

SHADOW EN ROUTE

A Creative Europe project



**A JOURNEY
THROUGH
LIGHT
STORIES
AND MIGRATION**



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA



Co-funded by
the European Union

SHADOW theater EasterN Roots Uniting people Toward Europe

FORWARD



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THE STORY

This book marks the closing step of a shared journey. A journey made of stories, shadows, and encounters that followed a line familiar to many—crossing borders, shifting languages, searching for space.

We chose shadow theatre not to revive a tradition, but to work within its logic. A theatre of silhouettes and screens, of voice and gesture, of space divided yet connected. A theatre that, like migration, speaks through distance and proximity at once.

Our project moved along a path that reflects the real and symbolic route of movement across the Mediterranean: from Türkiye through Greece, into Italy and beyond. This same path has carried both puppets and people, techniques and words, silence and sound. In this way, working with shadow theatre became a method of listening.

The voices heard through these scenarios are not staged from above. They come from the ground: from children, trainers, artists, community workers. From those who know what it means to inhabit two languages, two places, two lights.

What follows is a record of that work. A fragment of light cast from the screen.

INTRODUCTION

The Path of the Shadow

Shadow theatre is an ancient form of storytelling where figures cut from leather or cardboard are moved behind a lit screen, their shadows becoming the characters of the play. It is an art that exists between what is seen and what is hidden, between presence and absence. The figures do not show themselves directly, but speak through silhouettes, gestures, and voice. This creates a unique form of communication, where light and shadow, sound and silence, play together to create meaning.

The origins of shadow theatre go back centuries. Some of the earliest traces are found in Asia—particularly in China and India—where storytelling with shadows was used in both sacred and popular contexts. From there, the art form spread westward through Persia and the Arab world, eventually reaching the Ottoman Empire, where it took on a new life. It was in the Ottoman context that shadow theatre became known as the theatre of Karagöz and Hacivat, two iconic figures whose conversations reflect the tensions and humour of everyday life.

Karagöz is direct, outspoken, and often vulgar. Hacivat is refined, educated, and uses formal speech. Together they form a pair whose differences bring out social contrasts—between rich and poor, urban and rural, formal and popular. Through their dialogues, shadow theatre became a space to explore injustice, bureaucracy, migration, marginalisation, and power. In many cases, the screen became a safe place to say what could not be said elsewhere. Criticism, jokes,

resistance—all could appear as shadows, passed off as fiction, but recognisable to those watching.

The tradition of Karagöz spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. In the Arab world, it encountered the *hakawati* tradition of oral storytelling, creating local versions that blended puppet performance with the rhythm and power of the spoken word. In Greece, the character of Karagiozis emerged, adapting Ottoman figures to the Greek cultural and political context, often turning the comic hero into a poor, clever survivor under foreign rule. In southern Italy, similar elements are found in early forms of folk puppet theatre, especially in Naples and Sicily. The Mediterranean became a space of exchange not only for people, but also for stories, gestures, voices, and shadows.

Shadow theatre was always more than entertainment. It was a mirror of society and a form of popular education. It could be found in coffee houses, public squares, courtyards during Ramadan, village festivals, and later in theatres and schools. It followed the rhythms of life and adapted to new media. While it declined with the arrival of cinema and television, it never disappeared. In many countries, artists and educators have continued to use shadow theatre as a tool for dialogue, community building, and cultural memory.

In this project, shadow theatre became a way to connect young people with each other and with the shared history of movement across the Mediterranean.

The path of Karagöz, from Asia to Europe, follows the same route taken by many migrant families today. Working with shadows allowed participants to tell stories that were theirs but also part of a larger narrative—about crossing, belonging, and speaking from in-between places. Through this ancient technique, new voices have found a screen to appear on, and new light has been cast on both past and present.

The two characters in the image are Karagöz and Hacivat. They are the most famous figures in Turkish shadow theatre. Karagöz is quick, direct, and often rude. Hacivat is more polite and educated, and he tries to speak correctly. When they talk, they often argue, joke, and make fun of each other. But through their conversations, they also talk about important things—like money, work, justice, and everyday life. People used to gather during holidays to watch them on a screen, laugh at their stories, and reflect on society.

Shadow theatre is not only Turkish. It exists in many cultures, and each one has its own way of doing it. In Java, Indonesia, shadow theatre is called Wayang Kulit. The puppets are very detailed and made from buffalo leather. They are moved behind a screen with a strong light, and the puppeteer—called the *dalang*—also sings, tells the story, and controls the music. These performances can last for hours, sometimes all night, and are connected to old myths, religion, and philosophy.



Karagöz and Hacivat



The dalang is not just an artist but also a respected spiritual guide.

