience?

What is contemporary Shadow Theatre?

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The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed:.....

Lynne Kent

Date:.....

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## Introduction

As a backpacker in 1988, I happened to be in Barcelona during a puppet festival. Being a theatre studies undergraduate student at that time, I was interested in puppetry and Visual Theatre and grew up seeing the work of Handspan Puppet Theatre and Polyglot Puppet Theatre in Melbourne. Knowing no Spanish at that stage I mimed to the people in the box office that I was a student of theatre and they happily gave me a ticket to see the Italian company, Teatro Gioco Vita's production *Pescetopocodrillo*. What I saw inspired me for years to come. I thought I was watching an animated film with coloured fish floating past my eyes. On the screen there was an image of a fish, then the image zoomed into the eye of the fish and we, the audience began to see what the fish saw. I couldn't understand any of the spoken word but the production was so visual that the images spoke for themselves. Wonderful images, which told a children's story about identity and belonging. It looked exactly like a film and yet I could see puppeteers holding lights in front of the screen and moving around the stage.

Ten years later, I received an Arts Queensland professional development grant to study with Teatro Gioco Vita at the International Institute for Puppetry in Charleville-Mezières, France. Two years after training, I made my pilgrimage to train again with them in Piacenza, Italy where the company is based. Teatro Gioco Vita is a company with determination to develop a new language for working in contemporary Shadow Theatre. The Artistic Director, Fabrizio Montecchi urged us as participants in the Master classes in France to go deeper into the work by asking the question: "Why?", "Why work with shadow"?

The quote from Teatro Gioco Vita on the covering page of this essay is the starting point for this research project. Through creative practice, I wish to explore the exciting medium of contemporary Shadow Theatre, to find out what it is about the medium that still makes me want to create and produce performances using shadow and to articulate the process of creating this kind of challenging work.

In this research project, I have endeavoured to break the fifth wall that is the screen. The screen is an integral element in both shadow theatre and the use of electronic media in the live performance. A broad definition of the screen in the theatrical space is any surface on which an image, moving or static, is projected. By breaking the fifth wall we are getting closer to finding the space between cinema and theatre, a blending of the two mediums possible in Shadow Theatre. Research into contemporary Shadow Theatre performance has ramifications for multi-media performance, theatrical lighting technology and performance studies generally.

Shadow theatre is a form of early cinema. The basic elements of light, screen, animator and puppet eventually became cinema. Using cinematic techniques with innovative and resourceful technology shadow puppeteers have now arrived full circle at a sophisticated augmentation of the very primitive form of Shadow Theatre.



## Literature Review

### **Breaking the Fifth Wall – Enquiry into contemporary Shadow Theatre.**

In 1968, Peter Brook asked:

Is there a language, just as exacting for the author as a language of words? Is there a language of actions, a language of sounds - a language of word-as-part-of-movement, of word-as-lie, word-as-parody, of word-as-rubbish, of word-as-contradiction, of word-shock or word-cry? (Brook, p55).

I believe there is a new language: the language of the visual. This new language of Visual Theatre incorporates elements of puppetry, electronic projection, sound, movement and Shadow Theatre and has the capacity to convey complex emotion and narrative. It is just that theatre practitioners are not yet fluent in this new language. We have some of the vocabulary: the screen, shadow, digital projection and puppets but we cannot yet produce fully formed sentences that roll effortlessly into paragraphs and on into chunky stories. The audience and critics alike are not yet fluent in this visual language, however willing they are to engage with a new and exciting art form.

Film criticism, theatre/performance studies and screen studies have all been around in the academic arena for some time with lectures, television programs and countless books devoted to these subjects. Yet still we stumble over communicating ways of working, watching, understanding and enjoying Visual Theatre which quite simply combines cinematic techniques and theatre.

Following on from the influential work of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig, Visual Theatre was born out of a need to find answers to some of the questions writers and directors such as Grotowski, Brook and Beckett were asking in the 1960s.

We began to understand that the words in plays, that the physical beings in plays, that the events in plays were too often evasions, too often artifices that had to do not with truths but with semblances. At best they were about something rather than some thing; they were ideas describing experiences rather than the experiences (Sainer, 1975 p15).

One such question which strikes at the core of inquiry into Visual Theatre then and now is: “What is theatre?” Defining the essence of theatre as opposed to cinema or any other form of entertainment is the starting point for creating a new live performance. This definition is imperative if the new theatre work incorporates elements of the cinematic as contemporary shadow theatre does. We have to ask ourselves: “Why are we making theatre as opposed to film?”

Visual Theatre can encompass a whole range of performance genres including Black Theatre, Bunraku and Object Theatre. This dissertation and research project focuses on Shadow Theatre. Companies such as Amoros et Augustin (France) and Teatro Gioco Vita (Italy) are at the forefront of research into Shadow Theatre today. Their work may involve moving the screen, using hand held lights and using the body as shadow. Teatro Gioco Vita’s exploration into shadow theatre has taken the form from the established European tradition into a unique ‘corporal technique’ of the use of the body in shadow.

.... There is a complex relation between body, shadow puppet and shadow, which we aim to recreate on stage. The reality of our Shadow Theatre comes from an effort to present the various languages of the Shadow: we have tried to give a contemporary interpretation of the Shadow in the theatre compared to the established tradition.

(Teatro Gioco Vita, n.p).

Contemporary Shadow Theatre has come a long way from the heady days of hand shadow puppetry up against the walls of a cave.

