

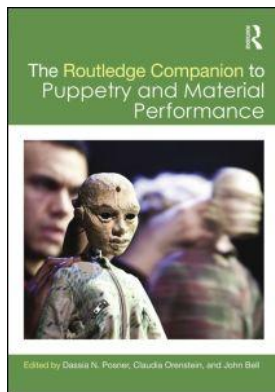
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Section IV

Negotiating Tradition

Traditional and Post-Traditional *Wayang Kulit* in Java Today

Matthew Isaac Cohen

Claims of authenticity and antiquity are attached to puppet theatres worldwide, particularly by advocates seeking patronage from heritage bodies, income from the tourist trade, or a sense of legitimacy and purpose in response to dwindling audiences. However, all we know about puppet theatre indicates that traditions are never, in fact, static but require constant revamping for contemporary audiences and changing performance contexts. Even forms that appear on the surface to be stagnant or inert, such as fusty American holiday marionette shows, the state-subsidized Bunraku company of Japan, or the ritual-bound shadow puppet theatres of India such as *tôgalugômbeaṭṭa* (Singh 1999), are, in fact, constantly being renewed and altered in sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic ways. Innovation is not tradition's opposite; change is required to keep tradition vital and meaningful as sociologist Edward Shils (1981) long ago emphasized.

The last century, however, has seen the development of new articulations of puppet traditions – not innovations within traditions but rather strategic departures from them. Puppet artists from Alfred Jarry onward have drawn deeply on tradition's social forms, dramaturgical structures, techniques, and technologies without heeding its rules and taboos. Drawing on the work of British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1994), I refer to such puppet theatre as post-traditional. Productions usually operate outside traditionally mandated time and space, tend to be highly reflexive, and are often politically aware, even subversive. Post-traditional practitioners are sometimes critiqued by conservative traditionalists for “destroying” tradition, but many are, in fact, deeply invested in its transmission while hostile to repressive ideologies of “traditionalism” (Pelikan 1984).

Some post-traditional puppetry has been catalyzed by collaborations with agents coming from outside of traditions – as in *Tall Horse*, a collaboration between South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company and Mali's Sogolon Puppet Troupe (Hutchison 2010). Other post-traditional puppetry has been the result of nonhereditary practitioners entering an established field of practice and remaking it according to nontraditional values, as in Cambodia's Sovanna Phum Theatre, which combines

shadow puppetry with circus. There are also examples of transformed tradition resulting from what Shils calls “endogenous factors,” the exploration by tradition bearers of new possibilities within the form, the radical rejection of selected precepts, and the bringing of other cultural forms and values into the mix (Shils 1981: 213–239).

Endogenous factors have been the primary causes of change within the traditional puppet theatres, or *wayang*, of Indonesia and the development of post-traditional *wayang* as well. Shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit*) on the Indonesian island of Java, my primary focus in this chapter, is in some ways hugely conservative, serving to reproduce ancient Javanese myths and embed Java’s versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in ritual contexts. *Wayang* “plays” (*lakon*) traditionally are orally improvised in performance and thus always contingent upon context, but one nonetheless observes a high degree of “substantive traditionality,” defined by Shils as “the appreciation of the accomplishments and wisdom of the past and of the institutions especially impregnated with tradition, as well as the desirability of regarding patterns inherited from the past as valid guides” (Shils 1981: 21). Shadow puppets carved from rawhide collected more than 200 years ago by T. S. Raffles and now housed in the British Museum could easily be incorporated within Javanese performances today. Puppets are valued as magically potent heirlooms (*pusaka*); performance collections are generally built up over generations rather than being the work of a single maker.

Advances in communication and transportation and the publication of *wayang* texts starting in the middle of the nineteenth century contributed to a blurring of regional *wayang* styles and reduction of local cultural specificities. Dutch scholars privileged literary renderings of *wayang* by the elites of Surakarta, a royal court (*kraton*) city of central Java, and supported *wayang* training courses and associated textbooks (Sears 1996). Texts originating from the royal courts of Surakarta were accepted as authoritative by *wayang* artists around the island. The dominance of Surakarta’s courtly *wayang kulit* was further promulgated in the twentieth century by recordings and radio (and later television and digital media). The neo-governmental *wayang* organizations Pepadi and Senawangi, founded in Jakarta during the New Order dictatorship (1966–1998) and patronized by cronies of President Soeharto, promoted Surakarta *wayang* as the *sine qua non* of Javanese tradition in their festivals, publications, and other public representations. *Wayang* was “a carriage-trade item” (Geertz 1990: 52) around East Java by the 1980s, and local puppeteers needed to adopt aspects of Surakarta style to compete (Day 1996). Puppeteers around central and eastern Java purchased colorful and lightweight Surakarta-style puppets tailored to the flashy puppet movement style popularized in the 1980s by Surakarta-style puppeteer Ki Manteb Soedharsono and sold off their old puppets (many of which had long served as *bibit*, or models, for crafting puppets) to antique dealers. Certain regional styles and minority puppet forms, such as *wayang krucil* and *wayang gedhog*, became endangered art forms.

