

Performing Wayang Internationally: One Dalang's Perspective

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Wayang puppet theater in Java— whether *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theater) or *wayang golek* (rod puppet theater)— centers on a solo puppeteer or *dalang* (also spelled *dhalang*), who provides all the puppet voices and narration, sings “mood” songs (*sulukan*), conducts the accompanying musical ensemble, utters incantations and enacts associated ritual actions, and often performs as MC—introducing and interacting with guest artists and relaying messages from hosts. It is also eminently a social art form, a whole art world involving the cooperation, complicity, and tacit support of many. Any performance is contingent upon collaboration between the dalang and a raft of individuals and groups. Performances are occasioned by important life cycle events or anniversaries of organizations and the decision of which story episode to enact is negotiated between the dalang and sponsor. Plays often bear a relation to the event; wedding stories, for example, are popular fare at weddings. The host normally builds or rents the stage and provides banana logs (the playboard for puppets), ritual offerings, and other accoutrements. Sponsors not only provide fees but also are expected to offer a dalang and his/her crew meals, snacks, and cigarettes. Audience members participate by requesting songs or by performing songs or dances before or during a play as guest artists. Musicians not only play instruments and sing, they also carry equipment, run errands, repair puppets, and give back rubs to the dalang when required. Drivers, sound technicians, puppet makers, and puppet wranglers are indispensable. The dalang's family is particularly important. Brothers will often share musicians and a set of puppets inherited from their father. An elderly uncle no

longer actively performing might be called upon to perform the sacred *Origin of Kala* play, which follows or precedes all-night shows to exorcise misfortune. Children are a dalang's apprentices and heirs and starting in childhood will perform matinee shows and short battle episodes which precede night-time plays. The dalang's spouse will greet and entertain sponsors visiting the house and make bookings in a spouse's absence.

Radical adjustments are thus required when wayang is transplanted to contexts outside of Southeast Asia, where customary networks, social expectations, and cultural knowledge are attenuated or absent. This article examines the modulation of the constraints that define *wayang kulit* and *wayang golek* through my own international wayang work, with a particular focus on my last four years of activity.¹ I will show how performing traditional art outside of its customary frame not only poses challenges but might also be grasped as a creative opportunity.

"Traditional" Wayang in Non-Traditional Contexts

As noted, in Java and other parts of the Indonesian archipelago, potential wayang sponsors normally approach a dalang and ask him or her to perform for a planned event—the anniversary of a factory, a village thanksgiving rite, a wedding. The puppeteer is then customarily charged with contracting musicians, a sound system and technicians, puppets, and gamelan instruments, assuming full responsibility for all artistic aspects of the performance. The situation is different abroad. The wayang performance often *is* the event, rather than being occasioned by one. I have performed over the years at gamelan, theatre, puppet, and arts festivals; universities, academic institutes, and schools; academic conferences; and museum exhibitions. A dalang is more often approached to perform with a

gamelan group than the other way around. Wayang is sometimes billed as a gamelan concert with puppets and in advertisements and programs the puppeteer's name is commonly less visible than the name of the gamelan group or even its musical director.

It is common abroad to lack players for the softer gamelan instruments which require bespoke training; drum players are key to wayang but most drummers outside Java lack training in accompanying puppet movement or interpreting the verbal, percussive, and kinetic signals a dalang gives in performance to start and stop pieces and indicate changes in tempo and dynamics. Musicians more accustomed to *klenengan* (musical concerts) than drama need to learn to adapt established musical repertoire, condensing or expanding structures, altering tempos, thinning or thickening textures, changing the order of sections, altering lyrics.

Sutrisno Hartana, a Javanese gamelan musician and dalang writing a dissertation on wayang in Canada, invited me in 2011 to perform with Gamelan Madu Sari at Gong! The Vancouver Gamelan Festival. Sutrisno taught me over a week or so of rehearsals not to fret over any loss of authority but to grasp a wayang performance as a collaborative opportunity to share and grow artistically. Through working with Sutrisno, a gamelan player as well as composer, I realized that each gamelan group has its own repertoire of pieces, old and new, which must be acknowledged and harnessed in wayang. A dalang must “work with what exists” – *bertolak dari yang ada*, in the words of Balinese writer-director Putu Wijaya. This might mean using repeatedly the same three pieces for a one-hour wayang with a novice gamelan group. It also means discovering and exploiting the distinctive pieces in a group's repertoire and building scenes and plays around these. Some of my favorite moments in wayang over the years have involved inventing theatrical contexts for *Gamelunk*, a jazz

