B. Hatley
Women in contemporary Indonesian theatre; Issues of representation and participation


This PDF-file was downloaded from http://www.kitlv-journals.nl
This article has its origins in a sense of omission in the research I have been conducting over the past few years on modern theatre in Indonesia – that is, theatre in the national language, Indonesian, employing a written script and derived from the model of Western drama. In such research I had not devoted particular attention to issues of gender in presentation and organization of performances, had not sought out the perspectives of female performers. Why this had been the case is a question I explore in the introduction to the paper, a preliminary exploration of the situation of female performers in such theatre through the examples of a small group of women actors. Their stories are presented against a background of observations of interpretations of 'modernity' in Indonesian theatre and society, and of the strictures of currently dominant gender ideology. As explained below, the project begins with an initial assumption of the reduced power and autonomy of women in modern as compared to traditional, regional performance, based on observation of both types of theatre, and contemplation of modernizing processes. The eventual findings, while not contradicting this assumption, at the same time, I hope, also present a more complex, layered, and interesting picture.

I cannot claim that my text allows these performers to 'speak with their own voices', in keeping with the agenda of certain feminist studies of women from non-Western or marginalized social backgrounds. For the accounts of their lives and work recorded here represent these performers' response to an initial request from me, and have been shaped by my questions. The women themselves did not ask that their stories be told, nor do they conceive of themselves as a group with perspectives requiring representation. What I hope to do, rather, is to provide for observers and analysts of Indonesian theatre and society some understanding of the rich and varied contribution of women performers to modern theatre practice. At the same time, these stories from the theatre world also reflect very interestingly on the nature of gender construction in Indonesian society, on the impact of dominant ideology, on strategies of response, and the possibility of alternate models of female identity.
Introduction – women in traditional performance

In earlier years, carrying out research on *kethoprak*, a popular theatre form performed in Javanese by mixed-sex troupes, I had often watched from the wings with a group of female performers and chatted extensively by day with the women of the troupe. My later writing drew far more extensively on talks with the invariably male troupe leaders and directors, but it did address as an important theme links between conventions of character and scenic portrayal in performance and understandings of gender in Javanese life. These conventions gave expression, I argued, both to dominant ideals and fantasies and to actual ambiguities and tensions in male–female relations; operating within a male-controlled framework they nevertheless afforded women performers, and, by vicarious extension, large crowds of female audience members, a certain space.¹ Glamorous star actresses, meanwhile, commanded adulatory audience attention, relatively high performance fees, and often special conditions within the troupe. By comparison, modern theatre on the whole seemed a much more exclusively male phenomenon – the domain of long-haired, intense young playwright/directors and actors, with radical political views and artistic philosophies, and audiences of very similar composition, male, youthful, ‘counter-cultural’. It was to the playwright/directors that I was introduced when I expressed an interest in *teater*, modern theatre, and who predominated in conversations with the actors: only rarely was I introduced to the few young women in the group playing female parts.

My observations of women’s participation in kethoprak appear to concur with evidence of the place of female performers in the traditional Javanese performing arts more generally – a picture of highly circumscribed, but also well-defined and acknowledged roles. The contribution of the *pesindhen*, for example, the female singer with the *gamelan* orchestra, to a shadow-puppet performance, is relatively minor compared to the all-dominating presence of the male puppeteer. But her musical skills and feminine allure are recognized as an essential part of the performance, for which she is highly valued and amply rewarded. As the only women in an all-male troupe, watched by overwhelmingly male audiences, *pesindhen* are the targets of much sexual innuendo in performance and have a reputation for sexual availability. R. Anderson Sutton suggests a close historical connection between these singers and female dancers who sang and danced with serial male partners at ritual celebrations (forerunners of present-day *ledhek*) who in turn recall a female figure in the ancient courts of Java attributed magical powers of fertility.

In the contemporary image of the pesindhen, sitting demurely immobile in her place among the gamelan instruments, subject to joking remarks and advice on her behaviour and deportment from the *dalang*, the sense of

¹ These ideas are explored in Hatley 1985 and 1990.
female power seems muted and constrained. By comparison, the figure of the single female dancer, known by different terms according to geographical area — *ledhek, tledhek, gandrung, ronggeng* — performing at *tayuban* dance parties and in local ritual celebrations, projects a more active and explicit sexuality. Sutton writes of the ‘depiction of wildness, associated with the female’ and a ‘primarily sexual’ licence in the behaviour of the entranced elderly *seblang* dancer at ritual performances he attended in Banyuwangi, who charged at men in the audience, chose her own male partners, and performed erotic hip-thrusting movements. In the better-known context of the central Javanese *tayuban*, it is the male partners of the young, female performers rather than the women themselves who perform erotic dance movements, attempt to touch the dancers, and frequently test ‘the limits of deviance normally tolerated in Javanese culture’. The female dancers here on one level might be seen as very much the objects of sexual attention, the target not only of the much-discussed ‘male gaze’ but also of predatory physical touch. But from another perspective these women also have considerable opportunity to exert power over men, in their reactions — responsive, indifferent, or coldly dismissive — to approaches from their male partners: meanwhile, as David Hanan argues in an analysis of the film *Nyi Ronggeng*, these men are as much exposed to the gaze (and the potential ridicule) of the crowd as are the *ledhek* dancers themselves. Ambiguity marks the whole situation of the ledhek, admired and well-paid for their sexual attractiveness, licensed to act in ways normally prohibited for women, but at the same time looked on with suspicion and disdain, their public image ‘somewhere between that of a prostitute and a film star’ (Hughes-Freeland 1990:41).

Female performers of each type mentioned here — kethoprak actress, pesindhen, and ledhek — share something of this ambiguity of status. Both their onstage display of sexual allure and the apparent freedom of their offstage lifestyle — travelling about the countryside, spending whole nights away from home, mixing freely with male performers — attract censure in their perceived deviation from the ideal of female modesty and devotion to husband predominant in Javanese conceptions of gender, celebrated in court literary works and everyday folk sayings. Yet at the same time their persona and behaviour may be seen to tap into an alternate, more ancient and earthy conception of the feminine, a female sexual and procreative power complementary to the male principle, a necessary aspect of cosmic wholeness. With the development of courtly states in Indonesia, it has been argued, and the accompanying adoption of world religions such as Hinduism and Islam, the potentially dangerous force of autonomous female sexuality was tamed and contained by male control, in the construction of

---

2 The term comes from Laura Mulvey's famous article (1975), asserting the domination of film by the male perspective of the camera.
the ideal of dependent, subordinate wife. At the margins, however, in spaces geographically or socially distant from the centres of court culture, the image of autonomous, compelling female power can be seen to persist, embodied in mythical figures such as Nyai Loro Kidul, goddess of the South Seas, and, in some measure, on a human plane, in the ledhek dancer and other women performers. These women enjoy a degree of autonomy within the performance, a privileged space linked with their female identity, recalling at some remote remove this tradition of magically powerful female fertility, in tandem with their ambiguous, morally tarnished social reputation.

Some studies of contemporary practice in the traditional performing arts report shifts in this picture, a reduction in the artistic autonomy and income of female performers through processes of institutionalization and formalization. Amrih Widodo writes of government-initiated changes in the format of tayuban in the Blora area of eastern Central Java, entailing more restrained, court-style clothing and dance movements for the ledhek and increased control of proceedings by a male master-of-ceremonies. Hughes-Freeland mentions the exclusion of professional ledhek from respectable state-organized tayuban in favour of students from dance schools and other academies. As ‘modernization’ ushers in a concern with formal standards and credentials and institutional organization, less-schooled, less organized social groups tend to be edged aside. Among professional performers of traditional theatre, typically lower-class, minimally educated, women actors are perhaps particularly vulnerable in their perceived connection with the private domestic domain, or here, the realm of sexuality and emotion, rather than the public world of institutions. The dominant gender ideology of contemporary Indonesia, a variant of the widespread post-colonial phenomenon of construction of women as embodiments of ‘indigenous tradition’ amid a sea of change, would likewise seem to have negative implications for women performers. For the definition of ‘traditional’, ‘natural’, predestined (kodrat) female character on the basis of which women are defined by the New Order state, mobilized organizationally for nation-building and, in many ways, judged socially, is a restrictive, puritanical one. Prescribing devoted support of husband and family as woman’s continuing primary responsibility whatever other social and economic roles she may take on, it provides little leeway for alternate conceptions of female nature and expressions of female identity.