The construction of a monumental, *kraton*-centric “Java” during the New Order dictatorship, critiqued by American anthropologist John Pemberton (1994), has been challenged by dynamic movements in Javanese culture since the 1998 fall of Soeharto. In the carnivalesque demonstrations leading up to Soeharto’s ousting, as well as in

follow-up celebratory protests against Islamist *sharia*-style regulations of propriety, artists and activists drew upon local forms of cultural performance to combat hegemonic authority. Artists today strive to establish communities of interest (*komunitas*) with local audiences and patrons, reviving and reinterpreting archaic and residual cultural forms of *wayang* and other arts. Endangered *wayang* forms, such as the scroll theatre *wayang beber*, suddenly seem to possess more than antiquarian interest. They are potentially vital cultural resources for “resistance against immanent power” (Nancy 1986). Recent trips I took to Java in 2009 and 2011 confirmed that while *wayang* remains a repository of traditional values, it is a dynamic art, responding to flows of popular culture, political and religious change, and current issues.¹ Far from being “merely” an historical relic, *wayang* is being reinvented on numerous fronts and engaging new audiences through the use of topical humor, social and political commentary, new modes of technology, and philosophical reflection.

Here, I will discuss two broad types or streams of Javanese *wayang* performance. The first I refer to as “traditional.” These are Javanese-language performances of standard play-episodes accompanied by gamelan, typically lasting all night, embedded in ritual contexts, and open to the general public free of charge. The second sort of *wayang* is post-traditional, sometimes referred to in Indonesia as *wayang kontemporer*, literally “contemporary *wayang*” (Cohen 2007; Mulyono 1982: 281–289), which is performed outside of ritual contexts in theatre buildings, festivals, or art galleries. Post-traditional *wayang* articulates new relations between performers and their communities of interest and new modes of engagement within and across contemporary art worlds.

It is worth emphasizing that these two streams of *wayang* are not bounded categories. Post-traditional *wayang* artists are often very skilled in traditional practice as well and quite capable of performing traditional *wayang* upon request. Jan Mrázek (2005) in his monograph *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre* likens *wayang* to a house that is constructed through performance to be inhabited by performers and spectators for a time. Slamet Gundono, perhaps Java’s best known post-traditional puppeteer until his untimely death in 2014, told me there was no fundamental difference between the all-night, gamelan-accompanied traditional *wayang kulit* performances he occasionally gave and his *kontemporer*, intermedial collaborations. Both contemporary and traditional *wayang* offered Ki Slamet houses in which he could live or, as he put it, in which he could *enjoy* (English in the original) himself. Art curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s comments on what he calls “postproduction” art are apropos. “The prefix ‘post’ does not signal any negation or surpassing; it refers to a zone of activity. The processes in question here do not consist of ... lamenting the fact that everything has ‘already been done,’ but inventing protocols of use for all existing modes of representation and all formal structures. It is a matter of seizing all the codes of the culture, all the forms of everyday life, the works of the global patrimony, and making them function. To learn how to use forms ... is above all to know how to make them one’s own, to inhabit them” (Bourriaud 2001: 17–18). Shils expands further on this metaphor in his discussion of endogenous factors in changing traditions: “The acquisition from the past furnishes their home but it is very seldom a home in which they are entirely at ease. They try to bend it to their own desires; they sometimes discard or replace some of the inherited furniture” (Shils 1981: 213).

