Performance As Education: Creating And Performing A Lesbian Themed Wayang Kulit In Javanese Style

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Abstract: In this article, the author describes her experience creating and performing an Indonesian shadow-puppet play (wayang kulit) with a lesbian storyline. Wayang kulit is a highly codified art form, and the codes can be manipulated to create new perspectives. This experience was educational for the performer, as learning to perform wayang kulit creates a deeper learning experience than merely reading about the art form. This article includes the historical background and contemporary iterations of wayang kulit and queer lives in Indonesia, framed with performance and anthropology literature combined with queer and feminist theory.
The performing arts are one way to learn about different cultures, as they can give us a window into a different reality. Studying culture through the arts is my preferred method of learning about the world, and it was in this spirit that I took a Southeast Asian art history class as an undergraduate with Jan Mrázek. Here I was introduced to wayang kulit and gamelan and fell in love with these art forms. Since taking this course, I have played with two Javanese gamelans (Gamelan Sari Pandhawa in Eugene, Oregon and Gamelan Nyai Saraswati at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill); traveled twice to Indonesia where I saw several performances and took a three-week gamelan course with Çudamani, a gamelan in Pengosekan, Bali; and performed my own wayang kulit play with Gamelan Sari Pandhawa for my Master’s project. Performing a wayang kulit myself allowed me to incorporate my research with lesbians and transgender people I met in Bali, as well as gain a deeper understanding of the art form that cannot be gained from text research alone.

The aims of my performance-- Pinang and Ayu: A Love Story-- were to engage, both theoretically and practically, with an Indonesian art form that I find fascinating, and to use it as a format for social commentary and education. As education theorist Maxine Greene (1994) stated, the more people become used to experiencing art from different cultures, the less likely they are “to rely on predefined categories in making multicultural curricula and the less likely they may be to generalize” (28). While not a traditional classroom presentation, my performance was a form of public pedagogy with the aim of showing the audience the diverse experiences of Indonesian people. Through this work, I wanted to both honor the art form by situating my performance within its contemporary framework of practice, and create a new story relevant to contemporary Indonesian and American culture, much like current dhalangs (puppeteers) are doing in Indonesia.

Through my efforts to manipulate the puppets, write a script for a performance, and vocalize the entire cast of characters, I gained a broader and richer understanding of the art form. As Victor Turner and Richard Schechner discovered in their experiments engaging both anthropology and drama students in one classroom, “there may be ways of getting people bodily as well as mentally involved in another … culture” (Turner 1979, 84). This creates a different type of knowledge, “a dialectic between performing

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1 Wayang means shadow, kulit means skin, referring to the leather the puppets are made from. Indonesian words will be italicized throughout the paper.
2 Indonesian orchestra- consisting mainly of percussive, bronze instruments, but also drums, flutes, and stringed instruments.
3 Indonesia is an archipelago, and Java and Bali are two of the more well-known islands. They both have gamelan and wayang kulit in different styles. Javanese gamelan is generally slower than Balinese style.
and learning. One learns through performing, then performs the understandings so gained” (Turner 85). Thus, I agree with Kathleen and Billie Dewalt’s (1998) statement that participant observation is “as critical to social scientific analysis as more formal research techniques like interviewing [and] structured observation” (259). Participant observation taught me both the flexibility and limitations of the form, especially as I was a beginning dhālāṅg. For example, when I was first writing my script a few scenes described the characters as pacing nervously, but when I began rehearsing I realized this wasn’t possible. This type of learning could only happen from physically manipulating the puppets.

The project also enabled me to creatively express my own political beliefs and reflect on the lives of lesbian women in Indonesia and the U.S., as well as their relation to their fellow citizens and government. My wayang kulit goes beyond the normal boundaries of the genre by focusing on sexuality. While I have seen and read about wayang kulit performances that include commentary on religion, the government, and the environment, to my knowledge queer sexuality remains mostly unexplored. One exception is the independent film Children of Srikandi, which uses wayang kulit interwoven with the stories of queer women in Indonesia (Tan 2012). This is most likely due to the general taboo nature of the subject in Indonesia, which will be discussed in a later section. I realize that I risk the criticism of trying to “Westernize” this art form by including my own political ideas. Daphne Patai (1991) has discussed the ethical difficulties ethnographers face when working with “third world” cultures and peoples, and I did question whether I was overstepping the boundaries of propriety by addressing this subject. However, there are many Indonesians, including gay activist Dédé Oetomo, who have been accused of bringing Western ideas to Indonesia when they are simply fighting for the rights of people who are already a part of the culture: women, queer people, and transgender people. By using an Indonesian art form instead of a Western one, I could ground the issue in a culturally specific way. As Ward Keeler (2002) and other scholars have noted, wayang kulit reflects Javanese social norms and values and cannot be looked at as separate from the culture. Ruth McVey (1986) also articulates its importance to the nation, calling it “the symbol of a great cultural heritage […] that has maintained its relevance because it does not exist on one level of meaning or time” (22). I was not trying to change the art form through my performance. Rather, I hoped to add an additional viewpoint into the current dialogue; a part of Indonesian culture that is often overlooked in this highly valued genre.

This article is structured similarly to the process I went through in creating my project. I will begin with discussions of wayang kulit, including its conventions, relation to gender, and current scholarship. I will then discuss the status of Indonesian lesbi⁴ and other queer people in the political and social context at the time of the performance. The remaining three sections are titled preparation, performance, and reflection. These sections serve to situate my methodology and the performance itself within a theoretical framework.

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**Figure 2**: Promotional Shot For Pinang And Ayu: A Love Story For The Performance "Pinang And Ayu" With The Support Of Gamelan Sari Pandhawa/Ken Jennings.

