

# Behind the Shadows: Light.

**A queer and feminist guide  
to using Shadow Theatre  
and Theatre of the Oppressed  
to address gender-based violence.**

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## IMPRESSUM:

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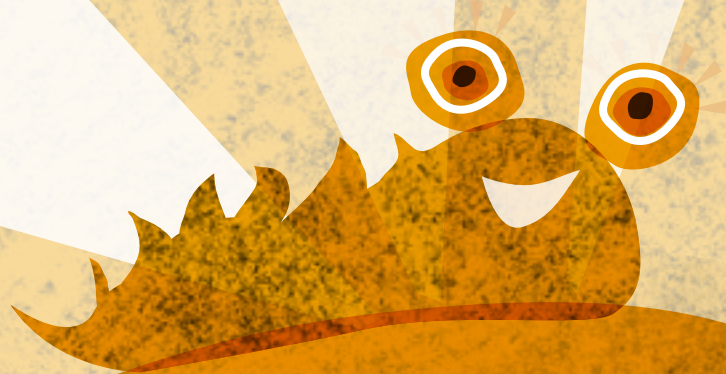
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**There is light...**



**Kiki is part of the light.**

**...and shadow.**



**Coco is part of the shadow.**





**They say this is it.  
Either you are part  
of the light,  
or you are part  
of the shadow.**

**And there is more.**

**This is Bow**

**And now?**





# Gender-Based Violence from a Queer\* Feminist Perspective

How did Bow's story make you feel? Have you ever felt like you didn't fit into a box? How can we honour the humanity of the Bows of the world, the colourful and diverse people who don't fit into the limited boxes society provides?

Putting a new-born baby into one of two boxes (either boy or girl), with all the gendered stereotypes and expectations that come with it, is one real-life example for such a violent categorization.

First, it is biologically incorrect that there are only two sexes (intersex) and second, it denies people the right to self-determine their gender.

**Putting people into a box is an act of violence.**

Patriarchal and heteronormative structures lay the foundation for such violence, marginalization and discrimination against people whose sex, gender, sexuality or other characteristics, question the dominant cis, male, white, able-bodied and heterosexual norm. These structures are also the basis on which **oppressive relationships** can flourish. Including intimate partner violence, which can exist in any relationship, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

We challenge these structures with this guide written from feminist and queer perspectives. We ask ourselves:

How can we overcome dichotomies in our work and methods?

How can we create more space for diversity and uncover the full spectrum of identities and experiences?

How can we create fertile ground for healthy relationships to flourish?

Despite the alarming prevalence, gender-based violence (GBV) and the experiences of survivors remain taboo and often shrouded in shame. GBV is rarely openly addressed, remaining in the shadows.

**Dis\_abled people** are **2-5 times** more often **survivors** than people who are not dis\_abled

In Europe, **one in three women** has experienced physical and/or sexual violence



**Trans people** are **more likely** to experience violence than **cis-gender people**



**BIPOC** are **more likely** to experience violence than **white** people



In Europe, **two in five LGBTIQ** people have experienced harassment for being **LGBTIQ** in the previous year





We are **all** involved in and affected by gender-based violence (GBV) in one way or another, from sexist advertisement and street harassment to our most intimate relationships. Even our relationship with the planet and with our own bodies can be marked by violence rooted in the same structures.

The discourse around GBV often focuses on the discrimination of women or on cis men hurting women. The impact of structural and interpersonal **violence** from the mainstream **against queer people and communities** often stays invisible.

The same is true for violence **within queer relationships**: It exists but is often wrapped in silence. Can we call out our own community members?

We've internalised some of the attitudes and beliefs that enable GBV, and even our feminist and queer movements can perpetuate violence, discrimination, and exclusion. We need more dialogue, moving from passing the violence we experience on to others, to healthy relationships where we can acknowledge our own role in any harm that takes place. What is the role of **love and joy** in our movements?

It is everyone's responsibility to work towards change. But are we, and how can we become, **response-able**?

This guide represents an ongoing journey rather than a final destination. Our aim is to inspire reflection, pose questions, and encourage dialogue that can help us build **healthier, more supportive relationships, communities, and societies**.



For this **dialogue** to happen, we need safer and braver spaces, that celebrate feminism as well as the diversity and fluidity of sex, gender and sexuality.