composition for solo flugelhorn and gamelan written by Simon van der Walt of Gamelan Naga Mas; Ben Rogalsky of Gamelan Madu Sari's vocal duet with gamelan accompaniment, *From Heaven to Earth*; Jody Diamond's gamelan adaptation of the traditional Jewish melody *Lekhah Dodi* titled *Sabbath Bride*; and Andy Channing's punk-rave gamelan classic, *Pig in the Kraton*. Performing wayang means field research for a dalang-- listening to gossip, reading the news, learning local landmarks that can be woven into dialogue—research that I have discovered is best facilitated by resident musicians.

Javanese nobility once constructed purpose-built pavilions called *paringgitan* for wayang performances, while ordinary *joglo* houses in central Java had panelled front walls that could be dismantled for mounting wayang screens. Few such bespoke wayang spaces exist outside of Southeast Asia: every performance involves a process of spatial exploration and negotiation. Gamelan groups accustomed to performing in rehearsal-room configurations need to adjust to novel spatial layouts that might take more account of audience sightlines than the acoustic needs of players. Non-Indonesian audiences often believe that it is more “proper” to view wayang from the shadow side of the screen. Spectators need to be encouraged to circulate during performances and not remain fixed in place, viewing *either* shadows or puppets but not both. I have found that this can be done by strategic placement of bars and food or creating open spaces for children to play. In a 2002 performance in The Arches in Glasgow with Joko Susilo and Gamelan Naga Mas, we employed “ringers” -- friends of gamelan members -- to play cards during the show in order to generate a more relaxed ambience. The American dalang Marc Hoffman told me in 1988, when I assisted him in a wayang at the University of Hawai'i, that he preferred performing in hotel ballrooms over theatre venues.

Performing wayang abroad also means frequently working with unusual sets of puppets, sometimes eclectically collected and in various states of disrepair. The short supply of wayang puppets might necessitate substituting one puppet for another. But a poverty of means can also be seized for theatrical opportunities. The “Temptations of Arjuna” scene in *Arjuna’s Meditation*, a shadow play I performed with Harvard University’s gamelan group and Jody Diamond’s personal set of antique puppets in May 2015, is illustrative.² With Arjuna sitting cross-armed underneath a beautiful antique banyan tree puppet (probably from East Java), Jesus enters with his crown of his thorns—a puppet from a rare Christian wayang form called *wayang wahyu*, which had been gifted to Diamond when she spoke at a Christian university in Java. Bearing his crucifix (a pair of crossed clubs), Jesus instructs Arjuna to stop meditating as Jesus has suffered sufficiently for all mankind. Then follow Ki Brayut and Ni Brayut, a peasant couple each bearing the load of many children. These puppets once were fertility symbols and were used in post-independence Indonesia for family planning propaganda, but are now rarely found in wayang sets in Java. They coax Arjuna to stop his meditation as meditating leads to an excess of sperm-- and look how saving up sperm has ended up for them. A comical Chinese figure, missing an arm, implores Arjuna to help him repair his bicycle. A troop of soldiers of various periods and ethnicities, mostly missing at least one limb, castigate Arjuna for meditating as his quest for power will lead to war, and all wars are evil. These “bits” were devised in response to the many damaged puppets in Diamond’s unique set. The apparitions’ pathos would not have manifested if I had not discovered the figures when rummaging through Diamond’s unorthodox collection.³ The diverse ages and origins of the puppets visualized the collapse of time and space in this cosmic moment.

Conversations with Wayang Tradition

In early 2011, I was invited by one of my graduate students who had recently founded an art center in Thessaloniki, Greece to give a lecture and “small demonstration” of wayang at the inaugural edition of an Asian theater festival. There are no gamelan groups in Thessaloniki, and until that point I had always rejected requests to perform unaccompanied. Gamelan music is not just a backdrop for wayang-- it is the pulse that gives the puppet life and defines the world in which wayang’s characters live and its kingdoms are built. But having studied contemporary wayang in Indonesia over the previous two years, participating in a gallery performance based on the underground cartoons of Eko Nugroho and observing rehearsals and performances by a number of innovative Indonesian puppeteers, I was interested in devising a solo performance in the form of a dramatic monologue with puppets. This would be my own contribution to an emerging field of practice which I have called post-traditional wayang, theatrical productions and performance projects that are grounded in the conventions of tradition but do not heed its restrictions and taboos.

