



Wuhan
Films

presents

Of Shadows and Men



a film by
Aurélien Foucault & Cédric Quennesson

France-China, 2007

www.wuhan-films.com

Duration : 22 min.
Format : Pal DV 4/3, couleur
Sound : Mono
Language : Mandarin Chinese
Subtitles : English, French

Contact info :
Wuhan Films-Aurélien Foucault
14 rue de Quineleu, 35000 Rennes
Tel : +33.2.99.53.37.05
[**Wuhan.films@gmail.com**](mailto:Wuhan.films@gmail.com)

Synopsis :

In Yunmeng, a rural city in the Hubei Province, there's a theatre, a teahouse where old men gather amongst the shadows of the past, drinking tea and playing cards. There, an ancient art takes place and brings magic back into everyday life. But China's growth towards a new century brings up a few questions...

Genesis :

Aurélien Foucault and Cédric Quennesson met in the city of Wuhan where they were teaching French to Chinese students. They found out they had a common love for cinema and the discovery of the Mengze Theatre was a sudden call for collaboration. They were both struck by the magic of the place and the warmth with which the artists and the audience welcomed them.

Master puppeteer Qin Ligang accepted the project "for the sake of Shadow play. It is important that more people get to know about it."

They shot this film with passion and enthusiasm for only budget and are now hoping to show it around.



©Wang Yunqing

Directors' note

Our first decision was to not make a documentary film purely dedicated to Shadow theatre in a broad general way.

There are thousands forms of Shadow Plays, not only in China, but nearly everywhere in the world, from India to Turkey and even France. Any attempt from us to show some kind of study or general overview of Shadow theatre would have been pretentious and overly ambitious-therefore bound to failure.

Besides, what really got this project going was the whole setting of that particular theatre: the place, the aging audience, the beauty of the puppets and the talent of the artists.

So *that* would be the subject of our film : not a vain attempt at offering a study of this ancient art but simply try to capture the magic of this particular teahouse.

We really wanted to manage to share what got us so fascinated.

The process of writing really hasn't been a problem, we were driven by instinct. We just let the subject take the lead.

The hardest task of them all has been the editing. We were both very busy and it was pretty hard for us to meet up for work, overcome the technical difficulties and find a right form to the film.

It wasn't easy to say all the things we wanted to without making the film too didactic or talkative. We had the set purpose not to use any voiced-off commentaries.

We also chose not to appear in the movie but without getting obsessed with invisibility. It was interesting to show the audience did notice us and welcomed us so kindly, which was a great part of this beautiful experience.

Finally, it was important to talk about the future of this ancient art.

At a time when a super modern China is all over the news and fears of the awoken dragon are touching all levels of society, we thought it important to show that, somewhere, people are still living another kind of life, quiet and very human-one of the multiple faces of China.

And in modern China, is there still room for these traditions? Chinese youth is little interested in such shows and it will be hard to find people to take over...

That is why we deemed it important to record it and try to broadcast it as much as possible, hoping that would lead us all to question our heritage and why not help a bit to re-awaken interest for Shadow theatre?

Aurélien Foucault

BIOGRAPHIES

Aurélien Foucault :

Born in 1979, Aurélien soon got fed up with French chauvinism and went to spend his 18th year in Sweden. He then went to live one year 'Bohemian style' in Naples where he celebrated his 20th birthday drinking up Cinema History with a pint of olive oil. After being tired of skipping dinners to go to the cinema or to buy a record, he decided to find a job that would allow him to live abroad. Undercover as a French teacher, he became a Whisky expert in Scotland and then went on to be a Vodka specialist in Russia. Possibly under the influence of local dumplings, he stayed 2 years in Siberia where he met his wife. After nearly drowning in the frozen Baïkal, he decided to move on towards new adventures.

Having worked enough to buy a Mamiya RB67, a video camera and a good computer, he was finally ready to pursue his dreams- and that's when he met Cédric Quennesson in China.

After the film, he crash landed in France and now daydreams about swapping his teaching costume for that of a full time film director.

Cédric Quennesson :

Cédric was born in 1979 near the French city of Douai. He leaves the rainy North where he was born in the 80's for the sunnier South, which as a matter of fact he would never really leave. As a teenager in the countryside of Cavaillon (famous for their melons!), he discovers Rock'n Roll, real friends and the unspeakable joy of homemade film and musical creation. This way he would always be able to defeat the terrible loneliness of the overwhelming melon fields.

From then he would start studies in Chinese, and alternate work on various projects, essentially in the fields of music and video, writing songs and scenarios. In 2003, his parents and his university made him understand that all good things have to end and he leaves France for China, where he would teach French for 4 years. He would also organize some video workshops for Chinese students and direct a few videos for French corporations in China. In 2007, he makes with Aurélien Foucault his first documentary film: "Of Shadows and Men".



