

A TRANSCULTURAL RE-INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARES' PLAY: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, AS A CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE BASED ON TRADITIONAL BETAWI STYLED THEATRE IN JAKARTA

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on how re-interpretations of William Shakespeare's plays have become part of transcultural articulations in Indonesian theatre. This study will focus on the play A Midsummer Night Dreams performed by the students of the theatre department in the Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ) or Jakarta Institute of The Arts as a sample of transculturalism in the Performing Arts in Indonesia as a sample for the case study. This writer was involved in the artistic process as a choreographer collaborating with the Theater Department Lecturers who directed and designed the play. As IKJ is situated in Jakarta, the play took on the style of Betawi traditional theatre to be adapted as the whole artistic design. The traditional Betawi style itself was adapted from Lenong and Topeng, two distinct forms of theatre passed down from generation to generation as oral traditions. The traditions in the Betawi theatre were then used as a base for re-interpreting and constructing the play intertwining the language and the cultural imagination of Shakespeare and Betawi, in dialogue, movements, set design, music, and performance space. This article was inspired by the questioning of transculturalism itself as argued in the book Gao and Transcultural Chinese Theater among others. In the performing arts sphere, can the performance above in re-interpretation be seen as a transcultural expression therefore an artistic representation, or be seen as cultural identity politics and could be considered appropriation due to influences of the globalisation of cultural, social, and political contexts? To collect the data to answer the questions in mind, this researcher revisited the memories and notes, and documentation of the artistic team and actors from IKJ, to understand their personal experiences in the artistic process and how they understood Shakespeare and Betawi itself through their own empirical journeys.

Keywords: *Transculturalism, Shakespeare, Betawi, Theater, Institut Kesenian Jakarta*

Introduction

The richness of Indonesian theatre can be seen in the varieties of oral traditions throughout the artistic expressions passed down throughout the generations. What is meant by traditional theatre is a form of theatre that is born and bred and develops in an ethnographic area that is the result of collective creativity. The performance is based upon the traditional patterns from the older previous generations and continued and passed to the younger generation loyally following the fixed form. The late Kasim Achmad who was previously a lecturer on Traditional Theater at the Jakarta Institute For The Arts wrote in his notes later published as a book chapter,¹ stated that "tracing traditional theatre in Indonesia theatre, could be made possible by identifying the differences and forms from the historical aspects, shapes, forms and styles of performance and the use of theater as a medium for expression.

He continues," The history of Indonesian theatre could be categorised into three periods those are 1) the traditional theatre period (or theatre in the past) (2) the transitional period where Indonesian theatre was introduced to theatre forms coming from outside Indonesia regions that heavily influences traditional theatre developments; or also known as the Bangsawan Theater period (3) Non-traditional period which gives birth to Indonesian theatre that grew after the Sumpah Pemuda or the Youth Oath that dedicated agreements for a united language that is Bahasa Indonesia. Every period gave birth to a different form but each was influenced by the other and the differences were an adaptation and development of the people's culture" (Kasim Achmad in Bondowoso (ed).2015: 441).

Kasim Achmad explains in his notes, that in Jakarta there had been a theatre performed based on Shakespeare's work *King Lear* in an Asian version as a collaboration between artists from six Asian countries from Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia. For this collaboration to succeed Ong Keng Seng the director of the play *Lear* from Singapore interviewed by Kasim Achmad stated, "my intention is that all the cultures emerged as a unity and reduce the differences and how new Asia is able to dialogue with the old Asia, with its traditions and history" (Kasim Ahmad in Bondowoso (ed) 2015: 452). This paper will focus on Shakespeare's famous play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed by the Theater Study Program at the Jakarta Institute for the Arts (IKJ) in Indonesia in 2019, where this researcher observed whilst also participating as a choreographer for the play. The artists involved were lecturers, former students of Kasim Achmad alumni and their own students in IKJ thus continuing the thinking of Kasim Achmad in their own creativity in a theatre performance using Betawi-styled traditional theatre *Lenong* as a trajectory for further interpretive purposes.

¹ Kasim Ahmad's notes are published as a chapter in the book "*Pendidikan, Birokrasi Seni dan Pergulatan Teater Timur dan Barat*" 80 Tahun A. Kasim Achmad by Institut Kesenian Jakarta in 2015. Titled Pengaruh Teater Tradisional pada Teater Indonesia pp 440-453.

Methodology

The data collected for this paper was from reflections, interviews during the artistic process, observations and participation observations during the making of the performance *Impian di Tengah Musim*, a study on relevant literature, and documentations of the performance and past empirical visits connecting with traditional *Lenong* communities.