Yet the position of women in traditional, regional performance, even in these contemporary times, seems still qualitatively different from that of women actors in ‘modern’ national theatre. Pesindhen and ledhek still

---

3 Andaya 1993 describes these processes.
make their own ‘self-contained’ contribution to performance, in a way which contrasts with both the artistic form and the mode of organization of modern drama.

‘Modernity’ in theatre is often identified with individual freedom of thought and expression. *Bebas* and *jujur*, ‘free’ and ‘frank/direct’ are terms frequently employed to discuss modern theatre, in implied contrast to the conventional form and prescribed symbolic meaning of traditional performance. Workshops and rehearsals involve training in the expression of emotion through free bodily movements and vocalization: in performance the troupe presents a freely developed new creation. This creation, however, is frequently the work of a playwright who also directs its performance, by actors who work together exclusively as members of his theatre group. Such a pattern of dramatic production, a blending, arguably, of traditional models of performance organization (compare the controlling figure of the male puppeteer) with modern notions of individual creativity, seems to have arisen contemporaneously with a process of ‘neo-traditionalization’ which took place in modern Indonesian theatre in the 1970s. This involved a move away from the European-derived model of highly scripted, realistic, narrative plays, introduced through the colonial school system and maintained by an educated, Westernized elite, to include more indigenous themes, elements of regional music and dance, and a more improvisatory approach.6

All actors, male and female, are implicated in the contradictions of this performance mode, combining a theory of free personal expression with a practice of strong directorial control, where actors play out the ideas of a dominant leader, and troupe organization is often hierarchical, authoritarian? But male actors at least participate actively in discussion sessions about the play, prior to and during the rehearsal process, and in some troupes may occasionally get the chance to direct a production. Women performers, very much the minority, seem to contribute very rarely to such discussions. Among the scores of troupes I met with in the course of research, only one had a woman writer/director. The picture is reminiscent of the gender balance in the field of ‘serious’ written literature in Indonesia, overwhelmingly dominated by male writers and critics. Though women authors produce much popular romantic fiction, serious intellectual creativity and debate, it seems, are still strongly coded as male. In theatre, women participants are further restricted by gender expectations in the field of social behaviour. Largely educated and middle class, modern theatre performers come from a social group greatly concerned with propriety and appearances, and hence with maintaining dominant ideolo-

---

6 These developments are discussed in, among other sources, Rafferty’s introductory article (1989).

7 Such contradictions are not confined to contemporary theatre in Indonesia. Eckersall (1991) discusses a similar phenomenon in recent Japanese theatre practice.
gical standards; such ideology weighs more heavily upon them than on the poorer, less educated practitioners of traditional, regional theatre forms. For young women in modern theatre groups, attendance at night rehearsals, for example, often causes major conflicts with restrictive, suspicious parents. A common model among the more established modern theatre groups is one where the wife of the male leader/playwright/director performs the main female role in each production. Her contribution is vital to the group, but it also depends vitally on her association with her husband – her performance is part of his creative project. If the marriage should fail, the wife withdraws from the group and from performing. Unlike the traditional singer or dancer, she cannot simply take her valued skills elsewhere.

In such a situation, gender relations and female perspectives seemed hardly auspicious aspects of modern theatre on which to conduct research. Issues far from the consciousness of theatre practitioners, they seemed likely to be less productive topics than the themes which young male actors do discuss frequently, state politics and issues of cultural identity. My likely observations of gender imbalance, informed by Western feminist concerns, would be seen locally as the reflection of an illegitimate, alien discourse, and hold little interest elsewhere. Hence my more or less conscious choice to document the interesting things that were happening among modern theatre groups, rather than what was not happening.

Yet, already uneasy about ignoring such a major area of theatre practice, I had begun to take note of distinctive differences between troupes in performing style and organization, which seemed to have important and interesting implications for gender relations. Then came the opportunity to conduct some brief research in Indonesia in connection with this topic. Rather than attempting a broad overview, I instead made contact with a selection of women actors from troupes whose work I already knew. The groups were chosen for their geographic spread, Jakarta, Central Java (Yogyakarta and Solo), and Bali, as well as the variety of their styles of performance. I had met most of the performers before, briefly, and been impressed by their work, but had never spoken to them at length, about themselves. This article draws on the accounts given by these women of their lives and work, of issues they focused upon, each account introduced by a brief profile of the performer and her group, and followed by some interpretative comment. All but the last story, that of playwright, director, and actor Ratna Sarumpaet, were recorded in February 1994, with a brief follow-up meeting in early 1995: Ratna I got to know through her involvement in the international women's playwrights' conference in Australia in July 1994, with further talks in Jakarta in January 1995. The text follows the sequence of the first research trip, presenting a series of

---

8 Modes of representation of such concerns in modern Indonesian theatre are discussed in Hatley 1990 and 1993.
Gesti (back row, second from left) with actors from factory workers' performance
narratives, with some common threads which weave through the different tales drawn together and discussed at the end.

First stop – Gesti, Teater Sae, and the workers’ theatre

My 1994 trip to Indonesia coincided with a performance in Jakarta by the group Teater Abu, literally ‘theatre of workers of all kinds (aneka buruh)’. The players were young workers from a number of different factories in and around Jakarta, staging their second production. They had become involved in theatre as one of the activities promoted by a women’s non-governmental organization working with factory workers, aimed at enhancing their self-confidence and sense of solidarity. Both productions were directed, however, by a woman who herself is not a social activist but a performer – Margesti of the group Teater Sae. Tall, spare, radiating energy, Gesti is probably the key performer in the intense, abstract, avant-garde performances of this group, directed by her husband, Boedi S. Otong. In the long, gruelling rehearsal period for each production, Gesti, along with the other actors, pushes herself to her emotional and physical limits under Boedi’s demanding direction. Boedi’s commitment to what he terms ‘subjective theatre’, grounded in the individual psychological experience of the actors, involves an intense personal engagement with the scripts of the group’s playwright, Afrizal Malna.

Involvement in Teater Abu, however, provided Gesti with a very different role and ambience. Invited by acquaintances in the women’s organization to hold training workshops with the young actors, Gesti gradually assumed a much broader creative and organizational role. She devised all aspects of production for the group’s performances, including music, costumes, and stage decoration. And because of the difficulty of holding rehearsals involving workers from different factories situated outside Jakarta, who worked six to seven days a week, with long shifts, the performers slept at her house each Saturday night, rehearsing late into the night and on Sunday morning. The style of the performances contrasted strikingly with those of Teater Sae, drawing strongly on the idiom of indigenous folk theatre, its simple music and dance, humour, and audience interaction, in place of Sae’s stark, abstract imagery.

The first production by Teater Abu, Nyanyian Pabrik (Songs of the Factory) had taken place in January 1993. Involving a mixed group of male and female workers, dressed in black pants and t-shirts, it consisted of singing and choreographed movement, reading of poems, and performance of play fragments, all addressing the theme of the strictures of factory life. Yet the overall mood of the show was one of exuberant celebration rather than bitter protest, as an opportunity for the young workers to both vent their grievances and express their energies and emotions, their sense of group solidarity and joy in performance.

The second production shared many of the characteristics of the first,
particularly its mood of innocent exuberance. Yet there were also interesting differences. This time the production Mentog (Duck) was based on an adaptation of a single playscript rather than a collage of elements: the theme was the ‘trial’ of a garment worker accused of stealing some of her products. (The largely humorous confrontations of the trial end with the acquittal of the worker, and a lively celebration by the whole cast.) Strikingly, all the parts in the play itself were taken by women – the worker and the friend who defends her, the factory owner, and the representative of the much-criticized official trade union SPSI, in the role of judge. The males in the group, sitting at the side of the stage, provided musical accompaniment. Where the first production at times invoked a generalized folk theatre style, here the whole performance was cast in a distinctively Javanese theatrical idiom, with gamelan instruments, Javanese songs (lagu dolanan), and Javanese dress – black farmers’ pants for the men, kain and kemben (sarong skirts and strapless bodices) for women.

