

NEW LIGHT ON SHADOWS

The Use of Shadow Theater as a Technique in Psychotherapy

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Travelers to Southeast Asia are usually quick to be attracted to the flat leather puppets known in Thailand as *nang talung* and in Malaysia and Indonesia as *wayang kulit*. Those fortunate or diligent enough to find a performance of shadow theater in a village setting often find the medium and the context in which it is performed to be enchanting. Indeed, enchantment is on some occasions part of the point, as shadow theater and other forms of ritual drama in Southeast Asia can be used to maintain or restore individual health, as well as social and even cosmic equilibrium.

The highly sophisticated and elaborate shadow play of courtly Java, with its multiple levels of speech, its mythological content and complex symbolism, its elegant and graceful mode of presentation, and the hypnotic strains of a large gamelan orchestra playing through the night, presents a marked contrast to the bawdy and folksy *nang talung* of the southern Thai provinces. There the stories are invented by the performers and the context is not usually highly ritualized. The accompaniment, by a small group of musicians, is light, airy, and pleasant sounding. Nevertheless, the medium is, even in Thailand, considered by its devotees to be powerful.

In Songkhla I have seen the puppet of the principal joker, *Ay Teng*, used as an icon in a puppeteer's house. It was elevated, enshrined, garlanded, and covered with gold leaf—considerations usually reserved for images of the Buddha. In all areas of performance such puppets are sacred. When properly invoked, spirits inhabit the puppets, and are capable of either beneficence or malefaction, depending on their perception of how they are being treated. In 1972 I attended a ceremony at Yarang, Pattani, in which a Malay puppeteer and dancer, Wae Omar, performed such an invocation. Members of his family were given certain puppets to hold, whereupon the people went into trance. In that dissociated state they were able to talk about certain family problems which they considered to be in need of resolution.

Much has been written about the Javanese shadow play from a scholarly point of view. Correspondingly little has been written about the Thai shadow play. In no case, however, has anything been written about the use of the medium in the West as anything but entertainment. France and Turkey are countries which have more or less indigenous traditions of shadow theater, and in those locations it appears to be on the level of Punch and Judy shows. The shadow theater that has reached America has been performed by Javanese puppeteers doing demonstrations, or, very occasionally, by an American devotee who has become sufficiently enamored of the medium to learn it, and present essentially Southeast Asian dramas to American audiences.

As an individual and family psychotherapist, I have been using shadow plays with clients for about eight months previous to this writing. With my co-therapist, Lisa Davies, who has been very helpful in developing this technique, I focus on one key issue from a family's constellation of problems. I then write a thirty to forty minute drama that tells a version of their own story in mythologized form. Perhaps a frightened young mother is wandering in the forest, she or her kin are accosted by demons of fear and anger, and her difficulties look insurmountable, until a wise old man, a trickster, or both, are able to help sort things out. The narrations, and Greek chorus types of reflections on the plot developments, are spoken by the wise old man, the hermit of the Thai and Malay shadow play, in either blank verse or rhymed iambic pentameter. The use of poetry helps to remove the performance from the immediate present.

Thus the members of the family are able to see themselves more as archetypes than as concrete humans caught up in webs of confusion. This helps them to detach themselves from the immediacy of their dilemmas, gives them a new perspective on their situation and the ways in which they interact with each other, and enables them to envision alternatives that had previously been inaccessible to them. Such a technique should only

be used when there is a well-established therapeutic bond with the family, and when their particular issues of distress are well known both to the therapist and to themselves. In every case it has proven to be a turning point in the treatment, enabling a family, or certain of its members, to move beyond an impasse and gain some clarity regarding what direction they want to take and how.

Before they come in for the session they have merely been told that there will be a special show. When they arrive and see the unfamiliar screen set up in the room, I tell them that I have written a unique play that is both for them and about them, and that the only time it will ever be performed is here and now. Then I disappear behind the screen. After a brief ritual prologue, which I use to establish an extraordinary frame of mind in both myself and my audience, the wise old man introduces the setting as "Deep in time and across the spacious plains."

