**Editor's Note:** A syllabus for the course described in this article is also available in the online supplements for this issue.

# Shadow *R & J* and *The Girl Who Flew*: Introducing Asia through Theater in an Interdisciplinary Honors Program

**By Adam D. Frank**

Readers of *Education About Asia* who have no background in Asian theater should take heart that they, too, can incorporate Asian theater as a tool for teaching about Asia. The caveat is that when one adopts a form of theater that traditionally takes decades to master, one must openly embrace ignorance, value hybridity, and measure success not in terms of whether students have rendered a style authentically, but whether they have captured some spirit of a particular style in order to tell the story they wish to tell. In my own case, while I have formal training as an actor and have worked professionally in film and theater since my early twenties, I have minimal training in Asian theater techniques (a mask workshop in Hong Kong and a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)-sponsored Asian theater workshop at University of The Redlands). I make no pretense of expertise in any of these forms. This article, therefore, should be read as a kind of do-it-yourself guide to incorporating Asian content into college honors courses in ways that might transgress both teacher and student comfort zones.

## Theater Courses in the Context of the Schedler Honors College Curriculum

The Norbert O. Schedler Honors College at the University of Central Arkansas, founded in 1982, offers a minor in Interdisciplinary Studies and is open to majors from across the university. In practice, this means all the instructors in the program, who themselves represent half a dozen disciplines, strive to incorporate interdisciplinary pedagogies and content in all our courses in one form or another. For example, a course taught by an anthropologist may include literature and film, or a course taught by a religious studies specialist may include a unit on ethnography or human geography. The honors conversation we cultivate is not only one of tolerance and inclusiveness, but also one that requires each student to address viewpoints that may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar. In turn, this requires the faculty to respect the challenges that some students may face accepting art forms and ideas sometimes rooted in alien spiritual perspectives.

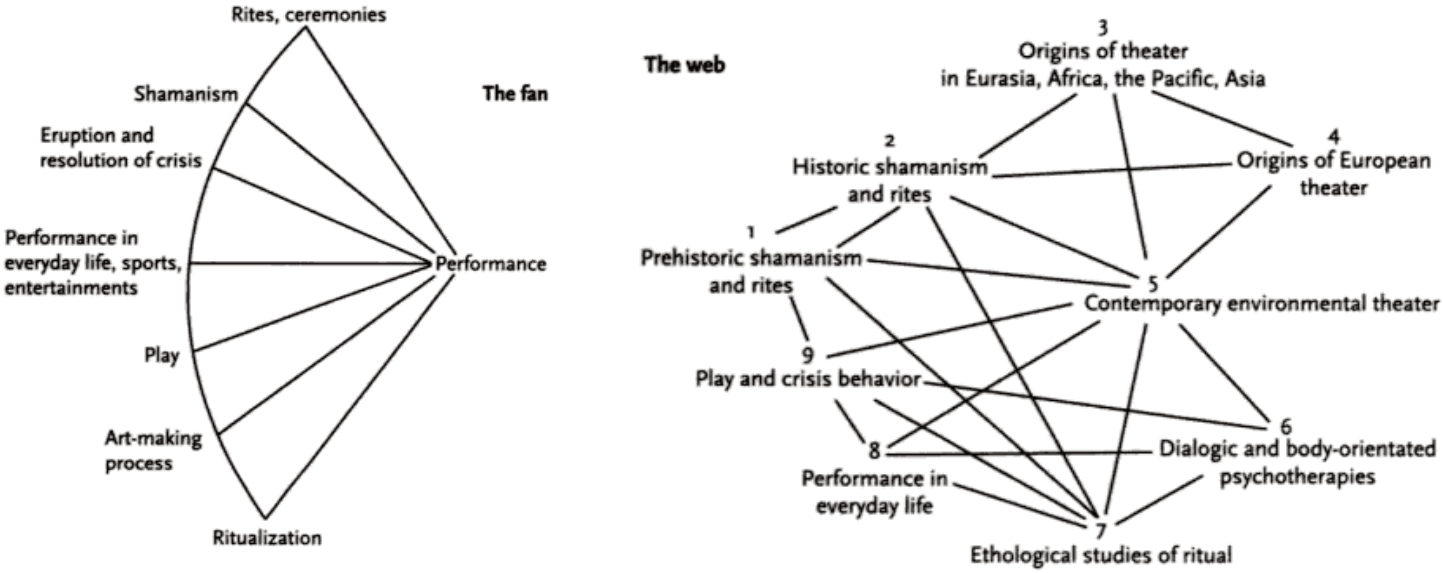
The two sophomore-level honors courses I discuss in this article, Asian Theater and Theater and Social Justice, build in strategies to address such challenges. Students in Asian Theater spend the first half of the semester learning about a wide variety of theater styles, including *kabuki*, *Noh*, and *bunraku* from Japan; Beijing Opera from China; *wayang kulit* from Indonesia; *kathakali* from India; and several other Southeast and East Asian forms. During the second half of the term, they apply what they have learned to a devised performance based on a William Shakespeare play. In the four incarnations of the course I have taught since 2007, productions have included *Macbeth, King Lear, A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and *Romeo and Juliet.* Depending on the way we decide to tell the story, the specific Asian theater techniques we adopt, and the technical requirements of the performance, each of these productions involves unique requirements. Thus far, the results have been happily creative, highly hybridic, and intellectually challenging for the students.