In Greece, shadow theatre is known as Karagiozis. This tradition developed during the time of the Ottoman Empire but changed over time to reflect Greek culture and history. Karagiozis is a poor man trying to survive. He is funny and clever, and he often tricks powerful people. The shows mix comedy with social critique and became very popular in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many people remember watching Karagiozis as children, especially during summer evenings.

In Türkiye, the Karagöz and Hacivat plays became a rich tradition during the Ottoman Empire. The stories were performed in coffee houses and public spaces, especially during Ramadan. The puppets were made of colored leather and projected beautifully on the screen. Besides Karagöz and Hacivat, there were many other characters from different parts of society—Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, women, dervishes—each speaking in a different way and reflecting the diversity of the empire. This was a theatre of voices, languages, and differences.

In the Arab world, shadow theatre was once very popular, especially in Egypt and Syria. It was called khayāl al-zill, which means “the imagination of the shadow.” One famous example is Ibn Dāniyāl, a 13th-century writer in Cairo who wrote shadow plays for adults, full of humor, politics, and fantasy. Arab shadow ►

Wayang Kulit in Java



theatre used language in a very creative way—mixing high Arabic with everyday speech, jokes, and poetry. Today, this tradition has mostly disappeared, but some artists are trying to bring it back as a tool for education and storytelling.

Even though these traditions are different, they all use light and shadow to tell stories. They use simple materials—paper, leather, cloth—but they create deep and powerful experiences. Shadow theatre allows us to see things from another side, to listen to voices that are often hidden, and to connect with each other through imagination.

Across the regions where it developed, shadow theatre has always been more than entertainment. It has served as a mirror of society, a space for dialogue, and a tool for education and collective memory. Though the materials—leather, paper, cloth—may have been light, the role of shadow theatre in community life was substantial.

In Indonesia, the Wayang Kulit tradition served as a vehicle for transmitting complex ideas about the universe, morality, and leadership. Performances were long, often lasting through the night, and combined mythological stories with philosophical teachings. The puppeteer (dalang) was not only an artist, but a spiritual and social figure. He interpreted ancient tales in ways that reflected current social concerns, allowing audiences to reflect on contemporary problems through epic narratives.

In Türkiye, during the Ottoman period, shadow theatre—

especially through Karagöz and Hacivat—provided a form of public commentary. It reflected the diversity of the empire by giving voice to different ethnic and social groups through caricature and dialogue. The plays touched on daily life, bureaucracy, corruption, and social inequalities. Performances during Ramadan brought people together, creating shared experiences across classes. The screen allowed space for humour and criticism, disguised in fiction, yet always connected to reality.

In the Arab world, particularly in Egypt and Syria, khayāl al-zill (the shadow of imagination) played an important role in both elite and popular culture. It was performed in market squares, royal courts, and religious festivals. The language of the plays was often a mix of elevated Arabic and popular dialects, reflecting the layered identities of the audience. Satire, moral reflection, and playful invention were used to explore serious themes, from governance to love, from poverty to fate.

In Greece, the character of Karagiozis became a symbol of the everyday person under pressure—from Ottoman rule, from poverty, from history itself. His ability to speak truth to power through humour made him an important voice in a time when others were silenced. Shadow theatre here offered a form of resistance, using comedy as a weapon, and turned a humble stage into a place of national and cultural affirmation.

In all these traditions, the shadow screen became a

democratic space. It allowed different voices to speak, sometimes anonymously, sometimes in disguise. It welcomed improvisation, adaptation, and change. It travelled with people, crossing borders and languages, keeping memory alive and offering new generations a way to see themselves in stories.

Today, shadow theatre continues to carry this potential. It connects the past and the present, gives space to the unseen, and offers a form of expression that is simple in form but deep in meaning. Whether in a village square or a modern classroom, it invites us to look at our world from the other side of the screen.



Shadow sketch from Egypt

THE PROJECT

Shadow en Route

Shadow en Route is a collaborative artistic project carried out between 2023 and 2024 across Italy, Greece, Türkiye, and Spain. It brought together educators, artists, youth, and cultural organisations with the aim of reactivating the tradition of shadow theatre as a tool for intercultural dialogue, social inclusion, and creative expression.

The project followed the same path that shadow theatre itself historically took: from Asia, through Türkiye and the Arab world, into Greece and southern Europe. Along this route, shadow theatre has for centuries reflected the voices, tensions, and humour of the societies that embraced it. Shadow en Route invited young people and local communities to rediscover this shared heritage, not by looking back with nostalgia, but by creating something new—shows, stories, and spaces that speak to today's realities of migration, identity, and coexistence.