Thus having referred specifically to the here and now, I proceed immediately to ritually remove the dramatic context from the present. This juxtaposition is like the disorienting switching of spatial context from far to near, and back again, that Javanese *dalangs* use to induce dissociation in their audience. It is also like the dissociating techniques of Western hypnotherapy. When I hypnotize clients to, for example, facilitate memory retrieval, I help them to be aware of the chair that supports them, the feeling of their own breathing, and the sound of my voice, at the same time that they become mentally aware of experiences they had in a much different time and place.

The dissociation is trance-inducing, and it is my belief that shadow theater, as practiced in certain Southeast Asian contexts, is tantamount to group therapy. Both theater and therapy are designed to draw sense out of bewilderment. To be bewildered—confused, afraid, subject to the force of unresolved anger, without clear boundaries around one's personal "kingdom"—is to be lost in the wilderness. Yet it is precisely in such a wilderness that the heroes of the plays find their insight, power, and the mentor they need to guide them to an act of truth. Our deepest pain is our best opportunity for salvation. Therapy is, in part, the business of enabling clients to look squarely at the personal demons that beset them—alcoholism, childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, phobias, obesity, etc.—and gain a sense of mastery over them. The hope is that the clients will sense that they and the demons are distinct, and that therefore they can control the demons instead of being controlled by them.

Such a process can be at the same time explicitly, yet metaphorically, dramatized in a context that is at once both intimate and cosmic. The wandering heroine is both the client, and the archetypal "lost princess." She is being attacked both by her own fear, say, of inheriting her father's predisposition for schizophrenia, and by an overdrawn demon from the Malay shadow theater with bulging eyes, bared fangs, unkempt hair and an exaggeratedly malevolent disposition. She, then, can begin to see the problem not as the bumbling, inflated demon itself, but rather as her fear of it. When that realization begins to take place, a milestone has been passed in the therapy. Shadow theater can, if used at the right moment, hasten the process.

It is a powerful experience for a family to see its own story being told in a darkened room as shadows projected by one candle flame, by a person who knows them very well. As they watch, the context, which is archetypal, has the paradoxical effect of enabling their issues to rise out of the subconscious into consciousness, much as the relaxation of hypnosis enables a client to be open to either recollection, or the insertion of desired messages into awareness. They see their dilemma and confront the possibility of its resolution. Instead of clinging to the demon they know in order to achieve a desperate and illusory safety, they see the demon let go of right before their eyes. And they see themselves, as embodied in a strange and powerful puppet, survive without their old enemy/ally—the demon they mistakenly thought was part of them.

Because the family's immediate experience of the show is likely to be important, and because their reactions to it are not visible to me from behind the screen, I have my co-therapist observe them unobtrusively as they watch. Much valuable therapeutic information is gained in this way. She can note their nervousness; their distractions; their respective levels of involvement; each person's laughter, or lack of it, in the clown scene in which the jokes are intended to achieve certain reactions; and more. After the show all of this is processed by both of us together with the family, and it all can be used to guide subsequent sessions.

There are, in addition, a number of other uses to which the shadow play as therapy can be put. For group work with children of families in divorce, the stages of separation can be dramatized. For work with clients with borderline personality disorder, the failure at the rapprochement sub-phase of separation-individuation can be dramatized to help them make sense of their disorder and its etiology. After doing a show with a family, another could be presented a few weeks or months later illustrating change—for example, progress, lack of it, or new issues. Or, having seen the medium in performance, the family could take on the task of creating their own drama, and either performing it themselves or giving it to the therapist to perform for them. The medium is flexible, and its potential is probably only limited by the creativity of the people using it.

Students of Southeast Asian culture will have noted my use of several concepts that have a Buddhist theme: detachment, insight, fear as the enemy, clinging, and letting go. This is not coincidental. The Western therapeutic enterprise is becoming increasingly influenced by such concepts, though they are most often presented as the realizations of particular authors. This they may be, but the grouping of such concepts as the way to contentment is as old as the teaching of the Buddha, and their presentation in dramatic form is apparently as old as South and Southeast Asian ritual drama. The use of shadow theater in therapy represents the blending both of themes, on the one hand, and techniques, on the other, from both East and West. It is a way to access the mystery and power of shadow theater as a medium while using Jungian archetypes and therapeutic pointedness to enable a troubled family to begin to move from bewilderment to sense, from chaos to order.