Shadowja Manifesto

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Mind of a Snail
Hey, I'm Chloe and this is Jessica. Together we are Mind of a Snail, a compost-modernist shadow puppet duo from the west coast of Canada. Since 2003, we have been developing a multi-layered style of visual storytelling using an overhead projector as our main light source. We do performances that combine original music, puppets crafted from recycled waste, masked characters, and eclectic experimentations in lighting and timing. A big part of our style has emerged from an event we have been hosting once or twice a month for the last 6 years called… Shadowjam!

What is Shadowjam?
Shadowjam is a fully participatory event where everyone is a performer and everyone is the audience. It’s basically a magical blend of improvised musical jam, in-the-moment shadow puppetry, and spontaneous storytelling.

We start by crafting shadow puppets together around a theme. Then we set up a sheet in the middle of the room, with an overhead projector and puppets on one side and musical instruments all around. Everyone is encouraged to try any role, whether it's as a puppeteer, musician, narrator or whatever else. No experience is needed and spontaneity is encouraged. The only requirement is that people try to be present in the moment, listening and responding with the whole picture in mind.

Shadowjam provides a framework for unconditional play within an expressive, inclusive group experience. Participants often describe it as a shared dream.

Shadowjam has developed quite a bit over the years of hosting this event. We’d like to share some of the techniques we have discovered for making a shadowjam the best it can be, so you can host a shadowjam too!
How to host a Shadowjam

1. Find a good space. A spacious living room in a house with musical instruments is ideal. Make sure joyful noise won’t be an issue. Consider where to hang a white sheet for the shadow screen.

2. Set a date and time for the jam. We like to have a potluck beforehand, so we usually invite people to come over around 7 and go until 11 or midnight or even later. Shadowjam starts when the sun goes down.

3. Decide on a theme. The theme is just a seed of an idea for people to think about while crafting, and possibly while jamming. It should be open to wide interpretation. Themes can be based on current events, a letter of the alphabet, that day in history, a word, or whatever you like.

4. Invite people. Invite people who are willing to get playful. The ideal amount of people seems to be around 14 people, but we’ve had great jams with only the two of us, and have also facilitated groups of over 50 people and it has worked out.

5. Gather ingredients.

Ingredients

Basic ingredients
fun friends
light source
surface to illuminate
voices
listening
spontaneity

More ingredients
white sheet to use as a screen
overhead projector
candle
flashlights
musical instruments & sound makers
objects & materials with intriguing shadow potential
crafting supplies
Crafting ingredients

**tools:**
- scissors
- exacto blades & mats to cut on
- pencils & pens
- needle-nose pliers & wire cutters

**materials (mostly found in the recycling):**
- cereal box cardboard (for most puppets)
- corrugated cardboard (for shadow masks and larger puppets)
- colorful translucent plastics, big and little pieces (plastic bags, fruit holders, theatre gels, transparencies etc…)
- material for textures (fluff, scrap fabrics, rubber bands, little objects, etc…)
- clear tape (not scotch)
- wire (steel or copper)
- clear plastic sheets (if you want)

puppets to show as examples: see crafting section

The Flow

**Summary**

Potluck and social time ~ an hour or two  
Crafting ~ about an hour  
Clean up/set up ~ 10-15 minutes  
Shadowjam ~ two hours or more  
Shadowjam analysis ~ 10-20 minutes  
Social time ~ as long as you like afterwards

**Shadowjam in Detail**

Keep in mind, you can create your own style and flow. We are forever altering and refining this sequence, these are just some of the things that we have discovered work really well for us. We try to keep our facilitation gentle and spontaneous. We often sing our suggestions as questions and answers. We lead by example and we stay open to whatever seems to be happening in the moment.

0. Before we start

*We like to start each shadowjam with the screen up, the lights out and everyone in a kind of a circle around the room. The projector is set up and turned off, the finished puppets are in a pile on one side and musical instruments are distributed around the room.*
1. Tuning in
We take a moment to listen to the sounds that are already happening and another moment to notice the light that is already in the space. The subtle shadowjam is here!

2. Introduce a small light
We invite everyone to make a sound for the light that they see. We light a candle and play with that light for a while with just our hands. Sometimes we bring in a flashlight and shine it at different objects around the room.

3. Bring the sheet down
When the time is right (i.e. the group feels unified and engaged), we bring the screen down. We might use flashlights or the candle as light sources. Several puppets often get introduced at this point. Musical accompaniment becomes more full.

4. Overhead projector
Again, when it feels right, the overhead projector is introduced. It's a smoother transition to start with a smaller frame and/or lots of colored gels layered on the projector because the light is quite bright.

5. Extended jam
Play with the puppets, sing, laugh, create beautiful compositions! Go as long as you like! Experiment, try out different roles, find the dynamics in the jam.

6. Closing
When it is time for the Shadowjam to come to an end we find a smooth transition into darkness. Often we will pile colors and puppets slowly on the projector as the music becomes more hypnotic and dreamy. Sometimes the smaller lights come back (flashlight, candle). Then... the light goes out and we are in the dark again.