©Wang Yunqing

Aurélien & Cédric

THE MENGZE THEATRE

Songs with strong Chu flavor, accompanied by cymbals and gongs, came from the Mengze Shadow Puppetry Theater in Yunmeng County, in Hubei Province's Xiaogan City. On the screen in the theater, a black-faced general stood with great dignity on a watchtower, waving his weapon while singing loudly. More than a hundred audience members were absorbed in the drama.

« Qin Ligang performs well, » said one member. « I like to watch his dramas. I've watched for more than 20 years. Except for on the eve of the Spring Festival, when he doesn't perform on the stage, I watch his dramas every day. I have become addicted to his shadow puppet shows. »

Yunmeng County is known as the Home of shadow puppetry in Hubei Province. According to statistics from the county's Cultural Center, there are 26 shadow puppetry troupes that perform all year round in both rural and urban areas. Qin Ligang's troupe used to be the only one in the county seat, but now there are six. Qin stands out among such competition. More than 100 people watch his plays each day, more than any other performance, as some fans set off from home at daybreak and walk kilometers to his theater.

Qin, now 55, has reveled in shadow puppetry since he was young. He began to perform in the late 1970s. Although he was in school for only four years, the stage properties that he made were even more exquisite and lifelike than those made by professional artists in shadow puppetry. Moreover, he was skilled in oral mimicry. He eventually realized his childhood dream by becoming the last disciple of Lu Yuanchun, the most influential shadow puppetry artist in Yunmeng County.

Most dramas that Qin performs are inherited from his teachers, mainly based on such popular folk stories as The Canonization of the Gods, States of the East Zhou Dynasty, and The Romance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties. The repertoire of shadow puppetry is plentiful, and he can perform dramas without repeating one for five years. Many older audience members see his dramas as history. By some estimates more than a million people have seen Qins performances. With ticket revenue alone, Qin has been able to put his three children through college and to build a modern four-story shadow puppet theater.

But Qin and other shadow puppet masters are facing a new threat. With the increase of the Internet and other modern media, nowadays the elderly are the ones most interested in shadow puppetry. In recent years, however, most audiences of shadow puppetry are the aged.

Qin has made great efforts in the improvement of the repertoire, music, and performing methods of shadow puppetry, but few of his efforts have worked so far. Facing those old audiences who are crazy about shadow puppetry, Qin has an indescribable feeling in his heart.

Tian Fei & Zhou Chao
(for China Radio International, <http://english.cri.cn>)

OF SHADOWS AND MEN

云梦皮影艺人 和他们的影迷们

A film
written, produced & directed
by
Aurélien Foucault & Cédric Quennesson

With
Qin Ligang,
Head of the Yunmeng Shadow Theatre Association
Teng Deqing,
President of the Yunmeng Folk Art Association
Qin Lang,
Ligang family
and all spectators of the Mengze Theatre.

Music : Teng Deqing
Cinematography : Aurélien Foucault
Sound : Cédric Quennesson

Interviews
and
Chinese/French translations
by
Cédric Quennesson

English Translation by
Aurélien Foucault

Shot in
Yunmeng,
Hubei Province,
People's Republic of China.

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Film Career:

“Of Shadows and Men” has been World Premiered at the **Full Frame Documentary Film Festival** on the 3rd of April 2008 in Durham, USA.

The film was showed just before the film “Sally Gross” by David Maysles and the directors of both film shared a Q & A.

Official Selections :

-Full Frame Documentary Film Festival

April 3, 2008 – Durham, USA

-Cinéma Nouvelle Génération Festival

Septembre 25, 2008 – Lyon, France.

- Meetings In Siberia Festival

Septembre 9, 2008 – Novossibirsk, RUSSIA

-Tehran International Short Film Festival

November 15 & 16, 2008 – Tehran, IRAN

-Jean Rouch International Ethnographic Film Festival

March 19, 2009 – Paris, France

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INTERNET LINKS :

Film Festival World :

http://www.filmfestivalworld.com/film/Of_Shadows_and_Men/

Film-Documentaire :

<http://www.film-documentaire.fr/film.php?id=19861>

Unifrance :

<http://en.unifrance.org/movie/30011/of-shadows-and-men>

[WWW.WUHAN-FILMS.COM](http://www.WUHAN-FILMS.COM)

PRESS CLIPS, WEB CLIPS AND REVIEWS

孝感日报

XIAOGAN DAILY

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云梦皮影戏法国小伙

□ 通讯员王云博 摄影报道

5月16日,云梦县梦泽影戏馆迎来了专程前来拍摄皮影戏影片的法国青年海百川和安民(中文名)。

曾作为独立导演拍摄过纪录片和短片的海百川和安民就读武汉大学法律专业,他们热爱富有东方特色的云梦皮影戏,为了让更多的法国人了解云梦皮影的艺术魅力,欣赏和理解东方的古老文化,他们冲破语言障碍,开始了云梦皮影的拍摄之旅。

图①:梦泽影戏馆是法国青年拍摄的重点。

图②:皮影戏传承人艺术家蔡礼刚 边表演 边介绍皮影的历史。

图③:两位法国青年满意地观看自己拍摄的充满艺术魅力的云梦皮影。

<http://tenenbaums.livejournal.com/>

4:45 PM - Cinema One - Carolina Theatre
"Of Shadows and Men" and "Sally Gross: The Pleasure of Stillness"

The first film from co-director Aurelien Foucault is a fascinating look at the dying art of Chinese shadow plays. 364 days of the year, elder citizens gather at small theatre cafes to watch a performer who, to them, is unquestionably the best in the world at this ancient brand of puppetry. His command of the intricately-designed characters and animals, the unspoken communication between he and the supporting musician and the simple beauty of his act is mesmerizing.

