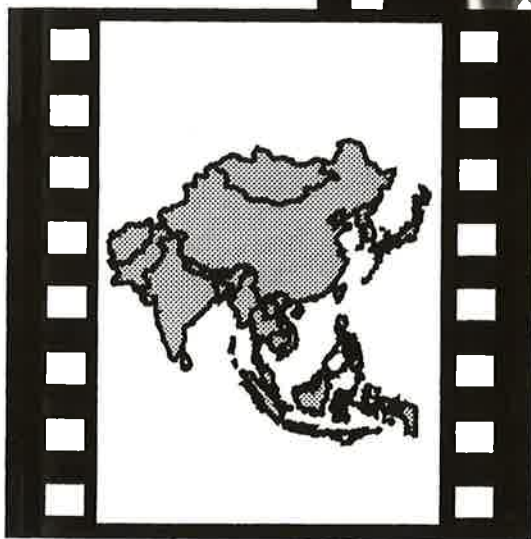


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ShadowLight Productions: “Explorations of the Shadow World” (8 DVD Set)

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ShadowLight Theatre – a unique company based in San Francisco – transcends the barriers between 2-D puppets, sets, and human interaction. These imaginative productions invite repeated viewings. Fortunately, this is possible through a collection of eight DVDs entitled “Explorations of the Shadow World.” Founder Larry Reed’s productions breathe new life into stories that stretch back countless years. While they may linger in Bali, they don’t rest there. Reed has also delved into such themes as jazz-age poetry (*The Wild Party*, 1995), Native American creation myths (*Coyote’s Journey*), the missions of old California (*Seven Visions*), the California Gold Rush (*In the Name of Gold*, planned for 2012), and the recent *Good for Nothing Lover*, based on a love song cycle from the Ming Dynasty, translated by Bay Area Beat poets in the 1950s. In addition, he has created shadow figures for the Mabou Mines production of the *MahabharAnta*, the Santa Fe Opera’s *Orfeo*, and the American Conservatory Theaters’ *The Tempest*, among other venues.



In Xanadu

In Indonesia, his productions are called *wayang listrik* (electric shadows). One reason is because he casts images onto extremely large screens using specially designed projectors and mirrors to change the size of the shadow images. Another is because he employs live actors as “shadow casters” who actually cast their own shadows eloquently behind the screen, along with those of the puppets. Reed works with a changing ensemble of actors, puppeteers, dancers, live musicians, and set and lighting designers. For example, a recent production, *Ghosts of the River* (2009), projects stories from both sides of the Rio Grande, using actors, shadow puppets, music, and the



Coyote's Journey

imaginative writing of Octavio Solis. “We use simple means to create sophisticated effects, and that serves as a bridge to other cultures,” Reed explains.¹

In all of these hybrid productions, the created settings are visually stimulating, whether they are representations of a meandering river, a Chinese vision of Hell, or an inner-city apartment. The scale and movement of the multiple settings is astonishing and speaks to ShadowLight’s attention to detail. Reed’s hybrid theatre is itself a unique world – neither entirely traditional nor completely avant-garde.² It is instead an idiom with its own lexicon and syntax and poetic delight, including stories of mythical tales, archetypal characters – some impersonation, some slapstick, moments of pathos. The sound for each play is also richly imagined and full of surprises. To view one of the ShadowLight productions is to become reacquainted with the vast potentialities of the shadow medium.

If shadow theater truly started (as many suppose) as a means to communicate with ancestors, *wayang listrik* provides an invaluable function in this hustle and bustle contemporary world where we often lose track of unseen forces around us, beyond our control. Even when the shadows are cast off electric illumination, it almost seems as if we were seeing images diffused through coconut-oil lamps. As Reed writes: “The shadow is understood to be a kind of intermediary – the unseen world as we know it, and the unseen reality of the spirit!”³

The *dalang* (puppeteer) is a “multi-tasker” par excellence – director,

conductor, storyteller, visual artist. He is part empresario, part shaman. In many of the ShadowLight productions, the *dalang* is Reed himself (often accompanied by reknowned Balinese *dalang*) but in *Coyote's Journey*, on-screen storyteller Charlie Thom, one of the last fluent story tellers of the Karuk tribe of the Klamath River in northern California, narrates the native American tale of the quixotic trickster Coyote, as we see the story unfold before our eyes in shadow-puppet form.

