

Disciplinare versus interdisciplinare

Disciplinarity versus interdisciplinarity

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Abstract

In my work there is no research of an interdisciplinary theater, because I think that all theatrical forms are potentially there, and the history of theater teaches it. The theater has always welcomed the new emerging languages, making them, with time, part of themselves. In my work there is also no research aimed at merging different disciplines to go to a “non-shadows theater”, a “beyond the shadows theater”, which cancels the specifics of the genre. Rather. In my work there is only the need, strongly felt by me, of a shadows theater finally inscribed and rooted in the present in which I live. An urgent need to adapt the shadows theater to Western theatrical culture, to translate those principles that are the foundation of this art of the scene, in the forms and with the possibilities that are typical of the historical and geographical today in which I live.

Keywords: Shadow Theater; disciplinary, interdisciplinarity, contemporary, tradition

Resumo

No meu trabalho não há nenhuma pesquisa sobre um teatro interdisciplinar, porque acho que todas as formas teatrais potencialmente o sejam, e a história do teatro o ensina. O teatro sempre incorporou as novas linguagens emergentes, tornando-as, com o tempo, parte de si mesmo. No meu trabalho, também não há nenhuma pesquisa que vise fundir diferentes disciplinas rumo a um “não-teatro de sombras” ou um “além do teatro de sombras”, que elimina as especificidades do gênero. Ao contrário. No meu trabalho há apenas a necessidade, fortemente sentida por mim, de um teatro de sombras finalmente inscrito e enraizado no presente em que vivo. Uma necessidade urgente de adaptar o teatro de sombras à cultura teatral ocidental, de traduzir os princípios que são o fundamento dessa arte da cena, nas formas e com as possibilidades que são típicas do hoje, histórico e geográfico, no qual vivo.

Palavras-chave: Teatro de sombras; disciplinaridade, interdisciplinaridade; contemporâneo; tradição

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¹ A legendary and esteemed figure of shadow theater, Fabrizio Montecchi was born in 1960 in Italy where he studied Architecture. He currently lives in Piacenza where the Teatro Gioco Vita is based, for which he has staged more than 35 shows. He has also collaborated with several prestigious opera and theatrical institutions, including the Scala di Milano, the Fenice of Venice, the Arena of Verona, the Rome Opera House and the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. A highly appreciated trainer, Fabrizio led internships and workshops throughout Europe and regularly at the International Institute of the Puppet of Charleville-Mézières (France), which awarded him the Transmission Prize in 2013 for his generosity and the rigor of his teaching. (Italia)

More and more often I hear repeating about my shows that “they are not just a shadows theater”. Someone comes even to say that “they are a fusion of languages and that goes beyond the shadows theater” or that “it is restrictive to call them shadows theater”. Somebody else, even more radical, has even claimed that “we can no longer speak of shadow theater”.

These judgments can be considered as very flattering but, from the point of view of a theatrist of shadows – mine for instance – they can also be read from a different perspective and contain a deep criticism to my work. In fact, they seem to affirm these judgments, the shadows theater get modernized by “interdisciplinaring” itself, leaning, or we could even say, asking help to other disciplines. In doing so, however, it goes beyond itself, it is no longer “only” shadows theater: “How beautiful this shadows theater is, because it is no longer a shadows theater!”. To many this may probably please, but certainly not to me.

I always defend, and strenuously, the idea that what I do is shadows theater. Against everybody and everything. Not by a spirit of contradiction but by a profound conviction. I am aware that some of my dramaturgical and linguistic experiments have produced works that do not always correspond to my conviction, but only because I voluntarily, and in some cases involuntarily, have moved or got boundless, in other territories. Otherwise I am irreducibly convinced that mine is, to all the effects, a shadows theater and that there is not in my work “interdisciplinarity” that is not already contained in the idea of this kind of theater.

For this, in the face of the above judgments, the question I always ask myself is: starting from which idea of shadow theater one comes to judge “what is” and “what is not anymore”, shadows theater? A shadows theater authentically child of our culture has yet to be completely codified and therefore we are not in front of a closed but open form, in continuous transformation. From where it derives then the conviction that if only there is an actor or a dancer on stage we go “beyond” the shadows theater or, at least, we have been moving in the spurious and indefinite territories of interdisciplinarity?

Are these preconceived ideas of shadow theater not based on a brief knowledge of traditional forms? But, how many do really know the traditions of shadow theater to the point where they can make judgments like these?

Take, for instance, the *Nang Yai*, a particular form of shadow theater thailandese unique in its kind (but also present in Cambodia). The light source is placed only on one side of the big screen but the action takes place on both sides and the spectators are arranged all around. Therefore there is no a real front and back, but a single space used in different ways. The story is told by a narrator not directly involved in the action, while it is represented by performers who manipulate large fixed shapes, which depict characters or situations of the story, to the rhythm of music. The originality of this form of shadow theater is that the performers manipulate dancing. The choreutic gesture, that is the posture that they take and the movements they make, codified in every detail, are an integral part of the manipulation and, above all, they are a fundamental part of the narration.

