

JAVANESE PERFORMANCES ON AN INDONESIAN STAGE

Contesting Culture, Embracing Change

Barbara Hatley



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Cover: Bondan Nusantara introducing a community show held in the wake of the devastating 28 May 2006 earthquake in Yogyakarta. Photo supplied by Bondan Nusantara.

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who made it all possible*

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Cover: Bondan Nusantara introducing a contemporary show back to the stage of the devastating 28 May 2006 earthquake in Yogyakarta. Photographed by Bondan Nusantara.

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It was James Peacock, or more precisely an encounter with his writing at Yale Graduate School in 1968, that started it all. Reading *Rites of Modernisation*, Peacock's study of the East Javanese popular theatre form *ludruk*, with its melodramatic plots, earthy humour, and illuminating reflections on the lives of its audience members, I knew at once that this was the sort of research I wished to undertake. While Peacock inspired from afar, my fellow graduate students provided more immediate stimulation and support. To Heather Sutherland, Lance Castles, Martha Logsdon, Katherina Clark and the late Ong Hok Ham, among others, for the lively intellectual exchanges, warm friendship and great parties, many thanks. One of those Yale mates was Ron Hatley, later to become my first husband, who took me with him on his PhD fieldwork to Malang, East Java, where I spent two years hanging around backstage as a fascinated groupie at *ludruk* and *ketoprak* performances. For that fantastic opportunity and all your encouragement and support, Ron, many thanks! In Malang we had the good fortune to be virtually neighbours with Pete (Alton) and Judith Becker. Sharing with them many late-night discussions of Javanese arts, music, philosophy and language, as well as wayang performances, temple visits and mountain climbs, was wonderful fun and provided invaluable insights into Javanese/Indonesian culture. In Malang too, I first experienced the welcoming and unfailingly helpful response to my presence from Indonesian performers that has made research over all these years such a delight. To the actors of *ludruk* troupes Wijaya Kusuma Units 1 and 2 (army patronage determined their name but thankfully impinged little on their colourful personalities) and to the *ketoprak* groups Wahyu Budoyo and Siswo Budoyo for willingly answering my badly worded questions and making the backstage world a second home, boundless

A Note on Spelling

Words are spelled according to the standard Indonesian orthography, except for some personal and proper names which are spelled as they appear in the original. The conventions used before the introduction of the standard Indonesian orthography are indicated by a footnote.

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Introduction

This book explores 30 years of stage performances in Central Java in a period of dramatic social change. It begins in the 1970s when the structures and institutions of the powerful New Order State were being established, moves through the monetary boom and cultural globalisation of the 1980s and 1990s, then traces the times of economic hardship and social conflict, political decentralisation and increased political freedom that followed the New Order's demise in 1998. By looking at the way popular theatre developed in response to socio-political circumstances, it illuminates both the workings of Javanese theatre and the local impact of major social change.

The main site for this exploration is Yogyakarta. An old court centre strongly involved in the national struggle for Indonesian Independence and in ongoing national politics, and whose myriad educational institutions draw staff and students from across the archipelago, Yogyakarta is hardly a 'typical' Javanese city. Yet its national significance, diverse population and rich cultural history make Yogyakarta an ideal place to examine how theatre gives expression to the social experience and sense of identity of audience members who are both culturally Javanese and modern Indonesian.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, 1970s–90s

My first encounter with theatre in Yogyakarta took place in the 1970s. Then my focus was on *ketoprak*, a form of Javanese-language popular melodrama with a repertoire drawn from Javanese history and legend, which I was researching for my PhD. Watching the nightly performances of the five commercial troupes based in the city and a myriad of amateur shows celebrating community events, I developed a sense of how *ketoprak*'s tales of the past gave expression to contemporary social concerns and cultural values for its *wong cilik*,¹ lower-class participants. In the 1980s and early 1990s I began to follow developments in *teater*,

Indonesian-language, scripted plays. At this time of strong government control, modern theatre provided room for its young, educated, overwhelmingly male practitioners to indirectly critique contemporary political authorities through satirical interpretations of Javanese history. Both *ketoprak* and *teater* might be described as 'popular' in their distance from classical theatre traditions and their close connections with particular social groups.

By the late 1990s, social changes in Yogyakarta and elsewhere in Indonesia seemed to challenge this picture of close integration between theatre and local social life. The forces of capitalist development and globalisation were physically transforming the city and having a major impact on theatre and the media. Multi-storied international hotels and sumptuous bank buildings were being erected along the main thoroughfares; middle-class housing complexes were spreading out into the rice fields that once marked the city's perimeter. In 1992 on the historic main street of Malioboro there appeared the amazing apparition of the Malioboro Mall — gleaming, multi-levelled, with escalators, designer clothing boutiques and a McDonald's restaurant. In the field of arts and media, four new commercial television channels had been established alongside the single government station, which until this time had enjoyed a monopoly over television broadcasting. Troupes performing traditional theatre lost audiences and disbanded; modern theatre groups suffered a haemorrhage of performers to *sinetron*, tele-movies produced to provide a modicum of local content alongside a flood of imported programmes.

In August–September 1997 I went to Java for two months to investigate these changes, to explore whether and in what ways local performances still conveyed social meaning in an age of commoditisation and globalisation. June–September had been the big months for performances for weddings and circumcisions, anniversaries of organisations and for celebrations of 17 August, Indonesian Independence day. During the 1970s and 1980s, community concerts (*malam kesenian*) held to mark Independence Day had conveyed a sense of neighbourhood identity as residents of all ages and interests, from tiny preschool dancers to teenage rock bands to middle-aged lady choirs, contributed to the show. A *ketoprak* performance often constituted the final, star attraction of the event; a common theme of villager hero defending his kingdom might be seen to express a kind of local, grass roots "nationalism" (Hatley, 1982). To what extent were performances of this kind still prevalent in the late 1990s? What did their content and mode of

organisation reflect about the contemporary functions and perceived meanings of local theatre?

