

Produced by Groningen University Theatre Society, Netherlands (2019)
Produced by WildClaw Theatre (Chicago, 2013)
Developed by WildClaw Theatre (Chicago, 2012)

THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH
by H.P. Lovecraft
Adapted by S. Thomasin Barsotti

S. Thomasin Barsotti
barsots@gmail.com
scottiebarsotti.wordpress.com
(c) 2014, 2019
All rights reserved

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Regina Olmstead, a college student studying economic anthropology. Toledo.
 Zadok Allen, a nonagenarian drunkard who's seen it all. Innsmouth.
 Joe Sargent, a bus driver. Innsmouth.
 Howard Barnes, a station agent and ticket seller. Newburyport.
 Annie Tilton, the curator of the Old Newbury Historical Society. Newburyport.
 Winifred Gilman, the keeper of Gilman House, bootlegger, aspirin chewer. Innsmouth.
 Samuel, a general store manager, young for that job. Innsmouth (via Arkham).
 Walter, Olmstead's cousin, a troubled young man. Innsmouth (via Arkham).
 Sheriff Raven, protector of the public order. Arkham.
 Officer Malone, a competent deputy. Arkham.
 Professor Trask, an anthropologist at Miskatonic University. Arkham.
 Barnabas Marsh, an aristocrat, runs the Marsh gold refinery. Innsmouth.
 Millicent Marsh, an aristocrat, heads the Women's League. Innsmouth.
 Teddy, a bellhop at Gilman House. Innsmouth.
 Olmstead's Mother, appears 40s, but is ageless. Y'ha-nthlei.
 Three Robed Figures, appear to Olmstead in dreams. ???.

Newburyporters
 Arkhamites/Witnesses
 Innsmouthians/Cultists/Deep Ones
 Telepathic Voices
 A shoggoth

Setting

Three locations in New England: Newburyport, a small shipping town; Arkham, a university center somewhat larger than Newburyport; and Innsmouth, a decrepit coastal village.

The time is prohibition era, after the crash. The season is Winter.

New England dialects might be used for many characters (other than Olmstead) if desired. Zadok Allen has a *very* heavy New England accent, in any case.

Note on adaptation

This is a very liberal adaptation of Lovecraft's story. It invents new characters and situations alongside the basic plot of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, most of which are taken from or suggested by passages from the original and other stories.

Each act is written as one continuous scene without scene breaks and very few blackouts, though there are changes in location and passage of time. It is intended that transitions happen fluidly around Olmstead, and that she rarely, if ever, leaves the stage except where specifically described as doing so. Beginnings and endings of scenes may slightly overlap, like a dream.

Note on language

Lovecraft's various chants (ie. CTHULHU FHTAGN!) are not a written language, and are described by Lovecraft as a "fumbling human attempt to catch the phonetics of an absolutely non-human word." They are virtually unpronounceable utterances that Lovecraft never provided pronunciation for, just that the words are pronounced "gutterally and thickly." According to Lovecraft, these words can "never be uttered perfectly by human throats."

Note on sound

When Olmstead's ancestors are speaking to her in dreams, they speak with the "voices" of all of their descendants. It is the adaptor's intention that this "dialogue" be more tonal than speech, like a multi-layered, discordant singing.

Sound should play a large role in defining space, particularly in Innsmouth itself. A sense of oppression and despair should pervade, and in the long scene with Zadok Allen, sounds and lighting changes should evolve over the course of the scene, underscoring a sense of dread and danger by the end. Soundscapes during his stories might also insinuate echoes of the events he describes.

Note on creature

The "shoggoth" is a shape-shifting creature that exists in Lovecraft's mythos, described most specifically in the story "At The Mountains of Madness."

"It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train—a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter."

~ *At The Mountains of Madness*

There is no one correct way to present the creature, but it should be huge, and probably only partially seen and darkly lit. It will be more frightful if it's size and shape is only hinted at, obscured by shadow, perhaps backlit.

The shoggoth repeats the cry "*Tekeli-li!*" a call reminiscent of a sea bird.

THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH

ACT I

NEWBURYPORTERS gather onstage.

REGINA OLMSTEAD walks up to HOWARD BARNES at the transit station counter. OLMSTEAD is dressed for cold weather and carries a small valise.