Over the course of twenty-four months, the project was coordinated by Sapienza University of Rome and supported by the European Union through the Creative Europe programme. It was implemented in collaboration with a diverse group of partners across four countries: in Italy, Teatro Gioco Vita and Amal for Education APS; in Greece, Syn-Koino Cooperative; in Spain, Sovint Cultura y Desarrollo; and in Türkiye, Amal İnsani Yardım Derneği. Activities took place in Rome, Thessaloniki, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Valencia, with each partner bringing their own expertise, networks, and local knowledge. Together, they co-designed a pathway of artistic and

educational actions shaped by the specific needs and possibilities of each location.

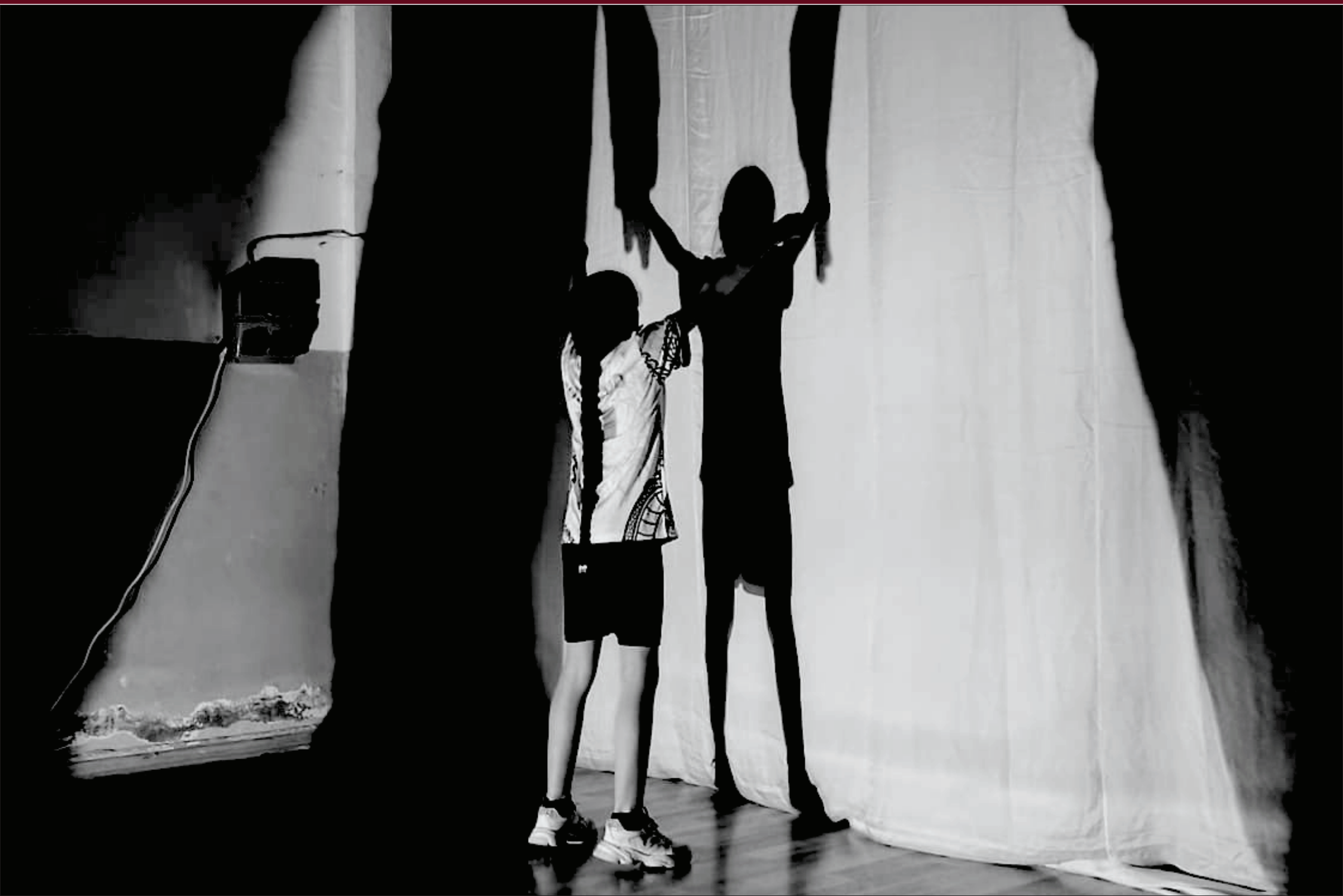
The project began with a series of capacity-building workshops designed for artists, facilitators, and staff members of the partner organisations. A total of six intensive training sessions were held in Rome and in Kilis, Türkiye, focusing on different aspects of shadow theatre, including puppet construction, dramaturgy, voice work, and educational methodologies. These workshops brought together seventy-five participants, building a shared understanding of both the artistic tools and the pedagogical potential of shadow theatre. Following this initial phase, three storytelling workshops for children were carried out—one in Italy, one in Greece, and one in Türkiye—reaching a total of eighty-six participants between the ages of ten and sixteen. In these workshops, children explored the language of shadow theatre and worked collaboratively to create original scenarios, build puppets, and stage performances that reflected their personal and collective experiences. Themes such as memory, movement, friendship, and the idea of home emerged naturally, shaped by the diverse backgrounds and imaginations of the participants.