### **The Established Tradition**

Whilst contemporary Shadow Theatre may be about exploring form and technique, traditional Shadow Theatre, particularly in the East, is deeply connected to culture and religion. Episodes from the Indian epics *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* are regularly performed across Asia with the puppeteer often given the status of a priest or holy man.

In *ruwatan*, traditional exorcistic performances, the voice of the puppeteer is the sole authority and this authority derives from the puppeteer’s command of magical and mystical knowledge. The text used during these performances, which exists in both oral and written forms, is non-Indic and very sacred; pregnant women are asked to leave the room before the text is recited, so powerful are the words believed to be. (Sears, p122).

In both Egypt and Indonesia, the role of the puppeteer is similar to that of a priest, not unlike the role of the puppeteer in other forms of puppet theatre in India. Michael Schuster describes his Indian puppet teacher, Thimmapacher as a

Priest for the Vishwa Karmis, a community of blacksmiths and carpenters, but he was also a *bhagavata* – a puppet narrator and troupe leader who teaches the text to the puppeteers, delivers narration, drums on the *mrdanga*, and sings to highlight action and emotion. (Schuster, 2001 p1).

### **The Popularity of the Shadow**

In many parts of Asia, Shadow Theatre was and still is a popular form of entertainment. Because Shadow Puppet Theatre is largely performed at outdoor festivals and carnival events, it is associated with food, music and audience interaction. Traditional Shadow Theatre has no invisible barrier (fourth wall) between the audience and the players. The audience can freely wander about and watch the performance from in front of and behind the screen. In Javanese shadow theatre the *dalang* or puppeteer often banter with the audience and/or uses one or more of the puppet characters to interact with the audience. References are often made to local events rendering the audience active participants in the content of the shadow play.

Traditional performances are often based on folktales with which a high percentage of the audience are familiar. The skill of the puppeteer is in the telling of the story and in the particular way the puppeteer mixes the epic hero's journey with references to popular culture and local events. "The stories may include the dissemination of cultural or literary knowledge or practical information relevant to the audience, commentary on local affairs, modern social problems, and attitudes or regulations considered important by the state" (Dowsey-Magog ,2002 p4).

The capacity for this art form to convey both the secular and the sacred make the Shadow Theatre tradition both powerful and popular. Western influences on traditional Asian shadow theatre have included puppet characters using mobile phones, occasional use of English words and even a change in narrative structure, (Sears, p124) yet the most profound and irrevocable influence on the traditional shadow play has been the advent of television, cinema and other electronic media.

While the basic elements of the screen, the projection of images and the desire to tell and to listen to stories may have remained the same for generations, traditional Shadow Theatre and this more recent advent of mediatized performance in the form of television and film, perform very different functions within communities and in their relationships with their audience. How can we harness the advantages of both mediatized and non-mediatized performance to produce a contemporary shadow theatre form catering to the needs of a twenty-first century audience? As Kustow demands: “Are there theatre-makers in the house to evolve theatre to face up to the mutations of online life?” (p202).

### **The Power of the Shadow**

Since the early days of hand puppetry in caves and in tents, Shadow Theatre has been a popular art form as well as powerful.

It was this power to create communal identity that gave the *karagoz* plays their vitality and importance within Ottoman and Greek culture. Even though both cultures had religious prohibitions that might have otherwise prevented the plays from being performed, these shadow plays were so popular with the community that the religious institutions found ways to excuse and even bless them (Smith, p3).

Perhaps this capacity for Shadow Theatre to be influenced by and to influence culture is the reason why the various governments and religious institutions in different countries have been so quick to ban and/or censor this popular form of entertainment. Censorship of the shadow play existed in countries such as Thailand and Turkey, much like government censoring of motion pictures and television today. In Thailand, “Direct government intervention in *nang talung* was applied mainly through repression and censorship by local officials in the 1970s when the persistent antihegemonic views of agricultural and working-class performers began to reveal Marxist tendencies.” (Dowsey-Magog, p2)

Government control of Shadow Theatre also took place through education. Schools for puppeteers were established by the Dutch colonial government of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Java. Richard Schechner suggests that Western “normative expectations” of traditional Javanese culture reflected in the shadow play, *wayang*, “stripped wayang of its politics and historicity, its ability to relate contemporary events, and tried to invent it in a form emphasising its basis in ancient ‘myths’, its ‘timeless’ aesthetics and its ‘mystical’ functions.” (Schechner, p27)

The schools were used to train puppeteers in the tradition of shadow theatre which Western expectations viewed as “exotic” and “authentic” thereby preserving a potentially subversive art form as a museum piece to be viewed at a safe distance, out of harm’s reach.

### **Fear of the Shadow**

The fear of a revolutionary uprising and the attempt by Dutch colonists to civilize the “primitive” and potentially subversive shadow play may also be rooted in a deep-seated Western fear of the shadow and darkness itself. Christianity’s obsession with “looking toward the light” and defeating the dark may also account for a significant shift in the association of shadow play from its use in ritual and ceremony to its association with evil and subversive acts. During the eighteenth century in Europe, a popular parlour game consisted of outlining one’s shadow from behind the screen. “All those who took part did so with a mixture of apprehension and anticipation; apprehension because they were worried they would reveal some terrible disorder of the soul; anticipation because they hoped they would reveal for all to see, inestimable, hidden qualities” (Stoichita, p159).

