

JENARO MELÉNDREZ CHAS

**SHADOW THEATRE IN THE
TRAINING OF OPERA SINGERS?
SHADOW THEATRE TECHNIQUES
FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES**

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FOUNDER OF CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE

Was born in A Coruña, Spain. He studied biology at the University of Santiago de Compostela. He lived in Tokyo for several years in the late 1980s before settling in Turin, where in 1994 his commitment to abstract painting met musicians Alberto Jona and Cora Demaria and they founded Controluce Teatro d'Ombre.

With shadows, he has participated in the staging of operas and shows in places such as La Scala in Milan, Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, La Chiesa del Salvatore in Venice, Comunale in Bologna, Verdi in Florence, Coccia in Novara, Landestheater Niederbayern, Victoria Hall in Geneva, Théâtre municipal de Tunis, etc. Together with Alberto Jona, he was the artistic director of Incanti, the International Figure Theatre Festival of Turin, from 1994 to 2018.

ABSTRACT

L'articolo esemplifica il potenziale del teatro delle ombre a scopi formativi raccontando, dalla prospettiva della creazione artistica, un'esperienza particolare di collaborazione tra un Conservatorio musicale svizzero e una compagnia teatrale italiana. Un'esperienza insolita perché legata a un percorso di formazione attoriale rivolto a studenti di canto in fase di perfezionamento. Azione e gestualità sono importanti quasi quanto la voce nelle produzioni operistiche contemporanee. Al fine di fornire agli studenti un'esperienza scenica più concreta possibile, l'uso del teatro d'ombra, ispirato alla metafora junghiana dell'inconscio e del non detto, permette una stratificazione di diversi livelli di approccio: vocale, emotivo, scenico e di costruzione del personaggio. Musicalmente, la scelta di unire repertori diversi, come barocco e contemporaneo è stata utile per stimolare la riflessione sull'uso della voce e inseguire suoni e profondità inaspettate. Le ombre, insieme ad una funzione scenografica, sono state il mezzo per rappresentare concetti e sensazioni come il doppio, le forme dell'inconscio, i labirinti del desiderio e le tracce del sogno. Le tre edizioni del progetto, di una settimana di prove e una rappresentazione pubblica ciascuna, si sono svolte negli anni 2015, 2016 e 2019.

PAROLE-CHIAVE

Ombra, Opera, Insegnamento, Canto, Messinscena

ABSTRACT

The article illustrates the potential of shadow theatre for training purposes by describing, from the perspective of artistic creation, a particular experience of collaboration between a Swiss music conservatory and an Italian theatre company. This is an unusual experience because it is linked to an acting course for voice students undergoing further training. In contemporary opera productions, actions and gestures are almost as important as the voices. To give the students as concrete a stage experience as possible, the use of shadow theatre, inspired by the Jungian metaphor of the unconscious and the unspoken, allows a layering of different levels of approach: vocal, emotional, stage and character building. Musically, the choice of combining different repertoires, such as baroque and contemporary, was useful to stimulate reflection on the use of the voice and to explore unexpected sounds and depths. The shadows, together with a scenography function, were the means to represent concepts and sensations such as the double, the forms of the unconscious, the labyrinths of desire and the traces of dreams. The three editions of the project, each consisting of a week of rehearsals and a public performance, took place in 2015, 2016 and 2019.

KEYWORDS

Shadow, Opera, Teaching, Singing, Staging



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SHADOW THEATRE TECHNIQUES FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

Shadow theatre's potential for teaching and learning is well known, from storytelling and language development to cultural awareness and creative expression. In this essay, as an example of the versatile and multifaceted possibilities of shadow theatre as an educational tool, I would like to share a very specific didactic experience of the theatre company *Controluce Teatro d'Ombre*, of which I am one of the founders, together with the musicians Cora De Maria and Alberto Jona. I would like to relate this experience because of its unusual characteristics, as it relates to an acting course for opera singers, the result of a collaboration between *Controluce* and the Vocal Education Department of the *Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana in Lugano (CSI)*.

In the course of its history, *Controluce* has organised a number of unique training experiences: technical workshops in Germany and Brazil, workshops on figurative art, such as the one held in collaboration with the *Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea* in Turin, or workshops specifically dedicated to opera, such as the one

entitled “Stage Verdi’s Macbeth” at the “Puppetry in Opera” conference organised by the Puppet Centre at the Barbican in London in 2014. The three workshops were born out of the collaboration with the Lugano Conservatory. They represent a kind of milestone.

Controluce has been at the forefront of the transformation of music into images for almost thirty years. Music forms the basis of the company's theatrical approach. It is mainly classical, contemporary, and operatic music. Looking for a descriptive phrase for the company's initial approach to a new production, something like “finding a kind of translation of music into theatrical expression” might come to mind, although all members agree that any art and technique can be brought into play in the creation process. In the broadest sense, because theatre is life, theatre is a global action linked to sensibility.