Tradition in context: Ritual drama and *komunitas*

Communally sponsored *wayang* performances, though uncommon in much of Central and East Java, remain the norm in Cirebon, Indramayu, and adjacent regencies of western Java. I attended a fair number of these community events in 2009 and performed *Greeting Sri (Mapag Sri)* in a number of villages. This is a story episode about the origin of rice cultivation that is enacted as a daytime drama in village halls to coincide with the agricultural year's first planting. Villages that sponsor ritual dramas of this sort, with offerings and incantations to placate spirits, are generally characterized by much substantive traditionality. But Indonesia is a majority Muslim country, and fundamentalist Muslims can be hostile to such customs, which they deem to be polytheistic (*syirik*) remnants of earlier belief systems. I saw the tensions between fundamentalism and substantive traditionality being worked out in 2009 in a small graveside celebration (*unjungan*) in rural Indramayu. The village where this event took place had recently elected a fundamentalist Muslim as village headman – probably due to money politics rather than genuine popularity. At this celebration, a *topeng* troupe performed mask dances with comedy interludes during the day, while a *wayang kulit* troupe performed shadow puppetry at night. The headman had pulled funding for village-wide agrarian celebrations due to his modern religious convictions, to the discontent of many. Despite this, villagers maintained the customary event, sponsored at the neighborhood level and independent of the village bureaucracy, by undertaking door-to-door collections under the sway of beliefs in the power of ancestral spirits to bring blessings and prosperity to descendants. The spirit propitiated was said to be of royal descent, with a proclivity for traditional arts; omitting the customary performance offerings was simply not possible.

Even in this most traditional performance context there were signs of change – including a subsidy from the local government of Indramayu. During the Soeharto era, performances were a cash cow for the local governments. A much-disliked regional regulation (*peraturan daerah*) in Indramayu compelled sponsors of *wayang* and other live performing arts to pay a luxury tax, and in Cirebon, Indramayu, and other parts of Java, cultural inspectors (*penilik kebudayaan*) employed by the Department of Education and Culture showed up regularly at performances to extort money from performers. After the fall of Soeharto, Indramayu's local regulations were dropped, and there were clampdowns on cultural inspectors' corruption. What is more, puppeteers and other performers became aware that villages sponsoring annual ritual dramas were eligible to apply for government subsidies for these events and now work together with patrons to write grant applications. Such funds apparently existed during the Soeharto era but were completely closed to performing artists or their communities of support. We can observe that, even while the dramatic forms and ritual meanings of ritual dramas have remained relatively constant, the context of these events is shifting.

I spent a long weekend in 2009 visiting the field site of folklorist Wisma Nugraha Christianto and discussed at length his research on East Javanese *wayang kulit*, which focuses on the arts management of Ki Surwedi, one of the province's most admired puppeteers. Christianto's research shows that Surwedi maintains his popularity with local sponsors by managerial flexibility and easy familiarity with patrons. Ki Surwedi

maintains strong *komunitas* by developing a network of followers and supporters, who hire him to perform more than 100 times a year at the reasonable price of about 5 million rupiah. One of the ways in which Surwedi accomplishes this is through cultivating social ties with his fan base. He encourages the development of credit unions (*arisan*) among devotees so that they can hire his company on a rotating basis. He arrives hours before performances in order to meet with fans in gardens or yards (*perkebunan*) before shows, while receiving a therapeutic massage, rather than arriving just in time to perform or hobnobbing only with elites in hosts' houses. He drinks socially with fans and friends and opens his house and studio to all to play gamelan. In translating Surwedi's client-patron relations to the language of arts management, Christianto is playing an important role in brokering tradition.

In contemporary reconfigurations of tradition, one sees that performance context is no longer bounded at the local level but is increasingly national and even international. Performers and their communities of interest are aware of different models of performance management and are able to hybridize these to suit the circumstances of events.

Tradition in performance: Political critique

The New Order military regime mandated an attitude of political quiescence in *wayang*. Few puppeteers under Soeharto had sufficient power to articulate a political vision or speak up against injustices. Instead, puppeteers were employed as *juru bicara*, spokespeople who parroted official government policy on recommended rice strains, methods of birth control, and the state ideology of Pancasila. In the early years of *Reformasi* (the post-Soeharto period of governmental reform), most puppeteers remained silent, afraid of reprisals even with the promise of freedom of speech.

I saw signs in 2009 that such political attitudes among traditional puppeteers were shifting and that political and religious critiques unthinkable under the dictatorship were being integrated into performances. Educated puppeteers attuned to discourse on human rights and interfaith dialogue were busy restoring *wayang* as a privileged dialogical space. I observed Yogyakarta puppeteer Ki Seno Nugroho interpret the canonical play *Anoman Immolated* (*Anoman Obong*) in May 2009 as a portrait of the authoritarian personality at a performance at the Sasono Hinggil hall of the Yogyakarta royal court and reinterpret *Semar Builds the Heavens* (*Semar Mbangun Kahyangan*) as a critique of government oppression and economic inequality at a performance sponsored by Yogyakarta's high court in February 2009. Mas Seno had recently joined the social networking website Facebook, and we often chatted through this medium about his shows and other activities.