SEPTEMBER 1997 — A NIGHT ON THE TOWN

Two months in Yogyakarta to catch up on developments in the performing arts seems but the blink of an eye in light of all that is going on, but I try. With three separate performances to take in on this particular night, my video batteries charged and notebook at the ready, the first stop is dinner, to fortify myself for the task. The place I head for is hardly a quiet spot, situated next to a sports stadium, facing the main telephone office, at the junction of several busy roads, with their streams of roaring motorbikes and exhaust-belching buses. But it is near where I am staying, on the way to my first destination, and serves a good *gado-gado* (vegetables with spicy peanut sauce) very fast.

Tonight, as I approach, the small restaurant seems to be at the hub of a maelstrom of people, noise and entertainment. From the stadium comes a noise like an earthquake or impending revolution, amplified rock music assaulting the feet via the shuddering earth and the ears in waves of distorted sound. Huge numbers of young men in their late teens, with jeans, black T-shirts and long, dishevelled hair, stream through the gates. Right across the road, at the prestigious state senior high school, similar waves of amplified music and thronging crowds indicate a major “happening”. Traffic has been partially blocked off and stalls set up along the street. Inside the school complex, a huge screen and stage mark the site of a performance later that night of *wayang kulit* shadow puppet theatre by the famous and highly paid puppeteer, Anom Suroto. All this is taking place as part of several days of *lustrum* celebrations, five yearly events organised by school alumni.

Eating at that spot, between the two crowds and the dual walls of sound while the traffic roars relentlessly by, I experience an intense, embodied sense of Yogyakarta in the late 1990s, in all its rush and noise, its teeming life and cacophonous voices. Setting out to locate and analyse such voices as they are expressed in performance events, for a moment I am no longer the detached researcher but a helpless, involuntary participant, engulfed and overwhelmed by aggressive noise.

But the dismay is momentary and the search goes on. The rock concert, of course, is off-limits to me, and anyone of my advanced years, local or foreign. Later that night I will return to watch the wayang, to gaze from afar for a time until summoned by a batik-shirted official to

a front seat alongside similarly clad dignitaries, prominent alumni of the school who constitute the organising committee for the festivities and their honoured guests. But first there are two other shows to take in. Less than 200 metres from the rock concert and the wayang, in the Bentara Budaya cultural centre attached to the offices of the *Kompas* newspaper, a mime performance is taking place. Cemek, a diminutive Yogyakarta actor and mime artist, with a colourful past as a thief and standover man, is playing out a meditation on power and oppression entitled *Kuasa Mahakuasa* (Power and Omnipotence). A youthful crowd of university students, journalists and artists watch as Cemek, Marcel Marceau-like in white face, mimes subservience to, then rebellion against, a peremptory, remote-controlled rocking chair symbolising tyrannical, unseen authority. Next he and several fellow actors whisper and shout in parody of the confused, contradictory accounts of witnesses in a then current court case over the murder of a crusading journalist.

Just as the show ends, I race out to hail a pedicab for the short ride to my next destination, the sumptuous princely home of a brother of the reigning sultan, not far from the palace itself. The head of the classical dance group who invited me to watch his group perform here, an uncle of the host and the Sultan, has made no mention of the nature of the occasion being celebrated. So the guests and I are equally disconcerted as I bumble incongruously into an elegant private party, where aristocratic relatives of the host and moguls of the tourist industry are dining at white-clothed tables set up around the edges of a beautiful pavilion (*pendopo*), in which the dance is being presented. Nevertheless, after a moment's confusion, I am graciously received and seated at a table as the dancers perform an excerpt of court dance drama. The host explains that this performance is being held to mark the commencement in a few weeks' time of a new venture, his presentation of dinner and classical dance shows for tourists on the model of existing programmes in other aristocratic homes. But while these other shows all play out the Ramayana legend as a simple love story with a dramatic climax, seen as unfailingly attractive to tourists, his focus will be the other epic of the Javanese dance drama repertoire, the Mahabharata.

Then back to the wayang. While delighting in Anom's sonorous singing and the witty repartee of his puppet characters, I chat politely about the Australian educational system with my distinguished, batik-shirted neighbour. Awestruck acquaintances, watching from afar, report later that my companion has been none other than the head of

the Department of Education and Culture for the whole Yogyakarta district! I start with surprise at unexpected additions to wayang as I have known it, such as nude puppets with movable penises, Muslim music played on tambourines and a solo pop song by an audience member, who turns out to be the wife of a well-placed military man. Finally, around 3 o'clock, when the waves of tiredness become too much, I walk home to bed, to drift off to sleep with the amplified sound of Anom's glorious voice still filling my ears.

* * *

Three performances within a few hundred metres and a fourth close by, each with their own form, their own purpose, their distinct audiences. No doubt other shows were staged that night in different parts of the city to mark other events. A rock concert, a shadow puppet play, classical court dance and politically oriented mime illustrate only a few of the types of performance on view. On other occasions I saw or heard about scores of productions of *ketoprak*; several concerts of *dangdut*, a hybrid Middle Eastern/Indian/Malay musical form, with a pulsing beat, gyrating, scantily clad female singers and huge male audiences; *jathilan*, hobby horse trance dance, performed by itinerant buskers and by a group of teenage boys and girls to mark a village celebration of Independence Day; experimental Western-style theatre, classical music recitals and performances of Islamic music and Arabic chanting to celebrate Muslim religious holidays. Neighbourhood concerts celebrating Independence Day also abounded. The first of my research questions was emphatically answered. Local performances were thriving in the Yogyakarta of the late 1990s, despite the hubbub of globalised media culture.

MILIEU AND MEANING

Along with the overall vitality of performance activity, the above descriptions also illustrate connections between theatrical events and particular social groups. The rock concert and the mime presentation, as modern forms influenced by Western models, were staged commercially, for a paying public. The wayang and classical dance had been organised by the alumni committee and the Sultan's brother in the context of specific celebrations. As regional, 'traditional' art forms they would more rarely be performed as a paying show.² But in each

case the show was observed by people from a particular social milieu rather than an amorphous 'general public'.³

Differences in social status and education clearly play a key role in this process: attendance at particular kinds of performance marks the lifestyle of a specific social group. Here are examples, one might suggest, of the kind of choices described by Pierre Bourdieu as he traced links between social class groupings and their members' tastes in art and entertainment (Bourdieu, 1984). University students, through their academic and recreational activities, have acquired enough contact with foreign cultures to appreciate the conventions of Western mime and to define themselves as part of a modern-minded, cultured, socially critical elite who watch modern theatre in a theatre building. Government officials and prominent professionals watching a wayang performance, renowned as the 'highest' of Javanese art forms, are accumulating a sizeable store of cultural capital as they sit resplendent in the VIP seats with their colleagues and other dignitaries. Contemporary aristocrats, observing an excerpt, tailored for tourists, of the court dance drama once presented with spectacular grandeur in the sultan's palace, are living out and capitalising upon their elite heritage. And the middle-class youth at the rock concert are expressing their rejection of local social hierarchy and hypocrisy through images and expressions drawn from a global culture of youth rebellion.