The second course, Theater and Social Justice, taught for the first time in spring 2016, incorporated Asian content through *The Girl Who Flew*, a shadow version of a short story based on my experiences working in a Vietnamese refugee camp in Hong Kong in the 1980s. In this case, the challenge was to provide historical and political contexts for the story, with the goal of using the devised performance as a springboard for immediate discussion with the audience about contemporary refugee crises and conditions. The play was devised using a Living Newspaper model rooted in forms created during the 1930s by theater artists in the Federal Theater Project, and, much like the Living Newspapers of that time, the specific content of the performance is intended to inspire action and social change.

The challenges these courses presented for both students and instructor, the techniques we used to create performances out of them, and the students' assessments of their own work are discussed in detail below.

## The Method of Devised Theater

The style of preparation, rehearsal, and performance I have adopted for both Asian Theater and Theater and Social Justice is a variation of devised theater.[1] Devised theater may take many forms. In its most orthodox form, actors devise scripts (sometimes from a chosen topic, sometimes a script that arises out of movement or improvisational games), and the final product viewed by an audience is the result of a collaborative, organic creative effort. The per-




Richard Schechner's model of performance as both a fan and web. Source: Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies,* 2nd. ed (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 17.

formance pieces subsequently discussed adopt a less strict interpretation of devised performance. Students begin with a written script (in this case, Shakespeare or a short story), then distill what they consider to be key elements of the story that most lend themselves to the puppetry technique we have adopted. Because the technical elements of puppetry forms both limit and free the performer in rather specific ways, much of the creativity involves finding ways to meld technique and story. In *King Lear*, *Macbeth,* and *The Girl Who Flew*, actors performed wordlessly; in *Midsummer* and *Romeo and Juliet*, narrators supplemented the puppetry with lines from the original texts. In all cases, the student performers are tasked with using the technologies in front of them to devise scenes through largely symbolic means. Thus, in *The Girl Who Flew*, a shadow puppet of a flying girl moves across a map of Southeast Asia with arrows leading from Việt Nam to Hong Kong. The map background and puppet movement replace the written narrative from the original story. Using this distill and devise technique, students are active participants in the creation of the piece. As they learn techniques, they discover new ways to convey the narrative. My function as director is to cultivate the collaboration and to make decisions based on what they bring to the table.

### Asian Theater: *Romeo and Juliet*

In spring 2015, my Asian Theater students devised a wayang kulit-based performance of *Romeo and Juliet.* Wayang kulit is a Javanese shadow puppet form. Traditionally, an array of ornate leather puppets are controlled by a single puppeteer, the *dalang.*[2] The dalang also provides all the voices for the shadow puppets, which are set between a single light source (an oil lamp, candle, or light bulb) and a screen. In our production, we combined this system with a contemporary shadow puppet format pioneered by Larry Reed of ShadowLight Theater in San Francisco and Manual Cinema in Chicago, where overhead projectors are used to project images of backgrounds and shadow puppets onto the screen.

In the weeks prior to devising the performance, students in Asian Theater are first asked to examine their fundamental notions of performance. Drawing upon the work of performance studies theorists like Richard Schechner and Deborah Kapchan, and anthropologist Victor Turner's work on ritual and performance (excellent examples of which are available in Henry Bial's *Performance Studies Reader*)[3], we work toward expanding notions of performance so that the strange becomes familiar and the familiar strange. As part of this work, students are asked to experience a performance and analyze it in terms of its components, its purpose, its audience, etc. While many students choose plays or concerts, others focus on things like political debates, fashion, or food culture. Simply asking, "What is performance?" starts a lively conversation, and, in the context of both Shakespeare and several Asian theater styles, offers opportunities for discussion of historical changes in audience definitions of performance.