Nine original shadow theatre scenarios were developed during the workshops—three in each participating country. These creative pieces were the result of collaborative work between children, facilitators, and artists, shaped by the local context and the lived experiences of the participants.

Each participating country adapted and transformed these scenarios into shadow theatre performances, selecting and applying various techniques learned during the trainings. In Italy, Greece, and Türkiye, groups of children engaged in months-long processes of collaborative creation—designing puppets, constructing stages, rehearsing scenes, and collectively interpreting the narrative content of the scripts. This work resulted in twenty-seven distinct representations of the nine scenarios across the three countries. A total of 307 children were involved in the performance phase of the project. The final presentations were held as public events, attracting diverse audiences and transforming the workshops into shared cultural moments. In total, these performances reached approximately 600 spectators, including families, educators, artists, and members of the wider community.

As part of its legacy, the project has generated a rich set of materials that document and extend its impact. A scientific publication on shadow theatre has been produced, offering historical, cultural, and methodological insights into the traditions explored throughout the project. Alongside this, an illustrated book directed to the wider public presents the process and outcomes of the project in accessible visual and narrative form. Twenty-seven video recordings of the shadow theatre performances created and enacted by children across Italy, Greece, and Türkiye have been collected and archived. These recordings capture the diversity and creativity of the scenarios developed and serve as valuable educational

and artistic resources. In addition, a documentary film traces the journey of the project from its early training sessions to the final public presentations, highlighting the voices of participants and the shared energy that shaped the process. All of these outputs are accessible through a dedicated project website, which functions as a permanent digital space for sharing the experiences, tools, and results of Shadow en Route with a broader audience.



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Kilis (Turkiye)

Teatro Gioco Vita





► **Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre**
Kilis (Turkiye)
Teatro Gioco Vita



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Kilis (Turkiye)
Synkoino Coop