Yet Javanese performance codes were also significantly subverted. The dress style of the women performers would identify them with the type of the ledhek dancer mentioned earlier, glamorous and seductive. Their movements, dialogue, and whole demeanour, however, contrast strikingly with this image. The four women first don masks, then each in turn introduces herself to the audience with wild, energetic dancing and down-to-earth verses, which are greeted with raucous laughter and shouted comments. Identifying themselves by the names of the four clown servants of the wayang tradition, Semar, Petruk, Gareng, and Bagong, they also display the abandoned, sometimes aggressive performing style of clowns. The dominant images of women in Javanese culture, the prescribed model of demure, controlled lady and obedient wife, and her mirror image, the dangerously sexual single female, are both flaunted. Recalling the strict behavioural controls reportedly imposed on factory girls to counter the dangers of their single lifestyle, and the promotion through state ideology of woman’s key role as supportive helpmate to her male partner, this situation of factory girls joking and cavorting on stage while their male counterparts are relegated to the role of providing musical support is intriguingly anomalous. The women actors clearly revel in their cheeky assertiveness. Earlier, I am told, at the beginning of rehearsals, the women were stiff and inhibited, and reluctant to use their masks: now they delight in the sense of anonymous licence the masks provide. They report

9 This was somewhat unexpected in view of the heated politicization of labour issues in the intervening year, with the murder of the worker activist Marsinah, and US pressure on the Indonesian government to improve worker conditions.

10 The script on which the Gesti version is based is a play by Djayakusuma Kwek (the title imitating the sound of a duck), in its turn reputedly an adaptation of a European original.

11 On conceptions of and conditions imposed on female factory workers see Mather 1983.
moreover, that participation in this production has helped boost their overall confidence and self-esteem.

The day after the performance, visiting Gesti at her home to talk about the show and about her theatre activities more generally, I ask about the prominence of women in the production. Is there an implied message? Has there been consultation on this issue with women activists from the sponsoring group? Gesti answers on a plane of personal rather than more general gender politics. She alludes to a mental state which has surely influenced her in encouraging female assertiveness on stage, arising from a crisis in her relationship with her husband. In this situation, Gesti recounts, her involvement with Teater Abu has been vital. Work with Teater Abu has given her an alternate focus, a channel for her energies, and a chance to develop her talents, to recover her own identity, and create an independent space.

Given the significance Gesti herself attributes to her personal situation in relation to her work with Teater Abu, and, also with Teater Sae, it seems appropriate here to recount something of the story of Gesti’s background, her marriage, and her acting, as told to me that day, at different times, by both Gesti and Boedi.

Born in 1959, Gesti was raised in various cities, as her father was a member of the military, but in a very Javanese cultural ambience. (Feodal, ‘feudal’, ‘hierarchical’, is Boedi’s description of the family.) At high school she specialized in economics, and after graduating worked as a secretary, taking courses in accounting at night. Acting was a side interest, but one which brought her considerable success – in 1977 she won the award for the best actress at the Jakarta youth theatre festival. Boedi was also very active in youth theatre, rehearsing in the same locations as Gesti’s group, and it was through this connection that they came to meet. What attracted Gesti to Boedi was that he paid attention to her and seemed to care about her, in contrast to the strict, harsh way she had been treated by her parents. Her parents opposed her marriage to this impecunious actor, but eventually, in 1985, they married. Boedi tells a striking story about what happened next. Feeling that the marriage would not last if Gesti did not really understand him and what he expressed in his work, he asked her on their wedding night to give up her job as a secretary and devote herself to theatre and to him. They had no money, lived in tiny, cramped quarters, and Boedi forbade Gesti to have any contact with her family apart from major occasions such as weddings and lebaran, the celebration at the end of the fasting month, to remove her from the influence of their values. Shocked, I comment later to Gesti on the harshness of Boedi’s attitude here, but she endorses the idea that it was necessary for her to break from her family and her past. It was some time later, she recounts, after she had a child, that problems began. Boedi refused to let her go out, even to watch the performances of other groups, insisting her place was at home with the child. Then, four years ago, Boedi became involved with another woman in an
affair which is still continuing. Because of the pain and stress of the situation, Gesti reports, she has contemplated divorce. But Boedi will not agree.

Boedi endorses this picture. As a child of a broken marriage himself, he does not want to repeat the pattern. If the tension between himself and Gesti becomes too great they will need to work out new ways around the problem, but for him, divorce is not an option. (Neither, it seems, is giving up the other relationship.) For him, in any case, the ‘tension’ in the marriage is a creative force. It helped inspire, through his discussions with the playwright Arizal Malna, the Teater Sae production *Biografi Yanti* (The Biography of Yanti), an exploration of the difficulties and ambiguities of marriage. And it has given to Gesti’s acting an increased intensity and fire which often frightens him as he directs, knowing that it grows out of anger towards him, but which makes her performances extremely impressive. He speaks frankly about the situation, and expresses surprise that others have not commented upon Gesti’s heightened performance in this light, since such personal factors are integral to the substance of his ‘subjective theatre’.

Gesti, too, when asked what satisfaction she obtains from acting, makes reference to the performances which have taken place since Boedi’s affair, describing a sense of plumbing the depths of her anger and frustration on stage, a feeling of cathartic self-expression. What input does she have into her characterizations, I ask, compared to that of Boedi as director? She explores and develops Boedi’s general directions about the character, then he gives comments. Her movements are her own creations. (She recounts the example of a very strong movement in *Biografi Yanti*, where she lifts her skirts over her thighs in a gesture of aggressive female sexuality. This arose from a moment in the last stages of rehearsal, where she was sitting in a similar way, and Boedi seized upon the movement as exactly right for the play. It was her original gesture, it seems, but Boedi who appropriated it, and reinscribed it for performance.)

I comment, as apparently many others have done, on the striking contrast between the style of performance of Teater Sae and that of Teater Abu. Is this a deliberate choice? What has been the thinking behind Gesti’s direction of *Nyanyian Pabrik* and *Mentog*? Her answer is that her role with Teater Abu is like that of a mentor, a guide (*pembimbing*). She attunes to their needs and helps strengthen their capabilities rather than leading and pushing the group in the more usual manner of a modern theatre director. It is not so much that she is avoiding employing Sae’s approach, but that the simple, humorous teater rakyat, people’s theatre, style seems to suit the group. Training the group in the songs and movement styles used in *Mentog* was meanwhile very straightforward for her, ingrained as they are in her own Javanese cultural background.
Sadly, perhaps, in January 1995 Gesti was no longer working actively with Teater Abu, though individual performers often came to see her. The women’s organization had ceased financial assistance to the group, which was now conducting its own rehearsals near its members’ work sites. Gesti would have found it difficult to make frequent trips out of town to the factory area to meet with them, since she was now five months pregnant with her second child. The marital situation was not resolved, however, and Boedi was away in Europe. Much of Gesti’s talk, therefore, was of her difficulties. Yet she also reported that she had begun vocal and physical exercises, preparing for a one-woman show. The script had already been written for her; she would start rehearsing and ask Boedi’s directorial advice on his return.

How might one interpret Gesti’s story, her experience of a woman performer’s role in modern Indonesian theatre?

Certainly Gesti’s situation within the theatre group fits the pattern described earlier - creative control by and dependence on her husband, as the director and group leader. The distinctive artistic approach of Teater Sae’s work, grounded in the subjective experience of the actors, intensifies this effect. The current fusion of domestic and dramatic, as Boedi directs his wife in performances rendered especially powerful by her pain at his infidelity, might be seen as the latest phase in Gesti’s ongoing construction within her husband’s texts. Yet, clearly, there are other dimensions to the situation, other ways into the text. For one thing, in Teater Sae’s theatre practice Gesti’s personal feelings are recognized, valued, and allowed free expression, in contrast to the suppression of emotion and enforced maintenance of harmonious appearances which is the usual experience of wives in such circumstances. Gesti’s performance in *Biografi Yanti*, with its unforgettable images of aggressive female sexuality, and tense, angular body poses charged with frustration and anger, is no passive construct, defined and contained by the director’s vision and passively ‘consumed’ by the audience. Its raw energy leaps from the stage in an assertion of emotion potentially experienced as intimidating not just by Boedi but men at large: a statement of female position in marriage cathartic not just for the performer but for women generally. Tapping into new reserves of emotional intensity, Gesti’s already powerful performance has strengthened and grown, and likewise her own reputation. She plays such a vital part in Teater Sae’s work that it is hard to imagine the group surviving without her: this theatrical ‘capital’ surely strengthens her position within her marriage and the group, though with what outcome it is impossible to predict.