I also reconnected in 2009 with my former assistant and principal informant for my doctoral fieldwork, Purjadi. When I first worked with him during 1994 to 1995, Purjadi was a recent graduate of the State Institute of Islamic Studies, strongly under the influence of a preacher associated with the modernist Islamic movement of Muhammadiyah. Purjadi did not come from a puppeteer family, and as a result his puppet and animation skills were still rudimentary, though he possessed an outstanding singing voice (trained through singing in the local *bujanggaan* club) and an

innate talent for vocal impressions. Purjadi performed ritual-drama ceremonies, such as *Ruwatan*, without offerings to disprove the existence of spirits and repurposed the branch story of *Semar Goes on the Hajj* (*Semar Munggah Haji*) – arguably created as a critique of scripturalist Islam by the radical left-wing puppeteer Abyor – as a piece of Islamic proselytizing (*dakwah*) to inform audiences about the rules of the pilgrimage and the requirements for a pilgrimage to be considered valid (*mabrur*).²

I observed in 2009 that years of association with the community of *wayang* performers and supporters had opened Purjadi to values of religious tolerance. For example, he now gave patrons the option of sponsoring the sacred *Ruwatan* ritual drama with the customary offerings. Purjadi was also involved in local politics, and many of the plays he created, such as *Cungkring Runs for Office* (*Cungkring Nyaleg*), had political themes, with heated debates between representatives of different ideologies.

One of the most interesting plays in Purjadi's repertoire in 2009 was *Human Scripture* (*Kitab Sucieng Manusa*), again based on an Abyor original, which I attended in a performance on March 14–15, 2009 in the village of Bodesari, outside Cirebon. The play concerned a knight returned from the dead in search of an answer to the question that hounded him in life: what is the *kitab sucieng manusa*, the universal "Human Scripture," or sacred text, valid for all humanity? The knight vows to kill anyone who cannot answer his question.

In his quest, the knight makes an assault on Suralaya Kedewatan, the heavens of Bathara Guru, head of the Javanese Hindu pantheon. The assembled forces of the gods cannot turn him back. Then *Cungkring*, Guru's nephew, the trusted retainer of the Pendhawa brothers (one of the two warring clans in the *Mahabharata*), arrives in Suralaya, in search of a cure for his ailing master, Darma Kusuma. Guru promises to aid *Cungkring* if he can defeat the attacking knight. *Cungkring* confronts the knight, who asks him about the "true" (*sejati*) Human Scripture. *Cungkring* responds that this question is not clear. We have to know what religious faith a human belongs to first. For Islam, it would be the Qur'an. For Christians, the Gospels (*Injil*). For Hindus, the Vedas. For Jews, the Torah (*Taurat*). The knight protests. Scriptures associated with religion cannot be understood unless you understand the language they are written in. For example, for the Qur'an to have meaning, you have to be able to read Arabic. But the knight insists there is a Human Scripture that can be understood regardless of the language of the reader and can be accepted by all religions, as well as by those without religion. *Cungkring*, unable to respond, is struck and flies off.

The knight then confronts Bathara Guru, who asks him what his religious faith is. The knight admits that he does not possess a faith. Then follows a theological dialogue, which goes something like this in my own rough, on-the-spot transcription and translation:

GURU: So that is why you don't comprehend the concept of a holy book (*kitab suci*).

You need to possess a religion first. Then you will understand.

KNIGHT: What sort of religion would suit me?

GURU: Religion does not work according to suit; it depends on belief and individual faith. Would you consider following my faith?

KNIGHT: All that matters is that I understand Scripture.



Figure 17.1 *Kitab Sucineng Manusa*, performed by Purjadi, Bodesari (March 14–15, 2009): Bathara Guru (center) consults with his vizier Narada (left). Photo courtesy of the author

GURU: You must first understand the Divine. To do that you must comprehend your inner self first.

Guru then launches into a long explanation about the different dimensions (*alam*) and the relation between the inner and outer world, grounded in the science of Javanese mysticism (*kebathinan*) and reiterating classical monistic theology (see Zoetmulder 1995) in modern, everyday language:

KNIGHT: I have no idea what you're talking about. Tell it to me straight, tell me how things are.