Discussions

To understand how a transcultural re-interpretation of Shakespeare using Betawi-styled theatre called *Lenong* in the Institut Kesenian Jakarta, (usually mentioned using the acronym IKJ for The Jakarta Institute of the Arts) produced in 2019, a historical view is needed. Julianti Parani (2017) also a lecturer and one of the founders of the IKJ dance study program, states in her notes for commemorating the 10th anniversary of Lembaga Pendidikan Kesenian Jakarta (currently IKJ) explains that the Betawi people started to develop as an ethnic group around the 19th century at the beginning of the 20th century. This period is based upon research on arts and cultures performances from that starting point in time till the 1930s showing that there are three types of arts and cultures in the Betawi areas that were supported by the people living in that area. According to Parani, this starting point in time is based on findings of researchers from the Netherlands such as Pigeaud and J. Kunst that the Betawi arts came from the end of the 19th century.

This information was also obtained from interviews with traditional practitioners of *Rebana Betawi* that said that the traditions could be remembered by them as early as three previous generations before² According to Parani's argument, the traditional Betawi theatre called *Lenong* has its roots in *Komedi Bangsawan* that is more known as *Komedi Stambul* and also started to emerge during the same period. She continues that *Stambul Betawi* originated from *Betawi Komedi Bangsawan* from the Malacca peninsula that arrived to visit Betawi in 1985 and until the beginning of the twentieth century often performed in Jawa, Sumatera, and Kalimantan. Hereafter the Betawi people identified themselves as an ethnic group in the second half of the 19th century and then the Betawi arts and culture also started to take form during that time. Therefore due to the tolerance distinctive in the Betawi people's character, the arts and cultural forms adapted, integrated, and assimilated until many forms were born that is currently known as Betawi culture (Parani 2017:80).

The Betawi traditional theatre *Lenong* is what Parani views as a people's theatre (*teater rakyat*), is comical in nature, spontaneous and *lenong* primadonnas could emerge such as the late Mak Nori who was also a teacher of the traditional Betawi art forms in LPKJ which is situated as part of the Taman Ismail Marzuki complex. When Taman Ismail Marzuki known

² *Rebana* is a musical instrument with influences from the traditions brought by Arabic settlers in Jakarta

as TIM, a cultural park in Jakarta was established in 1968, *Lenong* theatre as a popular entertainment was given a program in 1969. The *lenong* groups were brought under the umbrella group named Ikatan *Lenong* Jakarta advised by D. Djajakusuma. Sumantri Sastroswondo, S.M Ardan, and Ali Shahab, were all close to LPKJ at the time. In Parani's notes titled *Mengenang Kesuksesan Lenong*, or Remembering the success of *Lenong*, she writes that during this period the popular and high demand for *lenong* was the driving force for TIM programming monthly performances for the next years program at TIM. In the beginning, the stories performed for the *lenong* performances were sourced from Betawi cultural vocabularies, then developed into the director's creativity adapting stories from other cultures such as traditional Javanese, Arabic stories such as the famous 1001 Nights tale, and from the West such as William Shakespeare's plays, until *lenong* produced performances as entertainment liked by many people (Parani 2017: 125).

From these literatures it could be seen that the works of William Shakespeare are no stranger to the *lenong* communities. This information is also explained by D. Djajakusuma in his conversations published by editors Ario Sasongko and Marselli Sumarno (2018) wrote that enjoying *lenong* comes from being accustomed to watching the performances, even though one would be thinking that the stories told in *lenong* are obsolete, nevertheless one accustomed to being a *lenong* audience would still be able to feel enjoyment. (Sasongko and Marselli Sumarno (ed) 2018:64) D. Djajakusuma as a prominent figure in Indonesian theatre was considered a driving force for new balances between Western references in theatre making and starting to bring in references of local traditions of theater from *lenong* and then *wayang*, *ketoprak* and so forth into Indonesian theatre and has continued since (Sasongko and Marselli Sumarno (ed) 2018:150).

These views of prominent figures in Indonesian performing arts that were also among the founding figures of the Jakarta Institute of the Arts (Institut Kesenian Jakarta-IKJ), hence passed down their visions that greatly influenced the artistic practice by their students that also passed down to the current performing arts students in IKJ. Therefore it was hoped by these visionaries that the forms, aura, senses, idioms, and utterances of traditional theater would imbue the spirit and design of Indonesian modern theatre's identity in Indonesia. What came about was the birth of Indonesian modern theatre with Indonesian references as a new stream in creating theatre.