Yet the Yogyakarta scene differs in important ways from the European model of a leisure and culture marketplace, ordered by personal taste as a reflection of class status. Government officials do not attend just any wayang but the one being organised by the organisation with which they are associated. Also present at the show are not just elite figures like themselves but a crowd of ordinary citizens, who are being provided with entertainment through the largesse of their social betters, acting out their marginal social status as they stand packed together, watching behind the roped-off seating area. Factors of group identification, patronage and noblesse oblige are still very much in evidence. Even at modern, commercial performances, audiences tend to be not only drawn from similar social circles but to have many common connections. After the mime presentation, for example, virtually no other audience members left straight away as I did; the others all stayed back in the theatre building to chat with friends.

What is taking place here is arguably an adaptation to new settings and purposes of the long-established Javanese practice of *nduwe gawe*, the celebration of an important event in the life of a family or community.

The marriage of a daughter, the circumcision of a son — these were the kinds of events that a family of some standing in the community was expected to celebrate with a wayang performance, confirming and displaying the wealth and position of the hosts, as well as providing entertainment and an opportunity for sociability for their neighbours. For those of lesser means several nights of chatting and card playing (*jagongan*) at the time of such events provided a more modest equivalent. Now it is the wealthiest, most prestigious educational institutions whose alumni hold lustrum celebrations and mark the occasion with a wayang performance by one of Java's best puppeteers (*dalang*). For years the Yogyakarta chapter of the government political party, Golkar, would celebrate its election success with a wayang; in 1997 during my stay the local newspaper, *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, on the 50th anniversary of its founding, outshone all others with a glittering event involving no less than three top *dalang*, each operating a separate screen and accompanied by his own gamelan orchestra.

But at the same time, every day in towns, villages and across the city, often dutifully documented in the local press, myriad more modest performances mark significant occasions in the life of local organisations — satirical skits at a university graduation, a karaoke competition for the anniversary of a youth group, a women's gamelan concert at a celebration by a neighbourhood wives' organisation to mark the end of the fasting month. In many cases, the institution and even the event itself is a modern one modelled after a Western practice — a university graduation or school alumni gathering. The mode of celebration, however, draws on and perpetuates local practice through the staging of a theatrical performance. As global cultural influence pours in through modern economic and political structures and the mass media, local performances may take on a radically altered form. Yet their symbolic function in celebrating group membership for particular social groups is not necessarily diminished. Indeed, such events may assume enhanced importance, as assertions of an ongoing local identity, adapting to but not swamped by international influences and practices.

INTEGRATION AND CONTESTATION

Symbolic anthropologists underline the significance of theatrical performances and other ritual events as encapsulations of the perceived meaning of experience for members of a particular culture.⁴ Clifford Geertz's article on the Balinese cockfight, for example, is widely cited

for its analysis of the role of such entertainment as cultural text. The fight, Geertz argues, mirrors issues of status difference and social alliance in its betting structure, while its ferocious savagery gives a vivid, experiential sense of the potential violence beneath the calm of daily life, the utter seriousness of status rivalry (Geertz, 1990). Performances and rituals as texts are seen to embody a shared social meaning for their participants as members of a common culture.

In the performances described above, celebration of shared group identity is clearly an important aspect of the experience of attendance. At the same time, wider social and political forces combine with local dynamics in giving meaning to these events, creating both integrative and "combative" effects. In a later article Geertz reports on rituals and performances he observed in 1986 in the town of Pare in East Java on a return visit to the site of his research of the 1950s. Staged variously for the graduation of students at state and religious schools, a Muslim prayer meeting, a ritual celebration at a pilgrimage site and the 40th anniversary of the state police, these events represent the interests of differing ideological streams in contemporary Javanese society. These include the middle-class "youth culture" associated with the burgeoning education system, conservative and modernist Islam, the spiritual renewal ("neo-Javanist") movement and the institutions of the state, the last two both mobilising "traditional" Javanese cultural symbols. Geertz links the intense interest of these events for their participants, along with their often bland or jarringly inconsistent imagery, with the displacement under the New Order regime of expressions of ideological difference to the cultural realm. Purportedly non-political organisations, including schools, cultural associations and religious groups, stage rituals and performances, the key symbolism of which is assertion of position — "part of the struggle for power, status, wealth and recognition" (Geertz, 1990: 94).

Other scholars have documented processes of active enforcement by the state of this "culturalisation" of difference, analysed its effects and documented instances of resistance. Mary Zurbuchen, for example, deconstructs the rhetoric of New Order cultural policies, as wittily and very accurately reproduced in the political satires of the Jakarta theatre group Teater Koma (Zurbuchen, 1989). Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists such as Greg Acciaioli, Michael Dove and Amrih Widodo describe how state authorities have banned from performance elements of regional dances and music judged "unseemly" or contentious, promoting instead bland, sanitised versions of these forms (Acciaioli,

1985; Dove, 1988; Widodo, 1995). Yet such activity creates its own cultural politics. In the context of appropriation by the state of the East Javanese horse dance pageant *reyog*, the cultivation of *reyog* in its original form, with all its rough, aggressive vigour, by local communities in dispute with the government provides a strengthened sense of identity and a vital symbol of resistance (Wilson, 1999).

