

NORMAN LOCK

1. Can you talk about the inspiration for Shadowplay? What was on your mind while you were writing this novel?

Life apart from the page has become difficult – this, I know to be the result of self-consciousness, which in my case is a flinching from the assault of consciousness on a sensibility insufficiently armed against its painful disclosures. I'm sure this is true for many other sensitive people; I'm just one who has happened to make self-consciousness a subject of fiction. I've written stories in which I imagine myself – a writer of stories – entering the text itself after having transliterated myself deliberately into words or some other descriptive, symbolic system such as mathematics. It is a suicide neither more nor less deserving of censure than any other flight from reality. In *Shadowplay*, the shadow master Guntur becomes the words with which he improvises his rescue from the afterlife – from death – of a young woman he adores, a woman who exists for him as a story exists: powerfully, vividly, and illusorily. To possess her, he must interpolate her story into his own; he knows of no other way than by means of storytelling. His enjoyment of her is necessarily doomed because it has no corporeal dimension: he can enter her only as storytellers do the heart of their characters. Intimacy for Guntur is a play of shadows – a game for the mind – voyeurism and fetishism taken to their extremes, though he would not have thought of it in twentieth-century terms – is not entirely aware of his motivation. It is for the novel's narrator – an eighteenth-century Dutchman – to comprehend the significance of Guntur's paradox, which is also that of Pygmalion: the artist creator who, by virtue of his artistry, gives to his creation so strong a semblance of life that he must inevitably fall in love with it. Unlike the Greek myth however, Guntur's love is not returned – is shown to be transgressive and is therefore punished. A punishment given him for his arrogance and also for his having cut himself off from life.

While Candra lived, Guntur spoke to her only through the white, linen screen of his art – the translucent medium on which he projects, using the light of an oil lamp, the shadows of his hand-held puppets. The artist's estrangement, here, is seen as a necessary condition of his art. Guntur sits among the throng of his characters – each flat leather puppet carved in the likeness of a Hindu god, demon, prince, or princess projected onto the *dalang's* side of the story-screen, illuminated by the transfiguring light of storytelling. On their side of the screen, the audience sees only shadows – sees the artist not at all. Is this not the very essence of art and reason for the artist's sadness?

2. Before reading your book, I wasn't aware of the puppet theatre of Java, or of the dalangs who practice it. How did you happen upon it? Was it something you were already familiar with before beginning Shadowplay, or did the needs of the fiction lead you to look for an appropriate kind of theatre to fit your protagonist, Guntur?

I wanted to write about the artist's sadness and about the isolation to which the writer's life condemns me. Unless it is that writing is the mitigation I have chosen for an isolation I would feel regardless of my artist's life. And for a long time, I had wanted to write

about theatre – about my delight in its artifices, its power to invoke the unseen and to ravish by the use of illusion. I knew I wanted to write about the puppet theatre, which is theatre at its most illusory, i.e., at the greatest remove from the real. (That it is also a theatre without human actors may also be significant for a person in retreat, someone well on his way to being a misanthrope.) I had read about the Sicilian puppet theatre and attempted several times to write about it. But invariably the strings by which the puppets are manipulated forced on me the theme of freedom and its opposite: submission to a will not our own. I wasn't interested in elaborating that theme, nor was I happy with the visibility of that art's medium (the strings), nor did that theatre, in its naïve simplicity, hold for me the mystery of art. Then I remembered having seen a program about the Javanese shadow-puppet theatre, which in the remoteness of its origins possessed a strangeness and the mystery I wanted. To enact a parable of the artist's estrangement, nothing is more apt than a theatre of shadows, set in Java in the late sixteenth century. (That argument is, of course, Imperialist and betrays the ethnocentricity of the Westerner who satisfies in the Occidental world his need for the exotic.)

The *dalang* is an intermediary between characters whose originals inhabit the world's aboriginal stories – the immense, colorful, and powerful Hindu cosmology told in *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* – myths that seem nearly infinite in the multiplication of their stories and characters. I know them only a little, primarily from having watched Peter Brook's adaptation *The Mahabharata*. By his or her art, the *dalang* invokes ghosts from these ancient, archetypal stories, ghosts whose shadows seem to be cast from the beginning of the universe onto the present's story-screen. The *dalang* sits on one side of the screen with the ghosts; his audience on the other. (*Wayang*, the Indonesian word for theatre, also signifies the hand-puppets carved from flat leather pieces; felicitously for my purpose, *wayang* also means shadow and ghost.) In the shadows' distance from their originals (the distance between absence and presence), I found a device readymade to explore my interest in image and the original to which it points and how, in the distance between them, meaning can change. Earlier, I said that Guntur's art is transgressive. In bringing his characters – including Candra – into the light on the other side of the story-screen and allowing them to be seen, Guntur violates the prohibition in Islamic art against revealing supernatural originals, which led to the invention in Java of the shadow-puppet theatre. At least this is how I understand it.