Providing specific tools for analyzing performance at this early stage is a particularly crucial step. For example, prior to embarking on their mini-fieldwork project in performance, students in the course are exposed to Schechner's perform-

Tybalt confronts Romeo. University of Central Arkansas, spring 2015 Asian Theater production of *Romeo and Juliet*. All course photos in this article are courtesy of the author.

Juliet puppet under construction. Asian Theater, University of Central Arkansas, spring 2015, Conway, Arkansas.

Puppeteer constructing Lady Montague shadow puppet for *Romeo and Juliet*. Asian Theater, University of Central Arkansas, spring 2015, Conway, Arkansas.

The puppet cast of *Romeo and Juliet*. Asian Theater, University of Central Arkansas, spring 2015, Conway, Arkansas.

ance fan and performance web models. In the fan model of performance, the concept of performance functions as the handle of the fan, and the many types of performance radiate from the handle (e.g., rites/ceremonies, shamanism, performance in everyday life, sports, etc.). In the web model, the notion of performance is decentered so that lines might be drawn from pre-historic shamanism and rites to play, to dialogic psychotherapies, or to contemporary environmental theater. In turn, from these examples of performance radiate many others. In discussion, we expand both models to include many examples of performance that go unmentioned in Schechner, providing a moment for students to actively expand their notion of performance. I then ask students to apply one or the other model to the real-life performance context they have chosen to analyze.

Once students have demonstrated some absorption of the performance discussion through writing and discussion, we revisit a piece that, in our program, every student in the class has read the previous year: the introduction to Edward Said's *Orientalism.* In reading Said, our goal is to establish both the limits and the possibilities of exploring Asian theater through performance. In exercising self-reflection in how we approach these forms, we also free ourselves to draw upon them as artists. While this approach has its drawbacks (namely, both "Orientalism" and "hybridity" are difficult concepts for second-year undergrads to get their heads around), I have found it to be an effective means of motivating students to approach the material with a balance of respect and creativity.

Once the theoretical and conceptual background has been laid, we begin exploring specific theater forms. I use a combination of readers and theater history texts, primarily James Brandon's *Cambridge Guide to Asian Theater*, and also rely heavily on websites and video.[4] In addition to documentaries, I incorporate fiction film whenever possible. For example, when we read about Beijing Opera from the Cambridge text, students watch the 1987 Hong Kong film *Painted Faces*, which is the story of film stars Jackie Chan's and Sammo Hung's upbringing as members of The Seven Little Fortunes Beijing Opera troupe in Hong Kong. Through *Painted Faces,* students are able to see training methods and modern social and historical contexts for Beijing Opera. The film opens a window to discuss the political and cultural effects of the Chinese Civil War, the popularity of American and British pop music in Hong Kong in the 1960s, and the conditions that set notions of tradition against forces of modernity. Introducing new forms by first providing historical and cultural contexts becomes the norm as students are exposed to other forms over the next several weeks. In principle, we never detach forms from these contexts, though there is never enough time in the semester to build a deep foundation, and there are many times during the rehearsal process where students revert to stereotype or begin to mix terminology about different forms or mix up forms and cultural contexts. The instructor's job in these moments is to engage in practiced differentiation, reminding students to revisit the texts, timelines, and clips that provide us with contexts for particular forms. Some instructors may choose quizzes or texts for this purpose, while others may simply habituate the process through class discussion.

About halfway through the semester, after Asian Theater students have received a good deal of exposure to a variety of forms, we begin rehearsals. In spring 2015, students performed *Romeo and Juliet* with wayang kulit-style shadow puppetry as our base form. In order to link the intellectual content of the course with the performance, I asked student devisors to think and write about Orientalist elements of our own aesthetic choices and to point up the artificiality of hybridizing several forms. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, several students composed original music for the performance, including a combination of keyboards, flute, and, for percussion, wood blocks and pot lids. The composition began with a musical reference to a stereotypically "Asian" riff, then moved into music that focused on complementing and telling the story.

Hybridity ended up taking many forms in this production. Four *tayu* (a term for "narrators" drawn from several forms of Japanese theater) sat on stools and read from our cutting of the play, voicing all the characters, while eight puppeteers worked behind three different screens. During the opening fight scenes in the play, puppeteers emerged from behind the eight battle patterns. In operating their shadow puppets, puppeteers also sometimes drew upon kabuki and kathakali movement styles. Specifically, puppeteers imbued their puppets in battles scenes with the sometimes-powerful, heavy footwork of kabuki or with the rhythmic, dance-like movement of kathakali, adapting movement to underscore story elements. Since puppeteers were given the freedom to play with all the forms we studied, unusual hybrids often emerged in the rehearsal process. As we built our performance, we continually revisited the traditional forms, including the construction of the puppets themselves. Thus, the video we watched in preparation to rehearse continued to play an

important role throughout the rehearsal period: While our *Romeo and Juliet* puppets did not imitate Javanese puppets in appearance, they did so in terms of basic design and puppeteering requirements. At the end of the term, students were asked to write a final evaluative paper specifically addressing both the effectiveness of the techniques we chose to focus on and the earlier theoretical material from Schechner, Turner, and Said. Indeed, the final learning objective for the students in this course is to apply an analytical lens to their own experience as performers.

