The World of the Wayang: Puppetry of Indonesia
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The World of the Wayang:
Puppetry of Indonesia

Center for Puppetry Arts Museum

Dedicated to Dr. Melvyn Helstien (1920 - 1990)

Wong atua wuwulana
wong anom darma ngalakona

The elders initiate the story
the younger generation must carry it on
—mood song, Sundanese wayang golek purwa
Acknowledgements

The Center for Puppetry Arts Museum has been dedicated to presenting puppetry traditions from diverse cultures in its exhibitions for 10 years. The idea for an exhibition of Indonesian puppetry came to us from Nancy Lohman Staub when she learned of the national Festival of Indonesia planned for 1990-91. We immediately explored the idea of an exhibition with Dr. Melvyn Helstien, a respected scholar of Asian puppetry, and asked him to curate the exhibition. He readily agreed and our work began. He made preliminary object selections and outlined the catalog.

In March, 1990 Dr. Helstien passed away and we lost a respected and valued friend. He dedicated his life to studying, performing, collecting and teaching puppetry. We will miss his participation in our Museum. He was curator of the “Puppetry of India” exhibition in 1986 and from 1987-90 he served as a consultant to our Museum. We dedicate this exhibition in memory of his unselfish and extraordinary contributions to the field of puppetry.

Performer, director and scholar Dr. Kathy Foley graciously accepted the task of completing this project in Dr. Helstien’s stead. She finished the selection of the puppets and other artifacts, and authored the catalog essay. Her commitment to preserving and presenting the world of Indonesian wayang is inspiring. This exhibition would not have been possible without the participation and dedication of both Dr. Foley and Dr. Helstien.

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Vincent Anthony
Executive Director

Kerry McCarthy
Museum Director
The World of the Wayang: Puppetry of Indonesia

Tell of a country great and wide with shore and mountain. All is inexpensive that is needed to feed, to clothe, to house; a great country known everywhere, its fame like the incense of a great torch rising.

These words from the opening passage of the traditional puppet theatre of the Sundanese of West Java begin every story. Though the country that is represented in the story may be, fictively, India or Arabia, the average listener knows in his heart that the country in question is really his or her own. This narration pictures the ideal kingdom in Indonesian terms: a fertile and rich isle with volcanic mountains rising up from the sea, rice fields terracing up toward the peak. Thousands of islands in Indonesia fit this description; rich in resources, they stretch from mainland Southeast Asia toward Australia. The fifth largest country in the world, the Indonesian archipelago has more than wealth of agriculture, natural resources, and enterprise. It has a richness of culture seen in diverse arts created by its hundreds of ethnic groups. On Java, inhabited by people of Javanese and Sundanese ethnicity, and just to the cast in Bali, a puppet tradition thrives that is among the most vital in the world: the wayang.
Wayang performances last up to eight hours, and are usually staged at night, outside on a temporary stage that is constructed at the home of the family that hires a troupe. The performance helps celebrate a life cycle ceremony like a birth or a wedding. The major performer is the dalang (puppetmaster): he performs all the narration and dialogue, manipulates the myriad of puppets in a show, sings mood songs to enhance the scenes, and conducts the orchestra.

With two arms and one voice he encompasses a world. The dalang is a storehouse of traditional knowledge: he masters music, classical dance, the epics, and ritual incantations. His story is improvised according to strict constraints of the genre, and the movements, voices and dialogues of the puppets must fit the typology of the puppet image.

In Central Java and Bali the hide puppets are made from the treated skin of water buffalo which is intricately incised so as to create delicate patterns on the shadow screen. Water buffalo horn is used for the three rods (one for central support and one for each hand) by which the figures are manipulated. An oil, or more recently, an electric
lamp is used to create shadows on the broad, white screen stretched on a wooden frame. Puppets, when not moving, are planted in a horizontal banana log which is raised off the ground by a wooden stand.

In areas like Sunda, where three dimensional puppets are preferred, no screen is used, and the wooden figures with batik skirts act out the show on the banana log stage. For rod figures, a central rod goes through the body and into the head which swivels above. Jointed arms swing freely from the shoulders. These golek puppets in the hands of a skilled dalang are remarkably lifelike. The puppets seem to breathe, to walk, to cry.