## Queer\*Feminist Safer and Braver Spaces

Safer and braver spaces are spaces where we feel **safe enough to dare**, to try on and try out, to fail, to make mistakes, to cry and grieve together, to get back up and support and celebrate each other. Where we dare to be vulnerable and show up as our full unfiltered beautiful selves. Spaces where we include our **bodies and emotions** at the core of our work. Where we dare to feel pleasure in countless ways. In these spaces we may also reclaim our sexuality as an integral part of our being and way of connecting with ourselves and each other. As marginalized people, **practicing self-care and claiming pleasure as our birthright is a revolutionary act.**

Let's create inclusive spaces where we support the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our communities. Spaces where we are allies and sisters and where **solidarity is a verb.**

## Trauma-Aware Facilitation

When working with individuals who may have experienced violence or discrimination, it is essential to adopt a trauma-aware approach. This approach involves being mindful of potential **triggers** and identifying signs of distress. And to foster a supportive environment that addresses the needs of survivors and promotes **healing and resilience.** Introducing tools for self-regulation, **grounding**, and (re)connecting with the body and surroundings early in the process reminds everyone of the innate resources we have to work through trauma.

## Inviting Pleasure

How can we create a queer and feminist movement that is so sexy or joyful, that everyone wants to be part of it and contribute? In the words of Toni Cade Bambara,

**'The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.'**



# The Power of Theatre of the Oppressed

**Theatre of the Oppressed** (TO) is a political movement, philosophy, ethics and theatre practice. It originated in the 1960s during the Brazilian dictatorship when theatre director Augusto Boal and others started experimenting with theatre methods to support creative communities fighting against oppressive societal structures. When Augusto was in exile, he kept gathering theatre methods and games developed by people from different parts of the world, all fighting against external and internal sources of oppression. In TO, the people most impacted by oppression are the primary creators who bring their everyday issues on stage and involve the audience in actively researching avenues for positive change.

One of the most well-known methods of TO is **Forum Theatre**. It stages situations of injustice and invites the spectators to step on stage, try out creative alternatives and rehearse concrete actions to tackle oppression. In this way, the passive spectators become 'SpectActors'. TO leads from rehearsing revolution on stage to real-life community action.

Today, TO is shaped by practitioners, artists and activists from all over the world adapting from one context to another. In this guide, we share our practice of TO – focusing on a **queer and feminist position**.

# The Magic of Shadow Theatre

In some cultures, the shadow is considered the 5th element or even the representation of the soul. **Shadow Theatre** is an art form with a rich tradition dating back thousands of years in Asia, travelling along the Silk Road into Mediterranean cultures and all over the world.

Shadow Theatre is **magic**. The darkened theatre gives audiences an immersive, creative and sensitive experience with heightened perception. Shadow Theatre can take us into a dreamlike world inviting curiosity and play. Through cleverly positioned light sources, moving screens, dancing objects and bodies, sharp lines and utopian landscapes emerge. Adding music and colours, the audience is invited to experience the complex dimensions of a topic and emotions become tangible.

The best part? Everyone and everything has a shadow! Use a cloth and a light as your stage and draw or cut simple images into puppets. Or use everyday objects to create surprising effects. With shadows, **all of us can create theatre**.



# Combining **Shadow Theatre** and **Theatre of the Oppressed**

**Theatre of the Oppressed** (TO) politicises Shadow Theatre. Its ethics and values are an invitation to dive deep into topics that address structural, interpersonal and even internalised oppression. TO adds a perspective and concrete methods that can be integrated into Shadow Theatre, to affect change on individual, relationship and community levels.

On the other hand, **Shadow Theatre** opens an emotional space. It offers a breathing space to let participants and audiences cope with heavy issues within the topic of gender-based violence. Through metaphors, even violence can be shown, without directly reproducing it. Or, they may be used to add a poetic and emotional tone to a scene. Shadow Theatre can introduce complexity to a topic by making visible the inner fears and desires of oppressors and oppressed in Forum Theatre scenes. The screen can offer protection and people may feel safer to express themselves bravely with their bodies – fearing less stigma, gendered expectations, or shame.

The **combination** of Shadow Theatre and TO can make societal power structures visible. Combined they help to create spaces which inspire trust and honesty. These spaces feel safer, and more joyful and at the same time allow for braver interventions. Here we can humbly admit that we are part of the problem. And we can find aesthetic ways of expressing our utopias and desires for healthy relationships.



Drama Therapy, TO and Shadow Theatre have been combined to address gender-based violence through the **Shadow Liberation** method since 2010. In the process of developing this guide we combined all our experiences in working with body, queer and feminist perspectives and amazing shadow techniques. We encourage you to craft your own adaptations.