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

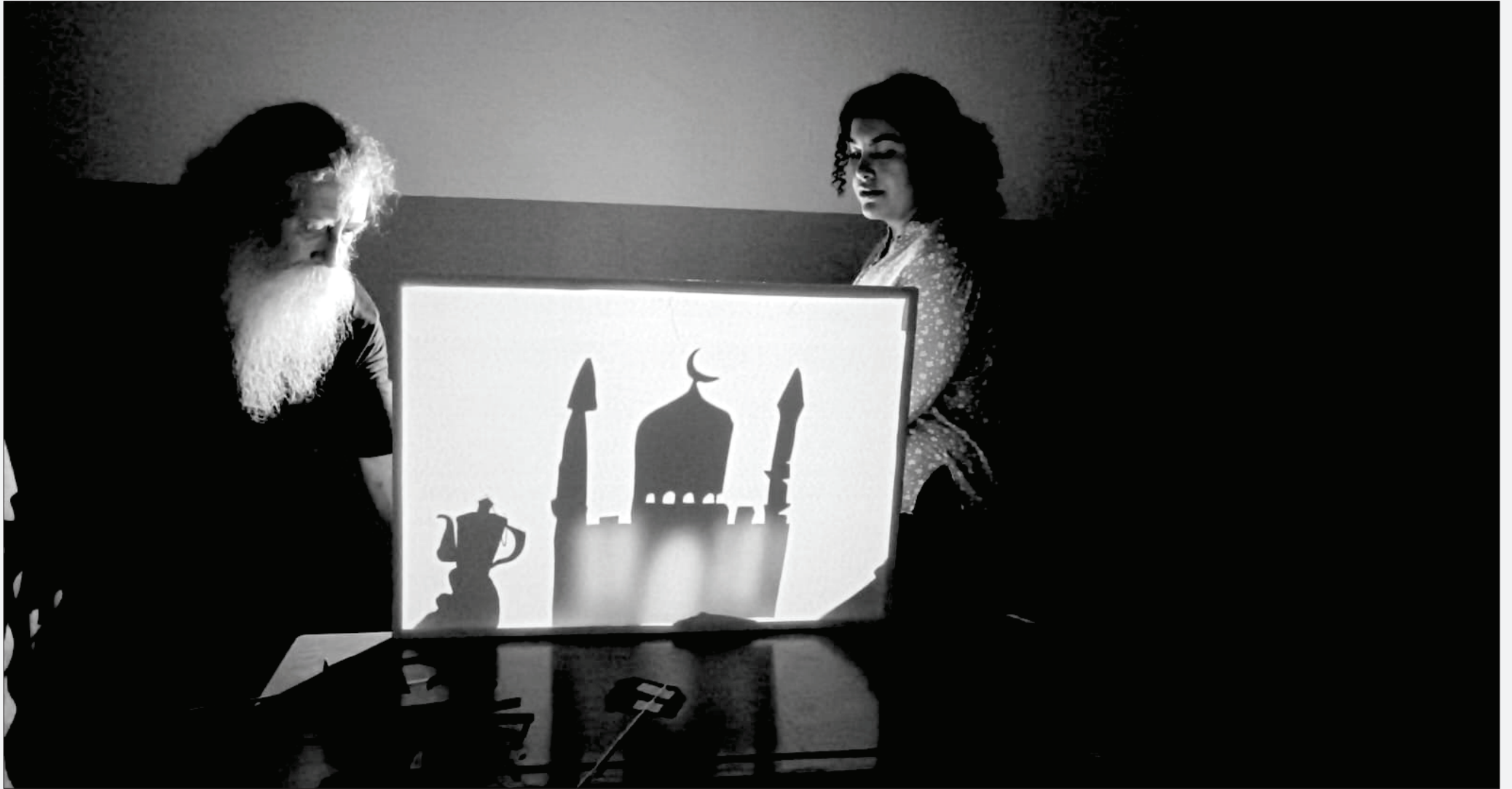
Kilis (Turkiye)
Synkoino Coop



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Kilis (Turkiye)

Sovint. Cultura y Desarrollo





► **Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre**
Kilis (Turkiye)
Sovint. Cultura y Desarrollo



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Rome (Italy)

Sovint. Cultura y Desarrollo



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Rome (Italy)

Sovint. Cultura y Desarrollo





►
**Capacity Building on
Shadow Theatre**

Rome (Italy)
Synkoino Coop