Gesti’s involvement with Teater Abu attracted much attention, perhaps in part because of the topicality and political volatility of workers’ issues.

---

12 By January 1996, however, Gesti was again rehearsing with the factory workers of Teater Abu, and had staged two small performances.
The style of her performances with the group suggests plural possibilities of interpretation – deliberate assertion of distinction from the Teater Sae mode; familiarity with and delight in Javanese folk theatre models not given expression with Sae; reflection of an accommodating female style of direction attuned to the capabilities of the group; hints of a stereotyping of lower-class people as simple, 'folksy'. The lapse in activities with the workers' group is surely sharply felt, particularly in the absence of other current theatre activities. Yet with characteristic intensity and commitment, Gesti continues to plan for the next stage of her career – a step which she expects will again activate the volatile, tortured, but brilliantly creative partnership with her husband.

Ratna Riantiarno and the Koma model

The contrast between Gesti and the next performer I interviewed, Ratna Riantiarno, in terms of personal image as well as the structure, performing style, and ethos of the group to which she belongs, is striking. Like Gesti the wife of the director and leader of a theatre troupe, in this case the prolific playwright and journalist Riantiarno of Teater Koma, Ratna is also the star female performer of the group. But where Gesti's tall physique, short-cropped hair, intense expression, and relatively severe dress style fit perfectly the abstract, intense quality of Teater Sae productions, Ratna's more conventionally pretty appearance, relaxed, yet vivacious manner, and stylish dress seem equally in keeping with the glamour, sophistication, and naturalistic mode of Teater Koma shows. Some of Ratna's most memorable roles include that of a star actress, queen of the 1930s popular stage, in Opera Primadonna, and the coolly beautiful but ambitious and manipulative Dewi Suksesi in Koma's 1991 production Suksesi (Succession), banned for its perceived reference to the sensitive political issue of presidential succession. Koma's particular performing style, its commercially oriented productions with large casts, elaborate sets, and aim of attracting a socially diverse public, connects with another vital aspect of Ratna's position within the troupe. Her role of manager of such productions, approaching sponsors, overseeing publicity, allocating funds, brings Ratna considerable power within the group and has attracted much outside attention. It was this aspect of her work that Ratna focused upon especially when speaking about her life and work over a restaurant dinner with her husband, Nano, and myself – the only time available in her busy schedule of daytime commitments and evening play rehearsals.

Ratna, of mixed Javanese and Buginese background, is the daughter of a well-known former politician. She came to theatre via involvement in Balinese dance during her high school years, practising with a group at the

---

Riantiarno's stated model for the style of his performances is that of the popular stage shows of the twenties and thirties in Indonesia, such as Dardanella, broadly appealing across different ethnic and class groups.
Taman Ismail Marzuki arts centre. She was attracted by the activities of theatre groups practicing nearby, and in 1970 joined the group Teater Kecil, headed by Arifin C. Noer. After leaving school she did a year of a secretarial course, then went to work in business. Toyota gave her a job in the sales section, where she learnt a lot about product promotion. In 1975-76 she spent a year in the United States, doing Balinese dancing in a restaurant. She loved having the opportunity to see all kinds of theatre, from big Broadway shows to off-off Broadway, and was deeply impressed by the demand for theatre and the way productions were organized and financed. She brought home many programmes with their advertisements from sponsors, without specific intent at that time, but to considerable effect later.

Through theatre she had come to know her prospective husband, an actor with Teguh Karya's Teater Indonesia: when Riantiarno started up the new group Teater Koma in 1977, she was one of the founding members. For the first production she and another woman member of the troupe had the idea of approaching their contacts in the non-theatre world and asking them to buy tickets. Friends from school who were now company directors were asked to buy tickets for their secretaries: Ratna's workmates in the Toyota company initially came to see her rather than the play. But gradually these people from the office world, who had for the most part never seen a live theatre performance and had never visited the TIM arts centre, became accustomed to the idea of theatre as something they could enjoy. The usual narrow composition of theatre audiences, limited to students and members of other theatre groups, began to open up.

Eventually Ratna developed a full promotion programme, selling series subscriptions to the public, and presenting potential sponsors with detailed proposals of options - so much for a half- or full-page advertisement in the programme, so much for a banner outside the theatre building, or to be able to give away free product samples at the door. Now restaurants and other food companies contribute in kind - providing pizza for the caste before a performance, cake for rehearsals, and so on. Meanwhile, within the troupe, Ratna is the one to whom those responsible for each aspect of the production - costumes, setting, publicity - must submit their proposed budgets, and she, in consultation with Nano, (Riantiarno's familiar name) determines how much each performer should receive from the proceeds. Ratna herself now has her own business as a consultant, organizing publicity events for firms.

In her case, Ratna agrees, experience in business certainly helped with the management of the theatre troupe. But, in the beginning, her assuming this role was not wholly a matter of choice. One important impetus was the fact that Nano was using his own money to finance productions – the money he earned from writing television scripts, for example, would be put towards the next production, whereas she felt such resources should support the needs of the household. And she believes this to be the reason
why so often the wives of playwright/directors (Putu Wijaya's present and former wives, for example, Rendra's wife Ken Zuraida) play the role of business manager of the troupe – to protect their own family finances from chaotic disruption. It is not always the case that the wife is the better manager, but very common. Nano, she says archly, is too soft – he would like to provide the cast with not only a meal but also tea and coffee and snacks each night during the performance. So Nano is a hero to troupe members, and Ratna an ogre.

Ratna talks of the problem of the conflicting claims of manager and performer. Sometimes she feels that the management role impinges too much on the creative side of her work. In the group's 1993 production of an adaptation of the Brecht play *The Good Woman of Szechuan*, she took the leading role, a part which she very much wanted to perform; but she found the experience very hard. In the group's coming production, *Lady White Snake*, an adaptation of a Chinese legend popular in low-Malay fiction earlier this century, which Nano plans to produce on a grand scale, in Peking opera style, she will not be able to take part. Because of the large amount of capital required for such a production, she will have to work full time on organizing sponsors for the show.

At the rehearsal of the play which I attended the following night, however, Ratna read the part of Lady White Snake and participated vigorously in a debate with other actors about the character qualities of various figures in the play. In the event she did not appear in this production, but clearly feels no readiness to withdraw from central acting roles or from total involvement in the performance process. As for other aspects of production, such as script-writing or directing, she has no aspirations to write, and does not contribute to the conceptualization and writing of Nano's plays. But she does take an interest in the directing process, and would like to attempt directing herself one day. Not a big production like those of Koma, something smaller – or perhaps as co-director with Nano.

Finally, departing from her own story, Ratna spoke about what she sees as a huge problem for women performers of modern theatre. The majority of female actors give up theatre activity when they get married. Frequently their husbands will not allow them to participate, or they themselves withdraw as their self-image changes to that of wife and mother. If they do keep going it is often difficult – they miss rehearsals or come along ill-prepared because of family needs. The timing and culture of theatre activity does not fit comfortably with family life.

What Ratna has achieved, it would seem, is a remarkable blending of a number of established, 'traditional' female roles, and their successful adaptation to the new milieu of cosmopolitan, capital-rich Jakarta. Wifely control of household finances is a long-established practice in Indonesian societies, supported by beliefs in women's superior capabilities with money
and their responsibility for maintaining the domestic realm. Female dominance in petty market trade and involvement in myriad forms of home-based trading is likewise accepted as normal, unremarkable. Ratna’s picture of playwright/directors’ wives taking on the monetary management of theatre groups in ‘self-defence’ against their husband’s profligacy extends the familiar stereotype of domestic financial relations into the realm of modern theatre. In conversation, a number of male troupe leaders indeed admitted to, virtually boasted of, their incompetence with money and reliance on a woman, usually their wife, to manage the group. But Ratna’s operations extend well beyond the bounds of the stereotype of wifely manager. She approaches potential sponsors, (male) company directors and managers, with glamour and charm, the allure of the ledhek/pesindhen/prima donna, not the down-to-earth toughness of wife-as-household boss. Company employees, meanwhile, as workmates past or present, are approached in terms of group solidarity and conformity, values of central importance in Javanese/Indonesian community life. Eventually, drawing on models assimilated from her contacts with the business world, Ratna begins to produce streamlined, professional sponsorship strategies: her image takes on aspects of the persona of modern business executive. At the same time Ratna remains directly and vitally engaged in the artistic dimension of Koma’s productions, playing female lead roles.