"Of Shadows and Men" is especially important for its preservation of an art that even the performers acknowledge is fading away. Here, the documentary has documented a component of life that needs to be captured, perhaps the most noble deed a film of its kind can accomplish.

<http://www.indyweek.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=228638>

]S[Of Shadows and Men—This short film, shot mostly in a bustling tea house, gives us a portrait of the dying art of Chinese shadow play. Showcasing the life of an elderly master puppeteer, the film shows us snippets of an actual play, the techniques at work behind the screen, the role this art plays as an important part of Chinese culture, and the hope for the future of this nearly extinct art in the puppeteer's talented grandson. —JH

<http://uniondocs.org/blog/2008/04/04/full-frame-day-1/>

We registered and got press creds, then set out to explore the festival. First up: Of Shadows and Men by Aurelien Foucault and Cedric Quennesson, followed by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile's film, Sally Gross - The Pleasure of Stillness. **The former was a short about the beautiful, but dying art of shadow puppetry in China.** The latter, a feature about Sally Gross (avant-garde dancer and co-star of Robert Frank's 1959 film Pull My Daisy). All of the directors were there after the screening for a Q&A.

Albert Maysles congratulated Aurelien on his first film, which was such a great moment! Albert went on to discuss ways to avoid influencing your subject as you document (don't even try to just be a fly on the wall, instead try to generate trustworthiness and rapport with them). He advised against making a film about anything that you can't personally connect with - the best films are made about subjects that you can relate to something in your past. Similarly, he spoke about the idea that patience and love are the main things that separate documentary filmmakers from propagandists. For more on Maysles, check out our upcoming podcast footage!

<http://www.newsobserver.com/news/durham/durham/story/1025519.html>

Filmmakers discuss works at Full Frame

Craig Lindsey, Staff Writer

DURHAM - Filmmakers, both young and old, flocked to the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival on Friday, where they discussed their latest films and even defended their most acclaimed works.

[...]

. "Of Shadows and Men," which screened Thursday, has a French filmmaker traveling to China to catch shadow theatre puppeteers entertaining the crowd.

"Shadows" opened up for "Sally Gross — The Pleasure of Stillness," the latest film from renowned filmmaker **Albert Maysles**, who followed the Rolling Stones for the 1970 documentary "Gimme Shelter."

Maysles, whose camera work can also be seen in the just-released, Martin Scorsese-directed Stones concert film, "Shine A Light," had some choice words for those who remember his film, which captured the Stones' 1969 Altamont concert where a black man was killed by a Hells Angel, as the "anti-Woodstock."
[...]

craig.lindsey@newsobserver.com, (919) 829-4760 or
blogs.newsobserver.com/unclecrizzle.

<http://www.newsobserver.com/print/friday/wup/story/1016194-p2.html>

"Of Shadows and Men" (23 minutes, directed by Aurelien Foucault, Cedric Quennesson, 4:45 p.m. Thursday)

Another fading craft, this time in China, is the shadow play puppeteer. Here the art is celebrated -- and given a glimmer of hope for survival.

<http://uniondocs.org/blog/2008/04/09/419/>

In reflecting on Full Frame, I'd like to revisit a screening that's already been somewhat discussed here. In pairing Albert Maysles' latest film about Sally Gross (The Pleasure of Stillness) with the first film from Aurelien Foucault (Of Shadows and Men), the festival programmers created a dynamic that echoed through the rest of Full Frame. The convergence of master and novice, established and innovative, predictable and daring. That's part of what made the festival so exciting, to see the potential everywhere mixed with stunning proven results.

[...]

On an ending note, some quips that were wonderfully memorable:

"To have a hand is to make good things." - Laotian saying, quoted in The Betrayal (Nerakhon)

"I never thought I'd look at the twin towers and think of anything but 9/11, and your film changed that." - audience response to James Marsh's Man On Wire

"I didn't want to make a sexy, National Geographic version of Kolkata." - Tim Sternberg in Q&A about his film, Salim Baba

"...all it takes is two guys, a camera, and a computer." - Aurelien Foucault on how to go about making your first film

<http://ncflix.blogspot.com/2008/04/full-frame-2008-press-breakfast.html>

We met filmmaker Aurelien Foucault in the buffet line. The French filmmaker is in town for the world premiere of his short doc (23 min.), "Of Shadows and Men."



The film documents one of the last shadow-puppeteers in China, where the centuries-old art form is dying fast. You can watch a trailer at the filmmakers' myspace page.