**Literature Review**

**Wayang Kulit**

Wayang kulit is an Indonesian art form performed mainly on the island of Java, but also in Bali, Lombok, and on other islands. The stories portrayed are usually based on Hindu religious texts, and are adapted to include commentary on local issues. The dhālāṅg sits behind a shadow screen manipulating

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⁴ Lesbi, taken from the English word lesbian, has been used since the 1970s in Indonesian (Boellstorff 2005).
the puppets and performing their voices. S/he cues the *gamelan* with a foot tap or a rap of a *gamelan* to play at the appropriate times. These performances have traditionally lasted overnight, but now shorter performances are also popular. Though *wayang kulit* was historically performed for the royal Javanese court, it is now performed for tourists, and as a part of local ceremonies, weddings, arts festivals, or other community events such as the opening of a new store.

Research on *wayang kulit* before the 1970s was based on the Dutch colonial research methods of cataloguing and categorizing rather than understanding *wayang kulit* in a larger cultural context (Keeler 2002). Since the 1970s, scholars have taken a more anthropological approach, looking at cultural norms, political ideals, gender roles, and class issues portrayed through the art form. Jan Mrázek, Sarah Weiss, and Helen Pausacker are among the current scholars studying contemporary changes and approaches to *wayang* and *gamelan*. Ward Keeler (2002), Laurie Sears (1996), and others have stressed that Western scholars have a different idea of performance itself, which can affect their own research. Ward Keeler (2002) especially feels that Westerners expect artists to be lone forces working against the mainstream ideas of society and the government (in Indonesia currently, these ideas are generally conservative Muslim and heteronormative), when *dhalangs* are in fact a part of the mainstream and highly valued in society, and so are not striving to further their own political agendas.

However, after seeing contemporary *wayang kulit* in Bali in 2008, I disagree with Ward Keeler. I saw two popular *dhalangs* at the Bali Arts Festival in Denpasar whose performances were highly political in nature, and outside of the mainstream Indonesian mentality. In one case, the *dhalang* questioned the national government’s value of Islam over all other religions. Another Balinese *dhalang* included pointed commentary on environmental devastation and poverty, and criticized the government for not helping the situation. Though Ward Keeler (2002) argues that ethnographers tend to fall in the trap of seeing what they want to see and may interpret *wayang kulit* and certain *dhalangs* as political when they are not, these performances were too obviously political to have been misinterpreted. Since I discussed these thoughts with local gamelan performers in Bali who concurred with my observation, I feel safe saying that the portrayal of a political message was intentional.

Historically, it was not unusual for political groups to use *wayang kulit* as a form of propaganda, and today the government often sponsors performances (McVey 1986; Mrázek 2005). Yet even when the government is a sponsor, the *dhalang* is “allowed to criticize or ridicule the sponsor [and] often that is part of the entertainment” (Mrázek 2005, 517). Several contemporary scholars have documented *dhalangs* using *wayang kulit* as a forum for political commentary (Cohen 2002; Curtis 2002; Weintraub 2002). In the 1950s, even the Indonesian communist party considered using it to spread their message, as “the emphasis on a clash of epistemological worlds could easily be adapted to the portrayal of class conflict and competing social philosophies” (McVey 1986, 23). However, this idea was ultimately abandoned because of the genre’s history as a royal art form, its feudal classification of characters, and because it is historically more Javanese than generally Indonesian. In contemporary Indonesia, *wayang kulit* continues to be a space for social commentary, as “[i]n a country where adverse comment on those in power has rarely been permitted, *wayang* performances have often been the only source of critical observations on public affairs, and interpreting the *dalang*’s allusions is a favorite game of the *wayang* audience” (McVey 1986, 23).

Despite it being a space for subversive messages, *wayang kulit* remains steeped in social traditions, including gender norms. It is historically a male-dominated art form; the *dhalang*, *gamelan* and the primary characters are all male. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabarata*, Hindu tales commonly seen in *wayang kulit*, feature male main characters with females playing secondary roles. Even Sita, the most morally upstanding of the female characters in the *Ramayana*, has her purity questioned and is asked to walk through fire to prove her faithfulness to her husband Rama. No male character must prove their worth based upon their relationship to a female character. Women’s issues are rarely discussed in *wayang kulit*, though in the 1970’s female characters were used in government-sponsored performances to educate about birth control (Pausacker 2002).

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5 Mallet
Throughout the history of *wayang kulit*, female characters have served mainly to perpetuate heteronormative gender roles. Even today, women *dhalang* and *gamelan* performers (with the exception of the *genderan*¹, who is traditionally the wife of the *dhalang* [Weiss 2002]) are the exception to the norm. There are Indonesian folk tales in which women have a stronger role, but these are not typically made into *wayang kulit* plays. Even the innovative performances I saw in 2008 continued in the tradition of marginalizing the female characters’ voices; in fact, except for Sita, there were no female characters at all.

**Queer Indonesians In Historical And Contemporary Contexts**

Since the *Era Reformasi* (Reform Era) began in 1998, changes in Indonesian government and the passing of new laws have given women and queer people less freedom. Though the current government claims that homosexuality is a Western concept, homosexuality and transgenderism existed in Indonesia (and were documented in local texts) before colonialism (Blackwood 2007; Boellstorff 2005; Offord 2003). Despite their consistent presence, homosexuality and transgenderism were scarcely documented by the Dutch during the colonial period (Boellstorff 2007, 85). While I have found no scholarship on the effect colonialism had on Indonesian’s queer citizens, Tom Boellstorff (2007) noted that throughout SE Asia “gender and sexuality became key sites for distinguishing colonist from colonized, thus acting to legitimate colonial rule through rhetorics of propriety and virtue” (191).