Such activities are, of course, completely dependent on Ratna’s membership of Teater Koma and her marriage to Nano as playwright/director. The style of Koma productions, large and spectacular, and Nano’s desire to create a ‘popular’ theatre, provides scope for Ratna’s entrepreneurial talents. Nano’s personality and the way he and Ratna relate are also centrally important — his easygoing openness, and unselfconscious reliance on Ratna’s skills in certain areas, such as her English-speaking ability, likewise gives space to and recognition of her contributions. As Ratna herself intimates, the fact of her marriage to the troupe leader gives legitimacy to a career as performer and theatre manager which, for another married woman, would be castigated as threatening to family stability. In the eyes of the public, nevertheless, Ratna’s success is well recognized: when I mention my interest in women in modern theatre it is her name which people most often raise. In recognition of her achievements, Ratna has been appointed as a director to the board of the Jakarta arts council, with special responsibility for programming.

During my 1995 visit, Ratna was away making a film with Teater Koma in Cirebon, Riantiarno’s home area, so I had no opportunity for a follow-up meeting. Hence the discussion moves on, with a geographical movement from the capital to Central Java, and a certain shift of focus — to the role of women performers in groups organized not as the prerogative of a single playwright/director but more collectively, with a collaborative structure and style. In Yogya and Solo I spoke to women actors from the groups...
Barbara Hatley currently regarded as most interesting and innovative in the two cities, Gandrik in Yogya and Gapit in Solo.

**Sapta and Ruli of Gandrik**

Like Teater Koma, the work of the group Gandrik is characterized by a naturalistic, popular style of performance. But whereas Koma’s model has been the extravagant spectacle of Indonesian/Malay commercial stage shows of the 1930s, with a touch of the Western musical, Gandrik adopts the informal, improvised style and simple humour of Javanese village folk theatre. In fact the group has staged a variety of types of plays since its formation in 1984, as a collective of actors from the group Dinasti coming together to perform for a district teater rakyat (‘people’s theatre’) competition. But it is the style that they developed then, straightforward, earthy, humorous, with mixed Indonesian and Javanese dialogue and a measure of social critique, which remains their trademark, and which still predominates in their performances. Organization of performances remains as before – the playwright of the group produces a script which is discussed and adapted in an exuberant, creative ‘brainstorming’ session with other members, then rehearsed under the overall control of the group’s director, with much improvisation from individual actors.

Saptaria has been a member of Gandrik since its inception, performing the main female roles, like that of the lovely, ambitious village singer, desired by both the village headman and the chief of the gods in *Sinden* (The Singer), and that of the young wife of a government official, agonized by the claims of a father from a forbidden social group in *Orde Tabung* (Test-Tube Regime). On stage, her persona is slim, attractive, stereotypically feminine, a construct and focus of male desire, yet with suggestions of a depth exceeding the confines of this image. Offstage her manner is gracious, her dress simple yet tasteful, hair in a single waist-length plait; in conversation she is warm, vivacious, and smilingly polite. In my brief contact with her, mbak Sapta had seemed to embody fulsomely the Javanese quality of *luwes*, graceful and flexible, a model of serene, competent Javanese womanhood.

Talking to her in February 1994 at her home in a housing area in the countryside south of Yogya, such impressions were confirmed, with the addition of some surprises. A striking discovery was the fact that Sapta is married to the director of the Gandrik group, with a five-year-old daughter. When I first met Gandrik in early 1987, Sapta and the director were both single, and in the intermittent contact I had had with the group since then, mention of this change of status had simply not arisen. For Sapta herself, marriage and motherhood, like so many other aspects of her life, seem to represent challenges to be responded to calmly and positively, and balanced against her commitment to the stage.

Sapta started performing theatre while still at high school. With a group of fellow students she entered a drama competition, winning the award for
best actress, and she has kept on performing ever since. She has played with a number of Yogya theatre groups as well as in radio plays, televised kethoprak broadcasts and, most recently, television movies, *cinetron*. She keeps going because of the great satisfaction she obtains from acting. This includes the challenge of attempting to enter into the consciousness of another person, and that of trying new media – working within fixed conventions of speech and gesture in kethoprak, creating one's own framework of expression in modern theatre. It is a spiritual satisfaction (*kepuasan jiwa*), she says, something for herself alone.

By day she works as an English teacher at a junior high school in the town of Muntilan, some 30 km and almost two hours by bus from her home. She has worked at this same school since first starting teaching. Her husband, who does not have a fixed daytime job, minds their child while she is away. This is an arrangement they have maintained since their daughter was born – taking turns to mind her or, when both are busy, taking her with them. Right up to the child's birth she had kept performing. It was Sapta herself who wanted to do this, not anyone else's idea – 'it was the baby speaking', Javanese would say. Indeed her daughter, Putri, has already shown acting talent, appearing in a television movie.

Sapta reports that people frequently ask how she juggles the roles of teacher, performer, and mother. Her recipe is to concentrate fully on the job she is doing at the time – never, she emphasizes, does she bring her schoolwork home. The fact that her husband is a *seniman*, an artist, helps also. Regarding negative attitudes to her involvement in theatre, she recounts that her parents were very perturbed at first at the free mixing with young men entailed in acting, but since no dire consequences eventuated they are now very happy about her success. And the students she teaches are thrilled with her fame – they gain prestige by their association with her.

To what extent does she contribute to the process of putting together a Gandrik production, gathering with other group members to work out the concept and shape of the show? Not much, she says, confirming my observation that it is the male members of the troupe who participate in pre- and post-rehearsal discussions; her involvement comes later, in rehearsal, discussing aspects of presentation of her own role. Financial administration is not her domain but that of one of the male actors. On the issue of expanding her theatrical activities, to try directing or script writing, Sapta reports that she enjoys writing, and has already scripted numerous radio plays, on themes of all types – romance, family melodrama, detective stories, comedy. She would like to try writing for Gandrik, as her fellow-actors have suggested, but is somewhat intimidated at the thought of writing for the stage, with its additional dimensions and challenges.

The other female performer in Gandrik, along with the eight male actors, is Ruli, originally from Kalimantan, wife of the lead actor and manager of the
group Butet Kertajasa. The stories of the two women reflect interestingly on one another.

Ruli learnt dance as an extracurricular activity during her high school years at a domestic science school in Banjarmasin; she then came to Java to further her studies at Bagong Kusdiarjo's performing arts school, padepokan seni, south of Yogya. She used to regard dance as a skill she could develop to assist her husband and supplement the family income after marriage. Ironically enough, at Bagong's school she met and married Butet, Bagong's son. It was Butet who asked her to perform with Gandrik, substituting for a female member who had suddenly left the group. Originally only a temporary arrangement, her participation in Gandrik's productions now seems to be ongoing. Often she plays rather feisty roles, such as that of the jealous village headman's wife in Sinden. Her friends joke that this suits her wild Kalimantan temperament; certainly her tall, rather angular build, sharp features, and large, rounded eyes fit well with such parts. Ruli still performs with Bagong's dance group and used to teach at the school, but is not doing so at present because of domestic demands. Several times Ruli mentions that she had wanted to find a job outside the home, but was persuaded against it. Pak Bagong, her father-in-law, pointed out that if she worked outside, she would have insufficient time for her children and no opportunity for dance and theatre activities. Instead she conducts a busy programme of money-making activities from home, such as cooking cakes and repacking and reselling sugar from the nearby Madukismo sugar factory. In any case, her husband provides well for herself and the children. For Butet works in public relations, and also as a free-lance journalist, in addition to his involvement in acting. Stocky, energetic, and extrovert, he might be more easily identified as a computer executive than a performer – in intriguing contrast to the quintessential image of intense, introverted artist presented by Sapta's husband, Jujuk.

By early 1995, when I met up again with Sapta, Ruli, and the Gandrik group, Ruli, to my great surprise, had a new baby; the Gandrik actors, in an expanded group with many new players, were rehearsing Butet's adaptation of the Gogol play The Inspector General. Sapta was playing the lead role in this play and in her local area's entry in the annual Yogya-region kethoprak competition.

