

Asia Research Institute-NUS & TheatreWorks, Singapore

BIMA SACRIFICED



A performance of Javanese wayang kulit by
Ki H Anom Suroto

with English translation by
Prof Hardja Susilo

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Javanese Wayang Kulit

Shadow puppet theatre is found in many forms world-wide, including Turkey, Greece, China, India, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, but the shadow puppet theatre of Java, known as *wayang kulit*, is renowned as one of the most complex.

The term "wayang kulit" does not in fact refer to shadow at all, but rather to the leather that the two-dimensional puppets are made from (*kulit* meaning leather), in contrast to other "wayang" (performing objects), like human bodies (*wayang wong*) or three-dimensional wooden puppets (*wayang golek*). The more usual term in Java for what is called "shadow puppet" performance in English is *wayang purwa*, which refers to the performance repertoire, "purwa" - meaning "ancient", but probably from the Sanskrit "parwa" - indicating Javanese tellings of stories based on or woven around the great Mahabharata and Ramayana epics.

Much has been written about the presumed Indian origins of wayang, and about the ritual significance of the shadow. But in Java today, although there is one kind of wayang performance called *runutan* which has a special ritual purpose, wayang kulit has no direct religious or ritual connotation. Unlike in Bali, where Balinese Hinduism keeps Balinese wayang more closely linked to religious ceremony, or in Malaysia, where the *dalang* often enters trance, wayang performances in Java are primarily for secular entertainment at private and public events, even if the stories (like tonight's) are intended to be edifying. And as entertainment, wayang is alive and well, providing endless opportunities for innovation, and presented also on television, radio, VCD and audio cassette.

Despite the fact that wayang kulit is shadow theatre, in Java the audience usually prefers to watch the performance from the *dalang's* side, not the shadow side. This way they can see the *dalang's* technique, the musicians, and also the colours and carving of the puppets. A full wayang performance lasts all night long, from about 9 p.m. until just before dawn, and during this time the *dalang* does not leave the stage. (Tonight's performance is a shortened 3 hour version). He performs non-stop - weaving a full night's story out of a short outline, such as the one you have for the performance tonight. He composes as he performs, working the outline into a formal but flexible performance framework. Often he chooses the story for the performance only just before he starts performing.

The *dalang* uses a huge array of language, from ancient Javanese poetry through to colloquial slang, and performs different voices and types of speech for different characters. He must also be a musician - as he gives signals to the gamelan musicians, and has to coordinate his song, narration and puppet movement to the various complex musical structures of the accompanying gamelan. And of course he must be an expert at manipulating the puppets, differentiating movements for different types of characters, performing amazing feats of choreography in the fighting scenes, and making skillful use of the screen and light source in producing effects of space and size.

Seeing a live wayang performance is an unforgettable experience. Usually, non-Javanese speakers only get to appreciate the visual aspects of the performance - impressive enough though these are - and hear the beauty of the sound of the gamelan and the *dalang's* voice. But wayang is also a storytelling form par excellence, and is a medium where Javanese can fully enjoy the beauty of their language. Tonight, non-Javanese speakers have the rare opportunity to get a taste of that

enjoyment through the translation and commentary of Prof. Hardja Susilo. The dalang, Anom Soeroto, is known as a top dalang for all aspects of performance, but is particularly noted for the beauty of his voice and his use of language.

Enjoy the performance. You should feel free to roam around. Wayang watchers (and listeners) in Java are never expected to remain constantly attentive or in one spot.

BIMA SACRIFICED *(Bima Labuh)*

As with most Javanese wayang stories, tonight's play depicts characters from the Mahabharata epic, which tells of the rivalry between the one hundred Kurawas and their cousins, the five Pandawas.

This story focuses on the dignity of the Pandawas, and provides an opportunity for the puppet master (dalang) to present a discussion on philosophical and moral concepts through the varied and rich voices of the characters.

The story is set during the period after the Pandawas narrowly escaped a treacherous Kurawa plot, when they were invited to the lacquer pavilion which had been deliberately built of flammable material, and then set alight. The Pandawa flee to a foreign kingdom.