The language used is a mixture of the local dialect and old Javanese (Kawi), an archaic literary language of Sanskrit derivation. The dalang is accompanied by a group of musicians playing on a gong chime orchestra known as a gamelan in Java or gender wayang in Bali.

The story structure follows a set pattern: Javanese stories, for example, begin in a princely court where a problem emerges, move to the depths of the forests where the hero subdues demonic foes, and build toward a culminating
war in which the forces of refined justice will defeat greedy foes. At midnight the clowns come bursting into the story; their jokes are not confined to the epic frame, but poke conscious fun at current scandals and politics. Heroes live in epic time, but clowns always exist in the now.

Conceptually, the Javanese performance is divided into three sections marked by moving to different musical moods. The sections are compared to stages of human life—youth, maturity, age. In the last period, having conquered the challenges of life, men can perfect themselves spiritually. Wayang is both fun to watch and profound to contemplate.

The audience eats and relaxes throughout the night. Foodstall sellers and peddlers with wares set up around the perimeters of the performing space, while gambling games spring up spontaneously. Young men roam through the audience, striking up flirtatious conversations with the unmarried girls who have come to savor the story’s romantic interludes. Children who have fallen asleep during opening scenes wake to enjoy the clowns’ antics and the fights, then they slumber again as
older people appreciate the words of a hermit on the complexities of life. Wayang weaves its spell of music, metaphor, mystery and meaning all through the night.

The origin of the word wayang is given variously. Some say it comes from bayang, which means shadow, indicating the widespread belief that the shadow theatre is the oldest theatre tradition on which other forms of puppet and human theatre are modeled. Indeed, shadow puppetry, called wayang kulit purwa (leather puppetry telling Hindu tales) is the major theatre art in Central and East Java. The shadow tradition also thrives in Bali, a small island off the east coast of Java. Rulers of the court of Majapahit are said to have fled to Bali to avoid the impact of Islam around 1520. Balinese date their current puppet tradition, wayang parwa, to these Javanese culture bringers. There is no doubt that the shadow theatre was carried by the Javanese to many areas that they have settled in the past centuries. Javanese have established puppet traditions overseas in Sumatra, Kalimantan (Borneo), parts of Malaysia, and even Surinam in South America. Though many other forms of puppetry are found in Indonesia, the shadow theatre is generally considered the oldest, and Javanese influence has helped in wayang's spread to other ethnic groups like the Sundanese in West Java.

Another possible source for the word wayang is from hyang, a
word for ancestral or divine spirit. Indeed, the puppet tradition holds an aura of the “sacred” about it. Certain puppeteers enact purifications via performances (called ruwatan in Java and Sunda and sapuleger in Bali) for persons or places who are perceived as being susceptible to Kala, a demonic manifestation of divine power. In areas of Bali, Java, and Sunda, some puppeteers make holy water which is sought after for health, luck and other positive values. Though most performances are presented more for entertainment than for religious purposes, some ritual features are apparent in each performance. For example, puppet performances normally take place in the context of rites of passage; incantations in ritual language sprinkle the average performance, and food offerings are customarily prepared for the spirits. The humor, political satire, and good story-telling, however, are clearly aimed at a living audience: the hero offers the demon Kala liquor and sweets as a bribe in exchange for the weapon he uses to attack humans (meanwhile the clown inserts asides on local officials who are similarly susceptible to graft). Both the human and spirit world are pleased and appeased by the show.
Though film and television have challenged the traditional primacy of puppetry as an entertainment, 
*wayang* remains strong. Puppeteers are cultivated by the government to disseminate information on health, family planning, and other issues in performances. With the rise of modern media certain puppeteers have become artists widely known beyond their areas, thus commanding now enormous fees. As always they wield strong intellectual and moral influence on their community. Even modern theatre and visual artists often turn to puppet theatre to make new statements about the emerging issues in this modernizing nation. Artists of the current generation are elaborating on the repertoire, 

the musical accompaniment, and the manipulation technique in innovative modes. Though the *wayang* is old—with the early references in Bali dating from the ninth century (Zurbuchen, 116) and in Java from the tenth century (Brandon, 2)—the *wayang* is continually renewing itself.