Two married women, working within a male-defined framework – for Gandrik, despite its open, democratic operating style, constitutes something of a 'boys' club', to which women contribute in particular, defined ways – each finding her own balance between occupation, family obligation, and self-expression. For Ruli the ideological-image of devoted wife and mother is more defining and constraining, while Sapta skirts around it. Sapta seems fulfilled and secure in her acting career and her job; Ruli voices acceptance of her housewife role, but also talks of the way her feet itch when she watches others dance, and her desire to return to dance teaching. Now,
with the arrival of her third child, the opportunity of teaching again has presumably receded further into the distance. Yet this new performance, *The Inspector General*, is clearly something she is determined not to miss out on – new baby or not, with her doctor’s explicitly sought permission, she is there on stage, in a combined dancing and acting role. For Ruli, the prominence and affluence of the family into which she has married, and her husband’s professional success, serve to impose limits on her own self-actualization. Within such parameters, however, she works with spirit, energy, and imagination.

For Sapta, marriage to a seniman without formal, permanent employment has allowed her the ‘freedom’ to keep working as well as performing. Yet her income is presumably essential to support the family, so the exhaustingly long, busy days of travel, work, and other responsibilities are not really a matter of choice. Again there are strong traditional Javanese associations – with images of woman shouldering responsibilities, displaying skills and efficiency, without complaint, fanfare, or overt recognition. In early 1995 Sapta was stretched further than ever, working at her teaching job and attending daily rehearsals for two different performances, in separate locations. Yet on the night of the kethoprak competition, when she was awarded the prize as best actress, the honour of public acclaim compounding her delight in acting, Sapta’s shining eyes suggested that it had, all been worthwhile.

**Inong and Gapit in Solo**
The group Gapit in Solo is often spoken about in conjunction with Gandrik; these groups were formed at roughly the same time, in the early eighties, with a strong Javanese identity and common reference to the forms of expression of the ordinary Javanese folk. But within that framework there are important differences. Whereas Gandrik mixes Indonesian and Javanese language in a way that gives their performances local appeal but also general accessibility, Gapit scripts employ exclusively the rough, earthy Javanese of its lower-class protagonists, with no concessions to cultural nicety or geographical diversity. Gandrik plays cover a range of themes and settings, contemporary, historical, even science-fictional, sharing common elements of light-hearted, improvised humour; Gapit’s stories are all set in impoverished urban slums and focus on issues of dispossession and disempowerment, both materially and spiritually, of local communities by the tide of modernity and development. Their humour is black, satirical, and biting. Where Gandrik performances provide exuberant entertainment with some reflection on social problems, Gapit has a single-minded mission. The representation of women figures in Gapit performances fascinatingly reflects this commitment. Young, sexually attractive women, like those who play leading roles in Gandrik plays (and the vast majority of dramatic plots in theatre universally) – are not prominent in Gapit productions. Here the central female character is a middle-aged or
elderly woman, valued not for her physical beauty but for her wisdom and understanding. One recalls mbok Senik in *Leng*, trying to dissuade the young protagonist from self-destructive violence against the factory which has dispossessed him, Mbak Sepi in *Reh*, advocating the values of kethoprak theatre as a moral guide for the present day; mbah Kawit in *Thuk* (*The Well*), maintaining the neighbourhood well as a symbol of community harmony. I had much admired the artistry of the young woman performing these roles, with hunched back and blacked-out teeth, wondering from what resources, what models she reproduced so convincingly on stage the persona of a Javanese woman three times her age. I was delighted to have the opportunity to ask her this and other questions at a meeting at the home of Gapit’s playwright/director, Bambang Kenthut, and his older brother, Mas Lis, an official at the Solo cultural centre and mentor to the Gapit group.

Inong (originally a pet name, now her usual appellation) is fresh-faced and simply dressed, graceful of movement, in keeping, one might conjecture, with her background — rural childhood followed by education in secondary and tertiary performing arts institutes in Solo. Now she works at the cultural centre (as do several other members of Gapit and other Solo theatre groups), as an assistant to Mas Lis in dance technique. She starts speaking immediately about what draws her to Gapit. She had performed with a few theatre groups during her student years, but since joining Gapit in 1987 has experienced a satisfaction not found elsewhere, a sense of real fulfilment and belonging. Two aspects of Gapit’s practice seem to be involved here — the family-like structure of the group, and the content of their performances.

Bambang Kenthut, who is present on and off as we talk, ruefully describes the organization of the group as *kerukunan*, ‘excessively group-oriented’. For there are 55 members of Gapit, including 30 players in the gamelan orchestra; they all take part in each Gapit performance, even those staged in other cities. Incoming money is split equally between all members, himself included, so no one receives more than *uang bensin* ‘petrol money’ — ‘honorarium’ is too grand a term. And in planning performances it is hard to find a time which suits all members. Yet Inong reports that there is also a real sense of family among group members, a feeling of mutual concern and support. Both Bambang as director, and crucially Mas Lis as the senior member of the group, help create this atmosphere. She, along with other group members, feels she has found her true family.

Inong’s personal family background is unusual, in that she was ‘loaned’ to her grandmother to rear, from the time she was three or four till she reached junior high school. From her grandmother she learnt Javanese poetry and singing, refined Javanese language, and also true Javanese respect for one’s elders. She feels privileged to have had this experience, since parents do not bring up their children this way today — they act more like friends to their offspring than respected, wise elders, and do not have...
the time to teach them to be true Javanese. The way she was taught about the world, by subtle allusion rather than a barrage of direct information, honed her powers of observation and deduction in a way which today's educational methods do not do.

Gapit's depiction of contemporary life is informed by Javanese values in a way which Inong can identify with, where she can 'marry my interpretation with that of the director'. While many groups wish to represent the problems of the little people, only Gapit does so convincingly, with a depth and maturity of perspective. Inong confides to me with great intensity that she sees that maturity, that vision, as stemming from the playwright's mother, with whom he is very close. She herself feels a *kedamaian*, a sense of peace and order, in Gapit's plays, coming from Bambang's mother, whom she greatly admires. Bambang himself confirms this closeness to his mother. Questioned about the recurrence in his plays of the figure of a wise older woman, he observes that in his view women are the stronger figures in Javanese everyday life. Inong, in playing these parts, draws amply on the example of her grandmother, and other relatives and neighbours – for mbah Kawit in *Thuk*, for example, she used the model of a particular neighbour in her home village.

In performing these roles Inong experiences a sense of personal satisfaction and of contributing to a social mission. 'I can do something for myself and for the society.' It is important, she says, that she and her fellow actors representing the poor and dispossessed are in reality not from that social group. They can thereby depict these people's experience with a broader knowledge of its context, bear a more effective witness to the world.

While thus distinguishing herself from the very poor and marginalized, she identifies her Javanese values as those of the ordinary people, not the aristocracy. It is nobility who have developed notions of female refinement and constraint. Women of her class are not versed in or concerned about matters of etiquette and style, and their relationships with their men are more egalitarian. Parental qualms about girls' involvement in theatre are likewise dismissed as a preoccupation of middle-class people, worried about their family's social image. The issue of mixing between young people of opposite sexes in theatre groups is simply a matter of trust – if you give children trust they will honour it in their behaviour.

Not all aspects, however, of her identity as a Javanese woman are unproblematic. She has been educated not to be straightforward, to keep silent in the Javanese way when she is angry or troubled, whereas she would like to be able to speak out frankly about her feelings. A further suggestion of dissatisfaction emerges when I ask whether Inong has aspirations to write or direct plays. She used to write Javanese poetry, *tembang*. Now, however, she lacks the energy, the idealism, the expectant longing for a wondrous, unknown future which inspired her when she was younger, before she had a boyfriend (*berpacaran*). 'I don't like this boy-
friend business,' she declares. This is her only reference to her boyfriend of some years, a fellow member of the Gapit group; when others mention him she keeps silent.

In conversation again in early 1995, Inong reports a sense of social isolation since her former university friends graduated and moved away. She finds it difficult to mix with people, in part because of a disjuncture between her own values and current social trends, the rampant materialism and breaking down of old patterns of social relationship. I try to ask subtly about the place of marriage in this picture, for at the age of thirty, high time for marriage for a Javanese woman, her education complete, with a boyfriend of long-standing, marriage is very much the expected next step. But in keeping with her own self-image as lacking in openness, Inong remains evasive. She will marry 'soon', she says, smiling, and will be drawn out no further.