In Indonesia, gay rights are virtually nonexistent. Due to increasing international pressure from LGBTQ non-government organizations (NGOs) since the 1990s for same-sex marriage rights, the government made “explicit statements against the practice of homosexuality for the first time” (Blackwood 2007, 298). In 1994, the Minister of Women’s Affairs said “lesbianism is not a part of Indonesian culture or state ideology” (Murray 1999, 142). In the same year, the Indonesian Minister of Population stated that “Indonesia would not support a declaration acknowledging same-sex marriage” (Blackwood 2007, 298) and the media took this as “the state’s official position against homosexuality” (Oetomo 2001, as referenced by Blackwood 2007). Sadly, it seems that Baden Offord’s (2003) speculation that “the very project of homosexual rights in Indonesia may act as a catalyst for its denial” (132) has become a reality. However, there are several active LGBT rights groups across Indonesia despite the groups’ difficulties in gaining respect from the larger population (UNDP, USAID 2014).

Since 1945 there has been no national legislation *explicitly* against homosexuality, however many Indonesians assume it is illegal because of government statements such as those discussed above (Blackwood 2007, 294). New regional laws, enacted since 2000, equate prostitution with homosexual behavior. The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission’s 2007 report on *Human Rights Abuses against Sexual Minorities in Indonesia* cites examples of gay men and transwomen being falsely accused of and arrested for prostitution for merely walking alone at night. A Balinese lesbian couple, who I informally interviewed in 2008, told me horrific stories of physical violence, discrimination, kidnapping, and forced marriage attempts they faced when their families first became aware of their relationship 20 years prior. Sisca, a transwoman⁷, told me that all transwomen she knows have done sex work at some point because they could not find other employment. Though Sisca’s statements may feed the perception that all queer people are prostitutes, it also illustrates the limitations transgender people face due to discrimination. It may also suggest that the legislation may feed this discrimination or even take advantage of it, and could potentially be used to arrest a disproportionate number of transgender people. A 2014 study (UNDP, USAID) found similar accounts of both personal and legal discrimination.

Thus, the fear of arrest and violence is very real in Indonesian queer communities. In 2008, I also met with three women who were starting a lesbian group in Bali (Srikandi Bali⁸) and were holding a women’s dance as a fundraiser. Their advertising was all underground, via email and word-of-mouth. They sent

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⁷ Some transwomen in Indonesia identify as waria, which combines the words waria (woman) with pria (man). Sisca did not use this word in conversation with me, though I do not know if she does when talking with other Indonesians.

⁸ I referenced this group in the prologue of my play.
me an email which billed the party as a fundraiser for global warming, but this was simply a ruse in case it got into the wrong hands. The tickets had to be purchased in advance, only women were allowed in (with the exception of male friends of the organizers), and there were no posters advertising the event in the city. The women told me that even this limited advertising would not have been possible in other areas of Indonesia. Bali is known to be the safest island for queer people (largely because it is the only island that is not predominantly Muslim), and many move there from other islands for this reason (personal interview, July 2008).

Some scholars, such as Evelyn Blackwood (2007) and Helen Pausacker (2002), illustrated how contemporary homophobic policies and attitudes have directly affected Indonesian performing arts. With the government’s limitation of sexuality to heterosexual marriage,9 theater and dance forms that have traditionally included transsexual or transgender characters have lost their popularity (Kellar 2004). As described by Blackwood (2007), there are several performance forms in which individuals play roles of the opposite sex, including a Balinese dance form called Arja where women express gender fluidity (295), meaning fluctuating between movements that signify male and female. While government officials continuously justified the new regulations on sexuality by claiming that homosexuality comes from Western influence, they were clearly ignoring these long-standing Indonesian art forms for their own convenience and to satisfy conservative Islamic supporters. This research, and my personal experiences travelling in Indonesia and talking with queer people there, served as motivation to create a wayang kulit that drew attention to the queer lives that are often ignored by mainstream Indonesian society.

Creating Pinang And Ayu: A Love Story Writing The Script

It was with this background knowledge of wayang kulit and queer lives in Indonesia that I began working on my script. While the stories I heard in Bali are not included in my play, they served as inspiration and further drove me to form new narratives of Indonesian queer identities. As Robert Cover (1982) stated, “[n]o set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning” (Cover, 4). These narratives are part of a “nomos- normative universe” (Cover, 4). The body and the way society views the body are a part of the nomos, as the body is “constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere” (Butler 2004, 21). In Indonesia, this nomos and the public body is generally Muslim and heteronormative. Thus the country’s laws mostly ignore the existence of queer identities. Though I’m not under the illusion that my graduate school project had any effect on the Indonesian nomos, this was my small way of introducing a new narrative through a performative context. Performance can have the power to spur political action, and since I believe in the feminist mantra that “the personal is political” (Forte 1990, 253), I hope that some who viewed my performance were inspired to join the fight for queer rights on an international level.

To create this new narrative, I used the Javanese folktale “Princess Pinang Masak,” which was introduced to me in the spring of 2008 by Kenneth “Qehn” Jennings (he uses the name Qehn as a musician), the music director of Gamelan Sari Pandhawa in Eugene, Oregon. I joined the gamelan in 2007, and they were interested in collaborating on a new wayang kulit play. In the original folktale, the beautiful princess Pinang Masak is kidnapped by the Sultan of Sumatra’s soldiers, as he wanted her in his harem. But she heard of the plan and made herself look ugly, so he rejected her. The Sultan eventually finds out he has been tricked, and goes after her, but she subsequently escapes on a boat with a group of women and men. The group founds a new village called Senura and makes it their home. Yet when the princess is on her death bed as an old woman, she wishes that no woman from the village will be beautiful, for her beauty was her curse. It is said that if you visit Senura Village today you will not find beautiful women, so if a woman marries she knows it is for love and not her looks (Bunanta 2003).