There are clear pros and cons to exposing students to Asian theater through experiential methods. Even in a sixteen-week semester, there is never enough time to both properly survey performance styles in their cultural contexts *and* create an effective performance based on those styles. On the other hand, the student puppeteers who devised and performed our wayang kulit version of *Romeo and Juliet* came away from the experience with a more grounded understanding and appreciation of the art form. Perhaps the most important outcome of the course is that very few students (most of them nonperformers) expect they will be able to achieve the performance goals we set out at the beginning of the semester, but enthusiastic audiences teach them otherwise by the end of the term. They come away from the experience having been stretched in unexpected ways.

**Theater and Social Justice: *The Girl Who Flew***

Theater and Social Justice is a course I taught for the first time in spring 2016. Partly by intent and partly by coincidence, the students in the class devised a shadow play based on *The Girl Who Flew*, a story I wrote from memories of my experiences working in Hong Kong's Vietnamese refugee camps from 1986 through 1989.

The structure of this course is similar in many ways to the structure of Asian Theater: a grounding in theory, followed by a period of practice. In this course, however, students are ultimately tasked with participating in a theater company called "The Ozark Living Newspaper" and devising short playlets on hot-button social issues. They perform these pieces for young adult and adult audiences, following up each performance with guided discussions about the issues presented on the stage. The model we follow for this audience participation is Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*,[5] which allows for audiences not only to comment on what they are seeing on the stage but also suggest ways of making positive changes as well, which actors and/or audience members then enact in the performance space.

Our distilled and devised version of *The Girl Who Flew* came about as a result of an unexpected invitation early in the spring 2016 semester to participate in a puppet slam sponsored by the university's theater department. Student groups were invited to present a combination of devised theater and puppetry with the common theme "Peace, Love, and Refugee." Given the short space between the beginning of the term and the early February performance date, I invited the class to devise a shadow puppet piece based on *The Girl Who Flew*. The story follows the relationship between a fake fortuneteller whom everyone in the prison-like camp seeks out and pays even though they know he's fake and a young girl who secretly projects her consciousness and can visit the distant families and friends of the people in the camp. The fortuneteller and the girl who flies form a unique friendship.

Early in the process, we decided to use two overhead projectors with transparency backgrounds and shadow puppets for this piece (all of which we describe as "puppets"). Two teams of two puppeteers handle the puppets, one team on each projector. The projectors sit behind the screen but create a very different quality and focus of light than would wayang-style light sources, such as work lights or oil lamps. The shadows are projected onto a screen made from hanging sheets and PVC. In structuring the piece, we decided to focus on four to five scenes from the story, using Vietnamese and Hong Kong pop songs to define the beginning and end of each scene.

The students in the course were tasked not only with learning performance techniques but also with learning the details of complex social issues to the point where they could facilitate a conversation about those issues. *The Girl Who Flew* allowed the students (none of whom are of Vietnamese descent) to study an issue, time, and place about which they had virtually no previous knowledge. In studying the background for the piece, they re-visited the history of America's involvement in Việt Nam, the history of colonialism in Southeast Asia (a topic they were already exposed to the previous year through Said), and the parameters and process of determining refugee status under international agreements and protocols.

*The Girl Who Flew* and the other piece devised and performed in Theater and Social Justice (a play addressing the Charleston massacre and the Black Lives Matter movement) opened up a whole new range of possibilities for addressing student learning objectives for our honors students. The students entered the course knowing they would engage in a

Girl Who Flew comforting the fortuneteller. From *The Girl Who Flew*, Ozark Living Newspaper –Theater and Social Justice public performance at "Devised Puppet Slam: Peace, Love, Refugee," University of Central Arkansas, February 6, 2016, Conway, Arkansas.

Girl Who Flew attempting to rescue drowning refugee.From *The Girl Who Flew*, Ozark Living Newspaper –Theater and Social Justice public performance at "Devised Puppet Slam: Peace, Love, Refugee," University of Central Arkansas, February 6, 2016, Conway, Arkansas.