Types of *Lenong*

Lenong itself has two types based on the stories told which are 1) *lenong dines* or *resmi*, and 2) *lenong preman* or *jagoan*. The stories in *lenong dines* used had a background of kings and aristocrats that came from Malay culture and also from Shakespeare's works

such as Hamlet, Othello and others whereas *lenong preman* stories are usually based on everyday lives of the Betawi people's interactions with the martial arts world such as with the *premans*, or *jago* accomplished in silat (Nawi.2016:260-261). The history of *lenong* has various versions pertaining to its history, the first hypothesis is that it has close ties to theatre art from Tiongkok or Chinese theatre based on the use of musical instruments. The second view is that it is considered an influence coming from Persian comedy, based on the Wayang Dermuluk troupe visits to Batavia in 1914. The third view is that in the 1940s-and 50s *lenong* emerged and the name came from one musical instrument dominantly played and produces the sound that could be heard as "*nong*" (Nawi.2016:262-263). A researcher and practitioner of Betawi theatre Syaiful Amri writes that the differences between *lenong preman* and *dines* was in the language forms. In *lenong preman* the language style used usually came from the masses consisting of ordinary people that converged in places such as the market and is considered rough typical to the lower social strata. Whereas *Lenong dines* usually used language in high form Malay that among the Betawi people is considered a soft spoken language style typically used by aristocrats with a perspective of higher officials in the government. Amri also adds that in *lenong* whether *lenong preman* or *dines*, usually has the presence of the *jinn* in their stories (Amri, 2022:35).

In discussions for preparing how to design the whole play of the Midsummer Nights dream that was held at the Theater Luwes in IKJ, attended by the whole theatre group and led by the Directors of the play, Hestu Wreda and Bejo Sulaktono³ *lenong dines* was considered to be the base for further developments in the production of the theatre. If we were to consider the types of *lenong* described by Amri above, the characteristics of *lenong dines* could be harmonised with Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream having stories intertwined with aristocrats, poetic language, and the fairy folk or *jinn*. The original title was translated into Indonesian as *Impian Tengah Musim* and performed at the Graha Bhakti Budaya (GBB) Theater in the TIM complex.

The story in the play evolved around plots that were sub-stories in the play; the court of aristocrats, the entanglement of four lovers, and the kingdom of fairies and the craftsmen that aspired to be actors. The play starts with the quarrel between Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of the Faeries. The point of conflict between the two was due to the presence of a boy under Titania's protection. Oberon then sends Puck, his attendant, to search for a magical plant and then use its essence on Titania's eyes. The magic of the plant will then cause Titania to fall in love with whatever creature her eyes fall upon, and whilst she was distracted, Oberon intended to steal away the boy. Whereas in the Kingdom of Athens, Theseus the duke was enamoured by Hippolyta the Amazons queen who had

³ Both are lecturers at the Theater Study Program at Institut Kesenian Jakarta.

been successfully conquered in battle. Theseus the decrees amusements to be held for their wedding. The workmen in this case who were craftsmen decide to prepare a play for Theseus and his bride, Hippolyta. In the midst of preparations, Egeus comes to ask for a solution for his family affairs asking Theseus to command his daughter to wed Demetrius even though Hermia his daughter pleads to marry her love Lysander. The duke orders the penalty of death if Hermia does not fulfil her father's wish for her to marry Demetrius. Hermia and Lysander decide to elope to another country, and the path to be taken was through the woods. Hermia confides to Helena who was in love with Demetrius and she, in turn, decides to inform Demetrius in an endeavour to win back his love.

The Enchanted Forest

The setting then takes place in the woods that was the dwelling of the Faeries under the rule of Oberon and Titania. The comical aspect starts here since the humans could not see the faeries but the faeries started to meddle in the human's lives. Oberon the Faery King, happens on Demetrius searching for Hermia who rather than finding Hermia came upon Helena instead and so rejected her in disgust. In pity for Helena, Oberon then orders Puck to anoint Demetrius's eyes with the love juice so he would then fall in love with Helena. Alas, Puck made an error and anointed Lysander in mistake, who then looked upon Helena who was heartbroken and just arrived upon the scene. Lysander instantly falls in love with Helena and chases after her, leaving Hermia. Puck then adds to the confusion by using magic on Bottom, one of the craftsmen who all came to the same place in the forest to rehearse their play. Puck turns Bottom's head into a donkey's head and brought him thus to Titania. Titania upon awakening cast her eyes on Bottom and immediately fell in love.

Shared Belief in Spirits.