**Animating Ideas**

Just as the boundaries of awareness become perceptible, there is perfect tranquility, undisturbed by any threat, and even the utterances of the gods subside. It is none other which forms the beginning of my obeisance at the foot of the Divine. Greatly may I be forgiven, for my intention to call forth a story.

*(Zurbuchen, ix)*
This passage that opens the Balinese shadow play articulates an idea of how divine power precedes yet interpenetrates the world via enactment. Puppetry is seen as a link between the knowable world of people and things, and the imperceptible reality behind the universe. The wayang often uses the analogy of the puppeteer as the unseen god: people are compared to puppets, only dimly aware of the larger force that animates them. "The puppets receive their spirit through the Dalang. The Dalang (God) breathes into the puppets," sings the Sundanese dalang in one of his mood songs and continues, "The screen hides the Almighty from our eyes."

Three principles that help explain the importance and persistence of puppetry in Indonesia are: 1) the importance of objects as temporary dwellings or visual representations for powerful forces and ideas, 2) the propensity of Indonesian peoples to seek congruence of imported ideas with indigenous cultural traits, and 3) the principles of generating new types of wayang within a constant framework.

**Objects and Power**

A traditional Indonesian world view sees that the universe is charged with power which can take up residence in material things as well as people. Mountains and trees are resting places nature generates, but people can construct...
monuments or images that invite this power to visit therein. In certain areas, figures may represent ancestral souls who, after death, are felt to meld with the larger forces of the universe interceding for their descendants. The wooden effigies (*tau tau*) of the Toraja people of Sulawesi, for example, are resting places for ancestors who can be helpful to their progeny in bringing good rice harvests (Volkman, 89). Among the Tengger people of East Java, ancestors are represented by small clothed figures (*petra*) during the Karo festival that invites ancestral spirits from the world beyond back to our world (Hefner, 121). This use of figures to represent the unseen forces behind the world may have paved the way for puppetry as a seminal art. The preference for shadow theatre which hides reality behind the screen, echoes an indigenous conception that the real forces behind life can only be dimly perceived in this world.

Current *wayang* primarily appeals through artful humor and powerful metaphors, but selected puppets continue to have a strong link to more mysterious forces. One example is the *kayon*, the “tree of life” puppet, which is also called a *gunungan*
(mountain): it represents the cosmic whole. The Javanese kayon generally shows a winged gate guarded by two ogres behind which is a garden containing a world tree. The use of this figure varies from place to place. The kayon dance at the beginning of the Balinese puppet show is said to represent the world first coming into being. In Java and Sunda, the puppeteer meditates as he holds this puppet over his head or to his mouth, praying that power from God, teachers, and elders will infuse him so that he can please his audience.

The chief clown Semar in Java and Sunda, is another character with mystic connotations. He is usually said to be the oldest being in the universe, half male and half female, a divinity who hides his glory behind his distorted form and low humor. His prodigious fart may knock out a demon who pursues him in battle. His flat singing and jerky dance evoke howls of laughter. Semar serves the aristocratic characters appearing in each story, but every audience member realizes that this puppet is divine. He is proof that the common people are the power behind a kingdom, and affirms the true wisdom found in an ordinary person's pragmatic response to life. Twalen, the main clown in Bali, has analogous associations.

The power or personality that resides in an image is related to an iconography of character that
underlies Indonesian theatre. This typology situates characters along a scale of refined (alus) to coarse (kasar). Although a dalang has over a hundred figures in his set, the many characters fall into a limited number of types. Each type has definite parameters of movement, voice, and character to follow in performance. The size of the body, the shape of the eye and mouth, and the slant of the head are the most important features. The puppet’s character type regulates the dance step in which the puppet will move, the note of the gamelan scale on which he/she will speak, and the degree of refinement with which he/she will converse. Refined, proud-refined, strong, emotionally uncontrolled are the major types in West Java. Only the headdress and accoutrements will distinguish one member of a single type from another.\(^1\)

This typology is more than a convenient way of distinguishing characters. It is associated with indigenous ways of dividing the psyche and the cosmos. Along the north coast of Java, for instance, dalang associate the refined character (Panji) with the north, ancestral beneficence, emotional control, and the power of the right hand. The strong demonic character (Klana) is associated with the dangerous South Sea, spirit realms, emotional uncontrol, and the power of the left. It is interesting to note that in each story the refined knight manipulated