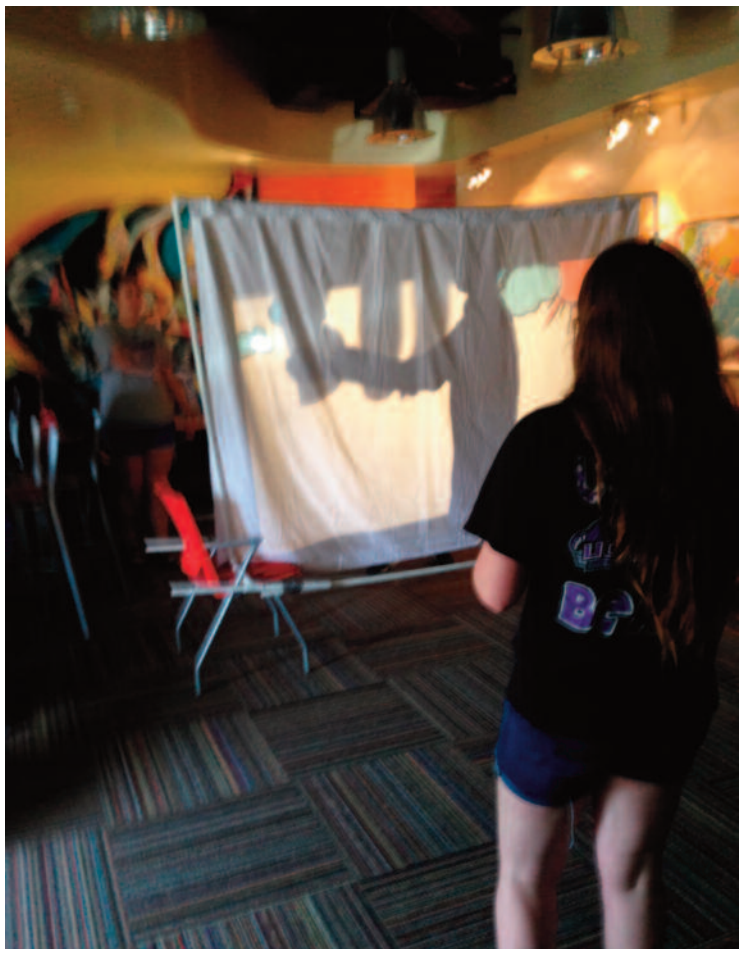
The fortuneteller accepting payment from a client in a Hong Kong refugee camp. From *The Girl Who Flew*, Ozark Living Newspaper –Theater and Social Justice performance at "Devised Puppet Slam: Peace, Love, Refugee," University of Central Arkansas, February 6, 2016, Conway, Arkansas.

The Girl Who Flew taking the Fortune Teller on a journey to his home in Việt Nam. From *The Girl Who Flew*, Ozark Living Newspaper –Theater and Social Justice public performance at "Devised Puppet Slam: Peace, Love, Refugee," University of Central Arkansas, February 6, 2016, Conway, Arkansas.

combination of theater and service around those issues. Engaging students in this way stimulates curiosity driven questions. As we devise the piece, proceeding through the plot of the story, students ask questions about history, politics, language, and culture. In line with the original Federal Theater Project Living Newspaper technique, a small group of students are tasked with dramaturging the piece (i.e., researching history, politics, historical contexts) and presenting their findings to the rest of the company. In both devising the performance and facilitating discussion about it, students thus operate from a foundation of knowledge on the issue at hand.

## Conclusion

Both the wayang kulit version of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Girl Who Flew* have provided opportunities for meeting Schedler Honors College student learning objectives in creative and satisfying ways. The distill and devise methods we used in both courses lend themselves to productive, stimulating dialogue throughout the process. Because the courses combine performance with a content-oriented intellectual grounding, students grow into an understanding of Asia some-



Asian Theater students participating in a workshop with professional puppeteer and theater artist Katie Campbell. University of Central Arkansas, Spring 2015, Conway, Arkansas.

what indirectly and incrementally. These are not survey courses and are not intended to replace courses where factual information and in-depth reading and research are the centerpieces of the syllabus. Rather, they are meant to provide experiential tools for accessing fundamental understandings of Asia and Asianness through creative processes. Given the experimental nature of these courses, course evaluations are particularly important, as is a final, evaluative paper that requires students to really think through what they have accomplished and to really question the depth and breadth of their own understanding.

NOTES

1. For excellent overviews of devised theater, see Tina Bicat and Chris Baldwin, eds. *Devised and Collaborative Theater* (Grantham, UK: Crowood, 2002), as well as Alison Oddey, *Devising Theater: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
2. Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
3. Henry Bial, *Performance Studies Reader,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007).
4. James Brandon, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theater* (London: Cambridge, 1997).
5. Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1993).

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