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Rome (Italy)
Synkoino Coop



Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Rome (Italy)
Synkoino Coop

Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre

Rome (Italy)

Teatro Gioco Vita





► **Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre**
Rome (Italy)
Teatro Gioco Vita



►
Storytelling Workshop
Rome (Italy)
Amal for Education aps

◀
Capacity Building on Shadow Theatre
Rome (Italy)
Teatro Gioco Vita



Storytelling Workshop
Thessaloniki (Greece)
Synkoino Coop





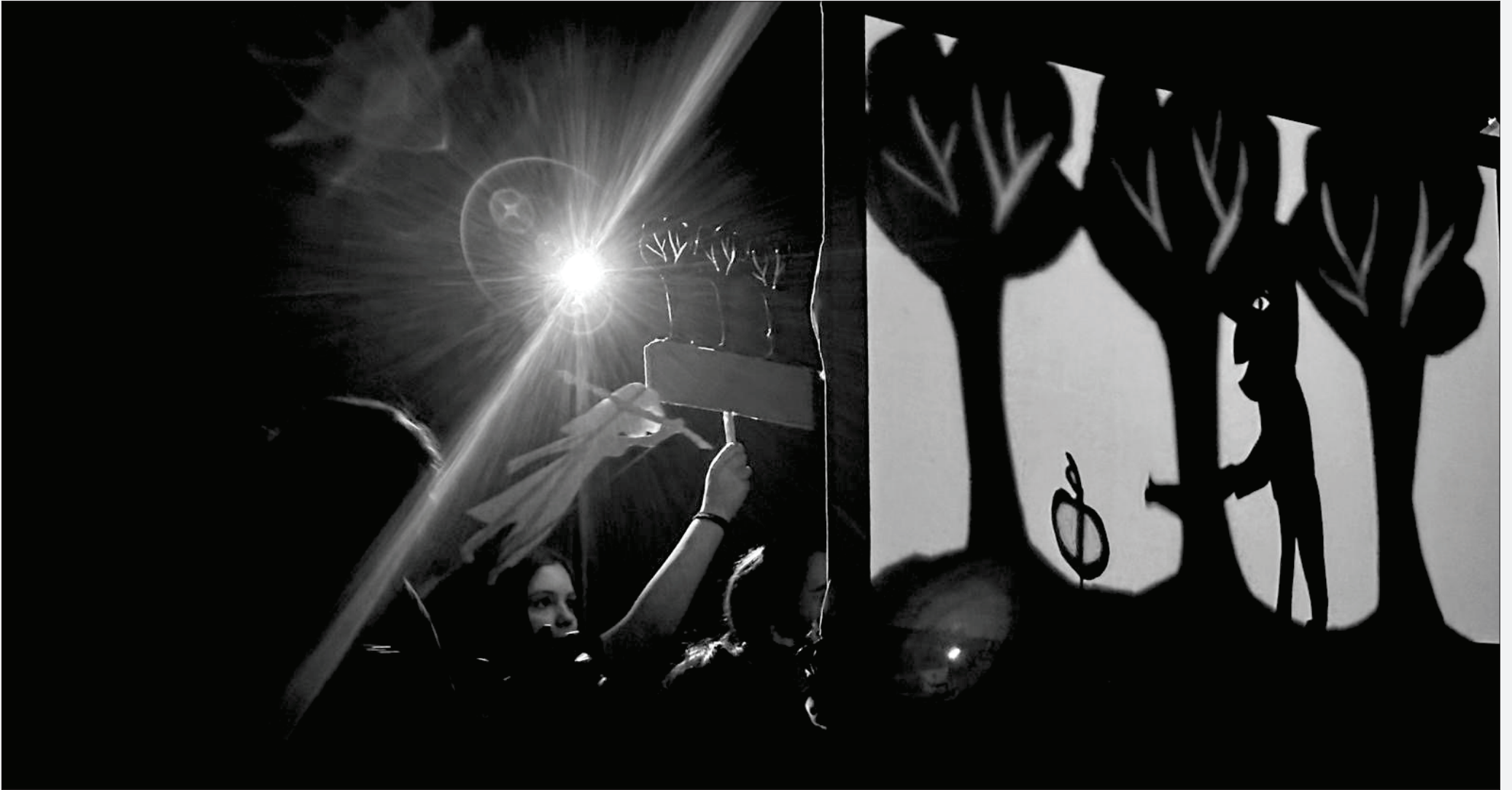
▲
Storytelling Workshop
 Kilis (Turkiye)
 AIYD / Amal for Education aps