I saw how easily this folktale could be adapted to include a lesbian storyline, and discussed this concept with Qehn, and then with the gamelan group very early in the process. In my play, Pinang lived with her

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9 In 2005: Article 484 of the state penal code prohibits an unmarried couple from having sexual relations (Blackwood 2007, 303).
wife Ayu\textsuperscript{10}. She still disguised herself to escape the Sultan, but he was disgusted not just by her disguise, but also by her sexuality. When Pinang and Ayu escaped to start a village for other queer people, they also assembled a Tomboi\textsuperscript{11} army to fight back, and ultimately the Sultan was defeated. Rather than wish that none of the village women be beautiful, on her deathbed Pinang wished that the villagers’ sexuality would be invisible to homophobic people, so that they could live in peace. The ending reflected the current difficult situation many queer Indonesians face.

I was very lucky that everyone in the gamelan was open to the idea of a queer storyline. For guidance on writing the script, I looked at one Qehn had written, and a book of \textit{wayang kulit} plays called \textit{On Thrones of Gold} (Brandon 1970). I also drew on my observations of a \textit{wayang kulit} I played in with Gamelan Sari Pandhawa in 2008, and a performance by Qehn’s teacher and mentor, Ki Midiyanto. My script very much followed in their style, such as the way the characters speak, the inclusion of mentioning the \textit{dhalang} in the clown scene. This inclusion is common in \textit{wayang kulit}, but the jokes I made about my appearance were typical of Qehn’s style. The way I chose to vocalize Cakil’s\textsuperscript{12} lines (an ogre character who is in every \textit{wayang kulit} play and represents a hero’s struggle with inner turmoil) in a high-pitched register were also taken directly from Qehn’s portrayal of the same character.

I finished the first version of the script by January 2008, though Qehn and I did not have a chance to go through it together until April. He helped me structure the script so that it would follow the conventions of the genre, such as waiting until as late in the story as possible to have a scene with the heroes—heroines in this case—and the inclusion of the battle with Cakil for the secondary protagonist. He also told me I should add a prayer scene for Pinang, and a scene for a secondary antagonist. Thus I wrote the character of Made,\textsuperscript{13} a servant of the Sultan, who was also hiding his homosexuality. Because traditional \textit{wayang kulit} performances are overnight there was much left out, such as lengthy scenes with the armies and their commanders, but the basic conventions were maintained as much as possible. There were five drafts of the script all together as we continued to work out the kinks; the later versions having only minor changes. Some elements of the script were altered when we began rehearsing the show in April with the entire gamelan, as music had to be changed to better fit the mood. Traditionally, the \textit{dhalang} directs the gamelan, but since I was a beginner Qehn took on this task for me. There were times in the script where my actions or narration signaled the musicians when to stop or start the music, but I was not using a gamel to indicate this directly or to set the tempo. This increased the level of collaboration, and also my comfort level in performing.

My main challenge in writing the script was with content; how to make an entertaining script that still included social and political commentary about gay rights, particularly Indonesian gay rights. I had to assume that my audience would have little to no knowledge of Indonesia at all, let alone the country’s political situation. I carefully chose moments in the script to include this commentary, and did so in simple language, as was appropriate for a performance context. Lengthy lectures from the puppets about gay rights would not only have been cumbersome for me, but also for a mixed audience who came for entertainment, not a lesson. Also, since I had targeted the local queer community in my advertising I knew that there would be people in the audience who understood the basics of queer activism and identities, and so I could draw on this common cultural background in the script. For this reason, I used references to American stereotypes of lesbians, such as Home Depot visits and softball playing, while specifically talking about Indonesian political issues, such as the government’s refusal to accept lesbians as part of their culture. My goals were to include social commentary on the contemporary gay rights movement in the U.S., to allow the audience to see the

\textsuperscript{10} The puppet used for Ayu was Balinese, and Ayu is a common women’s name in Bali meaning beautiful
\textsuperscript{11} A term used in Indonesia by some queer women to describe themselves
\textsuperscript{12} Pronounced Cha-keel. C sounds in Indonesian are always pronounced “ch”
\textsuperscript{13} Pronounced Ma-day with a short “a” sound, this is a common name in Bali and indicates the second child. I included a Balinese name to honor my teachers and interviewees there.
parallels between the gay communities, and also to note that for Indonesians, the situation is considerably tougher. This excerpt from the script shows this combination of US norms and Indonesian realities:

**Pinang:** Ayu, did you go to Home Depot yet? We need a wrench to fix the sink.

**Ayu:** Me! Why do I have to be the handyman?

**Pinang:** Because Princesses never have to do anything of course! Besides, one of us has to act butch so that everyone understands we’re lesbians.

**Ayu:** Isn’t this show supposed to refute lesbian stereotypes, or show the diversity of the community, or something? Besides, as a Princess can’t you hire someone to do that stuff for you? And furthermore, since I’m your wife, doesn’t that make me a Princess too?

**Pinang:** Yeah, you’re right, as always. Besides, I can’t have my wife doing all the dirty work! We should be ladies of leisure, take yoga classes or go to charity functions or something.

**Ayu:** You go right ahead honey. I’m going to work on my petition to the government for gay rights.

**Pinang:** The same government that said lesbianism is not a part of Indonesian culture? That’ll be a long time coming! ... Hey, aren’t we supposed to be at softball practice soon?