GURU: The Divine cannot be comprehended with logic for God is Most Mysterious (*Maha Gaib*). The taste of sugar or salt cannot be explained to someone who has never tasted these before. Similarly, to know the Lord you need to use *rasa* (feeling), not your brain.

KNIGHT: I want to see God directly.

GURU: The Lord is me, or rather, what is in the heart of a being who believes.

Post-traditional *wayang kulit*

Purjadi and Seno's performances, though contemporary in their religious and political ethos and worldviews, conform to long-established dramaturgical models. Yet, as I have indicated, *wayang* is also taking on new forms and being framed in very new ways. It is being reinvented and reaching new audiences, generating new communities of interest in the process. These efforts are increasingly interconnected, and post-traditional *wayang* practitioners around Java, in Bali, and on other Indonesian

islands, as well as in neighboring Malaysia, are operating in mutual awareness of innovations, shared through well publicized public performances, formal and informal gatherings, Facebook, YouTube, and other media.

The beginnings of this movement in *wayang* might be located perhaps in the 1960s, when non-Indonesian practitioners and scholars first began to study practical puppetry in Java and Bali; Indonesian puppeteers taught, studied, and performed abroad; and Indonesian puppet artists came into direct contact with Southeast Asians practicing related puppet forms through festivals and cultural exchange projects following the 1967 founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Cohen 2007). Intercultural communication and exchange yielded opportunities and tools for theatrical reinterpretations of *wayang*. Indonesian puppeteers personalized the tradition (Susilo 2002: 185) and developed new *wayang* variants with novel puppets, techniques, and scripts. Sociological studies of European art history reveal that the onymous artist emerged over centuries out of artisan guilds and monastic scriptoria (Martindale 1972). The Indonesian puppeteer's transformation from what Ward Keeler calls a "dissembled authority" (Keeler 1987: 268) to charismatic artist, in contrast, has taken less than two generations.

One of the seminal figures in post-traditional *wayang* was the late Yogyakarta artist Sigit Sukasman, who took an experimental approach to making *wayang* following his exposure to modern art in New York and The Netherlands in 1964 to 1965 (Susilo 2002). Sukasman worked with translucent hides and whimsical and idiosyncratic iconographies. His experimental productions of "measured" *wayang* (*wayang ukur*) employed puppeteers in front and behind the shadow screen in collaboration with dancers in variants of *wayang wong* costume – a combination without local precedent. Sukasman's studio in Yogyakarta, up until his death in 2009, was a regular meeting place for Indonesians and foreigners interested in critically exploring the philosophy and aesthetics of *wayang*. He supported himself through the sale of his figures to collectors and complained of how other Javanese puppet makers unscrupulously copied his designs without attribution. Sukasman's experimental attitude provided a model for a stable of Yogyakarta artists who played with *wayang*'s conventions in different ways. Many similar avant-garde creations (*kreasi*) emerged in Yogyakarta and its environs during the 1970s and 1980s.

Many of the experiments under the name of *wayang kontemporer* are ephemeral – "momentarily popular but lacking longevity" in the words of one *wayang* critic (Mulyono 1982: 283). Characteristic of this is a set of figures from a 1975 production created by contemporary gamelan composer Sapto Rahardjo that are on permanent display in Yogyakarta's Kekayon Wayang Museum. These figures, cut from cardboard and painted with fluorescent paint (illuminated in performance by ultraviolet light), depict the city's lively youth culture. A figure dressed in a sleeveless T-shirt and batik sarong listens to music on a portable audio player's headphones. A second is dressed in a tight-fitting, tie-dyed sleeveless T-shirt and miniskirt. A third sports a pink-and-green Mohawk. A fourth wears an outfit crossing combat fatigues with batik and flaunts thick eyeliner and lipstick. A *kayon*³-like figure notes the cast, referred to with joking nicknames (e.g., "Saptlik Raharjoslaq" instead of Sapto Rahardjo) and English and Indonesian slogans of the time ("Flowers of the War"). The name for this production is *Wayang Kreasul*, said to be jokingly