# How to Get Started with Shadows?

## Light sources

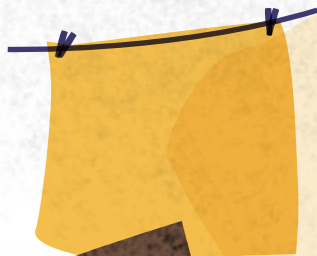


sun

halogen light



## Projection screens



bedsheet or hankerchief



torch



wall

## Shadow objects

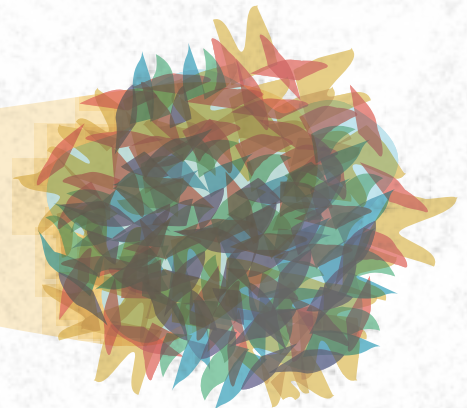
puppets and objects



body



## Light effects



beautiful reflections and light magic



# Designing a Theatre Process

This guide combines Shadow Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) to create dialogue on gender-based violence from a queer\*feminist perspective. You can use these techniques for different objectives and depending on your aim and the group you are working with, you might want to adapt the exercises.

In this chapter, we outline steps important to a theatre process. Each exercise is a microcosm of the whole workshop experience. There is an arch to each exercise like there is an arch to the entire process.

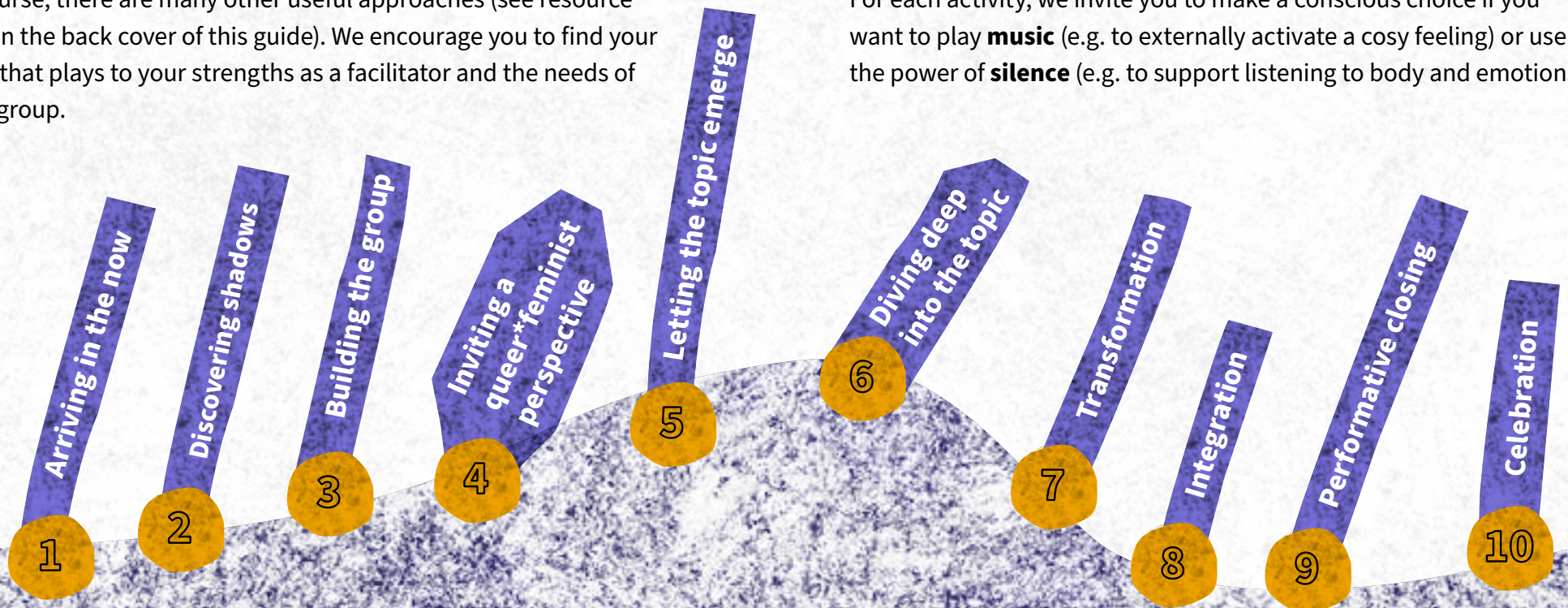
Of course, there are many other useful approaches (see resource link on the back cover of this guide). We encourage you to find your style that plays to your strengths as a facilitator and the needs of your group.

# Steps of the Process

For each step of the process, we give one example of an activity which combines Shadow Theatre and TO. Each page contains:

- ✓ the **description** of the game,
- + possible **variations**,
- ? **reflection questions**,
- 💬 **thoughts** highlighting technical, queer\*feminist, pleasure focused or trauma-aware details about the game.