**Ayu:** What did I tell you about stereotyping? But you’re right, come on, we’ll be late.

As previously discussed, *wayang kulit* has long been a space for social commentary in Indonesia and skilled *dhalangs* are masters at illustrating a political message, whether overtly or in a more hidden, implicit manner. Since it is highly codified, an audience familiar with the codes can easily understand its conventions (Schecher 2002, 183). In this case, the codified elements are the standard forms of puppet movement, stock characters, formal structure of the script, and familiar storylines from Hindu epics. However, since I knew there would be few, if any, Indonesians in the audience, I could not rely on manipulating the structure of *wayang kulit* to indicate a break from the norm. But, since the folktale included elements similar to those found in Western fairy tales, such as a Princess and a Sultan who desires her, I decided to rely on the manipulation of the audiences’ understandings of these meanings to “destabilize the codified forms” (Schechner 2002, 189). Any Western audience member would understand that it is a break from the heteronormativity prevalent in folk and fairy tales to make the main characters lesbians. This served as a form of appropriation coding, a strategy which “adapt[s] to feminist purposes forms or materials normally associated with male culture” (Radner and Lanser 1993, 10). In my story, the Princess had a wife, and led her army to fight for their freedom. While Pinang was helped by a male monkey god, Hanoman (my favorite *wayang kulit* character from the *Ramayana* story), the women primarily helped themselves; they were each other’s Prince(ss) Charming.

*Wayang kulit* as a genre is unique in that it allows for contemporary criticism and situations to be explored through ancient stories, as “[t]here is no time past in the wayang’s terms, for in its vision all time coexists” (McVey 1986, 22). This allowed me to simultaneously use recognizable Western conventions of fairy tales, such as beginning the prologue with “Once upon a time, long ago on the island of Java” and also easily include contemporary references, such as Hugh Heffner as a parallel for the Sultan, and commentary on President Obama’s contradictory stance on gay rights, of which many Americans, queer and otherwise, were not fully aware in 2009. This excerpt from the clown scene references Obama, and the 2009 Miss California, who in her pageant interview (which occurred shortly before my performance) infamously advocated for “opposite marriage.”

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14 Every *wayang kulit* includes a clown scene in the middle, which both sums up the play for people who have missed the beginning and also serves as a comic break.

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Petruk: So there’s this super cool chick, Princess Pinang Masak, and her awesome wife Ayu.

Bagong: Hold up Petruk - did you say her wife? Can they do that?

Petruk: Well, not legally. Not even in America! I mean, gay marriage is legal in a few states, and some have civil unions, but those don’t give equal rights to marriage. So until same-sex marriage is legal on a federal level, Obama might as well be advocating for separate but equal.

Bagong: Wait a minute, I thought Americans only believe in opposite marriage?

Petruk: I think only Miss California believes in that- or knows what that is. The point is, Pinang and Ayu are lesbians, and they’re married.

Subsequently, the fluidity of the art form allowed for more blatant social commentary than may have been possible with other performance genres such as dance, and to mix it with humor so that the audience was both entertained and (ideally) enlightened about current gay rights issues. Adapting the folk tale to fit my goals was as much fun for me as performing; I enjoyed the creative challenge of finding ways to include queer content, and Qehn and the other members of the gamelan enjoyed this transformation process as well. The Sultan can be seen as a metaphor for the larger homophobic Indonesian society; or for a global homophobic vein that many queer people can, unfortunately, identify with. He represents the heteronormative, patriarchal view, as expressed by Luce Irigaray (1975):

That a woman might desire a woman ‘like’ herself, someone of the ‘same’ sex, that she might also have auto- and homosexual appetites, is simply incomprehensible’ in the phallic regime of an asserted sexual difference between man and woman which is predicated on the contrary, on a complete indifference for the ‘other’ sex, woman’s. (de Lauretis 1990, 18)

This is why I included a few lines, both for the Sultan and a male soldier, in which they claimed it was impossible for a woman to love another woman. Pinang and Ayu also discuss the common problem for lesbians of being invisible in mainstream society.

Though Jeanie Forte (1990) said that “[f]or women, sexuality cannot remain private: since one is constructed as ‘woman’ through sexuality in relation to male desire” (259) lesbian sexuality frequently remains private by default in heteronormative societies, as its existence is often ignored. This is very true in Indonesia, where as I personally experienced in my travels, most outside of the queer culture have little to no knowledge of queer identities. I was relying on a queer audience, particularly queer females, to relate to this idea and knew that this type of dialogue would hold more meaning for them than the heterosexual audience members. Though I was using explicit codified meanings that would be obvious to the majority of the audience, the queer members would get additional messages, and were more likely “to recognize a double message” (Radner and Lasner 1993, 3), such as the Sultan as a metaphor for more than just a stereotypical alpha-male.

The clown scene is traditionally the place for the most obvious social commentary in wayang kulit, and mine was no exception. Petruk is used as the voice of the dhalang (Mrázek 2005, 480), so I was able to speak most directly through this character and didn’t have to alter the register of my voice. This scene has no place in the original folktale; as with Ayu’s battle with Cakil, Pinang’s prayer scene, and the Goro-Goro, it was added to fit the conventional structure of the genre. While I used it to include a line about gay people not being allowed to marry in Indonesia, and about the government denying lesbians’ very existence, I did this juxtaposed with American cultural references (such as lesbian musician Melissa Etheridge). The audience was able to understand and enjoy the commentary this way, for if I had only included Indonesian content they would have been lost. Again, these references were obvious to the

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15 A traditional wayang kulit scene in which the world is out of balance due to the conflict in the plot, similar to a pathetic fallacy
majority of the audience, and particularly funny to my queer audience. It was important to me to create something for a queer audience, instead of focusing solely on a heterosexual audience. There is very little in the entertainment industry created for queer people in general, and even less for lesbians (Fouts and Inch 2005). So even though I hoped that if there were people in the audience who weren’t aware of queer culture they would be educated by viewing my performance, I was mainly writing for my peers. For if we don’t write for ourselves, who will?