\(^{1}\)The face, body, movement, voice and demeanor of Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata is analogous to Rama, the prince in the Ramayana. Panji the prince in bulan (legends) of East Java, and Amir Hamzah the refined uncle of Mohammed in cepak stories. All refined heroes share the immutable rules of type.
by the right hand is destined to defeat the jerky, demonic king manipulated on the left hand. Although this can be simplistically seen as the triumph of good over evil, the datang knows he is the unitary force behind. The refined and the coarse are parts of our single humanity, as demonic and divine are manifestations of the same awesome divinity behind the universe. Images that capture the essence of each type clarify the power and range of the unitary energy that animates all.

**Congruence of Indigenous with Imported Ideas**

Another principle behind wayang is that it has used outside influences to develop and refine itself. Encounters with Hindu-Buddhist influences, Islamic, and even Western culture have been incorporated into the wayang in certain periods.

Indian impact is clear. The major repertoire of the wayang theatre is based on Hindu epics: over ninety percent of the stories performed today deal with the heroes of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Ramayana tells the story of Prince Rama, an incarnation of the God Wisnu. When his wife, Sita (an incarnation of Dewi Sri, the rice goddess) is stolen by Rawana, the demonic king of Alengka, Rama enlists the aid of the simian troops under Hanuman, a white monkey and son of the wind god. With the assistance of this
retainer, Rama defeats Rawana and reclaims his wife.

The *Mahabharata* deals with the exploits of the five Pandawa brothers as they struggle to regain their kingdom from their cousins, the hundred Kurawa. The usurpers are defeated only after the Bharata Yuda, a great war that brings destruction and sorrow to both these clans.

Some scholars feel that the art of puppetry was imported from India after the first century A.D. as Hindu culture came to Indonesia via the trade routes. Indeed the bulk of stories presented deal with characters from Indian epics. Local creativity, however, has done much to elaborate on them. The events of the great war have, over time, been linked to sites in the Javanese landscape. For example, Kresna, an incarnation of Wisnu, is said to be king of Madura, an island off the coast of Java, and the Pandawa heroes have been conceptualized as ancestors of the Javanese rulers.

Many new stories not included in the Indian versions have been invented and a myriad of characters of local invention introduced. The major stories of the Indian epics are compared to the trunk of a tree that grows straight and firm. The invented stories are analogous to branches that spread off from the trunk and can develop in new and interesting directions.

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2 Other evidence, like the use of indigenous terms for most of the technical apparatus (screen, light, puppet), argues for local origin.
Islamic influence is also strong. Muslim mysticism seems to have been at work in the period Java converted to Islam, and this helps explain the philosophical overtones that lie behind wayang in Islamic areas. The dalang of Java and Sunda believe that wayang was created by the nine wali, the saints who converted Java in the fifteenth century. The story goes that two of the saints were discussing how to draw the masses to Islam. One of them drew a wayang figure on the ground, the second understood immediately. This wali, Sunan Kalijaga, became, they say, the first dalang. He performed in the mosque, and audience members had to pledge the Muslim statement of faith to enter, ‘There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.’ While it is clear that wayang preceded Islam, this story affirms the truth that in the era of Islamic conversion modifications to the Javanese wayang tradition occurred. These changes included a greater stylization of the puppet figures, modification of the musical accompaniment, and a reinterpretation of the Hindu stories to suit Islamic ideas. Also an expansion of the repertoire to include tales of heroes, like Amir Hamzah, the uncle of Mohammed, took place. These stories are told via wooden rod puppets clothed in Javanese court dress called wayang cepak.

Western influence began with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1526, and subsequently, the Dutch
colonized Java for hundreds of years. The colonial period ended with the triumphant Indonesian revolution after World War II. Though Westerners may not initially perceive how the European tradition has been incorporated into wayang, these influences too have been worked into the texture of the art. Scholars like Ras hypothesize that the prominence of the uncouth ogre king from an overseas kingdom (raja sabrangan) who became the traditional opponent of the refined hero in the standard Javanese wayang kulit purwa by the sixteenth century was a representation of the large bodied and aggressive foreigners who threatened the smaller bodied and more soft-spoken Javanese. In current stories a clown may appear wearing boxing gloves declaring he is Muhammad Ali or sing and prance in the style of Michael Jackson. Puppetry finds a means to use new material in its own way.

