



History Of Shadow Theatre

Shadows have played a significant role in human storytelling for thousands of years. Their appearance in stories is often used as a way to build tension or fear. Evil villains can often be found lurking in them. Shadows have even been turned into an art form in their own right.

It seems that shadow puppet theatre probably began in China or India somewhere around 1,000 BCE. Both cultures had a type of show called “par” show. These involved scenes being painted onto canvas. While the story was narrated, a light would be placed behind the sheet. People would watch the shadows of the images that were cast onto the sheet.

There is evidence that these sheets had been replaced by puppets by 200 BCE. These are probably the first traditional puppet theatres. The puppets were jointed, which meant that they could be moved. For the first time, people were able to watch shadows moving across the screen in time with the story.

After these first puppet theatres, the art seems to have died out for a while. When the Mongols invaded the Middle East, they seem to have brought shadow theatres with them. They became popular again in the 1500s.

Many other Asian countries also have a history of shadow theatres. In Indonesia, “wayang” shows tell dramatic stories using puppets and humans. They are often complex shows with big orchestras providing backing music.

In Cambodia, shadow plays are called “Sbek Thom”. This means “large leather hide” and refers to the piece of leather that the shadows are cast onto. These plays are performed at religious ceremonies and as public performances in villages. They often tell Hindu myths and legends.

Thailand and Malaysia also have important shadow theatre histories. In Thailand, their “Nag Talung” shows have influenced modern Thai cinema as well.



Shadow plays reached Europe at the end of the 17th century. The first to introduce them was the Italians. Travelling Italian showmen would perform shadow puppet plays in Germany, England and France, and it became very popular. France and Italy embraced the new art form. It was popular for centuries. In France, it became a way to fight against the government during the French Revolution.

In modern times, shadow theatre remains popular in many parts of Asia. It is sometimes used as a way of adding impact to stories in films, but nowadays these are often created using computers rather than traditional puppets.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which word in the text tells you that shadows have been important to human stories?
2. What impression do you get of a villain who is “lurking” in the shadows?
3. Which word tells you that “wayang” stories are full of tension and excitement?
4. What does “complex” mean?
5. Find and copy a word that tells you that France and Italy loved shadow theatre.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

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Where do we think shadow theatre began?

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When were the first shadow plays performed?

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How were the first “par” shows different to later shadow plays?

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In which country are shadow plays called “Nag Talung”?

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How brought shadow theatre back to the Middle East?