Other parts of the play were crafted to add queer content and commentary to the plot, referencing particular experiences of Indonesian queer women. The final fight scene of the play ends with a victory for Pinang and her Tomboi army. I purposely spelled it “tomboi” because this is how it is spelled in Indonesia, and also because in the myriad of current American queer identities, some people identify as “boi.” This generally means they are biological females attracted to other females who project masculinity, and for whom a genderqueer or boi identification better reflects their sexuality and gender identity than the broader term of lesbian. The final narration states that “all the happy homos lived under a protective spell, where they will remain until homosexuality is no longer hated and feared, and the narrow-minded ones can see past the curse of hatred within themselves.” I could have chosen instead to make the whole society enlightened and accepting, but this utopian view would not have reflected the contemporary situation in Indonesia or the U.S., and I wanted the ending to give a lasting impression of the need for social change. In Indonesia especially, queer people live their lives primarily underground; this ending, though bittersweet, reflects this. Though this story was largely a celebration of lesbian identities and of lesbians’ perseverance through adversity, ending it without acknowledging the continued struggle for rights and acceptance would have seemed false, and even disrespectful of my Indonesian acquaintances who face daily resistance.

Learning Puppetry

I began learning the technique of puppet manipulation as we rehearsed the show, which began in April of 2009. Qehn showed me how to make the puppets enter the stage, stage a fight scene, and make the characters walk and talk to indicate different moods and personalities. Cakil, in particular, has a specific arm-movement that no other character uses (Mrázek 2005, 53) in which the puppet is flipped around with the arm held straight. The position of the puppets is also indicative of their status or characterization. Any royal character is always on the puppeteer’s right in their own palace- so Pinang and Ayu were always in the same positions, and Made was always to the left of the Sultan. Good characters (alus) are always on the puppeteer’s right, while evil characters (kasar) are on the left, unless the scene takes place in the palace of an evil character. So, if I had shown Pinang and the Sultan in his palace, he would have been on my right, even though Pinang is the good character.

Making the voices distinct from one another was one of the most difficult elements for me. While “[i]t is the puppeteer who is speaking, not the puppet; … the puppet has to be understood- heard- as producing the voice” (Mrázek 2005, 270). To my surprise it was the voices of Pinang and Ayu who were the most difficult, not the male characters. This was partially because I did not want them to sound like parodies, with high-pitched, hyper-feminized registers. I have a low voice myself, and making their voices too high would have been impossible to carry out for the whole performance. After much rehearsing, I decided to make Pinang’s voice a little higher and more sing-song, to characterize her as more carefree than Ayu. This decision was also made because it is Pinang who seems most unconcerned about the Sultan. Thus I vocalized Ayu’s lines in a lower register and without a sing-song inflection to portray her as the serious one of the pair. This serious voice also helped in her characterization as the activist, and the one whose lines included social commentary. Typically, “[t]he voice is always related to the visual appearance of the puppet” (Mrázek 2005, 271), but in this case the American audience would not read the puppets as that distinct from each other. And, since having two female protagonists is unusual for this art form, the voices had to be very distinct to avoid confusion. Furthermore, having voices that complemented, rather than mirrored, one another, further emphasized one of the points of the play: that lesbians are not identical.

I also made a puppet for the Tomboi army. In Indonesian this type of puppet is called a prampogan. I
have always been amazed at the intricate details carved to make the elaborate shadows of wayang kulit; this amazement has multiplied infinitely now that I have tried it myself. I modeled it after a prampogan Qehn created for a performance of Beowulf, which was also used in Pinang and Ayu as the Sultan’s army. I gave the Tombois’ faux hawks, a popular “lesbian” haircut at the time, as the queer and queer-familiar audience members would instantly recognize this coding. Their shields were emblazoned with the woman’s symbol (seen in Figures 3 and 4), to make it obvious that this is an army of women. I painted it with acrylics purchased at a drug store, and attached a stick with red thread, as is the tradition.

During a battle, you sometimes hold one puppet in each hand, and bring them together while the gamelan makes crashing sounds. The fighting moves are aggressive and bold, and take a lot of practice to perfect. Thus, the fight scenes are the most difficult to perform, and were made even more so in my case because female characters do not normally fight, so the female puppets are not built for this. The male characters (with the exception of some of the clowns, who also do not fight as they are lower-class servants) have more flexibility in their arms, the joints are strongly reinforced, and the tudings16 are stronger. It is interesting that Indonesian gender and class stereotypes are evident even in the puppets’ construction. As a result, several times in rehearsal I broke the tudings on both of my female leads when I was too vigorously having them fight their opponents. This led us to rethinking the fight scenes, and Qehn showed me less aggressive ways of conducting them and more careful ways of holding the puppets to prevent breakage.

Performance

At our last rehearsal prior to the performance, none of the tudings broke, we were all feeling fairly confident, and had our trouble spots worked out. The gamelan was taking this opportunity to wear gender-deviant clothing. However, since our clothing was

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16 The rods, traditionally made of water buffalo horn, that are held by the dhalang to manipulate the puppet.
traditional Indonesian wear, the audience wasn’t aware of the conventions we were breaking and it was our own private joke. In Figure 5, you can see I was wearing a batik shirt, which is normally worn by male performers. In the right bottom corner a hat on another female performer is visible: this is also normally worn by males. Females usually wear a lace shirt called a kebaya, with a sash tied over it. For this performance, only Qehn wore a kebaya.