Along with his BA in French (theatre) at Yale, and MFA in filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, Reed went to Bali in the 1970s for ten years of training with a family of puppeteers. (In those earlier years, he also served as a theatre director in Costa Rica, during a stint in the Peace Corps.) Although he was chosen as the Balinese shadow theatre representative at the Indonesian National Shadow Theater Festival in 1988, Reed doesn't teach Balinese puppetry; he prefers to refer interested students to study in Bali with the masters.



Shadow Master

Shadow Master (1979, 54 minutes) is a good place to begin (a film which has aired on PBS and the Discovery Channel). This is a live-action documentary about a Balinese family of shadow-puppeteers and dance performers. *Mayadanawa* (2007, 27 minutes) and *Ambrosia of Immortality* (2006, 36 minutes) continue the Balinese motif. Both are based on mythological stories of the triumph of good over evil. When English is not the language of the production, subtitles are provided. Each one of the DVDs is enjoyable on its own, but they also make an intriguing commentary when

viewed in dialogue one with another. Special features on the DVDs explore the aesthetic vocabulary of Larry Reed's visions, as well as insights into the idea germs, genesis, and flowering of each production. These special features include slide shows of still photographs of productions, interviews with performers and crew, and information about the back stories. It is regrettable that the DVDs do not offer scene selections (a useful tool for teachers) but this does insure that the entire performance will be savored.

There is something that will speak to each viewer in these productions. As Reed commented: "The characters in a shadow play represent all facets of human nature and can be understood to represent society at large or elements of a single personality."⁴ Look also for the new DVD version of *Monkey King at Spider Cave*, now bringing a total of eight DVDs to this unique series "Explorations of the Shadow World."⁵ (Individual films can be purchased as well.) The filmed productions and special features offer an unforgettable journey through individual artists' approach to performing traditions of China, Tibet, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Latin America, and the U.S. For more information, consult the website www.shadowlight.org or email info@shadowlight.org.

ShadowLight Productions has received the UNIMA/USA Citation for Excellence from the International Puppetry Association (twice), and their work can be seen in *Puppetry: A World History* (Eileen Blumenthal). Reed has twice been voted one of the top 50 artists of the San Francisco Bay Area (*SF Live/Metropolitan*). In addition to its performances, ShadowLight Theatre offers hands-on outreach programs in the Bay area for public schools and organizations at low to no cost. This is definitely an artistic force helping to bring Asian (and other) puppetry forms into a wider world arena. As described in an Asian Educational Media Studies review: "Reed's productions bring the unseen realm to life, making visual what previously was only referred to, implied, and imagined."⁶

Endnotes

- ¹ Harmanci, Reyhan. "Playing with Form: Shadow World Film Festival." *San Francisco Chronicle*. H-36.
- ² Catherine Diamond. "Wayang Listrik: Dalang Larry Reed's Shadow Bridge between Bali and San Francisco." *Theatre Research International*. 26:3 (2001): 257-276.
- ³ *Asian Theatre Journal*. 3:1 (Spring 1986): 2.
- ⁴ Review of *Dancing Shadows of Bali* by Angela Hobart, in *Asian Theatre Journal*. 8:1 (Spring 1991): 100.
- ⁵ The entire set includes *In Xanadu*, *Mayadanawa*, *Coyote's Journey*, *Shadow Master*, *The Wild Party*, *7 Visions*, *Ambrosia of Immortality*, and *Monkey King at Spider's Cave*.
- ⁶ "Larry Reed's Balinese Shadow Puppetry Films." (www.aems.uiuc.edu): pp.7-8.