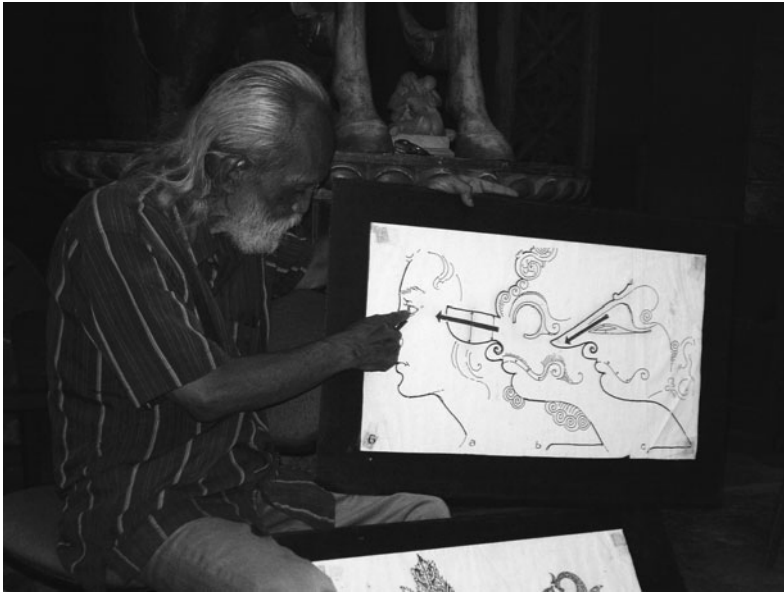


Figure 17.2 Sigit Sukasman (1937–2009) explaining *wayang* visual theory in his studio (April 26, 2009). Photo courtesy of the author

abbreviated from the phrase *kreasi tanpa melupakan asal-usul* (experiment without forgetting origin).

Some of the ideas initiated in *Legendary Wayang (Wayang Legenda)*, a 1988 production in Yogyakarta by painter and installation artist Heri Dono, were developed in Dono's subsequent installations and community-based performances in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Behrend 1999). *Wayang* imagery and ideas continue to inform Dono's work in complex ways. But although Dono is arguably Indonesia's most famous contemporary artist, his *wayang* performance work is little known in his country of origin.

While dialogue is extemporized and no two performances are identical, traditional *wayang* is characterized by its immaculate aesthetic quality, with a clearly defined process of creation. In its ideal form, *wayang* accords to Theodor Adorno's ideal of the monad, "an imminent, crystallized process at a standstill" (Adorno 1970 [2004]: 237). The Surakarta court manual for puppeteers, *Serat Sastraminuda*, prescribes, in an oft-cited list of nine aesthetic qualities, that "a puppeteer should not allude to themes outside the frame of the story, and should especially avoid smutty comedy" (Kusumadilaga 1981: 188). In contrast, post-traditional *wayang* that I have observed tends to be quickly rehearsed, porous to the world, and highly contingent on the circumstances of performance. Such *wayang* is less monadic than what Bourriaud describes as "a temporary and nomadic gathering of precarious materials and products of various provenances" (Bourriaud 2001: 28) – like an outdoor market. A post-traditional *wayang* production staged in Yogyakarta in 2009 offers a sense of post-traditional *wayang*'s processual fluidity.

Porous wayang

The first performance of what curator-producer Alia Swastika has called *wayang bocor*, “leaky” or “porous” wayang, was offered free of charge at the opening of a solo exhibition by Yogyakarta-based artist Eko Nugroho at the Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta in 2009. The episodic play, entitled *Berlian Ajaib* in Indonesian (which can be translated as *The Magical Diamond* or *The Wonder of Diamond* in English), was based loosely on stories and figures from the artist’s underground comix anthologies *Wart* (*Daging Tumbuh*). This was the second outing for what is described on Nugroho’s website as the artist’s “shadow puppet project” (Swastika 2009). The first outing, which used the same set of puppets based on Nugroho’s black-and-white cartoons, was a more conventional scripted drama, *A Wrapped Heart Inside the Refrigerator* (*Bungkusan Hati di Dalam Kulkas*), written and directed by Joned Suryatmoko of Yogyakarta’s Teater Gardanella collective and performed at Jakarta’s Teater Salihara in 2008. The puppeteer for this earlier performance, the constantly innovative Catur “Benyek” Kuncoro, was unhappy with the script’s literalism and the director’s lack of sensitivity to wayang’s idiom. Swastika thus allowed Benyek, with whom she had worked from 2006 to 2008 on a community arts project with earthquake victims in Bantul, to take over the creative reins. Benyek is an experienced collaborator, descended from a puppeteer family and a graduate of the puppetry department of Yogyakarta’s arts high school, Sekolah Mengengah Karawitan Indonesia. He has performed music internationally with the arts company of Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiardjo starting in 2004 and with the Acappella Mataraman vocal group. He has also worked with a number of Yogyakarta’s other premiere music groups, including Kua Etnika, and puppeteers visiting Yogyakarta, including Damiet van Dalsum. His wayang kreasi include *Wayang Kartun* (2005), *Wayang Kontemporer Dual Core* (2006), *Wayang Pixel* (2007), and *Wayang Hiphop* (2010), and he also writes Indonesian-language scripts for Enthus Susmono, currently Indonesia’s most highly paid puppeteer. Swastika offered Benyek back issues of *Wart* as stimuli, out of which he drafted a skeletal script, a series of short scenes depicting a carnivalesque night market (*pasar malam*), an alien invasion, and a dysfunctional family.