K. Deighton (1891) in his introduction for the play *A Midsummer Nights Dream* that the Spirits of Shakespeare in this play such as Oberon, Tatiana and Puck are representatives of the faery world described poetically as "Are either not mortal, or their date of life is indeterminately long, they are of nature superior to man, and speak of contempt to human follies", Ther writer then further explains that Puck derives from the old word Pouke originally meaning devil or evil spirit." In Betawi culture quoting from Abdul Chaer (2017) on Betawi Folklore writes that the Betawi also have old beliefs in the Dunia Gaib or the unseen world such as spirits, jin and so on. (133). Stories told of people who connected to the spirits as a familiar must give the spirits or *siluman*, food every Thursday night. These *siluman* took on the form of animals or human form. If the offerings of food were not given then the belief was that humans would catch a fever or kinds of sickness (page 137).

Imagery in the Poetic language re-interpreted for the stage design.

Examples of poetic language quoted from from in the script as a description where the fairies meet ;

On hill, in dale, forest or mead
By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,
Or on the beached margent of the sea,
to dance their ringlets to the whistling wind

And where Queen Tatiana reposes;

A bank whereon the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the the nodding violet grows,
Quite over canopied with lush woodbine,
With sweet musk roses, and with eglantine

An example of a Betawi poetic language called pantun;

Sang api eh eh sang api (Fire, oh oh Fire)
Ngape lu kelak kelik aje (why are you just twinkling)
Mengkenya aye kelak kelik aje (Thus I twinkle)
Eh, sang kayu base semue (Oh, it seems the wood is all suddenly wet)

Sang kayu eh sang kayu (wood oh wood)
Ngape lu base semue (why are you so drenched)
Mengkenya aye base semue (thus I too become drenched)
Sang ujan turun aje (The rain suddenly became a deluge)

In the Betawi pantun is usually uttered or performed as sung verse by a person or two people. The production of the pantun depends on the expertise, knowledge and skill of the performer. The text of pantun from Abdul Chaer (2017) in the form of story, is performed such as a dialogue, question and answer (page 77).

As can be seen in both of the texts above, the words give strong images. Strong imagery affects the creative works of writers, scientists and everyday thought. Imagery used in poetic language whether written or in the oral traditions functions for remembering. (Rubin 1995: 60). The imagery in the script in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the base for developing the stage set for the scenes. The use of material, lighting in *Impian di Tengah Musim* was largely influenced by the information of imagery.

Costumes and Music

According to Margreet Van Till during the colonial times in Batavia, “landlords became more economically active in order to become true aristocrats to impress the local population. A renowned estate owner known as Majoor Jantje in the mid-century held extravagant parties that consisted of the participation of Europeans, Chinese and Indonesian orchestra, a gala dinner, fancy dress parties and a ball in the evening. The evening was spent by the ladies dancing, speaking of fine clothes, balls, love affairs and handsome men” (Till 2011: 35). Therefore it could be seen that the Betawi were familiar with the form of dress worn by western aristocrats and such dresses albeit more simple, emerged in *lenong dines* performances. In the play *Impian Tengah Musim* performed in 2019, the dresses were designed by students of the Fashion Study Program in IKJ for the characters of aristocrats to give an aura of splendour. Whereas the faeries costumes and skin were glittery and made of soft fabrics, so the material could move along with the movements of dancing fairies.



Picture 1. Hermia, Demetrius and Lysander
Source: Theater Study Program IKJ



Picture 2. Costumes by the Faculty of Arts and Design Students
Source: Madia Patra Ismar



Picture 3. Oberon, Theseus and Puck

Source: Madia Patra Ismar



Picture 4. Bottom and Queen Tatiana

Source: Theater Study Program IKJ

The music accompanying the re-interpretation of *Impian Tengah Musim* for the performance was composed and arranged by the ethnomusicology department, using traditional gambang *kromong* instruments but also using trumpets, saxophones and drums. The music consisted of several new compositions and traditional music according to the scenes.



Picture 5. The musicians using traditional gambang kromong combined with modern instruments

Source: Madia Patra Ismar

Conclusions

This topic is still to be developed further. Hopefully in the future there will be opportunities for this writer to work on this subject in more academic research and artistic productions of *lenong dines* addressing Shakespearean comedy, therefore contributing to research and writings of collaborative productions and perhaps bringing together performers from different countries and enriching Asian performance of an intercultural.

Shakespeare.(Fotheringham, Chrisa Jansohn and R.S White (ed).2006). If a simple understanding of transculturality would be to see self in others then perhaps such productions would be a bridge of camaradie across nations through Shakespeare and enrich and revitalise the *lenong dines* Betawi styled theatre.

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