Performance in Central Java, in particular the court cities of Yogyakarta and Solo, where I have been following theatre developments over the years, illustrates especially clearly the phenomenon referred to in the introduction to this volume – the shift from a polarity of state domination and resistance during the long New Order years to a more diverse, dispersed and locally-focused contemporary performance scene. The rich court traditions, village performance genres and more recently-developed popular theatre cultivated in Yogyakarta and Solo provided plentiful material for government bodies to display their power and authority and inculcate models of ideal Indonesian citizenship. Meanwhile the same rich store of dramatic material could be interpreted satirically to critique state ideology and policy, in particular by the modern theatre groups supported by the big, politicized student population of Yogyakarta. Given the importance of performance as a medium of political expression and contest during New Order times, the big changes in politics and society which have occurred since the regime ended in 1998 seem likely to have had a significant impact on this social role. Describing contemporary performance, and making some suggestions about how it reflects on and connects with its new social and political environment, is the focus of this chapter.

Resistance to the state through critical engagement with Javanese performance tradition provided a shared idiom among modern theatre groups during the Suharto era, and attracted enthusiastic support from politically-critical audience members. The movement had begun with Rendra and his Bengkel theatre group in Yogyakarta in the 1970s. Rendra’s epic dramas about flawed, self-seeking kings resonated evocatively with the angry disillusionment with the New Order regime expressed in the campus protests of 1977–1978. When Rendra was banned from performing for 8 years, the group Teater Dinasti took on the mantle of Teater Bengkel in Yogyakarta, and continued to stage historical dramas satirizing powerholders. In the late 1980s the group Gandrik came to the fore, introducing a new theatrical style influenced by folk theatre models, involving contemporary settings, straightforward dialogue, critical humour

1 For reflections on performance in Yogyakarta since the 1970s see Hatley (2008).
and simple musical accompaniment. Other groups such as Teater Arena developed this style into *teater rakyat*, a populist theatre approach used with villagers and NGO workers in programs of social transformation. In Solo the group Gapit performed plays in Javanese language set in lower class neighbourhoods where residents have been dispossessed and bypassed by New Order development.

As political disaffection widened in the last months of the regime, the resistant role of theatre and its links with societal opposition strengthened further. Performers staged street theatre in protest marches, the actor Butet Kertarejasa gave speeches imitating Suharto, and theatre groups warmed up the crowd for the appearance of the Yogyakarta sultan at the biggest show of all, the one million strong rally for peaceful reform held on the 20 May 1998, the day before Suharto resigned. After the euphoria of Reformasi, however, as the new political conditions and structures of the regional autonomy era became entrenched, the former social connections of theatre dissipated. Some of the major groups from the 1980s and 1990s still perform occasionally, with the ongoing aim of critiquing contemporary political conditions. Gandrik has staged productions about the hypocrisy of the 2008 Anti-Pornography law and exposing the absurdities of ubiquitous corruption; Gapit has reformed under a new name, Lungid, mostly re-presenting classic Gapit plays. Their productions still attract enthusiastic audience support. Yet the sense of ‘organic’ connection with contemporary conditions, the links with oppositionist social groups and role of voicing suppressed political critique are no longer present. Meanwhile a new kind of performance scene has developed, engaging the energies of young people and capturing media attention – diverse, celebratory and participatory, locally-based yet shaped by global cultures and widely publicized through the new electronic media.

There seems to be a clear resonance between these theatrical practices and their social/political context – connection with the shift of administrative control to the local level under regional autonomy, prioritizing local issues; with democratising ideology and its emphasis on public participation; with the flourishing of global influences and networks in the post-1998 expansion of the media. This chapter identifies some common features of contemporary performance and the discourse surrounding it – how practitioners define the aims of their work and commentators describe it. On this basis some suggestions are made about how performance seems to be reflecting popular responses to the changed social-political environment and what kind of contributions it makes. Then three performer/creator/directors, key participants in the contemporary performance scene, talk about their work and give a sense of the issues they see as important.