Inong is unique among the women actors with whom I spoke in her explicit commitment to the 'mission' of the group with which she performs. She states great satisfaction in skilfully embodying and conveying to the world the social situation and cultural perspectives of the Javanese underclass. There is no sense of a compartmentalized, somewhat marginalized female contribution to the production; Inong is very much at the centre. Facilitating her involvement is the space afforded within the group both to Inong herself and to the characters she plays. Bambang Kenthut mentions that he initially sought her out, realizing from casual conversation and observation how sympathetically she would fit within the group: now he sometimes defers to her on performance details, acknowledging that she is 'more Javanese' than he. The female characters she performs, meanwhile, fulfil an established image of lower-class village women as strong, capable survivors. Bambang's extension of this image into wise spokesperson for the perspectives of the marginalized, while reputedly shaped by the influence of his own mother, is also broadly reminiscent of an aspect of female characterization in some recent works of Indonesian literature. In social critique of their society, the novelists Pramudya Ananta Tur and Mangunwijaya employ Javanese women figures, such as Nyai Ontosoroh in Pramudya's *Bumi Manusia* and the title character in Mangunwijaya's *Roro Mendut*, as symbols of resistance to dominant political authority. But where these larger-than-life literary characters seem clearly to be the product of a male consciousness, totally absent, for example, from fiction by women authors,¹⁴ Gapit's 'wise women' are more realistically drawn, familiar figures, and constitute a strong focus of identification for Inong, as a woman performer. There are associations with her revered grandmother and childhood neighbours, as well as with Bambang Kenthut's mother: her

---

¹⁴ Such arguments are set out more fully in Hatley (forthcoming)
own strong endorsement of her Javanese upbringing finds expression in the values and expressive style of these characters. Where in other troupes the physical demeanour of female performers fits closely with, and is perhaps partly constructed by, their stage roles, in Inong's case the connection between actor and role is moral and spiritual.

Yet however fulfilled Inong feels on stage in the roles of mbok Sepi and mbah Kawit, she cannot live their lives — her social place is very different. The free imaginings of the wide-eyed, rural child are far behind her, while the respected autonomy of wise old grandmother is a long way in the future. Her present is that of a young urban woman in a modern world whose values she feels at odds with, facing the pressures and responsibilities of impending marriage.

Inong's example reflects very interestingly on the common identification of women in contemporary Indonesian gender ideology as embodiments and transmitters of traditional cultural values. The dominant interpretation of this conjunction, constructing women in terms of supposedly 'traditional', 'natural' wife and mother roles, fits within a context of authoritarian, male-dominated political control. But the female image that Inong espouses through her Gapit roles is not that of supportive, nurturing wife and mother but of strong, guiding old grandmother, dispensing traditionally based wisdom which often confronts rather than supports the status quo. Interestingly, the same image appears, with the same implication, albeit less strongly emphasized, in the discourse of another of the female performers.

**Putri Bali**

Putri, a Balinese actor, television star, public speaker and compere whom I interviewed at the end of my stay, projects a sophisticated, relaxed charm. In her early thirties, elegantly though casually dressed, her onstage persona most often that of beautiful, dignified but sometimes coldly scheming royal lady, Putri is strongly reminiscent of Ratna Riantiarno. Like Ratna she works closely with her personal and professional partner, Kadek Suardana, the leader of the theatre group with which she performs. Like Ratna she has worked in business management and has wide social contacts. But for Putri the different aspects of her life have not yet dovetailed quite in the way they seem to have done for Ratna.

Putri began performing dance while in primary school, an interest she maintained until the late 1980s. In junior high school she joined a children's theatre group, which later went on to produce 'classic' dramas based on wayang stories, broadcast twice monthly on television. At senior high school Putri and a number of friends formed a modern theatre group. But she remained most active in television, frequently participating in advertisements and government educational slots as well as dramas. So familiar was her appearance in a family planning message that people would sometimes stop her in the street to ask contraceptive advice.
Engagements as 'master of ceremonies' at events such as weddings helped support her through a degree in management at Udayana University; another interest was speechmaking competitions, trophies for which line her bedroom.

In 1988 she had the chance to join Sanggar Putih, a theatre group she admired for its serious, professional approach, playing Lady Macbeth in Kadek’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth to a Balinese setting. Now her major performance commitment is to Sanggar Putih. But as her background has been mostly in television, hurriedly learning and reproducing scripts, she feels untried as an actor, unsure of her abilities. She would love to have the opportunity to perform with the big groups in Jakarta. For modern theatre activity in Bali is very limited, with few serious performers. Among women actors, theatre is regarded as a youthful hobby, to be given up at the age of about twenty-five, in favour of a concentration on marriage, work, and children. She herself performs on stage only rarely. Sanggar Putih generally stages a play only once every two years, because of the difficulty of financing productions.

The relatively low level of interest in and support for nontraditional arts in Bali has so far impeded the fulfilment of another dream – that of becoming a professional organizer/manager of performance events.

Putri has written a few scripts for television. One of these, planned as a children’s serial, is named after Dadong Dauh, a story-telling grandmother figure from Balinese folklore. A schoolgirl from a poor family works as a carrier at the market to earn money for dance lessons, with no time to visit Dadong Dauh with her friends to hear the old lady’s stories. But under the strain of such heavy work the girl collapses. Dadong Dauh shows her an easier and more pleasant way of obtaining money, by making and selling household offerings, working together with her friends as they listen to Dadong Dauh’s tales. The simple plot works on a number of levels – conveying nostalgic recognition of a figure from Balinese tradition, reminding parents of their responsibility to guide their children (in contrast to the mother of the young girl in the story, who is too harassed and busy to do so), suggesting by analogy that Balinese cultural practice, like the making of offerings in the story, may hold answers to many contemporary social problems. In general Putri is using the figure of the wise grandmother (an image particularly evocative for her because of her close childhood relationship with an elderly aunt) and her ‘traditional’ advice as a symbol of a cultural continuity which is being ignored by contemporary Balinese in their drive to be modern.

One of the contemporary social developments of which Putri is critical is the fact that it has become almost mandatory for women to berkarier, to have a career, as well as run a household. Wives work simply to follow the fashion, the modern trend. She herself feels that women should be free to choose whether to work outside the home or not. At the same time she expresses great pride in figures such as Ratna Riantiarno, Ratna Sarumpaet,
and Renny Djajusman (Putu Wijaya's former wife, now a theatrical manager and entrepreneur), women who have achieved great things on their own. Women can in fact do more than men, given the right opportunities.

For Putri herself, such opportunities have not yet quite materialized. She has had success and acclaim, but not yet fulfilment in the fields to which she aspires. In another setting one can easily imagine her in a Ratna Riantiarno role, as star actress and gracious and efficient theatre manager. Her personal circumstances, however, and the limitations of the modern theatre scene in Bali provide insufficient scope. Looking admiringly to the models of women performers who have achieved success in the fast-changing, sophisticated world of Jakarta, Putri at the same time identifies, like Inong, with a traditional female image as a symbol of cultural continuity and strength. During 1994 Putri in fact did get the chance to perform with the big names of Jakarta theatre, in a television movie produced and directed by fellow-Balinese Putu Wijaya. Moreover, she has been invited by Putu to make a series of television programmes in 1995, spending several months at a time in the capital. Her big break has come, perhaps. Yet with the opportunity arise dilemmas and contradictions - the danger of losing touch with the Balinese environment, being engulfed by the very 'modernity' Putri criticizes; of living separately from her partner or drawing him into the maelstrom of Jakarta and away from his vital work in Bali.

A move from Bali to Jakarta is in fact traced out here in our narrative, with a shift of focus back to the capital and the theatre activities and life experiences of Ratna Sarumpaet. Ratna provides a unique example of an Indonesian woman playwright and director as well as performer, with her own theatre group and rehearsal space. Divorced over ten years ago, her life seems free of the kind of restrictions imposing boundaries on the lives of the other women performers. Yet issues of female identity and marital relationship have surely shaped Ratna's life and work in profound ways.