**Types of Wayang:**
**Generating New Forms Within a Set Framework**

Indonesia's motto is unity in diversity. This saying aptly applies to wayang; although there are many varieties of wayang, the elements (dalang, puppet, music, and story) are found in virtually every form. However, the kind of puppets, the particular gamelan, the specific language and epic vary from one form to the next. One genre is distinguished from
another by the medium it uses, the epic it relates and the language it adopts. The most common mediums are leather shadow puppets (kulit), round wooden puppets (golek), or flat wooden puppets (klitik). The favored stories, based on the Hindu tales are called purwa (oldest, original); other less often told cycles tell Muslim tales of Amir Hamzah or chronicles of indigenous heroes and kings. This last group is known as babad.

Medium, story, and language combined identify the major performance genres. The wayang kulit purwa jawa, like the wayang golek purwa sunda, tells Hindu-derived tales, i.e., "purwa" stories. But the first uses Javanese language and flat incised leather figures (kulit) and the latter uses the three dimensional wooden rod puppets (golek) and Sundanese language. Wayang gedog and wayang cepak are two forms found in Java which tell chronicle tales. Both genres could tell, for example, stories of Panji, an amorous and heroic prince of East Java; or Damar Wulan, a prince who, disguised as a grass cutter, wins the heart of his queen. But the wayang gedog uses leather figures and the wayang cepak round wooden figures. Each time the type of puppet or the epic alters, the genre is given a different name. This masks the underlying consistency that music, story structure, and movement techniques provide within a single culture area.
The most frequently performed genres are wayang kulit purwa in Central Java, wayang golec purwa in Sunda, and wayang parwa in Bali. Wayang cepak is popular along the north coast of Java. Wayang klitik, with its flat wooden puppets, is found in East Java. Wayang beber, an almost extinct Javanese form which uses painted scrolls to tell epic stories, is considered the oldest genre from which all puppet theatre descends.

New forms of wayang are frequently generated: by changing the medium, the story, or the language to create a new synthesis. Thus wayang kulit indonesia and wayang golec indonesia are two recent experiments that have utilized the national tongue, Indonesian. Wayang sandosa is a recent experiment of the Academy of Music (ASKI) in Surakarta which uses multiple manipulators, an enlarged screen, multiple light sources, and an expanded musical repertoire to achieve startling visual and musical effects. Wayang pakuan was a form created in the sixties by Elan Surawisastra to tell stories of the old Sundanese kingdom with golec style puppets.
This exhibit is an introduction to the wayang world, attempting to show some of its varied manifestations. Wayang is a living and changing tradition. Though modern media are presenting a challenge to its popularity, thousands of viewers will turn out any night to see top performers like Dalang Asep Sunandar in Sunda, Dalang Anom Suroto in Java, and Dalang Wija in Bali. They innovate brilliantly within the tradition by commissioning new music to suit their clown sequences, creating new puppet characters and dances, and introducing new twists to plots.

The fascination of wayang is strong and its impact on European puppetry is telling. For example, rod puppetry was little known in Europe before this century when the Viennese puppeteer, Richard Tschner, saw wayang golek in a Netherlands museum in 1911 and introduced rods to his work. Rod puppetry is one of the most common manipulation techniques in America today due to Jim Henson, who had the technique at his disposal thanks to this Viennese puppeteer. Roman Paska, an important contemporary rod puppeteer, has acknowledged his debt to wayang golek, and many others who have seen wayang kulit have been impressed by this art. Composer Lou Harrison, for example, has collaborated with puppeteers using the fusion of music and theatre found in Java as a model. A number of current American puppeteers have engaged...
in and become *dalang* in the Indonesian tradition. Examples are Roger Long and Marc Hoffman in Javanese *wayang kulit purwa*, myself in Sundanese *wayang golek purwa*, and Larry Reed and Fredrik de Boer in Balinese *wayang parwa*. The Festival of Indonesia and this exhibit celebrate and continue this cross-cultural exploration of the rich world of *wayang*.

— Essay by Kathy Foley
Bibliography


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