For each activity, we invite you to make a conscious choice if you want to play **music** (e.g. to externally activate a cosy feeling) or use the power of **silence** (e.g. to support listening to body and emotions).





At the beginning of a workshop, it's important to get in touch with our bodies, and emotions as well as with each other and our environment. Take time for this. Invite participants to breathe. Leave everyday life and duties behind and fully arrive in the room. Giving this priority every day, before you do anything else, will allow for a deeper dive. Connecting with the **here and now**, we encounter each other with more presence and on a more equal basis.



## Shadow Awakening and Caressing Your Own Shadow



As the group sits in the dark in front of the shadow screen the facilitator uses a dimmer to slowly turn on a light. This makes the appearance of the shadows a conscious and collective experience.

Invite participants to look at and try to caress their own shadow on the screen.



### Sunny side up!

On a sunny day, you can become aware of and caress your own shadow in bright daylight!



- How often do you think of your shadow in your everyday life?
- What does it symbolize for you?
- Does your shadow have a gender?



Name games create a feeling of connection in a group. Include name games that introduce participants and their pronouns. Introducing pronouns is simple and could sound like this: 'I am Bow, my pronouns are they/them'.



We need to get familiar with the shadows our bodies create on the screen. Learn to always look at your shadow. Profiles and big gestures are more exciting to watch. Try it out yourself!

### Dwarf and Giant



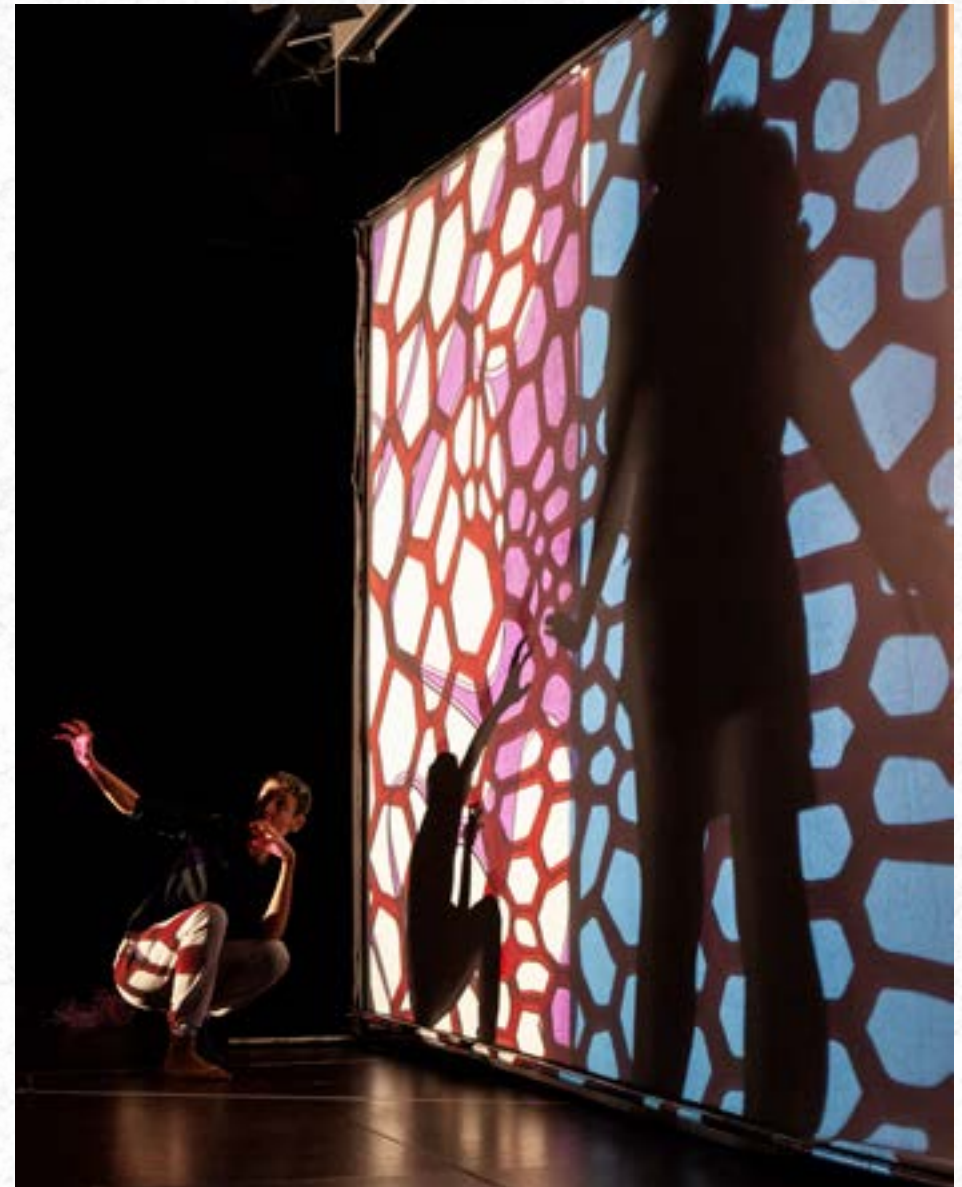
Play with the **size** of the shadows by varying the distance of two or more bodies from the light source. The giant shadow (giant standing close to the light and far from the screen) tries to catch/cover the dwarf shadow (dwarf standing far away from the light and close to the screen). If you want, you can play music and suggest emotions that suit the topic, context and group (e.g. fear, joy, desire).