NEWBURYPORTER

Innsmouth? Well, it's a queer kinda town down at the mouth of the Manuxet.

NEWBURYPORTER

Quite a port before the War of 1812.

NEWBURYPORTER

But all gone to pieces in the last century or so.

NEWBURYPORTER

More empty houses than there are people.

NEWBURYPORTER

Queer kinda town.

NEWBURYPORTER

No business to speak of, 'cept fishing.

NEWBURYPORTER

Strange folk in Innsmouth.

NEWBURYPORTER

Some lobstering.

NEWBURYPORTER

It's hard to describe.

NEWBURYPORTER

They've got this look about them.

NEWBURYPORTER

The "Innsmouth Look."

Like a skin disease. NEWBURYPORTER

Deformity. NEWBURYPORTER

All into some kinda devil-worship, ya know. NEWBURYPORTER

Once they had quite a few mills there. NEWBURYPORTER

Awful rituals. NEWBURYPORTER

Sacrifices, they say. NEWBURYPORTER

Most of them keep out of sight. NEWBURYPORTER

And for good reason. NEWBURYPORTER

Nothin' left now but one gold refinery. NEWBURYPORTER

Especially the older folks. NEWBURYPORTER

Runnin' on the leanest kinda part time. NEWBURYPORTER

Innsmouth? ALL OF NEWBURYPORT

Queer kinda town. NEWBURYPORTER

Can't be more'n three or four-hundred living there now. NEWBURYPORTER

Empty streets. NEWBURYPORTER

NEWBURYPORTER

Their skin has this rough, scabby look to it.

NEWBURYPORTER

Narrow heads.

NEWBURYPORTER

Stare-y eyes that never seem to shut.

NEWBURYPORTER

The “Innsmouth Look.”

NEWBURYPORTER

Makes your blood crawl.

NEWBURYPORTER

Bad breeding.

NEWBURYPORTER

A true American failure, Innsmouth.

NEWBURYPORTER

A tragedy.

NEWBURYPORTER

A shame.

NEWBURYPORTER

A bad place.

NEWBURYPORTER

Heathens, all of ‘em.

ALL OF NEWBURYPORT

And they stink, too.

BARNES

Well. Train’s the only direct passage from Newburyport to Arkham, and I apologize for the price, but unfortunately that’s out of my hands.

OLMSTEAD

It does leave me in a bit of a bind.

BARNES

If you just need to get to Arkham...well...

OLMSTEAD

Yes?

BARNES

You could...take that old bus, I suppose, picks up front of Hammond's Drug Store. But hear me when I say it ain't thought much of hereabouts. It goes through Innsmouth.

*Nearby Newburyporters cringes audibly at the name, protest.
Olmstead notices.*

OLMSTEAD

And why is everybody so down on Innsmouth?

BARNES

You mustn't put too much stock in what folks around here say. Newburyporters are hard to get started, but once they do they never let up. They've been whisperin' things about Innsmouth for the last century. Tall tales, some of it would make you laugh.

OLMSTEAD

Try me.

BARNES

Like say, there are stories 'bout how certain families in Innsmouth drove bargains with Satan himself, in exchange for prosperity, brought imps out of hell to live in Innsmouth amongst the decent folk. And of course there's Black Reef, or 'Devil Reef' as most folks call it, a rugged, uneven thing about a mile out. People say they seen every manner of demon you can think of on and around Devil Reef. Back in Innsmouth's shipping days sailors used to make big detours just to avoid it.

OLMSTEAD

Well that doesn't mean anything, what sailor wouldn't avoid a reef?

BARNES

To God's ear, that's what I always said--see I'm from Vermont, these kinda stories don't go down with me. But sure enough, some crews would go to extremes, take this big arcing course so that Devil Reef wouldn't even come into view.

OLMSTEAD

That's superstition for you, makes fools out of men, doesn't it?

BARNES

Well, maybe, but...if I can be honest with you, pure and true the real reason behind animosity toward Innsmouth is simply race prejudice.

OLMSTEAD

So they're negroes?

BARNES

No.

OLMSTEAD

Indians? Chinese?

