CHAPTER 7

The Sundanese-language Drama Festival
Celebrating Local Cultural Identity in West Java

Neneng Lahpan and Wawan Sofwan

The stage erupts in a cacophony of voices and movement, as children run around setting up musical instruments in full view of the audience. There are drums of various sizes, a set of large suspended gongs as well as a few smaller horizontal gongs and even a guitar. The uproar is all designed to make the performance space look like a hive of activity. Unlike the usual practice of setting up the stage before the performance begins, the sight of the children organizing the props here functions as the play’s opening scene. Once everything is ready and the instruments are properly arranged, the musical accompaniment begins. The stage fills with the alluring sound of interlocking gongs, as the children bring the instruments to life. It’s the opening music for a performance of the story *Randu Jalaprang* by Tatang Sumarsono.

The children who staged this performance were from Teater Bolon, a children’s theatre group from Tasikmalaya, West Java. As the only children’s theatre group based outside Bandung to take part in the 2008 Sundanese-language Drama Festival (FDKS, Festival Drama Basa Sunda), Teater Bolon attracted a good deal of interest, not least because it was competing with more established theatre groups and even professional companies. Its performance of *Randu Jalaprang* was notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, the story itself was more complex than many of the other stories performed during the festival. Its setting was the Bubat War from thirteenth-century Sundanese history, a controversial event that cannot be explored and dramatized on stage as freely as other stories with a fictional background. In this case, the development of characters in the play demanded some historical knowledge. The performance involved dialogues in a form of Sundanese that differs from everyday language.

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1 We wish to thank Prof Barbara Hatley for her input, criticism and suggestions during the course of an intensive and interesting series of email discussions regarding revisions to this chapter. Part of the discussion in the chapter was previously included in an article in the newspaper *Kompas*. See Lahpan (2008).

2 As explained in the Introduction, Wawan Sofwan discussed this topic in his oral presentation at the workshop on which this book is based, while Neneng Lahpan took responsibility for the writing of the chapter. Neneng is therefore named as first author.
and the epic-like story required a large cast and the staging of epic scenes such as battles between opposing armies. The same was true of the musical accompaniment and the stage design. The children were not only able to play the range of characters the story demanded, they also showed great skill illustrating the progression of the narrative with the traditional musical instruments that formed part of the stage design. Moreover, these instruments not only supplied the musical accompaniment, but also functioned in a very creative way as the props needed to create the royal court setting.3

It was precisely these aspects of the performance that elicited admiration from sections of the audience. The group succeeded in staging a highly energetic performance that not only entertained the audience but contained a significant amount of information about Sundanese history and culture. In this way, the group illustrated an important function of art. They staged a play that highlighted the aesthetic aspects of drama and stagecraft and the entertainment aspect of theatrical performance, while at the same time it contributed to the dissemination of knowledge about the Sundanese cultural heritage, which has been a subject of concern in some circles in recent years. The preservation of the Sundanese musical heritage and an understanding of the local values enshrined in Sundanese history, together with the maintenance of the Sundanese language, all formed part of Teater Bolon's performance.

Since the inception of the FDBS in 1990 as a bi-annual event, the qualities Teater Bolon brought to this performance have been matched by many other contributions to the festival, mainly by young people. The festival, organized by the group Teater Sunda Kiwari, has seen significant development in recent years. In 2008, it staged performances by 74 contributors, and in 2010 the number of contributors rose to 79. Since then, the festival has become an annual event, with high school student groups performing in odd-numbered years (46 student groups took part in 2011) and open groups performing in festivals in even-numbered years (56 open groups took part in 2012). As a regionally-based cultural event, the festival illustrates some important aspects of Indonesia's current socio-political dynamics. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the festival has drawn a huge response from children and young people, who make up the overwhelming majority of performers and spectators. Given the fact that young people of this generation are often seen as abandoning their regional linguistic and cultural heritage, the success of the Kiwari festival in

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3 In a scene depicting formal deliberations among members of the court, the drums were used as chairs, while in another scene they were piled on top of one another to form the gateway to the palace. In the scene changes, the transition from musical instrument to stage props was handled skillfully and quickly by the child performers.