Try to improvise a game you know on the shadow screen (e.g. play catch, handball or volleyball).



- How do you feel seeing your shadow image on the screen?
- How does it feel when shadows touch each other compared to physical touch?





## 3

## Building the Group

Let's play to get familiar with our own and others' shadows and build connections, practise active listening and allow for intimacy – with or without bodies touching.

### Mirroring Shadow and Touch



Use one screen and two fixed light sources, one on each side of the screen. Build two rows of people, one on each side. Each person is about 1 meter away from the screen and 1 meter away from the next person to the side. Everyone faces the screen and with their own shadow tries to mirror the shadow of their 'partner' on the other side of the screen. With a clap from the facilitator, people change partners by moving one spot to the right (people on the edges change the side of the screen; if a group size is larger this also allows new people to try the exercise).



If your screen is movable, facilitators can at some point suddenly remove it and ask participants to mirror bodies instead of shadows. Reflect on the difference this makes.



**High focus!** With the screen between the two rows, invite participants to mirror the other body by sensing it in direct physical contact through the screen. People may or may not close their eyes. Be aware that it is important to do this with a light source in the room. In the darkness, this exercise is even more challenging. To resolve this exercise invite participants to lose touch slowly and in their own time to move away from the screen, orienting themselves in the room and coming back to their own body. You can add a phase of journaling, drawing or a group reflection. This exercise can be beautiful as people can dive into their **non-visual** senses. At the same time, it can be challenging and even triggering. Only do this exercise with people that have established trust with each other and are ok with close physical contact.



- What did you experience?
- How does your experience connect to wider societal topics?



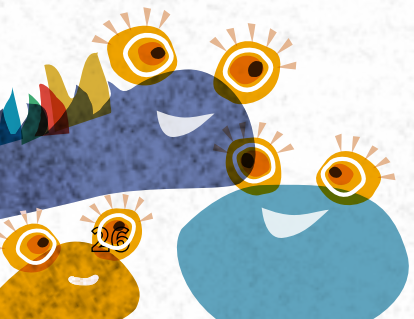
With two identical light sources, one on each sides of the screen at the same distance and angle to it, it is easier to make the same shape as your partner. Using different light sources, distances or heights, you can reduce perfectionism and introduce power differences between the mirroring partners.



Mirroring in direct physical contact can be a close or intimate experience that might remind you of blind Contact Improvisation jams or blindfolded Liquid Love where you often don't know who you share touch with.



Be aware of people's boundaries when mirroring body contact through the screen. Especially if talking is not allowed during the exercise and **nonverbal forms of consent** were not introduced and practised, it can be very hard to ask for consent.





## Inviting a Queer\* Feminist Perspective

It's time to create a space, where a queer\*feminist understanding of oppression can emerge. The group gets the chance to explore what power and oppression mean to them. We creatively dive into the topic of gender-based violence. On an emotional and embodied level, we create a container for safer and braver spaces.

### Image of Power



We play the famous TO game in the shadows: Two people are behind the screen, and only their shadows are visible to the group. The rest of the group is (one by one or in a group process) invited to change their posture, trying to create the biggest power difference possible.



Add a specific type of oppression within the topic of gender-based violence as a **headline** for the activity (e.g. sexual harassment). Observe if this leads to context-specific changes in the postures of power.



- What are situations from everyday life that come to your mind when you see these power differences?



Play with the power difference resulting from the different sizes of the shadows. Only the shadow of a part of the body of each person has to be visible on the screen.



Ask people for **consent** before you touch and move them as statues. Alternatively, you can show them with your own body how you would like them to position themselves.



If **stereotypes** emerge in the images or in the reflection of the images, name them without judgement or blame and offer or ask for an alternative perspective.





Each group is drawn to address different topics within the field of gender-based violence. Now it's time to explore what is this specific group's most important desire for change. In TO, we often use Image Theatre to do this: Instead of using words, we let our bodies and our shadows speak to share our experiences.

