

COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

From the Olympics and the Oscars to talent shows and Sadler's Wells, **Marianka Swain** explores the extraordinary renaissance of shadow theatre

Last year's unlikely *Britain's Got Talent* winner was not a singer, or a comic, or even a street dance crew, but a strangely moving Hungarian shadow act that also wowed at the Olympic Oath Ceremony. The global success of this partially revived, partially created genre surprised everyone, not least those responsible for its inception, renowned American company Pilobolus Dance Theatre.

"It's both a pleasure and a horror to see others playing around with it," admits executive producer Itamar Kubovy. "The pleasure comes from knowing you've opened up a new art form, one that resonates around the world."

Back in 2006, Hyundai asked Pilobolus to do a commercial in which the shape of the car was evoked by the silhouette of dancers' bodies. "They asked



if such a thing was possible, and I said 'Of course', having no idea whether it was or not!"

After some trial and error, Pilobolus created a well-received ad, which was seen by Laura Ziskin, producer of the 79th Academy Awards. "She said

it's just the sort of amazing human achievement we'd like Hollywood to stand for – could you do this with movies? Five days of experimentation later, we sent them a test and before we knew it, we were broadcasting to millions with pieces depicting ►

"IT DOESN'T WORK WITHOUT ABSOLUTE TRUST. OUR ELEPHANT TAKES FOUR PEOPLE, AND DANCERS AROUND YOU MIGHT SAY, 'HEY, MOVE STAGE RIGHT A BIT' AND SO ON – YOU CAN'T SEE WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE FROM THE OUTSIDE, SO YOU NEED THAT INPUT"

the nominated films.”

The exposure led to numerous requests for short performances, but “it wasn’t until we stood back from it that we realised, we’ve actually developed a whole new set of tools – could we apply those to a full narrative show?” Thus began a yearlong “collective investigation” involving nine choreographers. “Everyone brings something different, and you also have a built-in audience telling you what makes sense and what doesn’t.”

Dancer Lauren Yalango, new to the company, was excited by its reputation for “doing extraordinary things”, but even she was taken aback when confronted with “a group of people in a room, with a light and a sheet! I did have a moment of thinking, ‘Help. I’m not trained for this,’ but it was new for everyone, so we were exploring together.”

“At first, you almost feel dyslexic, because when you’re behind the screen you’re looking at monitors showing stage right and left so you know how it looks from the audience, but you’re doing the opposite to create the right effect. You have to let go of what you think you know – but that’s great for dancers, for anyone really, to keep growing and learning.”

“Our big epiphany was realising we didn’t have to put everything behind the screen,” recalls Itamar. “The magic comes from



the transformation of person to their shadow self, the fact that the shadow both is and is not that person, so we decided to move constantly between them.”

The company researched shadow play traditions, from Far Eastern puppets through to 20th-century filmic experimentation, “and we translated that storytelling to our way of working,” explains Itamar. “Pilobolus is founded on the principle of combining bodies, sharing weight, forming intense connections, so we’re essentially using that in place of puppets.”

“*Shadowland* is a classic fable told through the lens of this reworked form, mixed with our 30 years’ experience and physical vocabulary. It’s a coming-of-age tale about a dog-girl, really a

metaphor for self-acceptance – it speaks in freak-show traditions, but also how we feel about ourselves growing up.”

Lauren, who plays the protagonist, loves her character’s journey: “It’s hard to express different layers in dance sometimes, subtle emotional shifts that people can see at the back of the theatre, but the screen shows every detail, so there’s much greater scope.” It also means no room for error: “I wasn’t quite on my leg in a turn once, and I could pull that off normally, but everything’s magnified.”

“It doesn’t work without absolute trust. Our elephant takes four people, and dancers around you might say, ‘Hey, move stage right a bit’ and so on – you can’t see what you look like from the outside, so you need that input.”

**“I WASN’T QUITE ON MY LEG IN A TURN ONCE,
AND I COULD PULL THAT OFF NORMALLY, BUT
EVERYTHING’S MAGNIFIED”**



Left, below and bottom, scenes from *Shadowland*

Itamar was concerned about communicating the plot, but he received valuable advice from *SpongeBob SquarePants* writer Steve Banks. “He knew how to get across clear story points with limited depictions – not to make it cartoonish, but he helped us find the balance between fantasy and clarity.”

“We also used film-editing techniques. Film has a widely understood grammar, such as someone leaving the screen in one direction and entering from another, meaning they’re coming from a different place, or ending a scene by cutting to black.”

Shadowland retains the folk art tradition, with more than 300 handmade props, but the understanding of light sources and perspective is also a science. Lauren loves that dancers run their own lighting boards, tie off screens and handle props. “From the front, it’s smooth sailing; from the back, it’s organised chaos! Once our main light source went out and we had to improvise the whole thing just using flashlights.



there’s no language barrier.

“We did a workshop with young people at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and it was mindboggling seeing them slipping into it so easily, making their own props and creating a new world. I’d love to see more of that imaginative engagement, less staring at a ready-made world on a computer.”

Since the birth of *Shadowland*, the art form has spread like wildfire, from talent shows to YouTube, “which is hugely flattering,” says Lauren. “It’s a shame when they just copy us, but when they keep the ball rolling, that’s very cool.”

Shadow play has survived for hundreds of years because people have built on it; let’s hope it can survive a few hundred more by continuing to expand its horizons. ●

Shadowland is at the Peacock Theatre from March 11 to 30. To book, see www.sadlerswells.com or call 0844 412 4300.