In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, written at the turn of the twentieth century: “Darkness is night, the unknown, the impenetrable, the primitive, the evil”. (O’Prey, in Conrad, 1902 p9). Conrad’s protagonist, Marlowe, journeys into “deepest darkest” Africa to capture Kurtz, a rebel who has obviously been there too long and is suffering delusions of grandeur. On a psychoanalytical level, Marlowe’s journey can be seen as a journey into the depths of the subconscious, the interior of the self. Similarly, expressionist films of the 1920s such as *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* used shadow to create heightened effects such as the distortion and elongation of the vampire figure to portray a deeper sense of the “dark self” or the passage into the realm of the subconscious or the primitive self, reminiscent of Marlowe’s journey in *Heart of Darkness*:

It is as though the camera had first of all been able to plunge into the person’s mind through the shadow, so that it could then project the man’s inner self onto the wall....The shadow, an external image, reveals what is taking place inside the character, what the person is (Stoichita, p150).

The philosophical works of Plato, and in particular, *The Republic*, have had an even greater influence on Western thinking with regards to shadow. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, prisoners are shackled in a cave, "kept in the dark", able only to witness shadows projected onto the walls of the cave above them. The cave represents the state of unenlightenment; the prisoners remain captive until they wish to "see the light", to find truth, knowledge and enlightenment.

### **Shadows in the East**

Western attitudes toward shadow and shadow play range from quaint and primitive to sinister and, at the extreme, evil. Whilst the distinction isn't entirely absolute, Eastern attitudes toward shadow reflect a very different view. The Japanese architect and novelist, Tanazaki, in his treatise, *In Praise of Shadows* (1977), compares Japanese and Western sensibilities in relation to darkness and light:

But what produces such differences in taste? In my opinion it is this: we Orientals tend to seek our satisfaction in whatever surroundings we happen to find ourselves, to content ourselves with things as they are; and so darkness causes us no discontent, we resign ourselves to it as inevitable. If light is scarce then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover its own particular beauty. But the progressive Westerner is determined to always better his lot. From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light- his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate even the minutest shadow. (p31).

Practising Shadow Theatre in the West today means to subvert the predominantly negative view of shadow in the Western psyche, to transcend the faintly racist notion of shadow theatre as the quaint practice of traditional people of the East, and to contend with the dominant influences of the electronic media on this once powerful and popular art form. "In this age of electronic and satellite media, of de-personalised communication the shadow theatre is an act of provocation" (Amoros in Jurkowski, p 469).

## Mediatized and Non-Mediatized Performance

Theatre and Shadow Theatre particularly cannot possibly compete with the special effects available on television and in other electronic media such as film. As Susan Sontag states: “The theatre’s capacity for manipulating space and time are, simply, much cruder and more laboured than films” (Sontag, p8). A complex process of social change, resulting in the decrease in popularity of live performance, has the potential to force artists to resort to poor imitation and integration of digital media into theatre in order to sustain their audience. As Auslander argues: “the general response of live performance to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible” (Auslander, p7). It may be true that the theatre’s capacity to produce the special effects and fluidity of scene changes available is rough and at times forced. However, if theatre audiences today demand the immediacy and intimacy found in television as Auslander suggests, then supply must meet demand to produce sustainability.

If theatre practitioners are to successfully integrate aspects of mediatized performance with non-mediatized performance as some artists have done (Julie Taymor, Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson) then an examination of the differences and the overlapping similarities of each medium is crucial to enable live performance to be relevant in this new millennium. Sontag’s article *Film and Theatre* (1966), while now dated, offers an insightful look at the often perceived binary opposition between film and theatre. Among other distinctions she makes, Sontag writes that: “Cinema, at once high art and popular art, is cast as the art of the authentic. Theatre, by contrast, means dressing up, pretense, lies. It smacks of aristocratic taste and the class society” (p26). Perhaps this idea of theatre being elitist was true at the time of writing in the 1960s, but, as I have just shown, popular forms such as shadow theatre were, and still are, theatre by and for the common people. If given freedom from authoritative pressures, i.e. government interference, censorship, religious indoctrination and even commercial constraints, Shadow Theatre can continue to be relevant to a twenty-first century audience.

## **Liveness**

The only useful distinction to be made between non-mediatised and mediatised performance is the fact that one is predominantly live, the other is not. Other distinctions between the two media are, as Auslander points out, not essential. Rather, the influences between the two are reciprocal. As Sontag also states: “theatre can emulate and incorporate cinema, cinema can be theatrical” (p37).

The ultimate trump card theatre has up its sleeve is its liveness. If the focus is on this one ontological difference between mediatised and non-mediatised performance and its application to contemporary shadow theatre, we are one step closer to creating work that will produce both resurgence and a new augmentation of the art form, in turn addressing the decline in cultural currency of live performance in general. In 1964, Grotowski declared in an interview with Eugenio Barba, “There is only one element of which film and television cannot rob the theatre: the closeness of the living organism....It is therefore necessary to abolish the distance between actor and audience by eliminating the stage, removing all frontiers” (Grotowski, p41).

## **Contemporary Shadow Theatre**

Contemporary Shadow Theatre has the potential to combine mediatised and non-mediatised performance, cinema and theatre like no other form of theatre. Shadow Theatre is in fact early cinema. The “shadows chinoise” or so-called Chinese Shadow Theatre, parlor games and magic lantern performances were popular in France around the nineteenth century, the same time and place as the birth of cinema. (Geiser, p30) Whether the screen is a cave wall, or the side of a tent or a computer screen with surround sound, the basic elements of shadow theatre– the light, the puppet or actor and the screen– have been with us since time began. The task of the contemporary shadow artist is to continue to find new ways of working in this medium.

The very presence of the screen in shadow theatre renders it possible to easily cross pollinate from live performance to projection. Careful crafting of lighting states can produce effects (albeit crude) similar to camera effects and editing possible in cinema. The use of the hand held light with halogen pin point bulb and the lens removed means that the shadow puppeteer can pan and zoom and the lighting operator can cross fade. This is a process which I term “live editing”.



