Representing Indonesia in Australia through Performance

Communities, Collaborations, Identities

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Indonesia-related performance claims a modest but distinctive place within the wider panorama of performance forms that thrive in Australia. Australia’s geographical positioning as the closest ‘Western’ country to Indonesia and its immediate southern neighbour has been a unique influence on and frame for Australian-based Indonesian-inflected performance activity. With the advent of mass migration to Australia in the post-World War Two era, multiculturalism and increasingly easier, cheaper travel, this proximity has fostered direct person-to-person contact as well as other forms of cultural interaction, including diverse Australian-Indonesian creative encounters and endeavours mediated by performance.

This chapter focuses on aspects of locally-produced Indonesia-related performance of the last decade. It presents case studies that show how contemporary performance creates meaningful connections between Australians and Indonesians, or informs connections between Australia and Indonesia. The case studies look at, respectively, gamelan performance in Australia; three Indonesian-flavoured intercultural projects led by Australians of Indonesian descent or Indonesians resident in Australia; and the vibrant Indonesian student pop culture scene in Melbourne. In Gang re:Publik: Indonesia-Australia Creative Adventures (Crosby et al. 2008), an anthology of writings and art work, the editors’ preface describes the project as ‘an ongoing map of a shifting cultural network across Australia and Indonesia’. The case studies illustrate that performance activity is likewise part of a shifting Australian-Indonesian cultural network. In some instances, this network has a strongly transnational dimension; in others, it involves deep, long-term cross-cultural engagement; and in yet others, it is demonstrated by intense collaborative activity including both Indonesian- and non-Indonesian Australians. The case studies cover diverse performance media, genres and modes of representation: in some of the examples Indonesia is represented through a paradigm of authenticity, in others, of hybridity. However, in all instances performance creates ‘pathways’ between Australia and Indonesia.

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1 A version of this chapter has been published as Scott-Maxwell (2013).
Within this framework, performance activities create communities and express identities in ways to be explored below. Since this process is an ongoing one, at some remove from the Indonesian political context, the impact of post-New Order change is not a major focus of discussion. Yet political shifts within Indonesia and in the Australian-Indonesian relationship clearly impact on performance activities and their reception, as will be noted. Occasionally, performance projects have arisen specifically in response to political developments in Indonesia. In the case of Indonesian student pop culture performance activity, engagement with the here-and-now of artistic and social developments within Indonesia is central. A further, broader dimension of this framework for understanding recent Indonesia-related performance in Australia and the Australia-Indonesia pathways that performance creates is, on the one hand, the strongly developing transnational linkages of many Indonesian artists in the highly globalized post-1998 cultural environment and, on the other, strengthening Indonesian diasporic linkages. Australian-Indonesian cultural interactions and encounters manifest in performance commenced much earlier than the twentieth century, however. For example, fishermen, pearlers and others from various parts of the Indonesian archipelago were active in northern Australia in the nineteenth century and earlier, leaving traces of a hybrid cultural legacy that survive to this day in such things as Torres Strait Islander musician Jerry Lewis’s song, Bada Kris, with its Malay lyrics, or the many diverse influences on music, dance, linguistic and other aspects of Aboriginal Yolgnu culture (MacKnight 1976:88–92). However, Australia’s notorious early twentieth century history, which saw anti-Chinese and Pacific Islander sentiment formalized in the so-called White Australia Policy (the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901), restricted opportunities for contact with people from the Indonesian archipelago on Australian soil.

There was a hiatus during World War Two when about 6000 Indonesian seamen and political exiles from the Netherlands East Indies were evacuated to Australia. Indonesian cultural groups performed for themselves and local

2 These include the 2012 formation of a global Indonesian Diaspora Network, mentioned in Fridus Steijlen’s chapter in this volume, a branch of which was recently established in Australia. Another dimension of diasporic activity is the work of Australia-based artists from Indonesia or of Indonesian descent who interact with Indonesia-based artists and audiences. See, for example, Opal Vapour, a recent contemporary dance and music performance by musician Ria Soemardjo (whose music is discussed below) and dancer Jade Dewi Tys Tunggal, which was workshopped in Indonesia.

3 A recording of Bada Kris is on the CD, Sailing the southeast wind: maritime music from Torres Strait (2003). Other forms of early contact and exchange via performance include the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tours of major Indonesian cities by Australian professional theatre artists and musicians.