## Complete the Image



A collective shadow image (statue) is built: One person who has an idea they want to express, is behind the screen and freezes as a statue, projecting a shadow on the screen. One by one other participants step in and add themselves, creating a group of shadow statues. The rest of the group, in front of the screen, can interpret and tell the story of the shadows. Each picture can illustrate a different topic (start with easy topics, i.e. holidays, and gradually move to the issues you want to explore, i.e. micro-machismo). Participants can give spontaneous titles to the images.



### Telling a Story

Anyone in the group can tell a story with a sequence of three images: beginning, crisis and end. The story is told nonverbally, sculpting other people's bodies.



### The Storyteller

A person who is not part of the collective statue gets to be the storyteller. Using the torch like a camera, they change the perspective and zoom in and out of body parts, highlighting certain aspects which might be overlooked in the dominant story.



### The Image of Sexuality

How is sexuality perceived in our society? Let's answer this question with a collective shadow image behind the screen. Our bodies cannot touch each other, but our shadows can!



- Which power relations do you see in the images?
- Do these stories relate to our daily life? How?
- Which images have special importance to the group?
- Are there experiences of gender-based violence that several group members can relate to?
- What is the difference between an image behind and in front of the screen? How can shadow best be used to bring up the topic?



When interpreting the images, invite stories which go beyond heteronormative gender roles and other stereotypical roles.



Shadows can be used to create a dreamlike atmosphere. They can reveal the inner world of a character and explore feelings, needs and motivations that can inform the actions of a character.



## Rainbow of Fears and Desires



Inside of a character's shadow silhouette on the screen, you can use a second light source to make the character's fears and desires visible. Experiment with the image of another person acting within the silhouette, symbolic objects, puppets or light effects.



### Stream of Consciousness

Speak out loud thoughts, perceptions and feelings of the characters, they would not dare to express openly.



### Cops in the Head

Show internalised oppressors inside the silhouettes. These might be inspired by real people the character met in the past and whose voices stayed in the character's mind. These oppressors act as discouraging voices that stop the character from doing what they want to do or saying what they need to say.



- What did you discover about the characters and their relationships?
- What are barriers to change?
- Which role do oppressive structures play?
- What are our shared desires?



After having analysed the problems, it's time to transform them. This part helps to empower the group by focusing on creative alternatives and concrete actions that can be taken in the face of real problems.

## Ideal Image



First create a shadow image of a GBV situation from your everyday life (image of the problem). Then create an image of your desire, showing the change you want to achieve in this situation (ideal image). You could experiment with black and white shadow images for problems and colourful shadows for desires. Move slow-motion from the image of the problem to the ideal image. Pay attention to what happens during the transition and identify which intermediate steps are needed.



### Image of Transition

Create a sequence of transition images required to reach your desire. Assess (using bodies or words) if each transition is feasible or unrealistic and reflect for which characters and positions it is more or less easy to change the situation.



### Image of Dreams and Utopias

Create several collective shadow images of your wildest dreams. Do not judge what is expressed or censor what does not seem realistic – let your imagination fly!



- What are the values that motivate us?
- Are there power imbalances in our ideal image?
- What is each character's scope of action? What is our collective scope of action?
- Do any of these images inspire us to create real change?
- Which concrete steps do we want to take, and which allies do we need to be successful and enjoy the process?





Coming to the end of a workshop, it is important to offer a breathing space, where participants can integrate and make sense of their experience and their emotions.

## The Journey



Participants get some time for themselves to remember and relive their experiences in the workshop. They can either write in a journal or express what they lived through with their body. Then each person makes two statues: one statue of the moment when they arrived in the workshop and one statue of their feelings right now. Participants can show the transformation from the first statue to the second behind the screen.



Coloured light or music can be added.





## Performative Closing

Collectively reviewing important moments of the workshop allows us to appreciate and acknowledge what was there and what we've experienced together. It offers a last moment to share important feelings or issues that still need to be raised.

## Shadow Playback

- ✓ Ask the participants for memories of the time spent together. It can be cheerful, happy moments, as well as difficult, heavy situations. Once a participant verbally shares a memory, other participants spontaneously enact this situation in the shadows. It is an improvisation – a playback of this memory.
- ✚ You can also use shadow puppets and objects for the playback.
- 💬 Invite participants to physically **shake off** everything they want to leave behind!





## 10 Celebration

At the end of the process, let's celebrate! Let's celebrate the bravery, the moments of feeling shy and vulnerable, the breakthroughs, lessons learned and new questions. And the community, support and sharing.