POLITICS, CHANGE AND JAVANESE THEATRE TRADITION

Combative, political roles of performance surely did not originate with New Order culturalisation policies, displacing politics to culture. In Java, and in Indonesia more generally, display of power and exertion of political influence through theatrical, ritual events has a long and well-charted history. It constitutes a key theme in the extensive literature on wayang shadow theatre, illustrating its status as the most iconic of Javanese art forms. Drawing on Javanese discourse, Western social scientists view wayang as the embodiment of a hegemonic, aristocratic ideology emphasising social hierarchy, refinement and concentration of political and spiritual power (Geertz, 1960; Anderson, 1966). Ward Keeler, analysing structural correspondences between wayang and the overall experience of being Javanese, shows how wayang gives expression to the everyday 'politics' of authority relations in family and community (Keeler, 1987). Laurie Sears challenges the notion of a single hegemonic wayang tradition. She argues that Javanese aristocrats and Dutch administrators/scholars promoted a construct of wayang as a refined court art, imbued with Hindu-Buddhist philosophy, suppressing Islamic-influenced elements and village variants (Sears, 1996). Sears' picture of an alternate village tradition of wayang, distinct from that of the courts, is echoed in Richard Curtis' contemporary account of a distinct *wong cilik* appreciation of wayang's humorous clown interludes and dramatic battles, as opposed to the aesthetic, philosophical and ritual aspects of the performance (Curtis, 1997).

The mobilisation of wayang by political parties in the 1950s and 1960s, and its use by the state to convey propaganda messages both in Sukarno times and under the New Order, has been widely documented (Mc Vey, 1986; Groenendaal, 1985). Late-1990s wayang as described by Jan Mrazek — commoditised spectacles with coloured lights, multiple screens and famous comedians and glamorous singers sharing the limelight with puppeteers, who themselves sing, dance and appear as "guest stars" on television (Mrazek 1999, 2000) — seems

more involved with global media trends than local social and political conditions. Yet Mrazek's recent (2002) edited volume of articles on wayang abounds with cases of performances intimately connected with their local context, asserting East Javanese cultural identity vis-à-vis homogenising Central Javanese models, for example, or bringing communities together in social healing after the 1998 Solo riots.⁵

Such studies provide ample evidence of wayang engaging with issues of power and other aspects of its current social context, and playing an ongoing role in the construction of social meaning through theatre. However, partly because wayang has been so widely investigated by others, I have chosen to explore this phenomenon through two other theatre genres, ketoprak popular melodrama and modern Indonesian-language theatre (*teater*). My choice has been motivated, moreover, by an interest in the particular ways in which ketoprak and teater relate to Javanese theatre tradition. Both their collaborative, group-based mode of production and their approach in interpreting Javanese theatrical conventions and symbols connect these forms particularly closely with their social contexts and with wider processes of change.

Javanese theatre forms, I suggest, draw on a shared store of dramatic images — character types, interactions, settings — which are presented and perceived in accordance with the conventions of the specific genre, the circumstances of production of particular performances and the interests of certain groups. Such imagery has an ambiguous, multi-faceted quality, allowing for varied interpretation and potential contestation of the 'world view' expressed there. Rather than separate styles of performance cultivated by different social constituencies, I posit a more fluid picture. To view 'normative' wayang as the creation of court aristocrats and Dutch officials and, similarly, to see this process reproduced in the domination by New Order bureaucrats of 'traditional' Javanese cultural practices (Pemberton, 1994), overestimates the hegemonic role of elite groups, denying agency to others. Village and kampung audience members, in my experience, appreciate far more of wayang performances than simply the spectacular fighting sequences and clown humour. Many are deeply knowledgeable about wayang's philosophical and aesthetic aspects, understood in spiritual terms rather than connection with aristocratic values and practices. Theatrical symbols can convey a diverse range of meanings. A telling example is cited by Marc Perlman, the case of a court dance drama devised in the early twentieth century by radical nationalist Tjipto Mangunkusumo with the aim of critiquing the policies of the Solo court. As Perlman observes,

“the tradition provides rhetorical resources for criticism of authority as well as reinforcement” (Perlman, 1999: 25).

New genres define their mode of social reference in distinction to that of older theatre forms. Ketoprak and teater both appeared in the early twentieth century as part of the transformative changes taking place in Indonesia at that time — intensified urbanisation, European influence and emergent nationalist politics — and are marked by that history. Ketoprak is characterised by its practitioners as straightforward in expression, referring literally to the here-and-now, in contrast to the figurative, allusive (*pasemon*) nature of wayang. Its language is seen as direct, not complex and circuitous. It is also described as “about governance” (*pemerintahan*) — its stories of conflict between historical kingdoms are seen to have explicit political meaning rather than symbolising moral and spiritual struggles or cosmic principles like the battles of wayang. Ketoprak conveyed populist political ideology in the 1950s and early 1960s when many groups were aligned with the Communist movement. After the transition to the New Order its political connections and reference dramatically changed. Teater, originating from contact with Western drama and using the national language, Indonesian, belongs to the domain of modern Indonesian culture, not the tradition of Javanese theatre. Teater is therefore able to draw on the familiar images of Javanese theatre free of the constraints of traditional theatrical convention. Blatant satirising of this imagery along with subversion of the ideological concepts it encodes has been one of the chief attractions for politically critical modern theatre actors and their audiences.

Both ketoprak and teater engage with Javanese tradition with an explicitly contemporary focus. The way performances are organised and staged likewise connects them closely with their social environment. In ketoprak performances, often celebrating a community social event, actors improvise dialogue reflecting on shared social experience and mentioning topical local issues. Modern theatre groups employing written scripts have less opportunity for improvisation; however, in organising their own largely amateur activities rather than depending on elite patrons, they can refer more boldly to current political issues.

The following account of theatre and change in Yogyakarta begins with ketoprak in the 1970s. Opening chapters describe how ketoprak was

appropriated by and accommodated to the New Order government, while continuing to give expression to the experiences and perspectives of its lower-class, village and kampung participants. Chapter Four traces the development, from the late 1970s onwards, of a new style of theatre, performed and watched largely by students and other educated youth. Modern Indonesian-language plays drawing on Javanese "tradition" are seen to provide an outlet for the critical political views of its participants to reflect on their mixed Javanese/Indonesian sense of self.