◀
Storytelling Workshop
 Thessaloniki (Greece)
 Synkoino Coop

Performance Workshops for children

Rome (Italy)

Amal for Education aps





► **Performance Workshops for children**
Rome (Italy)
Amal for Education aps

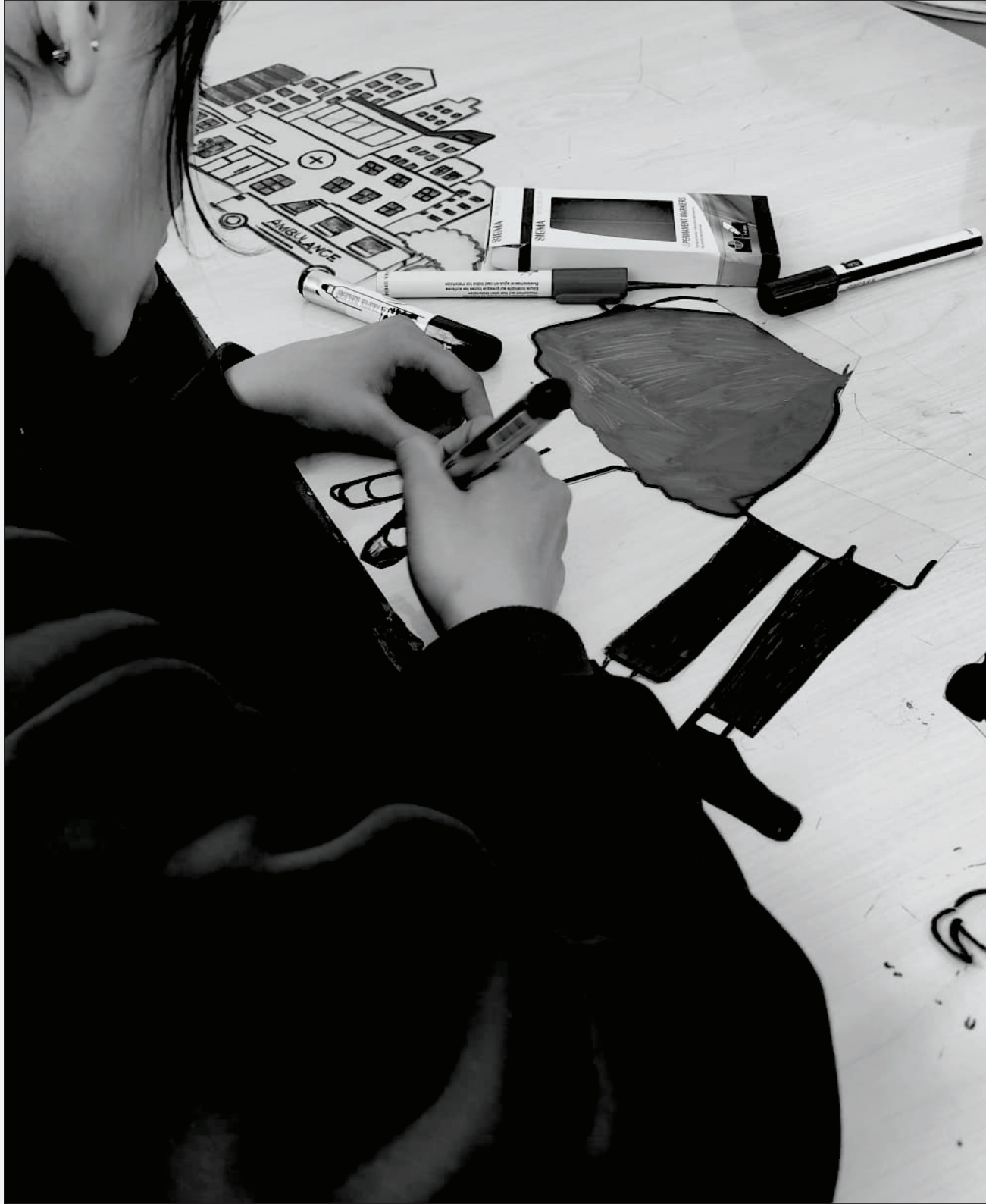


Performance Workshops for children
Thessaloniki (Greece)
Synkoino Coop



Performance Workshops for children
Thessaloniki (Greece)
Synkoino Coop





►
**Performance Workshops
for children**
Kilis (Türkiye)
AIYD / Amal for Education



Final event

Kilis (Turkiye)

AIYD / Amal for Education



Performance Workshops for children

Kilis (Turkiye)

AIYD / Amal for Education

Final event

Kilis (Türkiye)

AIYD / Amal for Education





Final event

Thessaloniki (Greece)
Synkoino Coop



Final event
Rome (Italy)
Amal for Education aps



Final event
Thessaloniki (Greece)
Synkoino Coop



Final event

Rome (Italy)

Amal for Education aps





Final event

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Amal for Education aps



Final event
Rome (Italy)
Amal for Education aps



Final event
Rome (Italy)
Amal for Education aps



THE SCENARIOS

9 scripts written by children

1. Karagiozis and the Tavern

Greece – Thessaloniki, Intercultural Primary School of Kordelio – Synkoino Coop

The tavern becomes a lively stage where Karagiozis encounters people of different origins and backgrounds. Through humor, satire, and daily struggles, the children showed how a simple public space could represent a meeting point for diversity. Conflicts emerge but are resolved through dialogue, showing the strength of shared experiences. The story reflects the resilience of multicultural communities and the value of living together despite differences.

2. Karagiozis in Space

Greece – Thessaloniki, Intercultural Primary School of Kordelio – Synkoino Coop

Karagiozis leaves Earth and travels to space, meeting unknown worlds and strange creatures. For the children, this imaginative setting symbolized the experience of migration, where the unknown can be frightening but also full of opportunity. The play illustrates curiosity, courage, and the need to adapt to new realities. It highlights how leaving one's home is both a challenge and an adventure, requiring creativity and openness to others.

3. Karagiozis and the Apple

Greece – Thessaloniki, Intercultural Primary School of Kordelio – Synkoino Coop

Inspired by the myth of the Apple of Discord, the children retold the story through Karagiozis with a focus on reconciliation rather than division. The apple becomes a symbol of conflict, but also of dialogue, as characters learn to overcome jealousy and find peace. By reshaping a classic myth, the children created a lesson on tolerance and cooperation. The story reminds us that diversity does not need to divide, but can be an opportunity to grow together.

4. The Flying Subway

Italy – Matemù Youth Centre – Amal for Education APS

A subway train dreams of flying, carrying children into new places beyond their city. The children used this metaphor to explore the desire for freedom, change, and adventure. On its journey, the subway becomes a shared space where diversity is not an obstacle but a source of imagination. The play celebrates movement, transformation, and the ability to dream together. It reflects how inclusion allows everyone to "take flight" without leaving anyone behind.

5. The Mysterious Flower

Italy – Matemù Youth Centre – Amal for Education APS

Children embark on a quest to find a magical flower, believed to bring peace and harmony. Along the way, they face challenges that can only be solved through teamwork and trust. The journey reflects the need to value differences, as each child contributes something unique. When the flower is finally found, it becomes a symbol of unity and intercultural dialogue. The story teaches that peace is not given but built through cooperation and respect.