Nugroho’s gallery opening was two weeks distant when I stopped by the Cemeti Art House to see if I might observe rehearsals for this contemporary wayang. Benyek, Swastika, and Nugroho, along with a number of other artists (including puppeteer Toro Widyanto, composer Yenu Ariendra, and scenographer Andy Seno Aji), spent the first two days of a six-day rehearsal process lounging around Cemeti, mostly engaging in small talk. I was casually offered the chance to puppeteer alongside Benyek and Toro, and I enthusiastically accepted this role of participant-observer, though no formal parts had yet been decided. Finally, Alia Swastika, anxious about the opening, pressed us to rehearse. Initially we tried to perform sitting down in back of the two wayang screens constructed for the exhibition – one painted like the sky in blue and white. This proved awkward with three seated puppeteers, and I suggested loosening the central control rods of the puppets so that they could be held at a distance while standing. This sort of jointing is unconventional in wayang (though not unknown for trick figures), but Benyek and Toro agreed, as it allowed for greater freedom and play. It was not long before we were twirling figures around at the screen and tossing

them back and forth with abandon across the gap separating the two screens. Toro, who had crafted the figures we were animating, treated the figures with great roughness, in the knowledge that he could always make more if they broke, somewhat to the consternation of Alia, who was hoping to sell the puppets as singular art objects after displaying them at the exhibition.

Alia was more pleased, however, when we propped up figures not in use against the wall behind the screens, perhaps as this allowed a more strategic view of the puppets. She seized upon this casual anti-illusionism as the production's defining characteristic, coining the generic term *wayang bocor*. With the visibility of puppets and puppeteers in mind, we quickly devised a framing prologue in which an itinerant merchant (played by Benyek) and his associate (Toro) hawked magical ointments and potions reputedly fashioned from a magical diamond (*berlian ajaib*). This frame story, which used human actors as well as puppets, although not based on a Nugrohu cartoon, allowed us to use another of the exhibition's set items, a modified food cart that had been prepared and painted by Toro. The conceit was consciously modeled after a then-current news story about a young medicine man (*dukun*) named Ponari who was said to fashion healing potions from a brown "magical stone" (*batu ajaib*). In our telling, the hucksters succeeded in selling one of their potions, before the police showed up, to a licentious but gullible Westerner wishing to sleep with Javanese women (played by the author). The performers ran helter-skelter, which allowed us to take up position behind the screen for the first scene.

As we put together the performance and rehearsed, Ariendra arranged a musical score from sampled sounds and assembled musical pieces, some of his own composition, others taken off the internet, while Seno Aji busied himself with arranging



Figure 17.3 Rehearsal for *Berlian Ajaib*, Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta (March 3, 2009). Photo courtesy of the author

other parts of the exhibition into an environment for the performance. The last creative player to make an appearance was Ignatius “Clink” Sugiarto, a lighting designer best known for his work with Teater Garasi. Typically for lighting designers unaccustomed to *wayang*, Sugiarto mostly focused his labor on lighting the pre-set and prologue, hanging the crucial lights for lighting the shadow puppets at the end. I protested that standard theatrical lanterns did not yield sufficiently defined shadows, but there was no time to rig special lights nor was there a budget for renting dedicated equipment. Benyek, Swastika, and other members of the creative team deferred to Sugiarto’s reputation, even while recognizing that the puppets were not ideally lit.