Traditional shadow puppeteers work the puppet/object close to and up against the screen. With the use of the halogen pin point bulb and the lens removed, it is possible to create a clear shadow some distance away from the screen; thus, space becomes a tool to work with giving the screen a depth never seen before in traditional shadow puppet play.

Working with light and space, the contemporary shadow theatre practitioner has now become more like an architect than ever before. In the words of renowned visual theatre director Robert Wilson: “A director works with space. Other directors pore over the text. I draw space. I always start with the light. Without light there is no space. With light you can create many different kinds of spaces. A different space is a different reality” (Wilson in Confino and Sormova, p63).

Play with multiple realities and multiple narratives in live performance is something which Visual Theatre (as opposed to text-driven, actor-based performance) can do very well. The use of puppets gives this kind of theatre the capacity to be even more theatrical than conventional theatre. Puppets are not real. Puppets can move into the abstract and into metaphor much more readily than actors can. In fact, puppets can and should do what actors cannot. It seems to be that the potential for metaphor and illusion, for play with scale and perspective are the only credible reasons to work in puppet theatre, since puppets are costly and time consuming to make and require specialised skill to operate. “The change of scale, the mixture of media-live actors, next to masked actors, next to puppet-helps you move through different levels of reality. You can go from a normal, naturalistic scene straight into fantasy or the grotesque just by switching from people to puppets” (Taymor in Marranca and Dasgupta, *eds*, p468).

This freedom of movement from one medium to another is not without its difficulties however. The more tools at our disposal, the more care is needed in considering which ones to use and how and why. Problems arise when projection is mixed with live performance in front of the screen. Audience members can be confused as to who or what to watch and when. Actors can be immediately upstaged by an often larger image projected onto a screen behind them. As Auslander argues, mediatized performance is more valued in the cultural economy and as such “live actors are only pale reflections of the mediatized representations that dominate the cultural landscape” (Auslander, p37).

The live actor has the capacity to respond directly to the audience, to make subtle changes or huge ones according to the *feel* of the moment. The mediatized image cannot. By the time the digitized image reaches the theatre audience, it is very far removed from the moment of creation. How then can we successfully integrate digital media, data projection, video image, CD ROM and film into the live theatrical experience?

### **Conclusion**

Successful integration or blending of the cinematic into theatrical space depends therefore on a commitment to producing live as many elements of a theatrical performance as possible. This may involve live music, live shadow projection, electronic projection and lighting effects produced by an operator live on stage and working in front of and from behind the screen to break the fifth wall. The “removal of all frontiers” Grotowski referred to may also involve direct contact between the audience and actor/puppeteer, allowing the audience to move freely around the performance space and/or performing in venues accessible to all such as the market place- rather like traditional shadow theatre.

With the use of modern technology, puppeteers can create many of the effects on stage that are found in film and on television today. We can cross fade from one light to another on the screen rather like camera editing, we can pan and zoom with hand held lights, we can distort, elongate and colour images on the screen. In short, we can create cinema. In the 1960s artists were asking the question: “What is theatre?” in response to the socio political climate which saw theatre as an elite art form with little relevance to the lives of many people at that time. With the decline in popularity of Shadow Theatre and live performance in general and with the liberal use of electronic media into live performance, artists once again must ask the same question.

## Methodology

### Performance as Research

Performance as Research as an emerging methodology within the discipline of research itself is a still evolving field continuing to negotiate its definition. Definitions must be broad enough to incorporate the vast array of creative work and approaches to it as well as tight enough to be applied to a rigorous set of academic principles. Alison Richards states that “Performance as research ... occurs when a production becomes an intervention in an established debate, dialogue or discourse, OR when it initiates or seeks to initiate that debate” (Richards, p1). Given the increasing use of technological aids such as data projectors and intelligent lighting in live performance, I would like to add to the above definition that performance as research could also contribute to advances in technology even if these are separate from established scholarly debate. Contemporary Shadow Theatre for example, is highly dependant on the technical to make it work. Without the light, Shadow Theatre does not exist. In the course of realizing an idea, problems arise, mistakes happen and often, finding creative and resourceful ways to solve problems results in new innovations in lighting technology.

*Cactus*, the performance upon which this research paper is based, can be seen therefore as a production which seeks to reignite the debate surrounding mediatized and non-mediatized performance. *Cactus* should also be seen as the conduit for new knowledge with regards to Shadow Theatre in Australia. On a more personal note, practice-led research is a method which has allowed me to gain greater awareness of my own practice in the hope of improving it. “Practice and theory are reciprocal. Critical practice should generate theory and theory should inform practice” (Gray, p15). Theory and practice feed off each other in a process Pavis calls “intercannibalism” (Pavis, p327).

In conducting research I used a pluralistic approach Robyn Stewart refers to as “bricolage”; that is, “an amalgam of processes and procedures” (Stewart, p1). I employed action research, elements of feminist philosophy and autobiography.

## Action Research

Action research works well as an effective tool for both teaching and directing. The self-monitoring aspect of action research which places the teacher/director as researcher, allows the director/teacher to ask questions of their own practice, to involve students/actors in the research, to modify their teaching/directing as a result of the practice and to effectively change their teaching and develop new theories with which to conduct further research.

The action research goals apply well to this research project: the improvement of practice, the improvement of understanding and the improvement of the situation in which the action takes place (McTaggart,1996). It is through using this model in creative practice that I began to understand more about what shadow theatre is and through this understanding I can produce better quality work.