In the 1990s the forces of commercialisation and globalisation, combining with ongoing authoritarian political control, presented both challenges and new opportunities for theatre. As performance genres blended in commoditised spectacles, practitioners of *ketoprak* and *teater* collaborated to stage huge stage events combining global cultural imagery with local political reference. Chapter Five explores the resonance of these shows for their largely young, urban, middle-class audiences. In the late 1990s, as the opposition towards the Suharto regime grew, performance activities thrived in the atmosphere of heightened politicisation.

The post-New Order period, covered in the final three chapters, presents many uncertainties. In the immediate post-Suharto years, performance activity declined under the combined impact of economic crisis and political instability. Identity and ideology could now be expressed directly rather than being displaced to the field of cultural display. Theatre's role in voicing shared political critique faded with the dispersal of the anti-Suharto opposition movement. Yet since 2003 the Yogyakarta theatre scene has become livelier, as performances engage with the politics of regional autonomy and democratisation and convey varying reassessments of "Javanese tradition". Diversity thrives, in theatre as elsewhere in contemporary Indonesian society, resisting the notion of general trends. But one possibility is a degree of re-creation of *ketoprak* as a populist, participatory form, encouraged by democratic ideology and devolved administrative structures. Another is the spread, albeit contested, of more inclusive gender attitudes, and the participation of strong, talented women.

1

Yogyakarta in the 1970s — Communities, Performances, History

Yogyakarta in the mid- to late 1970s was a diverse, dynamic city. A court centre steeped in tradition, it was also thoroughly wired into the modern nation through its history as the centre of nationalist struggle in the war of independence of the late 1940s and its current role as educational capital of the nation. Its distinctive spatial formation, with particular areas associated with specific social groups and cultural activities, gave expression to this rich history and contemporary diversity. This chapter outlines the physical and socio-cultural landscape of Yogyakarta in the 1970s and locates the popular melodrama *ketoprak* as a cultural form explicitly associated with the inhabitants of the *kampung*, the crowded neighbourhoods between the city streets, defined by themselves and others as *wong cilik* or underclass. It explores the origins and meanings of the identification between *ketoprak* and the *wong cilik* social group by giving an overview of *ketoprak*'s history of development and mode of practice in the 1970s.

SPACE AND PLACE IN THE 1970s

The legacy of Yoga's founding as the royal capital of the kingdom of Ngayogyakarta by Sultan Hamengkubuwono I in 1756, and its functioning as a powerful court centre, lived on in the 1970s in the large area in the southern part of the city taken up by the palace (*kraton*) and its surrounds. Within the remains of palace walls were the former residences of retainers and troops, also workshops making batik cloth

Performances staged routinely as commercial shows and for community entertainment continued to follow established patterns, reflecting the social and theatrical influences that had shaped ketoprak's development and giving expression to the experiences and attitudes of actors and viewers. Yet these familiar shows also contained novel elements, suggesting the responses of ordinary citizens to their changing social environment. To see how this process worked, and how reactions to new influences blended with ongoing social reference, it is necessary to look more closely at the way performances were constructed. The next chapter shows how individual stories were played out through a framework of stage conventions characteristic of ketoprak as a theatre form and suggests how those conventions reflected aspects of the world beyond the stage.

2

Theatre Conventions and Social Meanings

At the upgradings, seminars and competitions of the 1970s, defining the main features of ketoprak form was an issue of some contention. 'Progressive' bureaucrats and educationalists promoted their vision of ketoprak as modern drama, characterised by linear plots and psychological realism, while experts in traditional music and classical dance applied aesthetic concepts from older art forms. Active practitioners of ketoprak explicitly denied any fixed body of dramatic rules like those governing other forms of Javanese theatre such as wayang and classical dance, which are marked by stylised patterns of speech and characterisation (*pathokan*). Instead, they described ketoprak as 'natural' (*wajar*). Its speech style was seen as direct and straightforward, as opposed to the elaborate language of wayang, its reference 'realistic' (*realistis*) rather than symbolic.¹ Its very lack of fixed form demanded considerable skill from actors, who could not simply follow fixed patterns but had to be capable of continuous improvisation.

Such comments are highly revealing of ketoprak's self-image and the way it was shaped by influences from various directions. Ketoprak as a Yogyakarta-based form was identified with the hegemonic image of Yogyakarta culture as *lugu*, meaning 'straightforward' or 'unaffected', as opposed to the showier, sophisticated cultural style of the rival court city of Solo. By distancing ketoprak from the intricate patterns of court art and asserting its directness and spontaneity, the actors may have been asserting a pride in the plain strength of the 'little man', reflecting the populist, socialist ideology that had previously been strong among ketoprak troupes then. Talk of realism and spontaneity was reinforced with statements about ketoprak's reference to actual historical events,

in contrast to the mythological and symbolic resonance of wayang. Developing along with and as part of the emerging modern Indonesian state and society, ketoprak seems to have become associated with secular modern perspectives rather than traditional spiritual symbolism.

The notion of 'realistic' reference supports the suggestion of links between the ketoprak stage and social experience. Ketoprak actors did not explicitly discuss how such reference was conveyed through performances, yet what they did in preparing for and staging a show illustrated the operation of clear dramatic patterns. Such patterns continue to order conventional ketoprak performances and are invoked in varying ways in experimental shows. Thus the following description is expressed in the present rather than the past tense.

STAGING A KETOPRAK PERFORMANCE

As actors gather to prepare for a performance — just an hour or so before the show for experienced professionals, at the first of several rehearsals in the case of inexperienced amateurs — the first step is the choice of story (*lakon*). The next is the drawing up of a list of scenes through which the particular lakon will be played out. Scenes in standard locations and marked by particular kinds of interaction form a kind of grid through which every lakon is interpreted. The director of the troupe often chalks the scene list on one half of a blackboard and a list of characters and the actors allocated these parts on the other. Then he runs through the scenes one by one, summarising the action in each scene while the assembled actors listen attentively. On the basis of these instructions, often lasting only 15 or 20 minutes, experienced actors draw on the standard patterns of interaction of each scene to improvise an entire show. During the performance the scene list, placed in the wings, is consulted frequently by actors confirming their times of appearance and by stagehands in charge of setting up backdrops and moving props. A copy is given to the leader of the gamelan orchestra, seated at the front or side of the stage.² The list thus constitutes the single common reference point for the show.

