

Pure Research Report – *Theatre of Illumination*

Toronto, October 2005

by Shadowland Theatre, facilitated by Anne Barber & Brad Harley

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What is Illumination Theatre?

Shadowland Theatre, maybe because of our name, has been playing with light and shadow for over twenty years. We have done many shadow puppet shows along with our other visual theatre activities. In the course of creating our shows we came across the work of the French artist visual Christian Boltanski. His use of light and shadow is very moving, very emotionally charged, even as photo documents.

Thus inspired we wanted to pursue the idea of Illumination Theatre. This would be a theatre where light is the dominant agent in communicating the narrative. Our intent was to create a syntax, a theatrical structure using light, time and image. We wanted to explore beyond the two dimensionality of our present shadow puppet style and push into the third and fourth dimensions as well as exploring new dimensions of meaning and emotion.

Our researchers were invited to join us because of their own parallel and somewhat alternative interests in the uses of illumination in theatre, puppetry and the arts. Over three days we pursued explorations through discussion, sharing of images and memories and a series of practical experiments, using a variety of hand-held lighting equipment and simple materials.

Associate researchers:

Michelle Ramsay, lighting designer

David Duclos, set designer, artist, former director of the Theatre Centre

Anand Rajaram, shadow puppeteer, actor, dancer, writer

Brian Quirt, Artistic Director, Nightswimming

Nightswimming Interns: Andrea Romaldi, Marie-Leofeli Barlizo

University of Toronto Graduate Centre student: Katherine Foster

We started with a discussion with the basic question. What is light, dark and shadow?

From the beginning we found the subject to be simple, straightforward – and yet very illusive. Light, dark and shadow – illumination, it seems is always closely related to something else, a subject, an idea or an emotion, a memory, a dream. It was hard to pin down, in an empirical way, the elements that make up the syntax for the Theatre of Illumination. This was going to be more difficult than it first appeared.

Our first exercise was to share individual experiences and significant memories where light played the primary role. The responses all gravitated to the picturesque, to emotionally significant memories:

- long low shadows in the evening
- pink light of sunset
- blue shadows on the snow in winter
- shadows of traffic lights at night on the ceiling
- scary, black, black, black, fear of the dark
- moon shadows
- shadows of trees (cozy, comfortable, familiar) in summer
- shafts of light coming in through a high church window
- walking under street lights (watching your shadows move, change shape)
- the darkest room in the house (the bathroom, with the sound of dripping water)
- darkness of a cave or mine (texture of dark, the sound of dark – dampness, cold)
- a moon glade – full moon in spring through new beech leaves
- shadows in the forest
- covers over the head in bed
- irrational shadows, where you can't find the source – German expressionism, Dr. Caligari
- glaucoma – when the world turns to shadows
- shadows that disappear (ghosts)

- Carl Jung – shadow dreams
- spatial memory with eyes shut
- sitting in the dark before a movie
- night time, a time of possibilities
- glowing, fluorescent light amongst radio towers
- light in night, fog, heavy rain, snow
- blackness and claustrophobia
- seeing colours in the black
- strange, reflected light
- light reflected off the water onto different surfaces, a cottage ceiling, side of a boat

Onto our first experiment!

How abstract can we be? Can we get to the basics and eliminate the stories and images? If so, what is the experience? It is predictable when using light as an agent for viewing a subject, it is more difficult when it is the subject itself. Could we run the entire research period without using coloured light? Or, how far could we go before it became necessary?

The materials we brought in were simple: household lighting sources and paraphernalia, art supplies – paper, card, wire, string etc. We also had a theatre lighting rig available.

Experiment #1. The Dark.

- a) sit alone in the dark for 20 minutes
- b) lights on, write and talk of that experience.

The pure black, full dark that we had hoped for was never really possible as the space was not light tight. At first with the lights ringing in your brain it was very black, but fairly quickly shapes and pin-points of light entered and by the end of the twenty minutes it was possible to walk carefully around. This was the most primal aspect of the project, the realization that the light, dark, sight, brain, relationship is a dynamic one, that cause many shifts in the perception of reality. Sitting in the dark and listening to the brain chatter away, working overtime, trying to make sense of the seeming lack of information when really there was no lack, rather a flood of

black and grey images to the eyes and a heightened sense of hearing, feelings and thoughts. The brain worked hard at interpreting, identifying the new environment.

With the lights back on each of us shared our responses. And rather than remembering and linking images to the past it, our responses were immediate and more abstract. We attempted to omit light from our lives and it forced its way in. We were actively involved in the battle between the elements of light and dark.

Results:

- the room changed
- your brain and all your senses respond
- re-emerging structure of the room as eyes adjust
- images were never hard edged
- small changes in the weather outside = big changes inside (pin hole camera effect)
- it is hard to escape light completely
- movement of the shadows as the mind tries to make sense of it
- darker seems colder, lighter seems warmer
- darkness = quiet
- the past is the dark, light is the future --
- light strives to overcome the dark
- being able to see like a cat, night sight
- eyes feel starved, they seem to be hungry for light
- eyes feel separated from the body
- eyes fuzzed out
- it was hard work to see
- in the dark, is there a memory of the light?