Inspired by experiments in lighting and staging by the radical Javanese puppeteer Slamet Gundono (1966-2014), the reflexive puppet plays of Iranian playwright-director Bahram Beyzai, and the performance of failure in the British experimental theater company Forced Entertainment, I decided to create *A Dalang in Search of Wayang* about my own dilemma of performing wayang internationally. I open the show with a confession. I identify as a dalang but, living in Europe, I am often without a gamelan to perform with and am bereft of a knowledgeable audience who understands wayang’s conventions and find personal and communal meaning in its performance. I “hang without a hook,” *gumantung tanpa canthelan* in Javanese, situated between two worlds, lacking connection to both,

feeling inauthentic. Surrounded by wayang puppets, I seek guidance from Semar, wayang's principal clown servant, who quickly identifies me as akin to Cungkring, who in the Cirebon shadow puppet tradition, which I studied in the 1990s, is often questing for mystical insights and resolutions to paradoxes. Lit from the front by a bright theatrical lamp, I become a character in the shadow play: my shadow has equal status with those of the puppet characters who I turn to for help—Semar, Bathara Guru, Kresna, Anoman. I shift frequently from dialogues with the puppets to direct address to the audience, explaining the conventions of wayang and riffing on my own life in the manner of stand-up comedy as I go along. The performance questions my authority as “puppet master,” and I find myself frequently abused by the wayang puppets—at one moment Anoman even transforms me into an ogre and beats me up. As is often the case in Cirebonese wayang, there is no resolution to the story, though hopefully there is greater awareness at the end of not only my dilemma, but of traditions in global contexts more generally. A suitcase puppet show -- with all the puppets, my dalang costume, and equipment including the stage light packed in a single case – this production has proved highly portable, and since its Thessaloniki debut I have performed it internationally in conferences, universities, and festivals, with changing topical references depending on the context.

A Dalang in Search of Wayang was the first of a trilogy of new wayang plays responding to wayang's peculiar situatedness internationally. The next installment was *Lokananta: The Gamelan of the Gods* (2012), which I created together with the composer and gamelan musician John Pawson for the 30th anniversary of the University of York's Gamelan Sekar Pethak, one of the first university gamelans in the United Kingdom. Many of the UK's gamelan teachers and players are York graduates and in discussion with the program's founder Neil Sorrell and current graduate students, we hatched the idea of

creating an all-night wayang that would bring together players from different Javanese gamelan groups from around the United Kingdom. From fragments of Javanese myth and a number of different wayang plays, I collated a narrative tracing the mythic origin and development of gamelan. A war in the heavens results in the self-exile of the smith of the gods, Empuh Ramayadhi, who brings to earth the secrets of metal work. On earth, the courtier Patih Cadaskara sings songs and dances in feigned madness to gain access to an ogre kingdom and retrieve a kidnapped princess. The gods learn of these mad techniques and incorporate them into the gamelan that they bring to the earthly kingdom they establish once the war in the heavens has ended. While the original gamelan, named Lokananta, played by itself without the need for humans, subsequent sets of instruments made by Empuh Ramayadhi and his heirs were played by musicians.

Pawson and I divided the story into 5 segments, and in the weeks and months before the performance, we travelled around the UK rehearsing 170 musicians from 15 different university and community gamelan groups who were brought together into 5 regional “collectives.” Some moments brought together multiple ensembles, and all musicians sang in a choral number at the play’s conclusion. Pawson and I had worked with many of the groups previously and were able thereby to draw on their distinctive repertoires and interlace musical and dramatic insider references and in-jokes. We could include a piece for gamelan and bagpipes from the Scottish contingent. An arrangement of the *Dr. Who* theme song by the group from Wales (where the BBC television show is produced) introduced a stream of time travellers who emerged from a Tardis—the California composer Lou Harrison (who influenced many gamelan composers by his novel intercultural compositions), the Icelandic pop star Björk (who performed with the Southbank Gamelan Players on the television show *MTV Unplugged*), and the composer and musicologist Neil Sorrell, who still

leads the York gamelan program. New puppets were commissioned from the Indonesian puppet maker Ledjar Subroto, who specializes in such “portrait puppets.” The performance was not just an anniversary celebration in the end, but also a celebration of the whole British gamelan scene.