3. Like some of your other books I've read, Shadowplay is at least in part a meditation on the act of storytelling itself. Throughout the book, there are many moments where Guntur contemplates various aspects of storytelling as they relate both to his own puppetry. For example:

For Gunter, the world was as a palace is to the king's steward. None of its rooms holds secrets: the least chair or spoon is familiar. But outside its walls, all is not so familiar—may be, in fact, a mystery. Gunter knew the remote corners of Java's sacred imagination, but the young woman's story—alien to it—discomfited him. Inflexible, his mind could not admit a story unhallowed by a thousand years of repetition.

Or:

To say that Arjuna or any other of Guntur's puppets had minds is only to suggest the inordinate degree to which Guntur had concentrated his attention on them. Dwelling exclusively on some few objects, the mind may sometimes overcome the distance between itself and them. It will imagine it is regarding other intelligences when these are, in actuality, only itself. Guntur had held his puppets in mind with so much fervor and fixity that he believed he could possess them where they lay shut up in their boxes. (Unless invisible powers had, in truth, materialized in Guntur's shadow puppets—in that case, they might be said to have minds and with them to have subjugated Guntur' own.)

To me, both of these paragraphs speak to different elements of the experience of storytelling, but of course, neither are conclusive in and of themselves, and can be read not as commentary by you, the author, but rather only as parts of Guntur's journey through the book. That said, all of the works of yours I've read seem to have these kinds of concerns, and I wonder how you see them now, looking back over these books. Is it a progression on your part, where what you had about storytelling earlier books like Grim Tales is superseded by the newer commentary, or is it a matter of continually adding to the whole in the hopes of slowly bringing together all your thoughts on storytelling through a whole body of work? How have you own thoughts on storytelling changed over the course of your career?

To say that I am a writer and am interested in stories is not the tautology it might appear. At least for one who was once suspicious of stories. I came of age when language was foregrounded and stories were mere plots and to be despised. Even before language was preeminent, characterization was everything; the psychological work of fiction, this was the ideal to which a young writer with very little experience of world literature – with no experience at all of anti-naturalistic forms – aspired. My mistrust of stories may have been a misunderstanding of what fiction is; even psychological fiction tells stories – yes? I may have confused story with plot, or perhaps not. Do we not seem to prefer “fiction” and “narrative” to “story” in our description of what we do? In our minds don't we make a distinction between literary fiction and mere stories, which are what general readers seek in the best-sellers we disdain? (Perhaps writers younger than I are today suspicious even of the literary.)

In any case, for someone who has come to love telling stories, it is not surprising that I should think about storytelling and – having thought about it – write about it. But I am not so interested to describe its conditions and processes (this, after all, has been done in metafiction, which is already old-fashioned) as I am to consider the relationship of an image to its original. This preoccupation is also a commonplace, though my fascination lies in the uncanniness of the relationship – its supernatural aspect. The origin of my fascination may not be literature or theories of literature-making at all but the darkroom where once I spent a good deal of time watching images develop after the intervention of light. That experience thrilled and impressed me and predisposed me to what might easily be understood in terms of supernatural process. I understood it that way.

(My appearing sometimes as a character in my stories also has its origins in the pictorial arts rather than in literature – was the result of a painting imperfectly remembered. When I was a teenager, I saw Dalí's *Premonition of Spanish Civil War*. The bearded man who stands and looks at the monstrous creation I had mistaken for the artist himself.)

I have not – to answer one of your questions – set out deliberately to write a commentary on storytelling. Nonetheless, I am conscious of the act of writing, though there is little premeditation in how I write. What I came to write about Guntur and his storytelling was accidental: I mean that I discovered it during the writing of the novel – among the novel's words that had preceded the moment of discovery. I saw the story – imperfectly – before I set out to write it. In a longer piece, I have a notion of the story's course, if not its shape and detail.

In several fictions, I have used the Funambulist, or tightrope-walker, as a character and artist's surrogate. In the Funambulist's aloofness, in the risks taken, in the deliberate yet giddy headlong on a scarcely visible wire – in the tightrope-walker's terrible isolation – I recognized a perfect metaphor for the estranged artist. Writing seems to me to be a kind of stepping out, bravely or recklessly, on a wire that increases before me for as long as I speak or write words. This is what Guntur does in his rescue of Candra. To stop writing is to fall. Perhaps this is why I am helpless not to write.

4. You spoke in an interview with Blake Butler [hobartpulp.com (archives)] about the influence on your work of the anthology *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction*, published in 1971 and edited by Phillip Stevick. Can you speak a little about that influence, and how reading that book shifted your writing?

I read that anthology at the same time I read Donald Barthelme's first stories. I was nineteen and familiar with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American and British literature. You can imagine what Barthelme meant to me, or Russell Edson's or Enrique Anderson Imbert's tiny engines of malice and magic, or Ionesco's "Rhinoceros," or Hildesheimer's silent and baroque "A World Ends." The stories, or anti-stories, in that anthology and in Barthelme's *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* were impossibly marvelous. They excited me as had no other literary experience. They did what my discovery the year before of Paul Klee's and Miró's paintings had done: authorized for me a fantastic, an anti-naturalistic, and essentially joyous art regardless of how sobering the subject matter could be. Though I take pleasure now in writing fictions that can hardly be called anti-stories, I am resolutely an anti-naturalistic writer – a fantasist who identifies the language of fiction itself as a primary writing experience, perhaps as the preeminent one. In my writing, I would exalt the artifice of Matisse, or of Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium":

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and enameled
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Such an anti-Democratic, elitist view of art is sure to win me few admirers. I am, in fact, surprised at the number of my readers. But as I will read with interest Eugene Marten's *Waste* (a supreme example of American Naturalism and socio-psychological literature), I would ask that interest also be shown to writing that has nothing to do with either – is a theatre of invention, of the marvelous, whose characters are embodied by words. That art, it seems to me, is truly avant-garde.