Ratna is tall, striking, strong-featured, ethnic Batak, of prominent family background - both father and mother were politicians of the Christian party. She recounts a sudden, dramatic entry into the world of performance, via a 1970 production by Rendra of the Muslim work Kasidah Barzanji. Entranced, she dropped her final year of architecture studies, joined Rendra's group, and performed with them for nine months. Then she left, with the idea of founding her own group, but soon fell in love and married. Her husband first forbade her to act, but after several years encouraged her to establish a theatre group and financed its operations. She staged two productions, Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet, herself playing the role of Hamlet. Then came the blow of discovery of infidelity of her husband; his support for Ratna's theatre work, it seemed, had been motivated by guilt. In her disappointment, Ratna withdrew from live acting after 1976 to concentrate on television script-writing and directing.
Ratna Sarumpaet giving instruction to members of her theatre group, at a workshop in her home on script writing.
In 1987, after two years of battling in the Islamic courts, Ratna achieved a divorce, bringing to an end her troubled marriage, in order, she says, to spare her four children involvement in further conflict. She reports very close relationships with her children – ‘I am a mother first, then a performer.’ She revived her theatre group and returned to the stage. Now she holds regular training sessions at her home in acting and script-writing; other theatre people also gather occasionally in her rehearsal studio for discussions and small performances. Recent productions by her group Merah Satu Panggung include an adaptation of the Greek legend Antigone to a Batak setting, and most recently, in September 1994, a play based on the story of Marsinah, a woman worker sexually mutilated, tortured, and killed in mid-1993 after she had led a protest about factory conditions.

Ratna, who played the part of the Marsinah figure in the play, speaks passionately of her obsession by Marsinah’s story, bringing together her own long-term concerns with the oppression of women and with social injustice more generally. These are issues she sees as integrally linked, inasmuch as Indonesia’s authoritarian, hierarchical socio-political system, historically and in the present day, is male-created and male-dominated, encoding and celebrating male values. Ratna herself feels a strong personal identification with Marsinah through the suffering and violence of her own marriage – ‘I am Marsinah,’ she frequently states. The play, entitled Nyanyian dari Bawah Tanah, ‘Songs from Underground’, is set after Marsinah’s death, and consists chiefly of debates between a character suggestive of Marsinah, a female judge, and several male power-holders. Here ‘Marsinah’ challenges these latter figures, in long, fiery speeches, for their participation in the corrupt, unjust system which has brought about her own horrible death and the ongoing oppression of the Indonesian masses.

Involvement in this production has strengthened her political awareness and commitment, Ratna reports. She has actively supported the case of the journalists affected by the press bannings of mid-1994, and plans a possible new play inspired by cases of land dispossession in Central Java and North Sumatra.

Ratna stands out from the women performers discussed so far not only in the range of her theatre activities and her controlling position within her group, but also in her explicitly stated concern with oppression of women. From this perspective her work is sometimes constructed as ‘feminist’, but Ratna herself is wary of the label and critical of feminist acquaintances for their reportedly exclusivist attitudes and rejection of marriage. She also reacts against the suggestion that she might work through theatre towards improving conditions for women – the task is too great and social change does not come about in that way. Likewise, working with other women, as some have suggested, would be difficult – she is personally close to several
women actors, but does not feel intellectually and artistically at one with them. Her contribution to women, she hopes, lies in the example she provides of the possibilities of female achievement.

From observation of Ratna’s life and work, the suggestion occurs that one factor contributing to a sense of distance between this remarkably strong woman performer and director and other women might be Ratna’s adoption, in her plays and her troupe direction, of dominant, male-defined models. Her Marsinah figure challenges her opponents through formal language and rational argument in the male-identified mode of social and political debate; male power-holders wilt before the sustained logic and eloquence not of the historical, factory worker Marsinah, but of Ratna herself. Note the striking contrasts here with work of other women performers – the cheeky dance movements and earthy repartee of the actual female factory workers as directed by Gesti, and the fragmented traditional sayings quoted by the old lower-class women played by Inong. In the field of direction, meanwhile, Ratna is tough and authoritarian, as commanding as any male.

Acceptance into the male-centred world of modern theatre may have indeed required in Ratna’s experience conformity to dominant modes. As a woman director, perhaps she felt it necessary to exert her authority particularly strongly. In recent years Ratna seems to have won her long battle for recognition as a serious artist, for attention from critics and inclusion in discussions and other events. Yet, ironically, her very success in engaging the male system in its own terms seems to set her somewhat apart from other women performers, a focus of their admiration rather than collaboration.

Some conclusions

In many ways the above accounts confirm a picture of the situation of women in modern Indonesian theatre as one of limitation and constraint. Women playwrights and directors are almost nonexistent; even in those groups where the performance is constructed through group discussion and improvisation, rather than by a single organizing vision, women seem to take little part in these processes of conceptualization and innovation. As always, the woman’s task is more practical and circumscribed – to play out female roles within a male-devised theatrical project, and within a broader framework of long-established stereotypes of womanly nature. Additionally, women actors in modern theatre, more educated and middle-class than performers of traditional theatre, are seen to be more constrained by ideological prescriptions concerning women’s roles within the family. For all the performers interviewed, marital and family relations shape their lives in centrally important ways. For the single Inong, marriage is the great unspoken issue overshadowing and bounding her future. For Ratna Sarumpaet, her unhappy former marriage has provided both material capital for her performances and personal experience of gender oppression.
Women in Contemporary Indonesian Theatre 599

fueling her work; in divorce, motherhood rather than marriage is cited as her central, defining responsibility.

As originally surmised, there is the impression that the experience of a lead actress in a troupe dominated by her playwright/director husband can be one of suffocating control and dependence. On the other hand, marriage to the troupe leader can provide considerable power and opportunity to develop one’s skills, as Ratna Riantiarno’s example amply illustrates. Similarly, the two Central Javanese groups, Gandrik and Gapit, both with an open, ‘democratic’ structure and strong group bonds, nevertheless provide a somewhat different ambience for women, both as dramatic characters and as performers. An important determining factor is the performance style and approach of the group – emphasizing subjective (male) creativity or drawing on shared cultural paradigms, aiming to entertain or educate. Once again, women performers are not in a position to construct these frameworks; their role is to respond to the opportunities available.

It is here, in the nature and variety of such responses, that the richness of these women’s contributions lies. For five of the seven women discussed, established, ‘traditional’ female images provide the vocabulary for this process. Yet the varied nature of these images – woman as alluring beauty, supportive wife and partner, hard-headed business manager, wise grandmother, font of cultural knowledge and moral guidance – and the different ways these are interpreted and combined, suggests an important measure of choice and control. Rather than simply limiting and prescribing female identity, these images seem to provide material for innovative strategies of expression. Where traditional women performers embody a particular, defined female model, powerful in its allure and ascribed cultural meaning, modern actors have no such inherent status – they cannot lay claim to the compelling power of the ledhek. But neither are they confined by a single female identity – instead they can shift between images, or make use of several.

Those actors whose stage characterizations and offstage personae contain least traditional reference, Gesti and Ratna Sarumpaet, seem thereby most free to violate established limits of expression in portraying female experience. Gesti’s own performances and the show she directs each project an impressive female assertiveness. Ratna’s Marsinah figure engages in a direct, unrestrained outpouring of anger in her attack on the male political system. One wonders, however, about audience reception of these characterizations. Might it be that the critical perspectives of Gapit’s older women figures, for example, are read by audiences as more effective, legitimate expressions of ‘womanly strength’? Indeed, the invocation by two of the women performers of the image of wise older woman as spokesperson of resistance to dominant contemporary trends provides an intriguing new interpretation of the notion of woman-as-embodiment-of-tradition. Its potential for expression of female perspectives is more
respected, albeit more finite, than the uncharted freedom of new, international performing styles. Yet to what extent can it be a source of personal identification for young women such as Inong, whose social reality is very different?

Clearly my data are very preliminary, and provide no answers to the questions they raise. The implications for models of female identity in Indonesian society more broadly, beyond the theatre world, are still embryonic. But through the telling of these women's stories I hope I have been able to convey something of the richness and variety of their contribution to contemporary theatre performance, and the sense of fluid, dynamic potential for the future.

REFERENCES


Hatley, Barbara, 1985, _Kethoprak; Performance and social meaning in a Javanese popular theatre form_. [PhD thesis, University of Sydney.]


–, forthcoming, 'Nation, "tradition" and constructions of the feminine in Modern Indonesian literature', in: B. Martin-Schiller and J. Schiller (eds), _Re-imagining Indonesia; Cultural politics and political culture_, Ohio University Press.

Hughes-Freeland, Felicia, 1990, 'Tayuban; Culture on the edge', _Indonesia Circle_ 52:39.


Mulvey, Laura, 1975, 'Visual pleasure and the narrative cinema', _Screen_ 16 (3).


Widodo, Amrih, 1995, 'The stages of the state; Arts of the people and rites of hegemonization', *Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs* 29.