In each of these scenes, codes of theatrical representation — patterns of dress, makeup, speech, gesture, spatial distance between characters, scenery, musical accompaniment — work together to project familiar images of character, interaction and location. Theatre semioticians have illustrated the way in which stage codes and conventions are grounded in and linked together by cultural codes and ideological conceptions

pertaining to the world outside the theatre (Elam, 1980). General cultural rules of dress, for example, allow audience members to interpret stage costumes in terms of differences of status, age and personality between characters. In each of the standard scene types of ketoprak, stage codes and conventions can be seen to evoke particular areas of social experience for their performers and audience members.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the repertoire of ketoprak includes stories set in a wide range of geographical locations and historical periods, signified by distinct modes of dress. In keeping with ketoprak's putatively 'realistic' quality and its capacity to embrace the new, the authentic costume style of each story type should be reproduced whenever possible, the unfamiliar and exotic marked and celebrated.³ Yet as these stories from foreign sources are played out through the pattern of standard scenes, a process of domestication and incorporation within a recognised, familiar world takes place.

The scenes and their interactions show clear parallels with other forms of Javanese theatre, particularly wayang. However, each ketoprak performance contains a slightly different mix of scenes, their order determined by the events of the particular story as well as concern for dramatic effect, rather than by fixed rules as in the wayang tradition. A minimal group of scenes appears in every performance — two types of palace audience, referred to on the scene list as "refined court" (*[kra]ton alus*) and "strong court" (*'ton gagah*), or by the names of specific kingdoms identified with these qualities; fight scenes; designated battle (*perang*) or forest battle (*alas perang*) scenes; clowning interludes, referred to as *dalan gecul* (literally 'impudent, cheeky [scene on the road]'); and garden (*taman*) scenes, the site of love scenes and other male-female encounters.

1. Court Audience Type a) — the 'Ton Alus

The standard opening for ketoprak performances is a gathering of officials before their king in a palace audience scene (*jejeran*), like the opening scenes in wayang and other forms of Javanese theatre. Professional troupes sometimes open with a brief, dramatic sequence anticipating a thrilling incident in the action to come — a battle, a stealthy theft, a dramatic murder — or recalling an exciting event of the previous night's performance. This theatrical device, modelled on the opening credits in films and television shows, is immediately followed by the standard commencement of performances in a royal audience hall.



Figure 1 Director of Wringin Dahono troupe instructing actors before the show, using a blackboard with a scene list.



Figure 2 Pak Siswondho of Siswo Budoyo with notepad briefing performers.



Figure 3 Pak Sis giving some additional instructions.



Figure 4 Pak Muji, director of Sapta Mandala, playing the keprak in the wings.

Its function is to excite the interest of the crowd and hopefully sustain it through the slower-moving scene that follows. Most often the scene takes place in a *'ton alus*, a refined court.

Slow and stately music establishes the *alus* and *agung* (exalted, august) atmosphere of the scene. Other theatrical codes of costume, speech, gesture and spatial arrangement reinforce this picture. Costumes are imposing in their rich fabrics and glittering decoration and refined in their fine patterns and subtle colours. Brown limbs and torsos are coated with yellow makeup to produce a lighter skin colour considered more refined; weather-darkened faces are powdered and rouged, eyes outlined in black to create the glamorous and imposing visages of king and courtier. The king and queen sit on thrones at the right side of the stage. The prime minister (*patih*), the highest-ranking official, sits facing them at an extended distance, with courtiers and military officials sitting cross-legged behind him. Those of lowest rank, the common soldiers at the back, and the female servants at the foot of the thrones, crowd close together. Physical distance, both vertical and horizontal, signifies difference of social rank.

Gesture and speech mark the difference of status between ruler and ruled and the nature of the relationship between them. The lowered gaze of the courtiers and their gestures of obeisance — *sembah* (head bowed, palms together, thumbs against nose in a prayer-like pose) — as they address their lord, signal both subordinate status and loyal homage. The gestures of the monarch towards his officials suggest both dominance and benevolence as he extends his right arm, held rigid in a chopping motion or stretched out in an expansive, inclusive curve, to add emphasis to his words of command, information or encouragement. While the courtiers express their respect and devotion in elevated high Javanese (*krama*), the king speaks down to them in the familiar, low-level register (*ngoko*).⁴

In a formulaic exchange of greetings the monarch asks the officials whether they have performed their duties properly and whether all is well in the realm. They respond positively. Then the discussion takes on a more specific focus. The Prime Minister may reveal that there is a rebel who refuses to accept the king's authority. The king may raise a matter that has been troubling him, or announce an intended course of action. A messenger may arrive with dramatic news. As the king asks for explanation or advice concerning the issue in question, the *patih* and other officials weigh in with their views. Such discussions of affairs of state have a distinctive style. Speakers employ a serious,

reasoning tone, with an oddly chopped intonation as individual phrases are separated by brief pauses. It is as if interlocutors are being given opportunity to take in the import of the speaker's words, while he himself draws breath to formulate his next utterance. While the style of enunciation is general, differences of speech level continue to mark the distinction between monarch and officials, ruler and ruled.

On the basis of this discussion the king decides on the action to be taken, often the dispatch of one or more envoys to convey a message to a rebellious territory or hostile foreign state. Action now moves away from the central kraton, which has been defined by its theatrical codes as a locus of calm, order and clearly defined social hierarchy. Such codes have likewise built up conventional patterns of characterisation — of benevolent, dignified lord and loyal, respectful officials and soldiers.

2. Court Audiences Type b) — the 'Ton Gagah

The *'ton gagah* or strong, bold palace forms the mirror image of the refined court just described. It is introduced by fast, lively gamelan music with forceful drumming and hearty male singing, conveying a suggestion of strength and masculine vigour, which is reinforced by visual and verbal markers as the action commences.