BARNES

No and no. There may be some South Sea influence, actually, heard some talk of Fiji or Samoa at some point, but as far as I can tell they're white like you or me.

OLMSTEAD

But you said it's race prejudice.

BARNES

Well. Yes. Don't know what else to call it, when you don't like a people just because you decided you don't.

OLMSTEAD

I see.

BARNES

Yes, well young...

OLMSTEAD

Olmstead. Regina Olmstead.

BARNES

Ms. Olmstead. Howard Barnes. What's your business up there in Arkham?

OLMSTEAD

I'm doing research for school. Economic anthropology, specifically urban decay. Don't worry, Mr. Barnes, I won't bore you with my thesis.

BARNES

Well, you shouldn't be lacking for evidence of decay, especially if you happen through Innsmouth, whole sections of the place falling down and boarded up. Although they were on the decline well before the rest of the country.

OLMSTEAD

I also fancy myself an antiquarian. I love old buildings and relics, ancient legends. I've wondered if I might be missing a calling as an archaeologist.

BARNES

Plenty of those in Innsmouth as well.

Archaeologists?
OLMSTEAD

Old buildings.
BARNES

Ah.
OLMSTEAD

BARNES
The whole town's a relic of another time. Though I wouldn't want to be on or around any dig there, I'll tell you that. No tellin' what you'd find.
(Olmstead laughs, seeing this as a joke)
Know where you're headed once you're in Arkham?

OLMSTEAD
I have family there. My mother's side, in all its mystery.

BARNES
Come again?

OLMSTEAD
Oh, nothing. I have an uncle in Arkham, and my cousin Walter. So you don't have to worry about me, Mr. Barnes.

BARNES
Well, as I mentioned, the direct line from here to Arkham is the steam train. Which is the route I would recommend especially seein' as you're on your own.
(beat, looks at her)
But if funds are as tight as you say and you really can't swing it, Joe Sargent comes through each day at 10 in the morning and again around 7 at night.

OLMSTEAD
Joe Sargent?

BARNES
Innsmouth fella. Runs the bus, stops here in Newburyport, then Innsmouth, then onto Arkham, and then back. Though he never gets any custom from here, or Arkham either I guess. It's a wonder he keeps the rattletrap running at all, s'pose it's cheap enough but there's never more'n two or three riders and always just Innsmouth folks. People around here don't like it.

OLMSTEAD
But what do *you* think of Innsmouth?

BARNES

Me?

OLMSTEAD

Yes. It's clear what the rest of Newburyport thinks of Innsmouth. What about you?

BARNES

(pause)

Never been and I wouldn't care to.

OLMSTEAD

Would you mind pointing me in the direction of Hammond's Drug Store?

BARNES

Three blocks down. Hang a left. You'll see the awning.

OLMSTEAD

Thank you.

BARNES

But if you're decided on takin' the bus, should stay overnight here and take the 10am tomorrow.

(Olmstead turns back, puzzled)

The evening run terminates in Innsmouth. And I wouldn't go at night, I was you.

Olmstead puts the collar on her coat up against the cold, walks past Hammond's. The Innsmouth bus sits there, a person is slumped over in the driver's seat. The sign says "Newb'port ~ Innsmo." Olmstead approaches.

OLMSTEAD

Excuse me. Hello?

The slumped person turns and looks at Olmstead. It's a large man with an odd complexion in a frayed hat, a slack look on his face, huge staring eyes. This is JOE SARGENT.

OLMSTEAD

I'm sorry, I don't mean to disturb you. I'm going to Arkham.

(after an absurdly long pause, Joe looks up)

Tell me, please, if you would, how long is the stop over in Innsmouth?

(pause, no response from Joe)

I presume the bus idles for some time in Innsmouth before heading on to Arkham, yes? Can you tell me for how long? I'll be taking the bus...tomorrow morning.

JOE

(speaks with great difficulty)

10am. 60 minutes to Innsmouth. In Innsmouth for 60 minutes. On to Arkham at noon.

OLMSTEAD

Very well--

JOE

40 minutes to Arkham. In Arkham for 20 minutes. Back to Innsmouth.

OLMSTEAD

Thank you. That's all I needed.

Joe stares at her for a long time, then slumps back over. Olmstead goes to the Newburyport Museum and Historical Society. ANNIE TILTON is locking up for the night, a scarf around her neck, keys out, turns and sees Olmstead.