Another very interesting example is the Javanese *Wayang Kulit*. At the center of the scenic space (and not behind the screen, as we would say), there is the *dalang*, the

one who celebrates the event, the actor-manipulator who acts alone. The spectators, arranged all around, prepared all around, attracted as if in a spiral towards that center represented by the performer, the shape and the shadow. His vital energy is transmitted to those who assist, filtered or not by the screen, through acting and manipulation. Music also participates in the rite and empowers it. The screen, in this as in many forms of oriental shadow theater, is the meeting place between those who represent and those who assist and the shadows are a part of this communion, not the whole.

As a third example, I quote a simple anecdote. A dear friend and a great expert of the world's shadow theater, Lucille Bodson, returning from a festival in India, told me, a few months ago, of a wonderful experience having witnessed an Indian theater drama show. I do not remember exactly her words but the sense was that the surprise and the enchantment had been aroused mainly by having the opportunity to watch the show behind the screen, by the engaging music and the extraordinary voice and energy of the singer – narrator. To my question "And the shadows?", The answer was "Very static, that was not the most important thing."

Do you understand what I mean? From these few examples it is evident how the shadows theater is much more than what happens on the screen. This is the great lesson of the whole oriental shadow theater: everything that happens not only "behind" but also "around" the screen is important, because everything is shadows theater.

It is also in the precise choreography of gestures and postures that, coherently with the shapes and shadows, tell the story; in the flexed feet of the performers who dance they transmit the characteristics of the characters they are manipulating, in the action of the dalang or animator that often, more with the voice than with the manipulation of the shapes, makes the shadows live.

The body and the voice of the performer, the music, the light, the shadow puppets, together with the shadow, participate in the making of these extraordinary ancient traditions. The synthesis is so successful, so inscribed in the same idea of theater, that often we do not notice their great semantic wealth. Do you think that someone in creating them has worried about their "interdisciplinary" value? That someone has questioned the concept of interdisciplinarity?

Therefore, if there is interdisciplinarity in my work, this is not the result from contemporaneity – which interdisciplinarity seems to boast of having invented it – but from tradition, and from an idea of shadow theater that gives itself as a combination of different languages.

Because there has never existed, and can not exist, a theater of "pure" shadows, perhaps in Hades or in Dante's Inferno. And if anything like this has ever been possible, it was paradoxically the contemporaneity that invented it and made us believe it, certainly to do with the millennial oriental traditions.

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In my work there is also no research aimed at merging different disciplines to go toward a "non shadows theater", a "beyond the shadows theater", which cancels the specifics of the genre. Rather.

In my work there is only the need, strongly felt by me, of a shadows theater finally subscribed and rooted in the present in which I live. An urgent need to adapt the shadows theater to Western theatrical culture, to translate those principles that are the foundation of this art of the scene, in the forms and with the possibilities that are typical of the historical and geographical today in which I live .

I give another example that seems really clear to me and that concerns the manipulator/ animator. Each tradition revolves around a different figure of manipulator/ animator. From the thailandese dancers, to the Indonesian dalang, to the Turkish actor of *Karagöz*, the performer is the vital heart of the traditional shadow theater. And if the interpreter is the vital heart of the traditional shadow theater why he can not be it also of the contemporary shadows theater?

But what is the manipulator/ animator of contemporary shadow theater? What characteristics and qualities must it have? He is an actor? A mime? A dancer? A technician? Is all this together? Not being able to answer this question simply by drawing on "our" tradition – which does not exist – I feel compelled to look for it. And it is to the western theatrical universe which I turn to look for that interpreter that more responds to my idea of shadow theater.

Examples like these I could do with regard to all the aspects that pertain to the contemporary shadows theater and my way of practicing it, because it is a scenic form crossroads between the visual arts and those performing. In the shadows theater the bodily and the incorporeal coexist, the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, the human and the inhuman. This is why I can draw from actor's theater as well as from cinema, dance or multimedia.

It is obvious that this predisposition of the shadows theater to accept in itself other disciplines also contains risks and can lead to dangerous falls if we simply aim at the assembly of different languages but has very positive effects if we translate it into a drive and in a curiosity to cross these disciplines to know and investigate them, and to take, and eventually make them our own, principles and techniques.

The most important results I obtained in recent years are precisely those in which I managed to achieve a good synthesis, an organic fusion of these disciplines, and prefigure an idea of shadow theater (and, as you see, I used the term "prefigure" and not "realize") totally part of our theatrical and representative culture. But even the less successful experiences, where an evident disconnection between languages has created a greater impression of interdisciplinarity, have helped me to understand, correct and clarify the path. To live in the frontier of my discipline, to frequent its borders, is a way to know it better, because it is there where I find the greatest wealth of languages and cultures. The border is not a place of limitation and closure but rather of permeability and dialogue; as a place where exchange is most fruitful and where differences and affinities are found between languages.