Questions Raised:

1. What would the difference be in total blackout?
2. Can the black be more abstract?

3. Can we rid ourselves of image and narrative? Do we want to?
4. What is the meaning of black and light? (David Duclos suggested it is a creation story – in the beginning etc. everything grows out of the blackness.)
5. Is this where ideas and meaning come from?
6. Can we exploit these ideas in the telling of the ideas/stories?
6. How can this relate to the craft of creating theatre or storytelling? How does the experience of the dark makes the artists and audience react?

Experiment #2

Playing with light – as pure and simple – working on the basics, the vocabulary

We tried different light sources (candles, flashlights, incandescent, halogen) and surfaces (opaque, transparent and reflective). This revealed some new information and confirmed many existing prejudices.

In the blacked-out space we used light to create shadows. This simple idea once again became very complicated because imagery emerges the moment light creates a shadow and little narratives creep in. If the shadow of a chair is projected, it suggested a room. If the shadow of a hand is projected, it suggested faces created by kids playing at night. It was very hard to get beyond seeing the image of fading light as an image of a sunset. The mind is frantically creating layers of meaning, order and understanding.

Results:

- multiple light sources, creating multiple images of less intensity
- multiple surfaces – one image falling on an uneven surface, as the viewer walks around the image breaks up
- abstract shadows – beautiful and serene
- hand shadows – morphing images
- shadows from multiple sources – flattened down to create uniform 2D shadows
- shadow distortions – effects created by changing the light source/object relationship
- two shadows – the mysterious and yet somehow difficult shadows within shadows

- long shadows – the suggestion of morning and evening
- losing the source of the shadow – scary
- long shadows, change or loss of scale – scary
- fast moving light (unusual in Nature), modern, portable and fast moving, ie. cars
- big light – is capable of being a shadow eraser
- multiple moving light sources – fascinating, exciting

Questions Raised:

It was a very broad survey and every set-up or experiment cried out for refinement.

1. Where is the audience and who is the audience?
2. Why is the creation of imagery such a dominant impulse?

Experiment #3

Study different light sources in a contained space.

- a) Build maquettes, work stations
- b) How does changing the light source change the shadow?
- c) What feelings are evoked?

Results:

Light, dark and shadow – illumination, it seems, is always closely related to something else, a subject, an idea or an emotion a memory, a dream.

- candles – soft, warm light, gentle flicker, peaceful, pan-directional, complex, active
- bees wax – dense, rich light
- candle in patterned container/lantern – very active, repeated patterns
- candles in a menorah – ritual, bigger light, flickering, complex warmth, busy, kinetic
- phosphorescent paint – low light, glow, eerie, charged by light, no shadow
- open flame – primal fear, flame, chaos, large, chaotic shadows

- warm light – incandescent (flame candle sun fire)
- cold light – fluorescent (moon)
- halogen – cold light, very crisp shadow even at a great distance
- shadows – the edge of information(the edge of the light) (edge of mystery)
- light is a common experience – light on, light off, sunrise, sunset
- light adds meaning and focus to what they illuminate
- the brain works hard to create order out of the chaos of dark
- movement of light suggests real events – i.e. sun crawls down a mountain

Questions Raised:

1. Need to know the science of light, theories of light and sight, the physics, chemistry and biology.
2. What is the relationship between light and the "ahhh" moment (revelation, illumination?)
3. Using light as a character – can it be a protagonist, can we personify it?

Experiment #4

Task – use light and shadow to create a visual sentence.

Method – choose a light source, a place and an object to illuminate

Results – Stories

- 1) Snow falling in a wintry light. Using white surround (floor and walls), torn tissue and white floor lights, inspired by the comfort of watching snow from a window.
- 2) In a dark boxed-in space with hand held flashlights. Light maneuvering, one light overcomes and overpowers another.
- 3) Boat on water. A single light reflected on mylar creating complex water-like shadows, a shadow puppet of a boat moving slowly along.
- 4) Peep show. Alternating blue light and red light in a totally enclosed white foam-core tower with only a few peepholes for viewing from the outside. Inside a woman as if in a shower stall.

5) A single incandescent light bulb as a human figure. The lit bulb is crushed. Kill the lights; idea/persona gone

In Conclusion

It was interesting to strip the experiments down to the bare bones. To simplify the type of materials and the number of light sources (we ended up using none of the lights from the rig) and to attempt to reach the essential syntax of lighting. For example, in the experiments there was virtually no sound used. In this word-oriented, noisy world of theatre we were able to tell simple visual stories – but did light or illumination dominate in the telling? Dark and quiet go hand-in-hand and tend to define the pace which we found to be slower and less frenetic. This phenomenon is exploited in theatre to help the audience be quiet and shift into that suspended mode at the beginning of a show.

