

***Shakuntala .and the Ring of Recognition:***  
**The Use of Shadow Puppetry in a US College Production**

**By Assunta Kent**

In Kalidasa's Sanskrit classic, *Shakuntala*, while hunting near a hermitage, handsome noble King Dushyanta suddenly beholds his perfect match: the enchanting nymph's daughter – Shakuntala. But, in this wondrous Hindu parable, the lovers must brave the adversity of a sage's curse and experience loss and long separation. The action of the play takes us from an ancient ashram to the capital city and finally into the cosmic realm where earthly struggles are explained and balance restored.

Over the centuries, many writers and critics have been moved by the stirring plot and beautiful poetry of the script. But Western theatre practitioners have often ignored or taken a dim view of its prospects for production. In one reference, *Shakuntala* is dismissed in the following (ironically pertinent) terms:

Kalidasa's characters are not too well drawn; most of them are stylized puppets. . . the quick changes in location, the utter disregard for the element of time, the various scenes in motion – on the hunt, in the car of Indra in the air—strike anybody brought up with the traditions of Western drama as unusual. (*Reader's Companion* 389-90)

But within this description lie the very reasons for employing puppets!

Puppetry can effectively and entertainingly portray supernatural characters (demons and nymphs), perform superhuman feats (flight, aerial battles, fleeing animals) and employ allegorical symbols to represent intangibles. (Moon and Sun shadows arced across the sky in succession and then ended with a setting crescent moon to indicate weeks passing and the pre-dawn setting for the next scene.)<sup>1</sup> Puppets were also a culturally sensitive choice as nearly every region in India has indigenous puppet theatres. Many of these present tales from the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, from which Kalidasa's play borrows its plotline. Interposing shadow puppetry with scenes of human dialogue and dance also provided intriguing segues between frequently changing locations.

The practical and aesthetic choice to use puppets for scenes less suited to human actors reaped untold benefits. Besides the purposes to which I've already alluded, puppets served as efficient compressors of action in a very long script and showed characters in larger-than-life offstage actions (while the live actors were changing costumes). The shadowy silhouettes of the King and demons battling were more mysterious and powerful than a live representation—a performative truth that Indonesian *dalangs* have been exploiting for centuries. Indeed, our shadow puppets became “multi-purpose translators”—between the spiritual and quotidian realms (with their vastly different senses of time) and between onstage dialogue and off-stage actions.

With a cast of variously talented college students, I presented this sensuous, yet

spiritual, tale—accompanied by the stirring and meditative music and sound effects of a local *tabla* player—and interwove Indian and Cambodian dance with Western acting and Asian puppetry, while retaining the luxurious poetry. This amalgamation gave my students the opportunity to sample the myriad ways Sanskrit drama has been performed in India, while it allowed me to match performance techniques to the requirements of specific scenes, characters and actions and to best use the abilities of my performers and designers. Such “respectful quotation” of classical performance has been my longtime method for helping student actors and audiences engage texts from other cultures.<sup>2</sup>

Before analyzing some of the puppet scenes in our production, let me explain where they were deployed. As director and adaptor, I imagined the cosmic actions of the shadow puppets happening behind the cyclorama (or sky) above the periaktoi (rotating triangular flats) that represented trees in the ashram, pillars in the King’s open air courtyard, and the peaks of the celestial Golden Mountain. But my student set designer made each level of the stage a bit too high, which left too little visible space for the puppets to be seen by the entire audience. Once discovered, he offered a beautiful solution: a small replica of the opening set with an enlarged sky to be used as a shadow puppet screen, placed downstage right of the main set. This made the puppetry more immediate and, fortunately, no less supernatural – and it balanced the placement of our musician downstage left.

Our production of *Shakuntala* began with a musical invocation to Shiva, the curtain speech by the Sutrahara (traditional troupe’s Stage Manager) and a song by the Leading Actress. As she ends, the Sutrahara says “I was as swept away by the enchantment of your song, as King Dushyanta here, drawn on and on by the swiftly-fleeing deer.” The two live actors fade back, as lights come up behind the puppet stage to reveal a shadow buck bounding freely across the screen and then off. Seconds later King Dushyanta and his charioteer enter the main stage in hot pursuit—in their “danced” chariot with imaginary horses (indicated by dialogue), with the reins, bow and arrows mimed by the actors.

The King is stopped by hermits and informed that he has crossed into an ashram whose deer are sacred. After exiting the “chariot” (through its mimed door), the King notices the obvious signs of a hermitage, including a bunraku-style fawn that “browses in tranquility, unafraid of human voices.” Although shadow puppets performed all segues and off-stage actions, the fawn and lion cub who interact with human performers were cuddly bunraku-style puppets with a shrouded operator.

Beginning the show proper with the shadow deer seemed an alluring gentle way to guide the audience into an unfamiliar set of performance conventions. The shadow puppets helped audiences to suspend their disbelief in actions outside their own experience and mythos, perhaps because the shadows showed, rather than narrated, the fantastical actions – and seeing is believing.

After the charioteer dances the “chariot” off stage, the King spies upon three lovely maidens who dance in to water the trees of the sacred penance grove. Only then

does “regular” Western-style spoken narrative dominate and here the words are punctuated by many examples of *abhinaya*. The use of this gestural sign language (prescribed in the *Natyasastra*, an ancient Hindu guide to theatre theory and practice) more closely ties the live actors’ physical vocabulary to the puppet movements.