My overruns are therefore the order of the day, but they are never invasions with objectives of conquest, a way to settle in new territories or to bring the shadows theater "elsewhere". They are simply necessary to enrich my language, to learn new grammars and extend my vocabulary to arrive at a form of shadow theater that, with merit and without any sense of inferiority, can claim the right to be part of the arts of contemporary scene.

I can understand very well those who grasp in my work elements of “interdisciplinarity” but my goal is, as you have well understood, rather the opposite: to arrive at a “disciplinarity”, which takes all of these contributions into a form that I call, and I want to keep calling, shadows theater.

It is obviously this idea of shadow theater as “the place for excellence of the encounter between disciplines” that I try to teach. I am convinced that it is the laboratories, more than the shows, the most fertile instruments to convey these ideas and to favor their rooting. Only with the multiplication of experiences in this direction can I hope that they will find some codification and, in time, lead to the birth of a real western shadow theater.

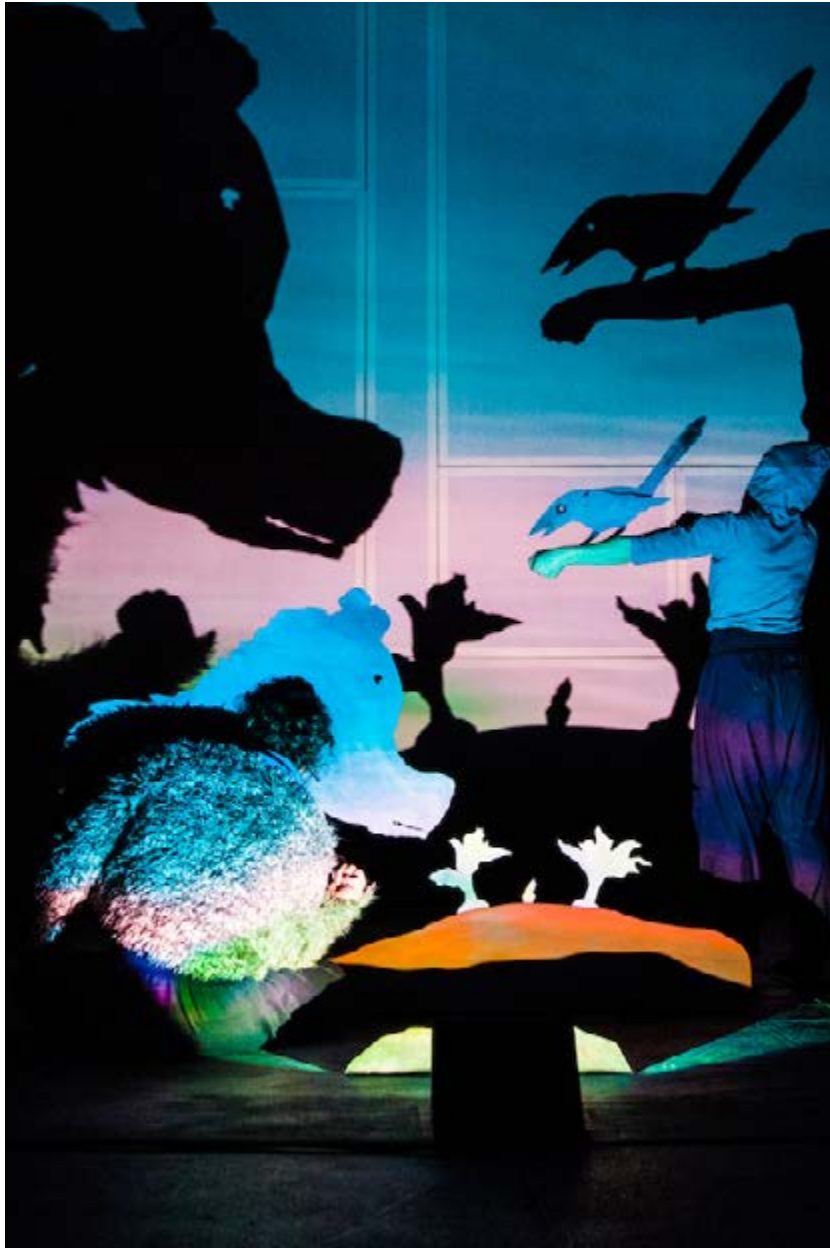
My dream is that in twenty or thirty years, no one will say more, looking at my shows: “this is no longer a shadows theater”.



E' così che tutto comincia (2012) - Piacenza (Italy). Photo: Prospero Cravedi



Donna di Porto Pim (2013) - Piacenza (Italy). Photo: Serena Groppelli



Il cielo degli Orsi (2014) - Piacenza (Italy). Photo: Serena Groppelli



Il cavaliere inesistente (2015) - Piacenza (Italy). Photo: Mauro Del Papa



Moun (2015) - Piacenza (Italy). Photo: Serena Groppelli

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