Significantly what the light did in all situations was focus. There was a wonderful concentration in the room. Most people chose to work on a small scale. We could have used the entire rig but that seemed too massive; there was so much to discover in the mystery of the small and intimate. There was often a meditative quality in the experiments that allowed repetition, long held moments and miniscule changes. Sequences were not necessarily narratives. The purely visual medium allowed viewers to add their own memories and associations. The viewers were forced to interpret what they saw and the differences that were articulated.

We had difficulty in redefining our relationship to light and shadow. Memories and clichés dominated our interpretations.

Light and shadow are strong emotional instigators conjuring time and place (a learned response).

We found that light was a basic stage setting that evoked at first response clichés like white light = day, or blue elevated light = night.

Light and movement often first suggested the passage of time, ie. sunrise.

Many people with flashlights in the dark is fun! It was very visually interesting, kinetic and calls out for more work to be done in the area of choreography.

It is great to be reminded of what the mind is capable of and how it works at figuring things out and how rigid it is when it is confronted by something new.

We did discover that different lights and surfaces lend themselves to, or are more comfortable in the telling of certain stories. In nature cool, white light = the night (moon), warm white light = day (sun).

Distorted shadows are scary/unnerving. Reflection = water nearby. Fire is old light. Man-made, electricity etc. is modern light. Fast moving light is new.

A sequence, be it movement from one lighting condition to another, or of a light itself moving, or even an object moving in the light, evokes a response. A sequence (the creation of a sentence from basic elements), though not necessarily 'story', seemed to focus the viewer and the interpretation causing the struggle for recognition.

The "aaah" moments are moments of recognition, familiarity and understanding. How prepared or able are we to look at something, create something we cannot conceive of?

We discussed uses of light that challenged the norms and how those affected our perceptions as audiences – i.e. a production of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* where the night scene was done fully illuminated; Shadowland's *The Footprint*, a shadow puppet show with the snow done as black shadow.

We were able to create shadow within shadows with more than one light source.

Many of us became intrigued by the potential information that the science of light and human visual mechanics would provide to the understanding in the creation of theatrical effects.

Colour is an aspect of light that we didn't get to in a significant way. In fact we tried to eliminate it initially. But it was there front and centre from the beginning and in fact we had to work hard to keep it out. Black and white doesn't really exist in nature. Shadows are not a uniform shade of black. It seems that the colour of shadows changes with the changing of the light source. The objects that created the shadow have colour. But the colour is lost in the shadow. Is black and white natural or man-made? Mixing coloured lights is quite different than mixing coloured pigments. Why? There were many questions that called for more rigorous scientific input.

We were not able to successfully separate the light and shadow (the medium) from the message, and we were surprised by that. So the McLuhan axiom of the medium being the message was difficult to research in our scientific survey. We didn't discover any image so neutral that we could just mess with the medium. Any light suggested so many ideas that it was almost impossible to disassociate ourselves from them and get to down to the bare bones of Illumination Theatre. All the experiments lead instantly to a revealing of meaning or enlightenment of an idea.

BUT new information came to light just days after the project ended from author Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim At Tinkers Creek* (pg. 31). "I chance on a wonderful book by Marius Von Sendon called *Space and Sight*". This is about people born blind and getting sight surgically later in life. To them vision is very abstract with no idea of space. Form, distance, size were meaningless. Shadows looked like dark patches, not as defining depth. Some of them never get beyond this initial phase – and wished to

return to what they knew. Others learned to understand and some found it miraculous. The idea of sight as abstract shapes that the mind can't figure is a great avenue for future research.

Like the blind who are suddenly able to 'see', if you do not know the language can you make a new image? Here we see that light and sight are a learned language, as theatre is, and the vocabulary of it can be strange to some.

We all understood the concept of "fear of the dark" but a blind person would have had a different notion entirely. Our emotional attachments to lighting conditions were clearly very strong, its metaphorical force came to the fore very naturally.

What if we had more time?

- we would try to make pure black or pure light.
- expand our simple sentence into something longer like poetry
- expand our illumination vocabulary
- study coloured light
- more technical/scientific details about light and colour
- interaction between additive and subtractive colour
- the audience's relationship to light, where does the audience belong?
- light choreography
- light as a character
- light control dimmers and strobes and flashes
- work on the greater understanding of the evocative "ahhhh" moment
- light as pure abstraction

Did we achieve our goal of Illumination Theatre?

No. We didn't achieve our goal but we did vacuum around the edges a bit. We enjoyed the opportunity to work with like-minded people and posed a lot of good questions. We opened the door and each of the participants will pursue aspects of Illumination Theatre in their own time. The project is ongoing. There is plenty to be explored.

Michelle Ramsay sent us a CD of photos that she took – and the photos made us all look very intriguing – nouveaux pataphysicians in Plato's cave achieving some kind of alchemy.

We had great fun playing with like-minded people in the big sandbox. Everyone added to the idea pool and worked in the congenial chaos of enthusiastic explorers searching the well-worn road for new sparkly gems.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Anne Barber and Brad Harley

Artistic directors

Shadowland Theatre

www.shadowlandtheatre.ca