7. Share a moment
It feels good to be in the dark for a moment, sharing the dreamy afterglow feeling. Sometimes everyone takes a breath together, sometimes there is spontaneous applause... the group mind will know what to do.

8. Shadowjam analysis
After the lights come back on, we all try to remember what happened, like remembering a dream. Talking about it together seems to be a natural way to integrate the experience. One of us will take notes. Later, we'll write it into a little poem and post it online.
**Tips**

**How to have Engaging, Dynamic Shadowjams**

**Participant**

There are many ways to participate in a Shadowjam. Trade around or combine any of these roles you like!

- flashlight holder
- overhead projector puppeteer
- puppeteer near the screen
- silhouette
- musician
- sound effect maker
- singer
- narrator
- puppet voice
- poet/writer
- photographer
- videographer
- sound recorder
- online linker
- puppet crafter
- idea person
- quiet observer
- host/facilitator
- etc…

Watch the screen, listen to the sounds, match the image to the sounds and the sounds to the image.

**Visuals:**
- Slow down all your movements, especially on the projector
- Always create compositions, think of it as a moving collage
- Often less is more; take your time exploring each idea that emerges
- Experiment! Try using puppets and light sources in unexpected ways
- Play with size and distances

**Sound:**
- Play what you see, not what you know
- Change the sounds when the images change
- Some possible ways to interact using sound:
  - Instrumental (play what you see)
  - Narrated/voices (say what you see)
  - Group song (sing what you see)
  - Sound effects (blip-bloop what you see)

Find a variety of textures and tones within the jam. Allow it to flow from abstract to literal and back again. Be spontaneous and have fun!

If you find you need a break, gently remove yourself from the space. Cell phones and social talking will distract from the shadowjam and affect everyone else’s experience.
Host
As a host, your main role is to be relaxed and engaged while creating a gentle frame in which the event can either gracefully or erratically unfold. Don’t stress or force anything, shadowjams can usually take care of themselves. Every shadowjam is a perfect reflection of the moment and the people there. Yes! Dissonance can be a natural state, however, there are a few things we like to do that can help smooth out certain awkwardnesses that tend to arise.

∙ Invite people who are willing to engage and play! It makes a big difference if you include at least a couple skilled musicians who love to improvise. Find some sensitive artistic allies to help facilitate the puppetry.

∙ Discourage small talk and party style socializing in the same space as the shadowjam. Have another area available for chitchat; make time before and after to socialize.

∙ Tune the musical instruments beforehand. We often tune all our stringed instruments to unusual, open tunings that sound good together. This takes care of two issues- people who don’t know how to play can strum and still be in tune with everyone, and people who do know how to play an instrument are forced to listen and break out of their usual patterns.

∙ It’s nice to have a collection of little sound makers, shakers, tooters, squeakers etc … Don’t have any loud djembe drums or irritating glockenspiels anywhere near the shadowjam (trust me!)

∙ Include some larger translucent color pieces, interesting cuttings that weren’t intended to be puppets, plastic bags and any other intriguing objects near the finished puppet pile before the jam starts. Often something unexpected becomes the star of the show!

∙ Inviting children to a shadowjam can be a bit of a gamble. Children are great at playing, but often that means the jam becomes all about them. Adults tend to sit back and “be adults” when kids are at a shadowjam, so it can inhibit the childlike release that a lot of people feel during a good shadowjam. However, this all depends on the community of people and the maturity of the kids who come.

Troubleshooting
Problem: Lack of engagement
∙ Hand out easy instruments/sound makers
∙ Lead by example
∙ Invite people to try the puppets
∙ Pass around a flashlight
∙ Try sound flocking as a warm-up game (helpful for large groups)
Sound Flocking
Start with quiet. The facilitator explains: “This is an imitation game. If anyone has an impulse to make a sound, do so. Everyone imitates the sounds they hear. If another person has an impulse to make a sound, they do, and everyone imitates that sound, and so on… Ready? Go!” Sound flocking should feel hilarious and organic. Let the sound journey happen for as long as you want. To end the game, the facilitator can do a conductor’s gesture of completion. “Now we are going to do the same thing, only make the sound for whatever light you see. If you hear someone else make a sound you think fits, imitate that sound to make it stronger.”

Problem: Jam is too much of the same, irritating, chaotic, or dominated by one style
- Have extra help with facilitating
- Let people read the shadowjamanifesto beforehand
- Use sound to help guide the energy into something new
- Encourage people to trade around roles during the jam
- Let puppets linger longer, slow down
- Don’t have too many puppets on the projector at once; you can slowly and gently remove most of them and make the image smaller with a frame

Problem: Jam is unfocused
- Substances can make a jam unfocused (everything in moderation)
- Eat together beforehand
- Have a separate space for socializing during the jam
- When you invite people, let them know what it’s about
- Cell phones off
- Make up a sing-along song out of a sentence or word you hear & encourage everyone to sing along

Easy Shadow Puppet Crafting
Here’s a few ideas for shadow puppets. None of these is “the right way” to make a puppet, we encourage people to experiment and come up with their own ideas. Puppets can be literal representations related to the theme or completely abstract objects.

