Review essays

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Performance and political change in Indonesia

Michael H. Bodden, *Resistance on the national stage: Theater and politics in late New Order Indonesia*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010, x + 391 pp. [Ohio University Research in International Studies Southeast Asia Series 123.] ISBN 9780896802759. Price: USD 31.96 (paperback).

Barbara Hatley, *Javanese performances on an Indonesian stage: Contesting culture, embracing change*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2008, xix + 336 pp. [Southeast Asian Publication Series in association with the Asian Studies Association of Australia.] ISBN 978997169410. Price: USD 32.00 (paperback).

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Two recent publications focus on theatrical performance in Indonesia during the New Order. While some of the material covered overlaps, the two books are very different in their approach. Read together, they complement each other, answering and raising questions more broadly about the role of performance in social and political life in Indonesia.

Michael Bodden's book examines the period 1985-1998, the 'late New Order', when state intervention in Indonesian theatre became more overt, and clashes with authority more frequent. His choice of performance to explore is text-based theatre in Indonesian and modelled on Western dramatic forms, which he calls 'modern theater' or 'modern national theater', and work that, in both content and practice, set out to critique, subvert and resist the authoritarianism and oppressive policies of the Soeharto regime. He argues that this theatre of resistance was integral to the resistance movement that eventually brought down the regime itself.

Bodden's choice of theatre to examine shows different aspects of this resistance. He takes the work of Yogyakarta-based Emha Ainun Nadjib and the Sanggar Shahaluddin in the mid 1980s as an example of Indonesian Islamic theatre and its resistance to state denial of Islamic identity, including the state's imposition of restrictions on females wearing the veil, or *jilbab*. A chapter on avant-garde urban theatre focusses on the Jakarta-based groups Teater Sae and Teater Kubur and their performances that challenged the dominant narratives of development and nation by presenting the pain of urban alienation. The crisis of language in the late New Order is discussed in a chapter about the work of the Bandung group Teater Payung Hitam and its 'theatre of pain' that showed the bleeding of meaning from language in New Orderspeak. By the early 1990s, New Order development ideology had run wild with greed, violence and corruption, and in response, workers' theatre and theatre about workers proliferated. A long chapter explores the activities of some of these groups, including Ratna Sarumpaet's *Satu Merah Panggung*; Teater Buruh Indonesia (TBI); Teater Aneka Buruh, ABU: Sanggar Pabrik; Teater Buruh (TABUR) Teater Detik, and the network Budaya Buruh Tangerang (BUBUTAN). Bodden here documents and argues well: '[w]orkers theater and theater about workers in 1990s Indonesia provide clear examples of the complex manner in which an alliance of resistance to the New Order state's labor policies and its policing of cultural activity was being constructed through and around theater' (p. 269). Finally, a chapter that focusses on Teater Koma's performance of political satire in the short-lived so-called 'era of openness' presents the maze of rules and regulatory structures that comprised the New Order's system of censorship. While some of these (like permits for performances and licenses for performers) actually pre-date the New Order, Bodden's documentation of the procedure for censorship shows how the New Order tied itself in knots in its byzantine authoritarianism, but also how the complication of the system with its maze of agencies (military, judiciary, police, security, and the state cultural bodies) also provided ways for artists to work around and even to challenge it.

The last part of Bodden's book brings these aspects of theatre and resistance together, showing how links were forged between these various groups and activities in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1998, the established cultural community, worker groups and activists came together to confront a common enemy, the power of the New Order, putting aside rivalries between them or within the various groups. This solidarity and resistance was part of a larger social process, but, Bodden argues, 'all of these groups contributed to a general social critique of the New Order that, for their specific and at times overlapping constituencies, helped construct, support, and sustain resistance to the Soeharto regime and contributed to its eventual overthrow in May 1998' (p. 312).