King Baka (Dabu Baka), an ogre king of the foreign realm of Ekakra, has almost exhausted his supply of tasty human morsels from his own kingdom. Now it is the turn of a poor man from the village of Menahan named Resi (sage) Irjapa to find flesh and rice for the king. Too poor to buy them, Resi Irjapa decides to offer himself and his family for the ogre king's meal.

Fortunately, at that moment Dewi Kunthi (the mother of the five Pandawa brothers) and her sons arrive at Resi Irjapa's residence after their escape from the burning pavilion. Exhausted and hungry, they ask if they can rest.

Dewi Kunthi learns of the plight of Irjapa's family. Reacting with her usual moral fortitude, she offers one of her own sons for the sacrifice, as substitute for the Irjapa family. She chooses her second son, Bima, to carry out this duty, because she trusts him as the one with the spiritual and physical strength to face and solve the problem.

Before Bima is sent off, Dewi Kunthi gathers her five sons together and gives them advice, paying particular attention to Bima. She tells them to fight the evils of greed, intolerance and anger which bring only chaos, like those driving the king who is oblivious to reason and the warnings of his advisors.

Inspired by Kunthi's wise words about creating a peaceful world by fighting the evils within oneself, Bima is strengthened in his resolve.

Can he succeed in his confrontation with King Baka?listen and watch as the story unfolds....

Ki H. Anom Soeroto Dalang

Ki Haji Anom Soeroto, renowned as one of Java's finest dalangs, was born in 1948 in Klaten, a town between Solo and Yogyakarta. He comes from a family of dalangs, and learnt the art from his father, Ki Sadiyun Hardjodarsana. (The family tradition continues with Anom's son now also a professional dalang). Anom also took some formal courses in the art of wayang performance, in both Yogyakarta (at the Habiranda school) and Solo (at the Mangkuncaran and the Himpunan Budaya Surakarta). He began performing professionally in the late 1960s, and in 1978 was honoured by the palace in Solo with a special palace title. In 1995 he was given a prestigious national award, the Satya Lencana Kebudayaan, by the Indonesian government. Apart from live performance, he is also well known in Indonesia for his numerous wayang kulit recordings. He is also a keen sponsor and promoter of wayang himself, and hosts a monthly performance by invited dalangs at his residence in Solo. Anom Soeroto has frequently been invited to perform overseas: at the Festival of Indonesia in the United States in 1990, at the Adelaide Festival in 1994, and also in Japan, Spain and Germany.

Prof. Hardja Susilo Translator

Born in Yogyakarta central Java in 1934, Hardja Susilo has been performing as a musician and a dancer since childhood. Before leaving for America in 1958 he was a dance student and teacher at Krido Bekso Wiromo traditional dance school and a gamelan teacher at the teacher training school in Yogyakarta. Since his student days his interests have ranged from classical Javanese literature to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's adventures of Sherlock Holmes. In 1958 he was given the opportunity to study Western music and ethnomusicology at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) under the tutelage of Mantle Hood, Charles Seeger and Colin McPhee, among others, while being the first Javanese music and dance teacher at a Western university. He received his Master's degree in music in 1967; subsequently he was given a position as a lecturer at the UCLA. In 1970 he was invited to join the faculty at the University of Hawaii, where as music professor he lectured on music of various cultures, and taught gamelan and dance practicum. In 1975 he was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor in Music. In June 1993 he was awarded 'Hadiah Seni' (Art Award) by the Indonesian Government for his contributions to traditional music. Hardja Susilo retired from his professorship in 1999. He has performed the simultaneous translation and commentary of Javanese wayang kulit performances at the Festival of Indonesia in Los Angeles, the Adelaide Arts Festival, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Hawaii.

Musicians

Prof. Rahayu Supanggah; Dr. Santosa; Suyanto S.Kar.M.A.; Sunito Wiloradya; Samino; Sudarsono; Dalmadi; Maryono; Budisutopo; Singer: Harjuti.