5. In 2011, a volume of your plays will be published by Noemi Press. How does your fiction writing interact with your playwriting? Are they completely different activities, or does one continue to influence the other?

What attracted me to the theatre was not so much dramatic narratives, regardless of their power to alter my consciousness, but their stage imagery. Brecht's destruction of theatre's fourth wall – his insistence that theatre be another mode of discourse, of thought – well, I understood it, but even in those plays of his which made a principle of alienation, I was captivated by alienation's devices, the very elements of theatre: sets, properties and stage furniture, lighting, music, costumes – all that serves to magnify action, thought, and characterization in what is essentially for me an operatic art. One of the radical directors of the last half of the twentieth century, Peter Brook posited a theatre stripped of everything but a character performing an action. Allowing myself to be

enthralled by the play's physical aspects – desiring to be so transported, I dreamed of a theatre stripped of human beings, where nothing remained but the illusory space.

Interestingly, Brook's first production, of a Shakespeare play, relied for its set design on paintings by Watteau – gorgeous, romantic, and highly wrought as a Fabergé egg. Five decades later, Brook produced *The Mahabharata*, as elaborate a stage picture as anything created for the American melodramas at the end of the nineteenth century, where one might thrill to a real locomotive traversing the stage. (What might happen to the *reality* of a locomotive in a situation like that we'll leave for another time, or to Wolfgang Hildesheimer, whose *The Collected Stories* I recommend in The Ecco Press edition, which can be gotten – at this moment at least – from Abe Books).

My own plays are indebted largely to the Theatre of the Absurd, especially to Ionesco's and Dürrenmatt's. The farther removed the work became from the representational world of the dominant American drama – the more experimental their proposed staging and anti-naturalistic their language – the closer they came to closet drama. In their resemblance to Post-War European drama of the metaphoric sort, they were deemed without interest to a general American audience. By the end of my playwrighting career, stylized language and stage imagery had become my preeminent concerns. I was no longer writing plays – I was writing literature, or at least an avant-garde literature. One of the most stylized of those plays – an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* – evolved years afterward into my first novel, *A History of the Imagination*. In the play (called, I think, *White Africa*), I transformed Conrad's wilderness, which to me is a conceptual one – a literary one – into an Absurdist landscape. My jungle like Conrad's was a construct of words. In that play, which was never performed, I imagined the African jungle as a kind of nightclub inhabited by cigarette girls, hat checks, a jazz band, safari hunters, and King Kong as a debonair young gorilla in top hat and tails, who danced to "It's a Fine Romance." That is precisely the world of my novel, which is also words.

If we accept, as I have, that stories are writings – are neither more nor less than congeries of words – we are at liberty to create idiosyncratic models of the world, which are as valid as mathematical or scientific descriptions of reality insofar as each, in turn, gives way inevitably to a successor. In any case, I consider the products of my imagination – in as much as the imagination and its product are of this world – to be real. (I believe there is no Reality, at least none knowable for us; and what we take to be real is only a consensual reality subscribed to by the culture's most vocal.)

The theatre – especially the theatrical elements that make for what purists might consider decadent – continues to function in my prose as settings or as metaphors for existence – an existence whose laws and conditions I am pleased to simplify, complicate, or distort into stage engines. By stage engine, I mean a construct that runs according to its own peculiar principles to generate meanings. Readers will find this to be so in *A History of the Imagination*, *Land of the Snow Men*, and prominently in *Joseph Cornell's Operas*, *Pieces for Small Orchestra*, and in *Shadowplay*.

5. What other writing projects are you currently working on?

I am finishing *A Book of Imaginary Colophons: Alphabets of Desire & Sorrow*. Rather than describe it, I'll give you a sample:

ALPHABET OF EMPIRE

The dream imperial whose figures were the cross, the sword, and astrolabe increased westerly for Juan Díaz, from the Canary archipelago to Mexico's gilded edge, as his eyes fixed on emeralds mined from the ungovernable sea and amulets milled by aboriginal light. Later, on an alien plateau, the Spaniard yielded to the flower gardens of Moctezuma, the bridges of Tenochtitlan (lacustrine city surpassed only by Constantinople), and the obsidian knife. At Tlacopan, during *el árbol de la noche triste* (Gethsemane of defeat and sorrow when Cortés wept), Juan Díaz wrote by greasy light to his father in Seville a letter inscribed with barbaric forms that told – though the old *grande* was unable to pronounce them – of a country annexed by death for death's own paradise.

After that, I hope to write something else that has never before been imagined. For me nothing else is worth the trouble.