The strength of action research is in the action itself. There are possibilities for immediate change from within a project rather than waiting until all the data has been analysed, a report written and recommendations for action are given. The researcher modifies and evaluates and acts on that information on a regular cyclical basis. Participatory action research involves “self-reflective cycles of planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then replanning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on...” (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000, p595). This is why this model works so well for both teaching and the creation of a performance. For example, after group feedback following the work-in-progress showing of *Cactus*, I was able to reflect on the feedback and make significant changes to the production.

The action research model for this project was limited to an individual application of the research methods, namely; planning, monitoring, observing, reflecting and evaluating as there was little time for group reflection. Whilst there were moments of collaboration, particularly between Lighting Designer, Jo Currey and myself, time and budget constraints made facilitating group collaboration difficult.

I employed autobiography in the form of a journal. Journal writing is an ideal tool for self reflexive study and I found it particularly useful at the beginning of the research inquiry as a method of gaining a greater grasp on the research questions.

This pluralistic approach is in keeping with a social constructivist paradigm which acknowledges multiple realities as personally and socially constructed. Social constructivists offer the idea that while the constructivist approach through reflexive practice tends to spiral inward leading to endless personal subjectivity, a social constructivist approach flows outward into language and therefore a shared set of meanings and an expression of the relationship between all participants. “We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth” (Schwandt, p197). As a result, knowledge can be constructed through social relationships between participants and researcher and through a shared set of meanings about the “subject” constructed through language. For example, very early on in rehearsal the puppeteers and actors began to use cinematic terms for some of the lighting changes we used. We even invented words to describe some of the physical movement of the actors and the puppets.

My search for a defined language of the visual in theatre is a way to validate this relatively new medium of Visual Theatre as well as facilitate easier ways to communicate and therefore work with others in this medium. The constructivist approach to inquiry acknowledges the participant and researcher as bringing to the process a whole set of values and as such, is active in the construction of knowledge. “We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience.” (Schwandt, pp125-26) This is also the essence of action research and reflexive practice and the model for the rehearsal process of *Cactus*.

Influences on the content of the performance project were also multi-faceted. I was inspired by the music of *Ennio Morricone* and *Fat Boy Slim*, comic strips such as *Lucky Luke*, literature from *O Henry*, art theory, countless Westerns such as *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and the physical comedy of the *Commedia Dell’Arte*. One of the modes of analysis for performance particularly applicable to *Cactus* is “intermediality” that is; “the integration of aesthetic concepts from different media into a new context” (Pavis, p49). For example, the use of sweeping camera (light) angles from inside one gunfighter’s leg to reveal another gunfighter in the opening

scene of *Cactus*. This particular camera shot can be found in the Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone and in comic strip books such as Lucky Luke. Applied to Shadow Theatre, the camera shot, done with a hand held light develops an augmentation of the form. The fast paced “live editing” in the opening scene coupled with a live DJ also makes reference to the fast changing narrative structure found in many music videos today.

My role as researcher involved participating in the research, observing the research and reflecting. As researcher and director, I was able to conduct experiments individually using models and torches to explore technical challenges and then give the same exercise to the actors and lighting designer to allow myself room to observe the results. Reflection on various exercises occurred sometimes in consultation with the cast and crew and individually at the end of what was often a very long day.

Having decided early on I wanted to investigate working in front of and behind the screen as a means to “break the fifth wall”, one of my research questions was: “When should I work behind or in front of the screen?” Further to that question was: “How can I move smoothly and effectively from behind to in front of the screen?” Finally: “How can I optimise the live theatrical experience?”

### **Weighting**

The creative practice component (the production, *Cactus*) of this research project is weighted at 75% with the written exegesis weighted at 25%.

## **Data Presentation**

The presentation of the data in this research project is best served by viewing the DVD recording of the performance, *Cactus*. (see Appendix A) With very limited resources, both the DVD recording and the performance of *Cactus* should be viewed not for its production values but for its intention to break the fifth wall: to succeed in bridging the gap between cinema and theatre.

*Cactus* was performed at the Rock n Roll rehearsal space at The Judith Wright Centre, Brisbane from November 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004. There was one week full time rehearsal period prior to performance as well as a smattering of rehearsals leading up to the week's full time rehearsal.

There was a work-in-progress showing after three days of rehearsal which, although very raw and rough, was to prove invaluable in determining the shape and sequence of scenes in the final production. In fact, if you were to compare the opening scene in the final performance on DVD to the opening sequence illustrated in the storyboard (Appendix B), you would see a vast difference.

### **List of Cast and Crew**

The following is a list of the cast and crew of *Cactus* and the various roles each played.

Director:	Lynne Kent
Puppeteers:	Ian Sweeney
	Rina Oh
Baddy:	Darren Kruck
Goody:	Jack Moore
Woman:	Patricia Chiu
Lighting Design:	Jo Currey
Assistant Lighting Designer:	Bec Paling
Costume Design and Construction:	Christie Dixon
Sound and Music:	Brett Parker
Stage Manager:	Lauren Clelland

As director, I effectively had three distinct spaces to work with: in front of the screen; behind the screen; and the images on the screen itself. These three spaces were sometimes used separately and simultaneously. Behind the screen functioned as a performance space for work in shadow and as a backstage area. In front of the screen was used mainly for intimate scenes with actors and/or scenes which involved contact with the audience and musician and physical, dance-like scenes. The screen itself always functioned as another place; separate from the place represented in front of the screen. For example, the opening scenes of *Cactus* saw the sheriff's office on the side of the stage in front of the screen whilst on the screen the audience witnesses a gunfight in shadow happening in another place, possibly even outside the sheriff's window.