Once the King has revealed himself to the maidens and the audience is certain that Shakuntala is equally smitten, Dushyanta is suddenly called away because his beaters have stirred up a elephant, who charges through the ashram trees “like a demon foe to their meditative rituals.” As he leaves the stage, we hear raucous drumming and see a shadow elephant rearing and trumpeting across the screen, with deer fleeing before him.

The King then sets up camp near the hermitage and is provided a reason to linger when the hermits request that he protect them from harassing demons. In the first attack, the shadow King is able to dispel the (Indonesian-inspired) demon puppets by merely twanging his bow. But later, just when he has secured a secret meeting with the lovelorn Shakuntala, he is drawn into a battle with demons attacking from the air over the sacred grove.

For the opening hunting scene and the subsequent elephant rampage and demon attacks, sound effects and music set the tone of each scene and tied together the worlds of puppets and live action. After the first segue or two, audience members looked to the screen for off-stage actions foreshadowed in the dialogue.

What is the purpose of so many off-stage actions? These assaults upon the ashram interrupt the onrush of the King’s unsupervised courting of Shakuntala. Similar to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, in which the father imposes hard labor on the prince wooing his sheltered daughter, the defense of the ashram gives King Dushyanta an opportunity to demonstrate his military prowess and his acclaimed protection of the sacred grove and to redirect some of his impetuous energy. This timely interruption allows both him and Shakuntala to long for each other, raising her value, "lest too light winning make the prize light" (Shakespeare, *Tempest*, Act I, 2, 452). It also lets her impatience build to the extent that this dutiful (adopted) child of a holy sage will agree to a secret marriage and consummation without waiting for her guardian’s permission.

These early puppet attacks are rather amusing, partly because of their frequency and brevity. In fact, the King averts them with such alacrity that he is less stirred by these battles than by his infatuated and single-minded pursuit of Shakuntala. If the ashram scenes are presented primarily as romantic comedy, then the demon attacks are recognizable comic devices to delay fulfilling the desires of the two virtuous young lovers.

The use of puppets (for an unworldly U.S. audience) also evokes a child-like wonder that worked well with the youthful attitude of our lover-protagonists. Even though the King is at least 10 years older than Shakuntala and already married several times over, there is something distinctly young about their courtship, and to our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, the propriety, shyness, and innocent seriousness of their love reminds us of

the sweetness of teenagers who find their true love at a summer camp—away from their “regular” life, and the cautions and distractions of parents, family, and teachers.

This scenario of secret love offers the puppets another of their traditional employments—aids in teaching important life lessons. In this case, interruptions break the romantic spell and give the audience, if not the protagonists, the opportunity to consider:

The King’s suppression of his initial awareness that it is not proper “to seek love in a penance grove,” the dangers of matchmaking by enthusiastic but naïve friends (who conclude that the courtly suitor’s “handsome form surely house[s] a noble nature”), and the rashness of the young lovers compacting a secret Gandharva wedding without witnesses.

The alternation of mood from romantic to comic/heroic and back is in keeping with the *Natyasastra*’s prescription that a play should lead the audience through each of the eight *rasas* (emotional states)—erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, and marvelous—leaving them in a state of peaceful acceptance at its conclusion. How then can later demon interventions be re-calibrated to represent fury, terror, and heroism?

In Part II, the King at first repudiates Shakuntala, because of a curse, and then remembers her too late. During his subsequent life-threatening depression (inspiring pathos), terror is introduced by the off-stage sounds of a monster attacking the King’s cowardly, conniving but very amusing companion, Matavya. At first our comic expectations are rewarded. A Demon-head rises behind the screen with the immediately recognizable turban-headed shadow of the obese counselor firmly held (by his cushiony tush) in its powerful jaws, while Matavya’s jaw is flapping out complaints and demands to be saved. Soon, the Matavya puppet, freed from the Demon, falls backward across the puppet sky like a very full setting moon. While the King is stirred into action, we are still laughing.

The joy of a good parody and the humorous change in scale—to see the grossly overweight complainer given his comeuppance in miniature—provides immediate comic relief and cleans our palate for the following terrifying and heroic scenes. And, soon we learn from the live actor, Matali, Indra’s charioteer, that this “attack” was his gambit to rouse the King for battle against the *rakshashas* who threaten the very gods.

The most elaborate shadow scene of the play combines the beauty of the earlier celestial bodies rising and setting with the martial excitement of the demon attacks. We now see a single shadow puppet depicting the King in Indra’s car driven by Matali, with an articulation for the King’s bow arm so he can aim and flap his bow against the screen, *wayang kulit* style. But when confronted by the Demon-head puppet, the Puru (Lunar Dynasty) King is swallowed up, chariot, charioteer and all, in a total eclipse. As the writhing Demon (with struggling King trapped inside) sinks into the East, the very order of the universe is threatened. Cacophony subsides into an eerie calm. Moments pass, until the King’s chariot emerges, peacefully returned to the path of the sun. As the screen darkens, the dancing live actors float toward the serenity of the Golden Mountain, whose outline glows from within like a shadow screen, sharpening their silhouettes.

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<sup>1</sup>Many student reviewers mentioned these simple but effective symbols.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of “respectful quotation” of performance styles, please see my paper in the proceedings of the 2009 Hawaii International Conference on the Arts and Humanities available on their website: <http://www.hichumanities.org/>

#### Works Cited

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