Life in Shadows

The stuff of storytelling, in silver and small scale

The Harvard Theatre Collection has recently acquired from a London dealer a unique set of 124 miniature Indonesian shadow puppets and the gongs, drums, and other instruments of a full gamelan orchestra, 160 pieces in all. Made of silver in Jogjakarta, Java, to demonstrate mastery in smithery, and exhibited at a colonial exhibition in Semarang on October 3, 1914, the set celebrates one of the oldest storytelling traditions in the world, at the heart of Indonesian culture.

Villagers gather in the evening on holidays, at religious festivals, for weddings, births, circumcisions, exorcisms, and—on Bali—cremations, for a wayang kulit, or shadow-puppet play. The dalang (puppet master) sits cross-legged on the ground, with a flickering oil lamp above and behind him and a taut, translucent screen in front. He holds a hammer between the toes of his left foot to beat cues on his chest of puppets for the musicians behind him. He has at least 100 puppets—perhaps as many as 500 for performances with the highest production value. They are flat, stylized human figures, typically of leather, pierced and painted, hinged at the elbows and shoulders, and operated by rods. They range in size from seemly women 10 to 12 inches high to ogres and other bad actors 30 inches high. Puppets made to appear in aristocratic circles may be finely wrought of young, female, water-buffalo parchment and elegantly decorated with colors and gold leaf, but puppets can be made of cardboard.

The puppet master is able to work two figures at a time, throwing their articulated shadows on the screen for the audience on the other side. (Sometimes audience members come around to the dalang’s side, where there’s a lot more to be seen.) The stories he tells, meant to entertain and to offer moral and social instruction by example, are well known to the audience. Many are versions of the centuries-old Indian epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, reworked with an Indonesian spin. Some are tales of local history.

The dalang must be strong. His play traditionally begins at 9 p.m. and is in three parts, each three hours long, performed without breaks. While audience members are expected to tune out for naps, the dalang is not. He manipulates all puppets and provides spoken narrative and dialogue. He begins slowly, but pitch and pace increase, and by 3 a.m. the action is lively—with the hero dispatched the villain or saving the stolen princess. Celebrations thereafter continue until dawn.

“God dwells in the heart of all beings, Arjuna,” sings Krishna in one translation of the Bhagavad-gita. “Thy God dwells in thy heart. And the power of wonder moves all things—puppets in a play of shadows—whirling them onwards in the stream of time.”