Much of the technical ground work of *Cactus* was done prior to working with the actors and crew. This was primarily due to limited availability of the cast and lack of funds but also in full knowledge of the specific needs of puppet theatre. The script, in the form of a storyboard (see Appendix B) was also written as a first draft prior to rehearsal with the actors. The storyboard also included a rough lighting plot and musical score. I also made mock puppets (rough versions) for the puppeteers to work with in rehearsal and they were refined or remade or made redundant during rehearsal time.

Aside from circus, puppet theatre is unique in its reliance on technical elements to construct performance. The actors/puppeteers need to work with mock puppets and/or lighting states and screen in order to inform the design. A puppeteer may work with a puppet but may find once it is used in the space that it is too big, no longer necessary or needs to be operated with the left hand and not the right. Shadows are affected by the space, the distance between the light source and the screen, the angle of the lights and the size of the screen and this means mock shadow puppets need to be constructed before embarking upon final construction.



## Data Analysis

### The Western

I want you to round up every vicious criminal and gunslinger in the West. Take this down. I want rustlers, cutthroats, murderers, bounty-hunters, desperadoes, mugs, pugs, thugs, nitwits, half-wits, dim-wits, vipers, snipers, con-men, Indian agents, Mexican bandits, muggers, buggerers, bushwackers, horn-swogglers, horse thieves, bull dykes, train robbers, bank robbers, ass kickers, shit kickers, and Methodists  
(Hedley Lamarr, *Blazing Saddles* (1972) in Mitchell, Lee Clark p256).

With its sweeping pans across rugged landscapes, the Western is the perfect genre with which to explore the cinematic possibilities of shadow theatre. “Effects of scale and perspective work both to suggest the subservience of the merely human to some larger, more permanent order and to endow the figures in the landscape with comparable stature and impressiveness” (Saunders, p15). The potential for comedy too, is enormous. There is room for parody of the excessive violence, the thrill of the chase, the saloon fights and the stereotypical notions of masculinity and passive femininity found in the Western. The opening scene of *Cactus* which hereafter will be referred to as *The Gunfight*, sets the comic tone for the rest of the performance, introducing the good natured sheriff, oblivious to the violent shoot-out taking place (on the screen) right outside his office and the character of the outlaw, capable of shooting someone in the back without a moments hesitation. *The Gunfight* scene also sets up the convention of the use of the screen as depicting a place separate from the place depicted on stage in front of the screen. The audience is also introduced to the use of the shadow itself and the combination of live actors in front of the screen and shadows behind the screen. Even though the slapstick style of the opening scene with its shadow play of shooting limbs off bodies, smoke and live sound effects may seem frivolous; there is a highly complex choice of lighting arrangement in conjunction with shadow play and performance.

### **The Use of the Screen**

An examination of the use of the screen, the size, the shape and texture of it, all give semiotic clues to the textual meaning of the performance. The screen must be treated as a symbol or tool to work with in the same manner as an object on stage would be. In Visual Theatre and in non-spoken word performance, the function of the screen becomes heightened. In the theatrical space, the screen becomes both a transmitter of signals, i.e. the projected image, as well as a visible addition to the stage design and set.

If the invisible barrier between the audience and the actor is the fourth wall, then the tangible presence of the screen, often separating audience and puppeteer, becomes the fifth wall. How can we “break the fifth wall” to optimise the live theatrical experience? Removing all barriers as Grotowski suggests is easier in conventional theatre than in Shadow Theatre where the screen presents a very real block between audience and player. Do we allow the audience the freedom to move from in front to behind the screen at any time during the performance as in the traditional Javanese style? Do we reveal and strike the screen during the performance?

When considering the use of the screen in the theatrical space, a number of other elements are at play. Just as puppets should do what actors cannot, so too should the screen be used to create an effect beyond the capabilities of the stage space. Too much use of the projected image however, and one might as well make a film. I am convinced that working both in front of and behind the screen offers the maximum possibilities for integrating mediatized and non-mediatized performance.

If the shadow image is projected in front of the screen, in full view of the audience, attention is drawn to the live act even more. The same could be said of the electronic image. If the operator of the image is visible and the mechanics of creating the image are also shown, the electronic image becomes a live act. The call for visible lighting operators and musicians in Brecht’s epic theatre was a call to destroy the elitist nature of the theatre of the past, bridging the gap between audience and players. For different reasons today, striving for a transparency of the technical element serves to reinforce the liveness of the theatrical act. It is a play of the theatrical trump card.

A strong theoretical framework helped inform decisions regarding working in front of or behind the screen. This is where I began to understand fully what this word *praxis* really means. To use theory *in* practice to inform the creative process is to have an underlying safety net to fall back on. When working in a medium such as Visual Theatre for which; as stated earlier, no manual has been written, we are inventing the language as we practice. Using existing theories surrounding the use of puppets, objects, light and electronic media in performance helps to provide a framework with which to begin enquiry into contemporary Shadow Theatre.

When first working with the screen in *Cactus*, I didn't have a clear idea of what the screen was. The question: "When should I work in front of and when should I work behind the screen"? had yet to be fully explored. I knew that I wanted to use shadow to convey an idea which would be much more difficult for an actor to do on stage. For example; getting an arm shot off, riding a horse or shooting a chicken. I also decided to use shadow to go into the abstract or metaphorical for example, the scene we called *Sneaky* (see DVD, 0:11:52 to 0:12:18). And we also used the screen to change scale and perspective in direct imitation of the classic Western for example, *The Chase Scene*. All of these decisions were largely informed by the writings of Julie Taymor, Robert Wilson and Teatro Gioco Vita followed by practical experiments to reaffirm the decision. For example, we would experiment with the same scene first, using a combination of actor and actor in front of the screen, then, actors in shadow behind the screen and finally actor in front of the screen and shadow behind the screen simultaneously.