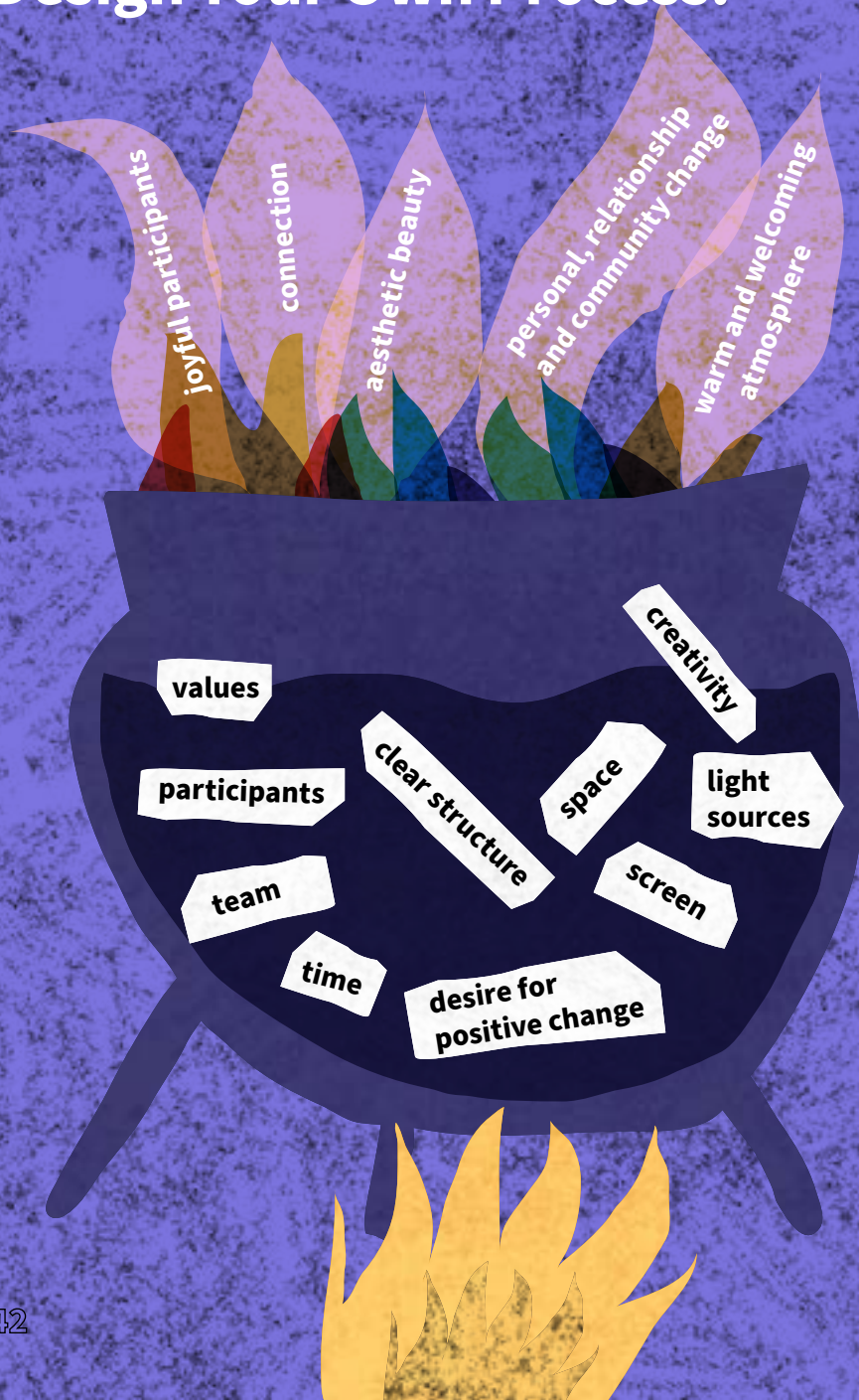
### Shadow Dance

- ✓ Set up a few light sources, put on some funky music and invite everyone to dance in the light – creating shadows. Play, and feel free to experiment. Just enjoy the music, the company and your bodies!
- ✚ You can experiment with dancing **puppets** (meaning cut-out dragons...) and **light effects** (e.g. prisms, sequins, mirrors).
- 💬 Make sure everyone feels seen and celebrated – with a quiet meeting of the eyes or with a roaring applause!





## Now It's Your Turn: Design Your Own Process!



## Spicy Questions

### Content and process

- What is my aim?
- What's the issue I want to tackle?
- What is my part in this? Am I affected by the problem myself, am I an ally, an oppressor? Do I hold privilege?
- Is it fun and liberating? What's the magic of the activity?