6. The Journey Through Colors

Italy – Matemù Youth Centre – Amal for Education APS

Colors are personified as characters, each with its own identity, pride, and conflict. At first, they fight for dominance, but soon they realize that their true beauty emerges when they come together. The play reflects the challenges of living in diverse societies, where differences can spark division but also create harmony. The story is a vibrant metaphor for migration and inclusion, showing that diversity enriches communities. It highlights coexistence as the key to creativity and collective strength.

7. The Last Leaf

Türkiye – Kilis, AIYD Community Center – Amal İnsani Yardım Derneği & Amal for Education APS

In this play, the survival of the last leaf on a tree becomes a metaphor for hope in times of hardship. The children connected the image of the leaf to their own struggles with war and displacement, reflecting their fear of loss but also their determination to survive. The story highlights resilience in the face of danger, teaching that even the smallest symbol of life can inspire strength. It is a powerful reflection on how communities hold onto hope despite adversity.

8. Adam's Journey

Türkiye – Kilis, AIYD Community Center – Amal İnsani Yardım Derneği & Amal for Education APS

Adam is a young boy forced to leave home in search of safety and a new beginning. His journey takes him across dangerous paths and uncertain borders, mirroring the experiences of refugee children. Along the way, Adam learns about courage, solidarity, and the universal need for belonging. The children's narrative transforms hardship into a path of resilience, where the end of the journey represents the dream of finding peace. The story captures both the trauma and the hope of migration.

9. The Necklace

Türkiye – Kilis, AIYD Community Center – Amal İnsani Yardım Derneği & Amal for Education APS

A mysterious necklace passes from one character to another, connecting lives across time and space. For the children, the necklace symbolized the memories and traditions they carried with them despite displacement. The story highlights how objects, culture, and stories can preserve identity even when families are forced to move. By tracing the journey of the necklace, the play illustrates how migration creates new links between people. It underlines continuity, memory, and the richness of shared heritage.



**Aylan's story in the
Syrian scenario "Adam's journey"**

THE LEGACY

Shadow en Route

One of the most meaningful aspects of Shadow en Route was the way it made cultural heritage accessible and usable, not as something to be preserved in isolation, but as a living resource for education, inclusion, and artistic experimentation. Shadow theatre, with its long history and transnational journey, offered a shared language through which diverse participants could explore both the past and the present. The techniques used in the workshops were rooted in historical traditions, yet they were applied in completely new contexts, often shaped by the experiences and imaginations of children who came from different countries, cultures, and life paths.

In all participating countries, the methodology of shadow theatre proved to be a powerful tool for working with mixed groups, including migrant and non-migrant children. It allowed for the development of narratives that were personal and collective at once, offering space for humour, critical thinking, and emotion. The process of co-creation encouraged participants to listen, negotiate, and contribute their own voices. This made the project a valuable experience in terms of learning not only artistic skills, but also forms of social interaction that are essential in today's multicultural societies.

At the same time, the project revealed the challenges of working with cultural heritage in settings where the traditions themselves are not familiar. In some cases, children or educators had never seen a shadow theatre performance before. This required a rethinking of the

methods and content, moving away from historical reconstructions and towards participatory processes that could accommodate multiple identities and levels of knowledge. Rather than presenting shadow theatre as something to imitate, the project treated it as a flexible frame—an open stage for new voices and new meanings.

This openness was essential in reaching audiences and participants who might not otherwise feel included in artistic or cultural initiatives. The project did not require any previous experience with theatre, and it did not impose a fixed aesthetic or narrative model. Instead, it built on local strengths and existing forms of expression, adapting to schools, community centres, and informal educational spaces. In doing so, it demonstrated how heritage-based work can become truly inclusive when it prioritises process over product, and learning over display.

The impact of Shadow en Route cannot be measured only in the performances presented or the materials produced. It lies also in the relationships formed, the confidence gained, and the questions raised. In many contexts, the project made it possible to speak about displacement, difference, and belonging in ways that were meaningful and safe. For some children, this was the first time their stories had been invited into a public space. For others, it was a chance to see how their creativity could become part of something collective and visible.

What remains after the conclusion of the project is a set of outcomes—such as publications, videos, and a dedicated website—but also a set of practices. The training modules, the scenarios, the methods developed in the workshops are all available to be reused, adapted, and extended.

More importantly, the experience has left behind a sense of possibility. It has shown that even a simple screen, a lamp, and a few paper figures can open up spaces for expression, connection, and shared creation.

CREDITS

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Video Documentation: Giulia Morello

With the participation of:

- Students, teachers and volunteers involved in the final performance
- Youth Centre Matemù – CIES
- Istituto Comprensivo “Guicciardini” (Rome)

Syn-Koino Cooperative

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Performance Venue: Mikis Theodorakis Theatre (Thessaloniki)

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School Partner for final venue: Cemil Çetin İlkokulu (Kilis)

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