Barbara Hatley's book does not set out to discuss the New Order as such, nor

specifically performances of 'resistance'. Her concern is stage performances in central Java from the 1970s through to the post New Order period, and she examines how performances that are 'Javanese' in their location, performers, use of stories, repertoire, iconography, or language (Javanese, or Javanese-inflected Indonesian), or those that question the Javanese frame itself, fare during a time of rapid social transformation. The performances Hatley studies are rooted in a place; not 'Java' in fact, but primarily the special region of Yogyakarta in central Java (with a few performances from nearby Solo included). While her geographical focus is narrower than Bodden's (whose choice of modern 'Indonesian' theatre is in fact limited to groups based in Java, namely Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta) her scope is broader in timeframe and performance type. Hatley sets out to make sense of the dazzling array of performance she has documented over more than thirty years, questioning what it says about (and for) a community in a time of dramatic change. This change includes the relentless implementation of New Order authoritarianism and resistance to it, but also encompasses globalization, the increased commodification of art, and the enormous changes in media and communications that began in the mid-1990s, before the New Order fell, and have continued at an astonishing pace ever since.

Hatley's book differs from Bodden's also in that she is firmly central to her story. She herself has witnessed these changes, and keeps at the forefront of her account her place as spectator revelling in the performances she sees. (Anyone who, like myself, has tried to keep up with her rushing from one performance to another in one night can attest to her energy and enthusiasm). Her long familiarity with the different groups and individuals she discusses allows her to trace, with great insight, the way they have coped with changing circumstances. Here she recounts her early unparalleled research on *ketoprak* in the 1970s. This covers the halting formation of new companies following the trauma of the 1965 coup and the arrests and killings of performers in groups associated with real or perceived LEKRA affiliation, and the resurgence of *ketoprak* as popular theatre and its reconnection with social and political conditions, including the expression of various political perspectives. She then compares this picture of *ketoprak* in the 1970s with the situation in subsequent visits to Yogyakarta, tracing the trials and tribulations of the groups and performers as they are made to suffer Government 'upgrading' sessions to bring their performance closer to state ideology, the decline in audiences for 'traditional' live *ketoprak* performance in the early 1980s, the boom when *ketoprak* 'crossed' into theatre and television in the 1990s, and the slump from 1998 when sponsorship dried up after the 1997 financial crash and solidarity between performers evaporated after the fall of the Soeharto regime.

From *ketoprak*, the book moves into the world of 'teater', or Western-style theatre practice, which also interacts with Javanese theatrical idioms. The

two worlds cross-fertilize. Hatley's discussion of Rendra's Bengkel Theatre in Yogyakarta in the 1970s and the early work of Yogyakarta-based theatre group Dinasti from 1977-1985 is an excellent background to Bodden's analysis of theatre of resistance after 1985. Here we see theatre, in a university town, emerging as a forum for debate and expression when university campuses were 'depoliticized' in 1978, and when performance bannings began. We also see the broader local context for the emergence of groups both Bodden and Hatley discuss, such as Emha Ainun Nadjib (a former Dinasti member) with the Sanggar Shahaluddin and their Islamic theatre, and Fred Wibowo's community-oriented theatre, Teater Arena.

By the time we get to the 1990s, Hatley's book, like Bodden's, is covering a time of increased political repression and intensified alliance among theatre people against it. Hatley concurs with Bodden that theatre was integral to resistance towards the New Order, seeing the resignation of Soeharto in May 1998 as 'the climactic success for the combined theatrical and political movement of the late 1990s' (p. 158). However, she sees this resistance as a more broad-based performance phenomenon, not only the concern of serious 'teater', but also found in *ketoprak*, comedy, mime, and even the street theatre of demonstrations. And at the same time, the celebratory performance life of Javanese in Yogyakarta – Independence Day celebrations, circumcisions, weddings, festivals and *kampung* competitions continued. Put together, and in the context of increased social unrest, Hatley argues that performance activities in Yogyakarta 'defus[ed] tensions and focus[ed] common feeling' (p. 187). Resistance was also forged and expressed in familiar vernacular and, particularly, humour.