TILTON

What's that?

OLMSTEAD

Oh, I...is this the historical society?

TILTON

It is. We're closed, I'm afraid. We'll open again at 10am.

OLMSTEAD

Too bad for me. I need to be on a bus at 10am.

TILTON

You're not riding in that death machine? The one driven by the Sargent fellow?

OLMSTEAD

As a matter of fact.

TILTON

A word of advice. Keep away from that monstrosity. That bus is filthy and falling apart, and that's the nicest thing I can say about it.

OLMSTEAD

Well, I'm headed to Arkham, but the train fare is too expensive. I'm only a student, I don't have a lot of funds to travel on.

TILTON

And you're unaccompanied in your travels?

OLMSTEAD

I am.

TILTON

You poor thing.

(sighs)

But surely you've heard Sargent's bus runs through Innsmouth?

OLMSTEAD

I have.

TILTON

Need I say more about it?

OLMSTEAD

Have you ever actually been there?

TILTON

Dear, you must avoid that place as if it were catching. It has slipped far, far down the cultural scale, hardly recognizable as a town.

OLMSTEAD

So it's impoverished?

TILTON

In every sense. Most of all, spiritually. The people, if you can call them that, are all deformed inside and out. A pagan cult devoured all of the orthodox churches a long time ago. Turns out...oh...all right, come on inside. Get out of this wretched cold.

OLMSTEAD

You don't mind?

TILTON

Truth is, you're the only person who's stopped in today, might as well make it worth my while showing up.

They go inside. Tilton starts turning on the lights, and they both warm up a little.

OLMSTEAD

Thank you. You're very kind.

TILTON

Well, maybe, maybe not. But I have a fondness for a curious mind. I'm Annie Tilton.

OLMSTEAD

Regina Olmstead.

TILTON

Come back here, I have a whole section hidden away on those nasty Innsmouth folks. There are some carved plates here that show them partaking in rituals to their god, a sort of half-man, half-fish. Disgusting.

OLMSTEAD

Hm. I think I've seen these before.

TILTON

(considers)

Where did you say you're studying?

OLMSTEAD

I hadn't said. I'm at Oberlin College. In Ohio.

TILTON

Oberlin. They school negroes.

OLMSTEAD

And myself, yes.

TILTON

Just look at him. Fish-Man. Who could worship something like that?

OLMSTEAD

What are these gold things? Is it jewelry?

TILTON

We assume so. Queer-looking sort of gold though, isn't it?

Tilton shows Olmstead a bracelet. The material seems to be gold, but has a light lustrousness of some other alloy mixed in. Olmstead gasps and seems immediately transfixed.

TILTON

Came to us from Innsmouth, clearly some exotic provenance, but we can't place it. Probably East-Indian or Indo-Chinese but we can't be sure. Had a metallurgist examine it, but even he could only guess at its origin. Our theory is that it belonged to the Marsh Family.

OLMSTEAD

I'm not familiar.

TILTON

Hm. Big deal in Innsmouth, the Marshes, they own the gold refinery up there. This piece seems to be worth something to them, ever since they became aware we had it. Three generations of Marshes have tried to purchase the piece from the Society at outrageously exorbitant sums. We get some small pleasure out of denying them of it.
(Tilton puts the bracelet back in its case)

OLMSTEAD

It's so...

TILTON

Grotesque?

OLMSTEAD

Compelling, I thought. The detail in the reliefs, crafted with such perfection.

TILTON

Years ago an Innsmouth man, drunk beyond sense, pawned it in town for a fraction of what it's surely worth. They're all drunks, far as I can tell.

OLMSTEAD

I've never seen anything like it.

TILTON

Neither have I. Makes me uneasy to look upon it, so I usually don't. But occasionally, when someone such as yourself has an interest in such things. Why are you interested in Innsmouth, again?

OLMSTEAD

Well I'm...

Olmstead touches the jewelry. There's a change in the room, the lights seem to dim, and a low rumble is heard, like an earthquake underwater. A distant voice is heard chanting. Olmstead's breath becomes short, like she's having an asthma attack.

VOICE

IA! IA! CTHULHU FHTAGN! IA! IA!