The term “Figure Theatre” embraces an inexhaustible quantity of languages, themes, skills, possibilities, research, and actions, whatever the point of view: history and tradition, techniques, research and innovation, philosophy and depth of thought, or lightness and humour. No human story is excluded. To use a common Italian saying, we could say that puppet theatre “permette tutto e il contrario di tutto” (“allows everything and the opposite of everything”). Within Figure Theatre, Shadow Theatre is a special field and is the predecessor of Cinema (the use of projected images to create the illusion of movement on a screen). It could also be seen as a predecessor of the concept of theatre itself, with its magical ritual, as in ancient times the Indonesian Wayang Kulit. (Keeler, 1987).

As a theatrical tool, contemporary shadow theatre has the potential to reach unusual regions of the mind in the audience, close to those of dreams and the subconscious.

The idea of the shadow as a metaphor for the unconscious can be traced back to the work of Carl Jung, who developed the concept of the shadow into a vast and complex spiritual realm that contains not only repressed emotions and memories, but also universal archetypes and symbols shared by all human beings (Jung, 1979). Jung used the image of the shadow to represent those parts of our psyche that we are unaware of or try to hide from ourselves and others. He believed that the shadow could contain both positive and negative aspects of our personality, such as our deepest fears and desires, as well as our hidden talents and potential (Jung, 2001). Jung believed that recognising and working with the shadow would lead to a greater understanding of us (Johnson, 1994), and that exploring and internalising the shadow was an essential part of the process of individuation to become a fully realised and integrated person.

Following this inspiration, a major effort in Controluce's performative work has been to understand and develop the characteristics of shadows. Certainly, since its foundation around 1994, this has been one of the factors behind its success and its long history as a diverse and independent theatre group, as well as its collaborations with many artists in Italy and abroad.

At that time, Turin offered opportunities to support culture. A shared passion for theatre led the founders of Controluce to the idea of combining music and abstract painting with Eastern shadow theatre techniques. Controluce's work took two different but complementary directions, puppetry and musical theatre. From the beginning it has been a constant and natural attitude of the company to collaborate with writers and other musicians, artists, and arts organisations. Working with shadows has attracted the curiosity and artistic interaction of people and institutions, including great names

in literature and music, both classical and modern, as well as major theatres and festivals around the world.

The shadow's ability to stimulate the human mind was essential to the purpose of the experience in Lugano – the subject of this article – which aimed to give voice students the opportunity to explore character psychology and move through a variety of expressive styles. Shadows were conceived and created to represent concepts and sensations such as doubles and selves in mirrors, the shape of the unconscious, the intersecting labyrinths of the unspoken, the blurred traces of dreams. The shadows also took on a scenic function. They provided a “dreamlike” substitute for scenic elements that could not be materialized.

Perhaps one premise must be considered to understand the educational relevance of such an initiative for voice students. Today's opera singers must be skilled actors and actresses in addition to basic vocal technique. Movement and expression on stage are almost as important as the voice in contemporary opera productions. Singers are looking for drama schools and performance coaching in addition to their vocal training. Music schools and conservatories have long been challenged by the intersection of music and theatre, the very essence of opera.

The starting point for the experience described here was to imagine a way of meeting this need. The aim was to propose a practical and comfortable didactic project in which singing and acting would be as closely linked as they are in an opera performance. The aim was to give the students a stage experience as real as possible. A Vocal Scenic Workshop using shadows as “agglutinative” elements was conceived by Luisa Castellani, singing teacher at CSI, and Controluce.

The workshop was structured around a final performance open to the public, after a week or so dedicated to rehearsing a musical program chosen according to a very specific and important criterion: combining music from different historical periods. Baroque and contemporary music, put together as an exercise in vocal training on a stage set that was assigned to the shadows.

As Luisa Castellani explained, the initial idea of juxtaposing repertoires that are only apparently distant from each other was to encourage young singing students to think about the use of the voice, and to try to get out of the rut of a somewhat stereotypical nineteenth-century vocal style (*bel canto*). For them, even in the more classical repertoire that a singer must deal with today, comparing techniques in relation to repertoires such as Baroque and contemporary is a way of discovering unexpected sounds and depths. Moreover, the choices were exquisitely didactic, related to her students' vocal and tonal qualities during these years at CSI.

Hence the proposal, in each of the three editions of the workshop, to combine a great classic of the ancient repertoire, such as Purcell's *Dido & Aeneas* or Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *Orpheus*, with 20th century authors to provoke reactions and new technical synapses in the use of the voice.