The third piece in the trilogy was a more modest play for *wayang golek* titled *Dewi Gegurit*, which I created for the Gamelanathon Festival at London’s Southbank Centre in 2013. This emerged from my recent practical studies in the *wayang golek cepak* tradition of Cirebon and Indramayu and conversations with Marisa Sharon Hartanto, an MA composition student from Jakarta interested in adapting gamelan melodies to non-gamelan idioms. The score she composed for piano, soprano, flute, percussion, and double bass interwove pop songs, jazz, and classical Western music with gamelan motifs and songs. The thinly-veiled autobiographical plot concerned an unhappily married prince named Raden Gambuh (Sir Puppeteer) from the hermitage of Bukit Pasugihan (Mt. Rich) in search of a new wife. The beautiful and cultured Dewi Gegurit (Lady Song) from the nation of Nyugoni (Stoke) tells him she will marry him on the condition that he can provide a wayang performance for their wedding. Finding it impractical to import a troupe from Java, he makes his own show with an ad-hoc pickup band and thereby wins Gegurit’s hand. Spectators commented on the joyfulness of the allegorical drama and were impressed that the ensemble could sound “authentic” despite the absence of any gamelan instruments or gamelan-trained musicians.

Conclusion

Performing within a traditional puppet art such as wayang means requires not only a mastery of codes and conventions; it requires a surrender of autonomy, a reversal of normal

subject-object relations. A puppet has “a life, law, and logic of its own, which it imposes on the manipulator.” The puppeteer courts the energy of a puppet that embodies a force “which has nothing to do with him, so he goes out to meet it” (Foley qtd. Orenstein 2008: 180). This relation to wayang does not disappear, even when far away from Java’s art world. One might question, subvert, and even mock tradition’s restraints, but it still *feels* wrong when a friendly clown is cast as an ogre in a student production, or Arjuna is given an effeminate voice. Tradition retains its affective hold.

The once-distinct art worlds of wayang in Java and wayang internationally are today becoming increasingly mixed. Many of the problems and opportunities outlined above will be familiar to Javanese puppeteers performing or teaching wayang in cosmopolitan Jakarta or one of Indonesia’s “outer islands.” Experienced puppeteers know they cannot depend on a five-star hotel to provide banana logs. A long period of isolation of Indonesian artists is over. While under the authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998) foreign tours and visits were strictly controlled by the government and the development of foreign language skills discouraged, today Indonesian puppeteers are full participants in international puppetry. Few perhaps benefit directly from Indonesia’s membership in the ASEAN Puppetry Association (since 2006) or UNIMA (since 2009), but many have participated in cross-fertilizing intercultural collaborations that often operate outside the official cultural sphere. Involvement of Balinese puppeteers in productions by Californian dalang Larry Reed and the Australian-Indonesian touring production *The Theft of Sita*, for example, have yielded flexible mirror puppets, innovative lighting, projected imagery, and trolleys for multi-puppeteer spectacles in Bali. Indonesian puppeteers are increasingly adept in completing funding proposals, planning workshops, and repurposing wayang techniques for intermedial projects. Mobile internet technologies allow Indonesian puppeteers to follow each other’s

innovations and study the work of foreign puppeteers. The pace of change of contemporary wayang today is hard to reckon.

Works Cited

Orenstein Claudia. "Coming Full Circle: Performing Objects, New Media and Interculturalism in New Puppetry." *Indian Horizons* 55.2-3 (2008): 172-188.

¹ Consult <https://kandabuwana.wordpress.com> for an overview of my wayang performances.

² This is a classical play episode, often performed abroad and first redacted in poetic form as *Arjunawiwāha* (Arjuna's Marriage) by 11th-century Javanese court poet Mpu Kanwa.

³ This scene concluded—as in many renditions of this canonical play—with various spirits (*setanan*) manifesting to frighten Arjuna, and heavenly nymphs (*widadari*) enticing him with their beauty.