When she moves to the post 1998 period, Hatley's writing is less focussed – perhaps because of the cacaphony of voices she is dealing with, but also because the closer her writing moves to the present, the less time she has had for reflection, and the more we are presented with accounts of performances. The chapter on 'Celebrating Yogyakarta Identity', for instance, includes performance from Solo, and the specifically 'Yogyakarta' aspect to the 'sense of identity' is not clear. A sharper comparison of the two places might have clarified her thinking on 'Yogyakarta identity'. As it is, the array of post New Order performance activity, like Independence Day celebrations, often leads to weak conclusions, as when she writes, 'some interesting expressions of local skills, traditions and identity were taking place' (p. 229), where one senses her trying to make sense of it all. But given her dexterity in handling earlier periods, readers can look forward to deeper reflection in future writing.

Together, the two books offer interesting points of comparison and raise questions. For instance, while Bodden presents 'modern' Indonesian theatre as the core of resistance and battleground for censorship, Hatley reminds us that at least in the early New Order it was 'traditional' non-scripted

performance – popular theatre – that was the main target of state control. This was where the legacy of theatre's link to politics was considered at once threatening, and potentially useful if harnessed to New Order ideology. As Hatley writes, '[m]eanwhile, modern national cultural forms – Indonesian language literature and theatre, film, popular music, painting and sculpture – received less attention. Such art was subject to strict censorship of potentially subversive content but not to efforts to shape its content or form' (p. 117). This is also one of the few times in either book where other art forms are drawn into the discussion. Yet this is a most important point to explore – namely the role of live performance in Indonesia in both creating and maintaining 'resistance' to authoritarianism, and also in fostering a sense of community. What was it about live performance during the last four decades of the twentieth century in Indonesia (Java/Yogyakarta) that made links with activism so fluid? Was live performance just a particularly vital form at that historical period, a period now irrevocably gone? Hatley has begun to grapple with the changed situation of the early twenty-first century, with live performance in the globalized, commodified, thoroughly mediatized time that coincides with post New Order. Bodden does not yet pursue the post 1998 activities of the theatre groups he discusses. Readers may look forward to both his and Hatley's further thoughts on theatre, society and politics. For instance: is theatre any longer a significant arena for debate, expression and resistance? Would workers now act – or others act about them – in theatrical mode, or would they now use Twitter, or post videos on YouTube? Would they now even think of their audiences being local – which live performance expects? Where is creative resistance to new authoritarianism – such as political Islam – now taking place, and who is it performing to?

Finally, a brief note about readability and difficulties in writing about performance. Both books would have greatly benefitted by an accompanying DVD of extracts of some performances they discuss, or even by providing links to where they might be found on the web (copyright clearance is clearly problematic, but short extracts could surely be negotiated?). In terms of readability, Hatley's book wins because of its close attention to audiences – the reader gets a vivid sense of context, of what it actually felt like to be there. It is great fun to read. Bodden's is more distant, more a discussion about what was happening on the stage. There is less sense of the performances as live events (perhaps because his discussion is often based on viewing DVDs of the performances). This sense of distance is further emphasized when Bodden slips into unqualified generic categorization, as with phrases like 'New Order theatrical taste', 'middle class theater with its dominant aesthetic ideology', 'from a middle-class high-art perspective', 'middle-class theater', and the use of the term 'middle class' in general (pp. 289, 271, 253, 242). In contrast, Hatley's telling is more nuanced and self-aware. Both books at times get bogged down in

lengthy plot summaries, or blow-by-blow accounts of 'what happened'. This is particularly true of Bodden's book, where plot summaries are very detailed and could have been radically edited, but also true of Hatley's recounting of post 1998 events. Bodden's book also suffers from the publisher's in-text referencing style. As his sources are predominantly Indonesian newspapers, the text is constantly visually interrupted by long in-text references, making it difficult to read. Future writing on performance might actually benefit from current changes in publishing – given the advances in on-line publishing – with links to plot summaries or to photographs and video clips of performances discussed, so that the analytical text can be read more freely. One hopes so, because, as these books show, thinking about performance is integral to understanding Indonesia.