Controluce contributed to the project by offering its artistic vision and its theatrical skills and expertise, which allowed the work to be projected onto a much more complex, rich, and multi-layered level than the purely scholastic one. The contribution of the Shadows has allowed us to deepen the stratification of the chosen pieces of music, not only from a vocal point of view, but also from a stage, emotional and character point of view, and to make full use of their multiple

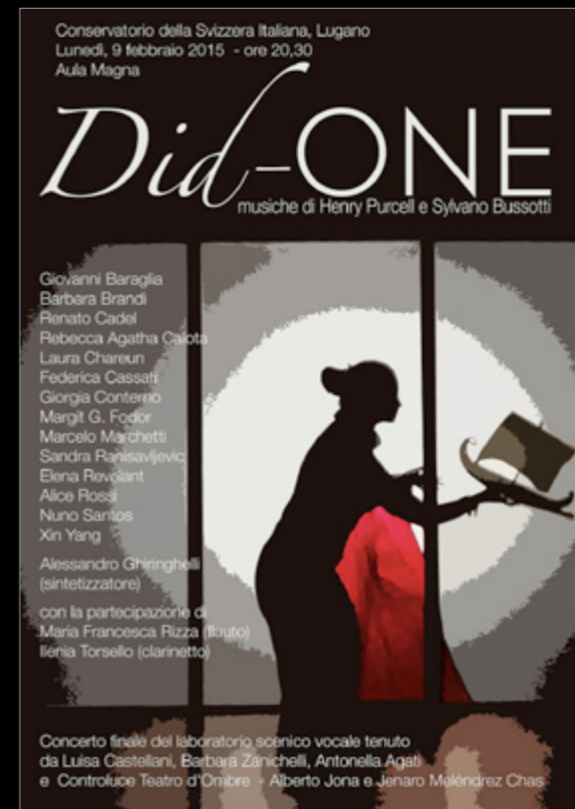
values in a didactic context, but also one of artistic growth and mutual stimulation.

Thus, it was possible to identify Bussotti's *Lachrimae* with Dido's tears; or to see that the ruthless mechanism of Poppea's coronation is, in a certain sense, already written in the stars of Stockhausen's *Zodiac*; or to discover how Cage's motto "happy new ear", for a new listening to the sound world around us, fits perfectly with Orpheus' ability to converse with nature, with shadows, with pain and absence. Three editions took place in 2015, 2016 and 2019. The first was entitled *DID-ONE* and combined musical moments, arias, and duets, from Henry Purcell's masterpiece *Dido and Aeneas* and fragments from Sylvano Bussotti's *Lachrimae*.

In the second workshop, entitled *POPP-KREIS*, Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and Stockhausen's *Zodiac* (Tierkreis) were intertwined. The thread of the story was maintained, but it was opened to new and unexpected suggestions. To access the individual characters and their emotional world, sudden musical and stylistic deviations became possible.

The third was entitled *ORF-AGE*. Monteverdi and John Cage meet thanks to the myth of *Orpheus*, which allows us to explore fundamental elements of their poetics: sound, silence, space. Monteverdi's *Orpheus* (1607) and John Cage's *Songs* and *Litanies* explore the profound meaning of music and being, becoming theatrical action through the ephemeral and magical suggestion of shadows.

As didactic events, those *Laboratori* of high education had the particularity of reaching extremely sophisticated artistic aspirations and training layers thanks to simple means as the shadows are. The feedback of all participants was that of an enlightening experience, which is what I wanted to tell. ❖❖



POSTER 1ST EDITION: DID-ONE (PURCELL-BUSSOTTI) (SHADOW OF FEDERICA CASSATI).
[F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.

POSTER 2ND EDITION POPP-KREIS (MONTEVERDI-STOCKHAUSEN) - CARDBOARD SILHOUETTES.
[F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.

3RD 'S EDITION IMAGE ORF-AGE (MONTEVERDI-CAGE) (GIOVANNI BARAGLIA AND JAVIER CARVAJAL).
[F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.



BOTH'S FLIGHT DID-ONE (PURCELL-BUSSOTTI) (SHADOWS OF RENATO CADEL, GIORGIA CONTERNO AND GIOVANNI BARAGLIA). [F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.



ANGER ANGUSTIA DID-ONE (PURCELL-BUSSOTTI) (SHADOWS OF LAURA CHAREUN AND RENATO CADEL). [F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.



ROME IN FLAMES 1 POPP-KREIS (MONTEVERDI-STOCKHAUSEN) (FEDERICA CASSATI AND ANNA PIROLI). [F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.



BACKSHADOWS 1 ORF-AGE (MONTEVERDI-CAGE) (BARBARA BRANDI AND OTHER CSI PUPILS PARTICIPATING IN THE WORKSHOP). [F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.



ROME IN FLAMES 2 POPP-KREIS (MONTEVERDI-STOCKHAUSEN) (ALBERTO JONA). [F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.



BACKSHADOWS 2 ORF-AGE (MONTEVERDI-CAGE) (CSI PUPILS PARTICIPATING IN THE WORKSHOP). [F] CONTROLUCE TEATRO D'OMBRE ARCHIVE.

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