The performance went well. It was the first time I had the lamp behind me, and at times I nearly got distracted as I enjoyed watching the shadows. The tudings did not break, and the audience was very responsive. Though I was behind the shadow screen and so could not make eye contact, I could feel their energy. As “[n]o theater performance functions detached from its audience,” (Schechner 1985, 10), their reactions gave me more confidence and also increased my desire to perform well in order to please them. I found myself exaggerating certain elements, like the Sultan’s deep laugh, as I felt the audience responding well to them. Though it was the puppets who were “speaking,” my views were expressed through them, illustrating the liminal state of “performance consciousness,” an incomplete transformation in which the audience sees the puppets’ shadows on the screen, but is still aware of the fact that it was I giving them their voice (Schechner 1985, 6). Their active attention was crucial to my success, and I was very grateful for it.

Performances always include an element of risk, and so naturally there were some things that did not go perfectly. When I gave my introductory speech, I explained to the audience that in Indonesia, the audience comes and goes, chats to each other, and moves around during the performance. The Indonesian idea of audience, in this setting, is much less static than American audience norms. Some people did move around and talk, though most seemed hesitant. Later I learned some were distracted by the door opening and closing and the children who kept standing in front of the screen. Some of the gamelan musicians on the outside of the arrangement were also bothered at times by children getting too close to them, but they are used to this for it happened at all of our performances when there was no physical barrier separating us from the audience.

Conflicts between audience and performer occur, and are to be expected, in cross-cultural performances. Overall, though, I was pleased with the audience’s level of interaction at this performance. I think it helped that we set up the screen and the instruments on the floor, instead of on the stage. This brought an element of casualness that would have been absent otherwise, helped to break down the boundaries between the audience and performers, and encouraged some viewers to be more relaxed. Also, this broken-barrier was reinforced through the script, where the puppets directly address the audience. While this is part of the genre, this is not typically seen in Western theater forms, and it seems that the audience was pleasantly surprised by the breaking of the fourth wall.

Reflection

In the 1980s, emerging lesbian performing groups in New York City used forms that were so codified a heterosexual audience would have found it incomprehensible (Dolan 1990, 40). Though I was creating a performance with a lesbian audience in mind, I did not want it readable only to this group. I operated in the mode of “revisionist feminist critics … who suggest that dabbling in traditional forms might be an effective method of insinuating social change” (Dolan 1990, 41). It is a strategy of lesbian artists, particularly in theater and film, “to alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility” (de
Lauretis 1990, 33). Though characters in wayang kulit are largely allegorical and thus their personalities are not very developed, I wanted Pinang and Ayu to be seen as lesbians who lived outside of the conventional stereotypes and beyond the butch/femme dichotomy. As Jill Dolan (1990) stated, “[r]econstructing a variable lesbian subject position … requires emptying lesbian referents of imposed truths, whether those of the dominant culture or those of … radical feminist communities” (53). Through humor, I addressed these common categorizations of lesbians, but I also did not attempt to define how a lesbian does, or should, look or act as this is an impossible and counterproductive task.

Jeanie Forte, in describing feminist performance art, stated that:

All women’s performances are derived from the relationship of women to the dominant system of representation, situating them within a feminist critique. Their disruption of the dominant system constitutes a subversive and radical strategy of intervention vis-à-vis patriarchal culture. (251)

My performance also functioned as a form of resistance against patriarchal culture, but I hate to categorize it as radical merely because of its inclusion of feminist and lesbian content; I hope that we are in a time where this commentary that challenges the status quo is more familiar to a mainstream audience. For why is it that something that is read as queer is automatically deemed radical? This labeling always makes me cringe; I do not think of myself as subversive or radical simply because I am a lesbian. However, the presentation of this queer content in wayang kulit is radical, in that it is a break from the heteronormativity of the genre. Gamelan Sari Pandhawa had already broken this mold, as at the time of the performance we only had one male member; this performance reinforced the group’s position as outside the gender norms of conventional gamelans.

I once heard a professor say that if you scratch the surface of academic research, you will find the researcher themselves just below it. I am definitely guilty of this. However, it was also about my queer “family” in America and in Indonesia. Pinang and Ayu: A Love Story was not just a love story about two women, but also an expression of my love for Indonesia, wayang kulit, and the global queer community at large. Using Charles Briggs’ (1996) method of examining positionality, there are many aspects of my own identity to explore through this work, which all affected how the performance was perceived, and how I approached it. Next I will discuss my different positionalities that lie close to the surface: graduate student, ethnographer, Gamelan Sari Pandhawa member, performer, and queer community member.

As a graduate student, I had to take care that this wayang kulit would work as a terminal project. From this position, I worried about putting enough critical content in the script so that it would be evident to my thesis committee. I also added some lines to Made and Gareng’s
d a scene for a small commentary on class issues, since one of my committee members had expressed a desire to see this addressed in the script. But my position as a student also allowed for some fun, as in the clown scene I mentioned my thesis committee. The clown scene is often used to poke fun of important people in the audience, so this was a surprise for the committee that followed the guidelines of the genre. Here is an excerpt from the clown scene that shows both the breaking of the fourth wall and the inclusion of my committee:

**Petruk:** We’re in another wayang kulit, brother!

**Bagong:** Another one! What is it with Javanese people and their wayang kulit?

**Petruk:** Actually, we’re in America this time. Eugene, Oregon.

**Bagong:** you- what where?

**Petruk:** Eugene. At a University. This is for Summer’s terminal project.

**Bagong:** Who’s Summer?

**Petruk:** She’s the one behind the screen.

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17 Made’s boyfriend
Bagong: Ah! I forgot about that part! So we’re in a puppet show! I guess Bush wasn’t the only puppet in America!

Petruk: We’re not those kinds of puppets! We’re here to provide comic relief, social commentary, and to sum up the story. And to suck up to Summer’s thesis committee—hi thesis committee! Don’t you love the show?

Bagong: What’s a thesis committee?

Petruk: Um, I don’t know exactly, they’re these people who decide if she gets her degree or not.

Bagong: Oh, sounds important! We should be on our best behavior then.