### Time and space

- Is the space wheelchair accessible, including the stage and toilets?
- Are there gender-free / all-gender toilets?
- Do I provide childcare?
- Is there enough time for breaks – for an informal exchange about the topics, relaxing and socialising?

### Queer\*feminist perspective

- How do I invite diversity and different perspectives?  
How can we overcome binaries in the workshop setting?
- Does the participant list contain the real names and pronouns?  
Is the team respecting pronouns?
- Do I have the experience and capacity to safely hold the space for this topic? Do I need support or co-facilitation?
- Can I connect participants to local support and community places?

Let's be aware of the complexity. This list is only a small collection of questions that can support you during the preparation of a theatre process. Please adapt to the needs of your group and make use of your strengths. We encourage you to try out, trust your feelings and at the same time be aware of the responsibility you have as a facilitator. We are happy to receive your reflections after trying out. Let's keep on learning together.



# Shadow-Forum-Theatre



**Now it's time  
for community  
action!**

**Let's create a support group  
and an accountability group!**

**Let's contact the mayor!**

**Let's strengthen self-care  
and collective care in our activism!**



# Thank You!

This guide exists thanks to many people and organisations.

## Theater der Unterdrückten Wien / Theatre of the Oppressed Vienna

([www.tdu-wien.at](http://www.tdu-wien.at), [www.facebook.com/TO.Vienna](https://www.facebook.com/TO.Vienna), [www.instagram.com/tdu\\_wien](https://www.instagram.com/tdu_wien), Telegram channel: [t.me/TdUWien](https://t.me/TdUWien)) is a feminist theatre that combines Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and somatic methods. TO Vienna's three pillars are (1) queer and feminist issues including gender-based violence and care, (2) climate justice and (3) the intersection of capitalism and emotional health.

**Affabulazione** ([www.affabulazione.net](http://www.affabulazione.net), [www.facebook.com/assaffabulazione](https://www.facebook.com/assaffabulazione)) is a community-based association and cultural centre. It fosters participation and the arts as a way to reinforce democratic decision-making processes.

Meet **Shadow Liberation** ([www.shadowliberation.blogspot.com](http://www.shadowliberation.blogspot.com), [www.facebook.com/shadow.liberation](https://www.facebook.com/shadow.liberation), [www.instagram.com/shadylib](https://www.instagram.com/shadylib)) a globally reputed participatory theatre method blending Drama Therapy, Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and Shadow Theatre. This method mobilises trauma-informed group Drama Therapy processes which lays the foundation for devising original plays addressing sexual violence, gender and sexuality.



**Video by:** Ivan Gasbarrini

**Photos by:** Anusc Castiglioni, Clelia Carbonari, Evan Hastings, Joschka Köck, Magoa Hanke

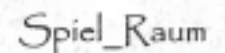
We want to thank all people whose work too often remains in the shadows: people who **cared** for the children, cooked while we were drafting, people who did a lot of **background** organisation and contributed in so many other ways. Thank you for making this project possible.

And last but not least, theatre processes are impossible without amazing **participants**. Thank you for sharing, daring, breathing, dancing and learning with and from each other.



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## What's this Guide About?

This guide offers a first insight into the world of Shadow Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed and ways of combining both.

We share our ideas, questions and experiences working on the topic of gender-based violence from queer and feminist positions.

To dive deeper follow this link: [www.tdu-wien.at/bsl-resources](http://www.tdu-wien.at/bsl-resources)

Get inspired by the video about our process: [www.bit.ly/bsl-video](http://www.bit.ly/bsl-video)

## The Origins of this Guide

Many threads are interwoven to create the fabric of this guide.

Evan Hastings with his Shadow Liberation method has been the first to combine Shadow Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed

(TO) to address gender-based violence. Independently, Silvio Gioia (Shadow Theatre artist and pedagogue: [www.silviogioia.com](http://www.silviogioia.com)) and

Claudia Signoretti (feminist TO practitioner of Parteciparte TO company: [www.parteciparte.com/it](http://www.parteciparte.com/it)) made their experiments with

Shadow Theatre and TO around feminism. Magoa Hanke, Linda Raule (theatre practitioner, dance pedagogue and social scientist)

and Joschka Köck (TO practitioner and social scientist) from TdU Wien, got inspired by Shadow Liberation and integrated Shadow

Theatre into their feminist TO practice. Magoa (TO, Shadow Theatre, somatics, dance, drag: [www.magoa.eu](http://www.magoa.eu)) is bringing queer\*feminist

perspectives and a trauma-aware focus on the power of pleasure into our work. The guide would have been impossible without the

warmth and amazing shadow puppetry and light magic of Anusc Castiglioni (Shadow Theatre artist: [www.anusc.it](http://www.anusc.it)). This guide is

a fruit of the journey of our intercultural team.



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