In stories set in mythical, pre-Islamic times, the setting is the palace of a foreign king, ogre-like in appearance. He and his courtiers, like demon figures in wayang wong dance drama, have bare torsos, red and black painted faces, fangs and long tangled hair, and speak in roaring tones. The focus of the discussion is often the king's desire to marry the queen or princess of the alus kingdom. He may order a party of envoys to depart immediately with his proposal of marriage. Alternatively, a delegation dispatched earlier with such a proposal may return with news of its rejection. This provokes an outburst of apoplectic fury, and the king rushes offstage, to do battle with those who have insulted him and to take the princess by force. The action accords with codes of gesture and speech that signify the king's passion, ferocity and lack of self-control.

In stories of the time of Demak and Mataram, within the period of 'factual', recorded history, the denizen of the *'ton gagah* is generally the head of a territory on the periphery of the alus kingdom. This area is considered by the central kraton as within its domain but by the local lord as an autonomous region. The lord sits facing his courtiers, red-faced, legs wide apart, a hand on each knee, looking about him with



Figure 5 Pak Sis in his finery as alus king, just before the commencement of the Siswo Budoyo show.



Figure 6 Alus king in a village performance.



Figure 7 Courtier at an Independence Day show performs a sembah gesture to alus king.



Figure 8 Alus prince emphasises a point in addressing his court.

a bold, forthright gaze. Codes of gesture and expression define him as rough (*brasak*) or hot-tempered, passionate and brutal (*brangasan*). His men, though respectful, are less formal and restrained in demeanour than their counterparts in the alus kraton. They do not sit in a hierarchical line but bunched together at their leader's feet. Codes of appearance suggest relative equality and bold vigour. Their faces are ruddy red, with thick black moustaches and eyebrows.

As he talks, loudly and forcefully, the regional lord twirls his moustache, turns his head to look around the stage, often throwing back his head to laugh loudly at some particularly pleasing report or at one of his own jokes. His followers speak somewhat more assertively than the alus courtiers of the previous scene, with fewer elaborate constructions. The chief issue is, of course, the dispute with the central kraton. The regional leader presents his case, an alternate viewpoint to that of the alus court. His voice often rises in anger at the thought of the injustice of the king's demands. The reason for refusing to acknowledge the authority of the centre may be that he is of an older royal line than the upstart central king, or that the people of his area should be allowed to use their resources for their own needs rather than having to pay tribute to the central court.

A party of envoys from the central court arrives. Initial greetings are cordial, but when the visitors deliver the message that the regional leader must demonstrate his loyalty by appearing at the central palace, he vehemently refuses to comply. He challenges the envoys to a fight outside on the town square (*alun-alun*). Even in a 'ton gagah, physical combat should never take place inside a kraton audience hall with its connotations of order and stability. The envoys accept the challenge. Everyone rushes from the stage to frenetic beating on the wooden slit drum (*keprak*), used to signal scene changes and mark dramatic moments. Loud gamelan music reinforces the mood of mounting excitement.

3. Battle Scenes — Alas Perang

Battles are an indispensable ingredient in any show, its chief attraction for many young male performers and audience members. The two sides may have already met, as in the scene described above, or they may encounter one another by accident on their travels in a forest, indicated by a painted backdrop of dark trees and curling vines. In the case of accidental encounter the two parties must first discover one another's identity. Codes of dress and demeanour distinguish the alus kraton party from the red-faced denizens of the 'ton gagah.



Figure 9 Demon king sends his men off to do battle.



Figure 10 Demon king, mortally wounded in battle, surrounded by his men.



Figure 11 Brangasan leader explains reasons for his rebellion against the central kingdom.



Figure 12 Two bold, moustachioed figures in a 'ton gagah scene.

The alus party may be led by a particularly handsome, sumptuously dressed and beautifully made-up young man, the male star of the troupe, referred to variously as the *rol* (from Dutch *hoofdrol* or "main role", seemingly borrowed from Stamboel), *peranan* (from *peranan utama*, Indonesian translation of the Dutch term) or *bambangan*, a wayang term for the young knight who battles demons in the forest in a wayang performance.

Verbal codes reinforce visual ones as the prospective combatants begin to converse. The regional lord and his soldiers employ a gruffer and more abrupt tone than the party from the central kraton. When it becomes clear that a fight is looming, they are the first to switch speech levels, from polite *krama* to aggressive *ngoko*, signalling a change of mood and intent. The two parties retreat to the wings at opposite sides of the stage as the gamelan plays loudly and furiously. The actors then reappear, pair by pair, in ascending order of military rank and fighting skill, all engaging in the same basic combat style. They first circle one another, knees bent, hands raised to deliver a chopping blow, then leap and somersault in the air, uttering stylised grunts with each strike, combining movements of the indigenous Malay/Indonesian self-defence form *silat* with techniques derived from other forms of Asian martial arts.⁵ Youths who have already worked out a routine together wait in lines in the wings on either side of the stage to come on as a pair. As they wait, they signal moves to one another with their hands.⁶ Last of the series of combatants to appear are the star fighters of the troupe, who put on a particularly impressive display. After this it is time for the climax of the scene, the meeting of the two leaders.

Here the alus "hero" confronts his opponent in a matched contest of strength and vigour. There is no question here, as in wayang battles, of the alus hero warding off brute force with deft, delicate gestures, signifying superior *spiritual* strength. This fight, if not quite as skilled and acrobatic as the expert display preceding it, should nevertheless be hard-fought and energetic, maintaining the momentum and excitement of the battle. So the actor playing the leading role, though clearly defined as of a refined of character, should also be physically robust and a good fighter.⁷

4. The Clown Scene — *Dalan Gecul*

The scenes so far discussed, audiences in rival courts and battles between them, employ theatrical codes grounded in Javanese understandings of political power and social order as well as contemporary images of



Figure 13 Alus king confronts rural rebel.



Figure 14 King and courtier from rival kingdoms battle.



Figure 15 Independence Day performance depicts nationalist struggle.



Figure 16 Fighting with kris and sword.

manly strength and valour. In the midst of these scenes, however, there occurs an encounter where these codes and the cultural understandings they draw upon are playfully subverted — the clowning interlude.