As an ethnographer of performance, a wayang kulit enthusiast, and a member of Gamelan Sari Pandhawa, I wanted to show my American audience as “true” of a portrayal as possible in form and structure, even though I was simultaneously pushing the boundaries with the content. Since I was the main performer in this show, I positioned myself as the one with “discursive authority” (Briggs 1996), a role I was not entirely comfortable with as an inexperienced dhalang. One of the goals of Gamelan Sari Pandhawa is to introduce gamelan and wayang kulit to new audiences, and I believe this is one reason Qehn was so careful to teach me conventional structural methods. I also felt this was important; since this would be many people’s first time seeing a wayang kulit performance I wanted them to leave with some sense of the genre. And of course, I wanted them to be entertained, so that they would appreciate the magic of wayang kulit as much as I and the other members of Gamelan Sari Pandhawa do.

My position as a performer was the most obvious to the audience. Though I introduced myself as a graduate student and explained the purpose of the performance was for my thesis, I hope that they saw me as a performer more than a student. I started consciously performing from the moment I began my opening speech; I wanted to appear confident and relaxed, and to make the audience comfortable as well. I also wanted to prep them sufficiently by giving a brief explanation of the genre. Since I was sitting behind a screen during the performance, I was not aware of the audience visually, but as previously discussed I felt their presence and positive energy. I wanted to please them and enjoyed interacting with them. During the final battle scene, I heard my friends answer Pinang’s battle cry. This seemed a natural progression in the performer/audience relationship, and was evidence of my close relationships with certain members. I estimate that I knew approximately one third of those present, and this helped me feel more at ease, as I knew they would be supportive even if the screen had fallen over. My ‘performance of a performer’ continued after the show, as strangers from the audience came to talk to me and I wanted to continue to project confidence, and also my genuine gratitude for their attendance and support.

Lastly, my position as a lesbian and a member of the local queer community gave weight, and perhaps even a layer of authenticity, to the performance. I embodied this identity visually, by wearing a rainbow sash and styling my hair in a faux hawk to match my Tomboi army; signs that would immediately read as lesbian to the audience, and would clearly identify me as “family” to the queer audience members. I myself am always suspicious of queer representations in entertainment and scholarship that are not created by queer people, and I wanted to let the community know that this was not the case here. As stated previously there is not much created specifically for us, and it was important to me to make this contribution to the Eugene queer community. I did not tell the audience verbally that I was a lesbian, but through explicit coding, it was evident.

In Indonesia, this performance would have been very different. In the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S. I was very comfortable being “out:” I was not afraid to tell people about my sexuality, and nearly everyone I knew was aware that I am a lesbian. However, when I travelled in Indonesia I did not tell most people, only other queer people I met and a few men at a bar who were very persistent suitors. I did not feel safe to come out there, and would probably not feel safe performing Pinang and Ayu as it is written. In Indonesia, I would have to use a different kind of coding, “in which one group of receivers is ‘monocultural’ and thus assumes that its own interpretation of messages is the only one possible”
(Radner and Lanser 1993, 3). I would probably employ codes of indirection, which use metaphors to create ambiguity that can only be interpreted by certain groups (Radner and Lanser 1993, 16). This type of coding is frequently used by dhalangs performing government-sponsored shows, as “[t]o evade censorship, [subversive] political messages are interwoven with humor and satire” (Weintraub 2002, 133). But even using veiled messages, I do not know if I would have the courage to perform it to a mainstream audience. Since queer people are often arrested under false pretenses in Indonesia, this threat would probably mean I would perform it underground, if at all.

Conclusion

Wayang kulit is full of contradictions, which perhaps is why it has remained popular for so long. Dhalangs are hired by the government, yet they also may criticize the government, sometimes within the same play. It reinforces Indonesian ideals of class relations, religion, and gender, but since it is so codified, it can easily be manipulated to show subversive messages. It was traditionally performed as entertainment for the royal court, yet is enjoyed by Indonesians of all classes. For these reasons, Carol Warren, as referenced in Cohen (2002) “characterizes wayang as a countermodern cultural border zone in which dichotomies, including past-present, tradition-modernity, and East-West, are played off one against the other in the service of identity construction and revision” (111).

Through this project I played with these dichotomies, including my own dichotomy of ethnographer and performer. I fluctuated between these positions, which gave me varied lenses through which to view the results. At times this perhaps made me hyper-sensitive as I worried about how my project would be perceived by all parties involved. Were my multiple goals accomplished? I cannot say for certain, but overall I feel that they were. I wanted to engage with the current world of wayang kulit by including my own political agenda of queer activism and a global commentary in a local context, and I believe in this I was successful. I followed the conventions of the genre enough so that it would be readable as a wayang kulit, rather than as postmodern or avant-garde.

As Richard Schechner (1985) stated, “performers- and sometimes spectators too- are changed by the activity of performing” (4). The experience of creating and performing a wayang kulit enhanced my understanding of the genre, Indonesian culture, and the way performance can be used as a vehicle for social commentary, education, and political activism. I can only hope that some in the audience, especially those who expressed their thanks and appreciation after the show, felt this too. I wanted to honor this tradition for which that I have so much respect and awe. From talking with some of the audience members after the performance, some were happy to see wayang kulit for the first time, some were happy to see lesbian identities represented, and some of these experiences overlapped. I don’t expect everyone to start writing the Indonesian government or donating to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), but as a believer in grassroots activism, I feel that education and awareness are the first steps to create change. Since this project wasn’t performed for an Indonesian audience, it did not affect Indonesian queer people directly, but I hope that for the American audience it created awareness of a larger global context from which to view queer rights. Wayang kulit is a treasured art form, and this performance cemented its place in my heart.

Figure 7: Summer Pennell Prepares For The Performance
References