After the work-in-progress showing, it was clear that the screen needed to be given a consistent position within the narrative. The audience was confused as to whether the images on the screen represented another place or time. I decided then to use the screen to represent another place separate from that in front of the screen and to set up this convention in the opening scene.

To summarize this discussion regarding the use of the screen in the theatrical space:

- the screen has to be used to convey an idea either not possible to illustrate on stage or better done in projection e.g. abstract or metaphorical ideas and
- the screen needs to be positioned consistently as something other than what is taking place on stage e.g. another physical place and/or time.

If the screen is also included as a design element incorporated into the overall set design, then the projection (shadow or electronic) can be physically incorporated more easily into stage space.

## **Optimising the Liveness**

### **Music**

When working in Visual Theatre, and especially in non-spoken word performance, the tendency is to concentrate on the visual. The aural however, can have a huge influence on the production setting the tone, the rhythm and pace of the performance and giving the actors and puppeteers their cues. As we worked behind and in front of the screen in *Cactus*, sometimes the only way the puppeteers behind the screen could know what was happening in front of the screen was with the help of the sound track.

From the beginning of the creative process I wanted live music. I was also quite firm in my desire to work with a musician who enjoys playing for live action and/or a DJ who is well used to playing to a live audience. This is simply because live music adds so much to the live performance. I decided that if I couldn't have a live orchestra or cowboy-crooner Nick Cave play live, then the nearest I could get to live sound would be to have a DJ mix up recorded music live on stage. Much of the music I gathered well in advance of the rehearsal process. The music was collected from a range of sources but most notably from sound tracks of well known, iconic movies such as Quentin Tarrantino's *Kill Bill*, Sergio Leone's *The Day the West was Won*, Ry Cooder's soundtrack to *Paris Texas* and The Little Golden Book's vinyl recording of *Davy Crockett*.

This music was given to the musician to arrange and to experiment in rehearsal and to improvise within performance. While there were many sound effects such as gunshots which needed to coincide exactly with the action, there was plenty of room for the musician to improvise using live instruments, vocal work, vinyl scratching and distortion of recorded music. In fact, every performance of *Cactus* was very different musically from another.

The musician was also visible on the side of the stage and integrated into the action of the performance as a character from time to time. In the Brechtian style of transparency, the audience was continually reminded of the presence of the musician throughout the performance.

### **Lighting**

In contemporary Shadow Theatre, the possibilities exist for the actor to be both the puppeteer and the lighting operator at the same time. Again, if the lighting operator and/or mechanics of lighting are visible to the audience, the cinematic moves more easily into theatrical space. This is easier said than done however, since the means of producing the huge range of special lighting effects now available to us are even further removed from the live performance. For the lighting operator of today, it is simply a matter of hitting a key on the keyboard to produce a lighting effect.

At present the complete detachment of human activity within the field of light, an area worshipped for centuries as a life force, has been achieved contrary to the importance of it to the creative expression and play of theatre performance and its contribution to post modern space (White, in Confino and Sormova *eds*, p114).

A short scene that encapsulates all the exploration of the research enquiry can be found in the scene we called *Eavesdropping* (see DVD, 0:010:15 to 0:11:00). In this scene, the outlaw suspects his lover of infidelity so sneaks up to outside her house to eavesdrop on her. The actor becomes the lighting operator in this scene as he picks up a hand held light and uses it to look inside the house. What makes *Eavesdropping* even more successful is that the character the actor plays, the outlaw, has a reason to pick up the light so it is not just a technical device but perfectly fits the narrative also.

The light very definitely becomes as a camera here, directing the eye of the audience into the window. After the actor operates the light, we cross fade to another hand held light operated by puppeteers behind the screen to project an image of a large window which the puppeteer then zooms into, revealing the woman and the sheriff.

In *Eavesdropping*, the audience is witness to:

- the visible mechanics of creating the illusion because it is partly done in front of the screen;
- the screen used to depict another place separate from that in front of the screen;
- the light as camera, directing the eye by zooming and panning;
- the live editing technique of cross fading from one hand held light to another;
- the actor/puppeteer as lighting operator and
- the use of all of the above to illustrate the narrative.

Other technical innovations included work with gels and gobos. To produce a clear shadow which can remain clear as the puppeteer or actor moves away from the screen in order to get bigger for example, the lens must be removed from the light source. Without the lens attached, the light becomes very hot, very quickly. This means that any gel placed in front of the light will most probably melt. During the course of devising the opening scene referred to as *The Gunfight*, Lighting Designer, Jo Currey devised a gobo for a fresnell to obtain the smoky effect seen on the screen as background to the body shadows. Fresnell lights do not usually contain gobos but this was the only way we could have the smoke effect and clear body shadows (See DVD, 0:01:35). Whilst we cannot confidently lay claim to being the first to invent such a solution, this is certainly not usual practice.

### **Colour**

Another interesting and unusual effect which was the result of an afternoon dedicated to play with light and colour can be found in the scene we call *The Combat Scene* (see DVD, 0:00:45 to 0:1:13). In an earlier scene in *Cactus*, we used a vivid red gel as backdrop to a scene depicting images of war, red being a colour associated with blood and violence. As *The Combat Scene* also contained images of war, we wanted to use red but didn't want to repeat images and effects the audience had already seen.