OLMSTEAD

(removes hand from the jewelry)

I'm not.

(recovers)

Um...I...I'm just passing through there on my way to Arkham.

TILTON

Here.

(Tilton hands Olmstead some cash)

Take the train. I insist. Innsmouth isn't any place for a god-fearing Christian to linger, even only for an hour.

OLMSTEAD

Why would you assume I'm a Christian?

TILTON

Why would I assume you weren't?

Olmstead leaves the museum.

That night, nowhere to go, Olmstead sits on a city bench in front of Hammond's. She itches her neck unconsciously, and starts to take deep, wheezing breaths. She pulls out a small vial of liquid and a handkerchief. She looks around to be sure no one is watching, and pours a small amount of liquid into the handkerchief in inhales from it deeply. This seems to bring her some relief. She looks at her surroundings miserably, then lies down, pulling her coat tight.

The wind picks up. Then, the lights change and the sound of wind morphs into water, as though she is submerged. A ROBED FIGURE appears and approaches Olmstead on the bench. The Robed Figure holds its hand over Olmstead's head, and without touching her, pulls her upright. The Figure wears strange jewelry, and seems to swim. Olmstead's eyes open. Lights slowly start to come up on a young man, far away, with his back turned. The Figure moves toward the young man. Olmstead watches the Figure move. The Figure stops partway and turns back to Olmstead.

OLMSTEAD

Walter?

The young man, WALTER, turns to Olmstead.

WALTER

I can't sleep anymore. I can't sleep.

OLMSTEAD

I'm sleeping on this bench. I can't afford a room.

WALTER

That makes sense. Reggie.

OLMSTEAD

What?

WALTER

Do you sometimes find it difficult to close your eyes?

Walter walks away, into darkness.

OLMSTEAD

Walter? Walter!

(looks at the Robed Figure)

Who are you?

The Robed Figure “speaks.” Its voice is a strange harmony of three women, and three men, like singing. The sound intensifies as the Figure approaches Olmstead. The Figure reaches out a hand to Olmstead’s face, its fingers are fused together. The Figure lifts Olmstead’s chin, and they look at each other’s faces. Olmstead’s breath starts to quicken. The Figure places its hand on the side of Olmstead’s neck, where she was itching. Her breathing immediately slows and she relaxes, laying back down. The Figure vanishes into darkness and the sounds of water die away. Light reverts. Olmstead shoots awake on the bench.

OLMSTEAD

Hello? Hello?

A Newburyport couple stands nearby, gawking at her. She itches her neck. They look at her like she’s filth.

She gathers herself. Other Newburyporters approach Hammond’s. A sound is heard, a terrible rattling and humming. The Newburyporters regard the sound and disperse, moving down the street. They all regard Olmstead with a mixture of suspicion and worry. Olmstead notes their eyes on her and pulls her collar closed.

The Innsmouth bus pulls up. Two Innsmouthians disembark. The Newburyporters treat the Innsmouthians with disdain and disgust. Some turn their backs. Some glare as if to insist “We’re watching you.” One of the Newburyporters spits. Then, the crowd watches dumbfounded as Olmstead

boards the bus, whispering, murmuring. Olmstead holds money out to Joe Sargent.

OLMSTEAD

Innsmouth.

(pause)

On to Arkham.

(pause)

Round trip, please.

Joe doesn't take the money at first, staring. Eventually he takes it, and Olmstead sits.

They depart. The sound of the engine is an awful, rattling whir. Olmstead sits in the closest seat to the front, across the aisle from Joe. She's cold, though Joe seems fine.

OLMSTEAD

60 minutes you said? To Innsmouth?

Joe Sargent gives a very slow nod.

OLMSTEAD

What is that river there, is that the Manuxet?

Joe nods again, slowly.

OLMSTEAD

Been driving this route a long time?

Joe doesn't nod.

OLMSTEAD

It's beautiful in its way. All of the old bridges, that last one looked like it may collapse in a heavy snow, incredible it's still so sturdy.

(beat)

Look at all the crumbling foundations, dead stumps biting through the sand. You can tell the area was fertile once, and thickly settled. Amazing how things change.

JOE

Plague.

OLMSTEAD

Excuse me?