When crafting, use clear tape, not scotch. We don’t like to use wet glue (it takes too long to dry) or glue gun (it leaves smudges on the projector).

Basic Shadow Puppet:
1. Draw something on cardboard (can be any size~ ½ an inch to 4 feet long)
2. Cut it out (exacto on a mat)
3. Attach a wire (bend both ends of the wire into small spirals before attaching)
For larger puppets you can use a chopstick or dowel instead of a wire.

Add color and interesting textures!
Moving Parts:
You can use a small piece of wire to make a joint by spiraling one end, poking it through, then spiraling the other end. Flatten both spiralled ends of the wire against the puppet. You can also make a joint with thread or floss, knotted at the front and back. To make the movement work best, you need one fixed handle (wire, stick or cardboard) attached to the body of the puppet, and one movable handle (wire or a strip of clear plastic) attached to the moving part. You can also experiment with flexible materials to create moving parts. Cloth, rubber bands and shredded plastic all have interesting movement possibilities.

Shadow Masks:
1. Make a headband with cardboard
2. Cut out a head in profile larger than your own head
3. Attach it to the side of the headband
To use the mask in the shadows, the mask should be kept parallel with the screen.

Frames:
1. Use a piece of cardboard slightly larger than the projector surface
2. Cut out an empty space of any shape you want with an exacto
Frames are used for puppets on the projector to play inside. Several frames of different sizes are very helpful to have in a jam. Some of our favorites are the moon, an egg, a rectangle and a circle.

Landscapes:
1. Get a 4 inch wide strip of cardboard, at least as long as the projector surface (or longer)
2. Decorate it with whatever landscape you’d like
The landscape can sit at the bottom of the image for puppets to walk along, and you can experiment with pulling it up to see underground, turning it over when gravity stops working, etc…

Transparencies:
You can use photocopies of images, or you can make marks on a sheet of clear plastic. You can use overhead projector pens, ink, paint or whatever you want to try. Most paint and some ink appears grayish or black no matter what color it is. Paint or draw something while projecting as part of the shadowjam! Scratch or wipe it away! Good times!

Messy Stuff:
It’s fun to get a glass pan to put materials in on the projector. Some of the materials we have tried: water, soap, molasses, food coloring, thinly sliced fruit, sand, flour, etc…
BASIC SHADOW PUPPETS
- coloured plastic
- cardboard
- tape
- wire
- texture

MOVING PARTS
- wire joints
- fixed handle
- clear plastic movable handle

SHADOW MASKS
- headband attached
- flat cardboard

FRAMES

LANDSCAPES
- textured stuff
- shape
- cardboard
**Online Extensions**
Sometimes we set up a camera and stream live on Ustream. We try to set up the camera in an unobtrusive spot (we have it hanging from a hook in the ceiling) with a laptop in the next room. The light from electronic devices can be distracting and can make people more self-conscious than they would normally be, so we try to keep it as subtle as possible.

You can also document parts of the jam and make short videos to post on youtube. Again, this needs to be done in a very subtle way, or it will affect people’s experiences negatively.

Photo documentation is great, but often I’m so engaged in the best parts of the shadowjam that I forget to take a photo! Either you can have a dedicated photographer during the shadowjam or… after the jam you can set up the puppets again in the scenes that you remember and take clear, perfect photos of the best scenes! (this is actually kind of a secret, don’t tell everyone!)

And then, of course, there’s writing the shadowjam analysis poem! You can post all this stuff online in our Shadowjam group on Facebook… or you can just send us a copy and we’ll be stoked!

facebook.com/groups/shadowjam Updates, photos, shadowjam analysis poems etc...
ustream.tv/channel/shadowjam We broadcast during jams, there are a few recordings up as well
tribes.tribe.net/shadowjam Old group, but lots of great photos & shadowjam analysis poems
snaylmynd.blogspot.com Overhead Projector Palace ~ artsy shadow blog by Jessica
mindofasnail.org Links to the rest of our Mind of a Snail stuff

**In Conclusion**
Shadowjam can be as simple or as complex as you’d like it to be. Walking by a streetlight at night with your friends, you can have a 3 minute shadowjam. Or you can throw a giant party and invite famous jazz musicians and well established art stars! Shadowjam should be free and fun and open to possibilities. The more shadowjams you have, the easier and more fun it gets! Please use what you find useful in this guide and make shadowjam your own, all that we ask is that you let us know about it, and tell us how it went!

**Quotes**
“Our collective stories become fluid, urging subconscious symbologies to boldly come to the forefront.” ~Jessica

"I do believe the shadowjam world is worth dedicating a life to. It's an effective loosening and binding of the people. With the freedom of coming together, inclusive and focused without having too much structure.” ~Nayana and co.

“To light a candle is to cast a shadow.” ~Ursula K. Le Guin