The audience who attended our performance was young, warm, and enthusiastic and absolutely packed the art gallery. Spectators roared with laughter at even the smallest of jokes – and were particularly appreciative of Toro’s broad humor as mime and puppeteer, including a comic bit with an oversexed dog. Ariendra commented that aesthetically the production was “ugly” (*jelek*) – many aspects were very rough indeed, related to the fact that many of the costumes and scenic elements were added at the last minute. However, he added that this roughness was redeemed by the humor and warm atmosphere (including free snacks and an after-show party with a DJ and alcohol). Swastika, cannily realizing in rehearsal that our motley crew would never pull off a polished performance in the time allotted, pushed for the performance to be an “event” after the model of auteur director-playwright Rendra’s rough *sampakan* theatre, rather than a finished aesthetic product. The reputation of the venue and of Eko Nugroho, as well as Swastika’s connections with the press, meant that this hastily assembled production received attention from the national media, including a preview in *The Jakarta Post* and a review in *Tempo*, as well as coverage on Metro TV’s English and Indonesian language news shows. Apparently this mode of working was successful enough to encourage future productions – in Java as well as at the Lyon Biennale 2009.⁴

Reflections on post-traditional *wayang*

Post-traditional *wayang* subverts the structures and forms of Javanese tradition. Unlike the acerbic historical avant-garde of early twentieth-century Europe, though, there is no “desire to wipe out whatever came earlier in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure” (De Man 1970: 388–389). As is the case for what theatre historian Harry J. Elam calls “post-blackness,” post-traditional *wayang* is a performance turn “simultaneously free from, and yet connected to and perhaps even haunted by, the legacies of the past in the present” (Elam 2005: 382). Post-traditional *wayang* cannot be folded into tradition, though certain innovations (such as the new puppet types invented by Sukasman) might be recycled by traditional practitioners.

Traditional *wayang*, like all traditions, is a “consensus between living generations and generations of the dead” (Shils 1981: 168). Post-traditional *wayang*, in contrast, like much contemporary art, “tends to abolish the ownership of forms, or in any case to shake up the old jurisprudence” (Bourriaud 2001: 35). While the traditionalists helming the national *wayang* associations Pepadi and Senawangi attempt to

inscribe regional *wayang* styles within the strictures of a national *wayang Indonesia* complex, a defensive posture to shore up Indonesian cultural territorial integrity against perceived incursions by neighboring Malaysia, post-traditional *wayang* boldly opens the tradition to global cultural flows. Post-traditional *wayang* is thus epochalist rather than essentialist in Geertz's (1973) formulation; it is often more attentive to international media than local spirit beliefs. As such, it offers an ideal footing for collaborations between Indonesian and foreign artists, manifest in such noteworthy international projects as *The MahabharANTA* by Mabou Mines in collaboration with puppeteer I Wayan Wija (1992), *Visible Religion* with puppeteers Sri Djoko Rahardjo and I Made Sidia (1994), *The Theft of Sita* with puppeteers Peter Wilson and I Made Sidia under Nigel Jamieson's direction (1999), *ShadowBang* with composer Evan Ziporyn and I Wayan Wija (2001), *Mahabharata Jazz and Wayang* with the jazz ensemble Luluk Purwanto and the Helsdingen Trio in collaboration with puppeteer Nanang HP (2003), *Semar's Journey* with puppeteer Seno Nugroho (2007), and *Cebolang Minggat* with puppeteer Slamet Gundono (2009). Previous generations of European theatre makers appropriated *wayang* for exotic color. An international collaboration with Indonesian artists today "entails that we [foreigners] understand reflexively that our 'concepts' are only another set of (by Western accident) privileged schemata" (Lash 1994: 156).

Notes

- 1 I have been studying *wayang* since 1988, when I made my first trip to Indonesia as a Fulbright scholar hosted by the Department of Puppetry at Indonesia's most prestigious conservatoire for the traditional performing arts, now known as Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta. My studies have been ethnographic and historical, as well as practical: I actually learned how to perform as a puppeteer, something that has been possible for foreigners, even actively encouraged, since the 1960s. Much of the material in this chapter was collected during two recent trips to Indonesia: five months as a visiting scholar hosted by Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta in 2009 and a two-week visit to Java in January 2011.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of Purjadi's interpretation of these plays, see Cohen (1997: 263–332).
- 3 The *kayon*, or *gunungan*, is the tree-of-life puppet that is used to mark the beginning and end of scenes and serves as an all-purpose prop.
- 4 For more on Eko Nugroho's "*wayang* project," see the artist's website <<http://ekonugroho.or.id/>> and YouTube channel <<http://www.youtube.com/user/TheEkonugroho>> (accessed August 15, 2013).

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