We began to play with different colours and eventually various shades of green, which is the colour of camouflage and military greens. By experimenting with various combinations of red and green in front of and behind the screen, we discovered that an absence of colour creates another colour. Thus, a green gel projected onto the actor in front of the screen creates a red shadow of the actor if at the same time, a red gel projects an image from behind the screen. The red and green projected at the same time create an orange coloured backdrop and the red gel from behind creates a green shadow. In short, we were most excited to be able to produce a red shadow of the sheriff/soldier and green shadows of cacti/foot soldiers. This discovery was only made possible through creative practice and the luxury afforded by an afternoon dedicated to play and experimentation with colour.

### **Space**

*The Chase Scene* (see DVD, 0:03:02 to 0:04:32) is an example of the use of space as a tool available for the contemporary shadow artist to use. The freedom to work a puppet away from the screen and still have a clear shadow means that the screen now contains a depth of perspective to it which is more three dimensional and cinematic than has ever been possible before. In *The Chase Scene*, a puppet sheriff is chasing the outlaw (made in the classic shape of the man on a horse in the Marlboro advertisement) through a thicket of cacti. The illusion of travel and depth is intensified as the puppet riders appear small, as though in the distance and grow larger to appear closer to the audience. At the same time in contrast, the riders pass cacti which first appear large and then diminish into the distance.

Everything is deliberate. Within the first five minutes of *Cactus* the audience knows the performance is in the Western genre, that it is a comedy, that the performance takes place with live actors in front of the screen and in shadow on the screen, and that there is live music and sound effects. The audience learns who the major characters are and where they are and they see cinematic effects in shadow with the use of the hand held light. The audience also sees the screen used as a device to take us to another place. They know the place depicted on the screen is not the same place depicted on stage in front of the screen.

The choice to produce a comedy was also deliberate. I wanted to subvert the dominant idea of the shadow in the West as negative and to use it as a tool for comedy. I also wanted to juxtapose the comedy of the excessive violence in the opening scene with the very real almost naturalistic portrayal of the death of the female character in the final scene to heighten the dramatic effect. The death scene in *Cactus* where the female character is tragically shot by her lover, the sheriff, in a case of mistaken identity is made all the more poignant in contrast to the comedy if it is played “for real”.

It was my hope that the audience would be reminded of current events and of the very real consequences of war and violence in which the majority of those affected are women and children. Although *Cactus* is first and foremost a comedy, I saw an opportunity here to refer to current events and to make a political statement in much the same manner as traditional Eastern Shadow Theatre.

The anti-violence statement made by the female character in her solo scene was also a deliberate deviation from the passive portrayal of female characters in the Western. “Indeed, the rare films which show women in stronger roles,...risk being dismissed as frankly ludicrous, somehow not really Westerns” (Saunders,p16). Sick and tired of patching up wounds, of burying the dead and of being abandoned by her lover (the outlaw) the female character in *Cactus* throws away the stolen booty given to her by the outlaw. Standing in front of the screen with a brilliant red background and abstract images of war in shadow behind her, she makes her stand against the futility of war.



## Conclusion

When people go to a live music event they often comment on the quality of the music and the quality of the musicianship. Watching Brian May play *God Save the Queen*, provides double the amount of entertainment as listening to a recording of him play. People are naturally curious and like to appreciate how things are done. Watching the talents of a live performer is testament to the positive attributes that make up the human being; of all that is good and great. Performing Shadow Theatre exclusively from behind the screen denies the audience the opportunity to fully appreciate the human form and the human capacity to create work which is both primitive and very sophisticated.

*Cactus* was a project which sought to break the fifth wall. By working in front of and behind the screen, using a combination of live actors, musicians, puppets and shadow work and making transparent the means of producing the images seen on screen, we optimised the live theatrical experience. We played our trump card.

Through inventive lighting which served to produce cinematic effects in shadow such as zooming and panning and careful consideration of the use of the screen, we were able to come close to bridging the gap between cinema and theatre. Through creative practice, we were able to invent innovative solutions to challenges in lighting specifically for contemporary Shadow Theatre and to do all of this on a shoestring budget.

*Cactus* – a live cartoon was chosen as one of Scene Magazine's, *Top Picks for 2004*. The Judith Wright Centre for Contemporary Arts reported a 99 percent attendance rate as *Cactus* was sold out every night of its four night season. The intermediality of the production, drawing on iconic Western movie genre characters and cartoon-like physicality gave *Cactus* a broad comic appeal. As a comedy, *Cactus* subverted negative Western notions of darkness and shadow. Using elements of traditional Eastern Shadow Theatre which made Shadow Theatre popular and powerful to begin with, *Cactus* presented the audience with a refreshing new take on an old form.

Striving to break the fifth wall resulted in an exciting blend of live performance and projection rarely, if ever seen before in Australia. This kind of research has ramifications for theatre practitioners who seek to integrate shadow and/or electronic projection into live performance. The investigation into the use of the screen in live performance will be particularly useful to shadow puppeteers and video artists alike.

As a backpacker more than sixteen years ago I was astounded by the human capacity to recreate what appeared to be digital animation live on stage using simply, shadow puppets and light. Little did I know how exacting the form of contemporary Shadow Theatre is. Embarking on research through performance in this field is a process of refining and defining a new language of the visual in theatre. I never would have imagined the journey I have taken since first seeing the work of Teatro Gioco Vita. It has taken me around the world a few times and finally to Brisbane, Queensland: a state with abundant light, in order to work with shadows in the dark. But then, sometimes you have turn out the light in order to properly see.

**Lynne Kent**

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10,781 words

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