Before the curtain rises, a bright and lively children's song (*lagu dolanan*) signals the imminent arrival of the clowns and a buzz of excited anticipation runs through the audience in response. The curtain rises on a plain cloth backdrop or occasionally on painted forest trees, scenic markers indicating no particular location, merely somewhere 'along the way'. After a moment two figures dance in from opposite sides of the stage. Their appearance is odd in some way — both are grossly fat, or one is fat, the other skinny and slight.⁸ They are attired in either a plainer version of the costume style of the main characters in the lakon or contemporary village-style Javanese dress. Their physical characteristics connote humorous ungainliness; their costumes signify low status and village connection. At the end of the scene, when their master appears, their identity is revealed as that of servants to the handsome, noble hero. Up until this point they are simply anonymous jokesters.

Codes of movement, speech and gesture in this scene underline the marginality of these two figures to the social order so far portrayed. Whereas in palace audience scenes spatial distance between courtiers indicates their differing rank, the constant bodily proximity of the clowns — arms round one another's shoulders in camaraderie, one slapping the other on the back or digging him in the ribs to emphasise a point — suggest equality and intimacy. In speech, both use basic, uninflected *ngoko*, suggestive of familiarity and equality of status. Their utterances are marked by wildly varying intonation patterns, in contrast to the even tones of refined figures — crowing cackles of delight at outwitting the other; abandoned howls of dismay when angered or upset. And there is much physical roughhouse — pinching, punching and kicking in retaliation for a trick; removing the partner's hat or picking his pocket when he is not looking. The overall ambience is one of equality, intimacy, earthy directness and crudity, lacking emotional restraint.

Actors stress the spontaneity of these clown interludes, free of stereotypical modes of interaction and exchanges of dialogue. Yet amid this freedom there are identifiable patterns. Almost always there is singing and dancing, often in response to audience requests. Little parcels shower the stage — presents of cigarettes, sweets, clothes, sometimes money, accompanied by letters requesting songs. The clowns duck to escape flying missiles, then open their arms to solicit more.

The letters are read in garbled fashion and the contents of the packages pocketed, stacked for later distribution or flung into the wings to other performers. Very frequently the clowns stage some kind of show, such as a competition, an excerpt from another dramatic genre or role-play. Here their marginality to dominant codes is extended into deliberate parody.

Competitions usually centre on language, tests of skill in language forms considered by village and kampung Javanese as prestigious but difficult to reproduce. These include high Javanese, the national language taught in schools, Indonesian, and the language of modernity and global outreach, English. One tricks the other by asking for high Javanese equivalents of low-level words for which no high form exists. The latter applies standard rules to concoct preposterous inventions. Javanese/Indonesian homonyms confuse both clowns hopelessly; English words are mispronounced in such a way as to resemble Javanese expressions and interpreted accordingly. The clowns' foolish bungling evokes laughter. Yet there is also playful suggestion of the richness and breadth of *ngoko* Javanese, the familiar and comfortable everyday tongue of performers and the audience. High Javanese is revealed by comparison as limited in scope, stiff and artificial, while the newfangled languages of Indonesian and English have seemingly adopted much of their vocabulary from Javanese.

The dramatic excerpt presented is often a fragment of *wayang wong* dance drama. Favourite scenes are the formal court audience and the battle between the refined knight and his demon opponent. In each case farcical humour derives from the incongruity of the casting. Bumbling clowns in their humble village attire act out the parts of king and courtier; in the battle fragment a hugely fat female clown may dance the part of the delicate and refined satria, Arjuna, while a skinny, *woebegone* actor plays the crude and volatile fanged monster, Cakil. The characteristics of performers clash bizarrely with the codes of physical appearance, gesture, movement and speech by which these dramatic figures are usually portrayed. Then, in a further assault on theatrical convention, the performers exchange roles.

Acting out the parts of king and courtier provides plenty of opportunity for shrewd subversion of the conventions of encounter between ruler and ruled. 'Accidental' blunders, offensive to the superior figure, are common. In place of the standard words of a courtier to his king asking for pardon for any unintended errors of expression, the clown playing the underling may state airily to his companion in an

impersonation of the lord, “*menawi atur kula lepat panjenengan kula paringi aksami*” [If I should say something wrong, I extend to you my forgiveness.] Then the ‘lord’, hearing a sound behind him suggesting that someone else has entered the stage, without turning around gives the order “*Balia! Aja ngganggu suasana!*” [Go away! Don’t disturb the atmosphere!] The other clown, facing the new arrival, stares in horror and makes frantic warning signals. The audience roars with mirth. But his companion blithely continues, until finally he turns and almost collapses with mortification. For the new arrival is none other than his master, catching the clowns in the act of parodying the relationship of master and servant — their relationship to him.

The prince, who until this point has stood by, silently looking on, may mildly rebuke his servants for their cheekiness or, on occasion, get caught up in their banter. Then he informs them of the mission which he has been instructed to carry out and announces that it is time to depart. At the close of the scene the servants exit with their lord in the manner of the clown/servants (*punakawan*) in wayang, reappearing frequently in the course of subsequent events. They cause disruption in palace audiences with their ignorance of court etiquette; they participate with little military skill but much slapstick humour in their master’s battles; they parody his wooing of a royal lady by making lewd advances to the lady’s elephantine maidservant.

Aspects of the mode of interaction of the clowns appear in other encounters between low status figures such as soldiers, bandits, students of a religious teacher and villagers. Here too, codes of gesture and speech connote intimacy and equality, as characters sit chatting in low Javanese, or huddle, heads together, sharing a secret or conspiring over a plan. One favourite location of direct, informal communication is the village home. Such homes come in two types — an *omah bubrah* (literally “broken down home”), indicated by a backdrop of rattan walls with a single hanging cooking pot, and an *omah perkutut*, a comfortable house with the cages of *perkutut*, singing birds, visible through a large window.

5. Love Scenes — Adegan Kaputrèn/Adegan Taman

Love encounters between noble sweethearts usually take place in the palace garden or women’s apartments, and are labelled accordingly on the scene list as *adegan taman* (garden scene) or *adegan kaputrèn* (scene in the women’s quarters). As the scene commences, joyful flowing gamelan music signifies a romantic mood. A noble lady is seen conversing with



Figure 17 The famed Siswo Budoyo clowns, Jogelo and Jorono.



Figure 18 Comic maidservant puts male clown in his place.

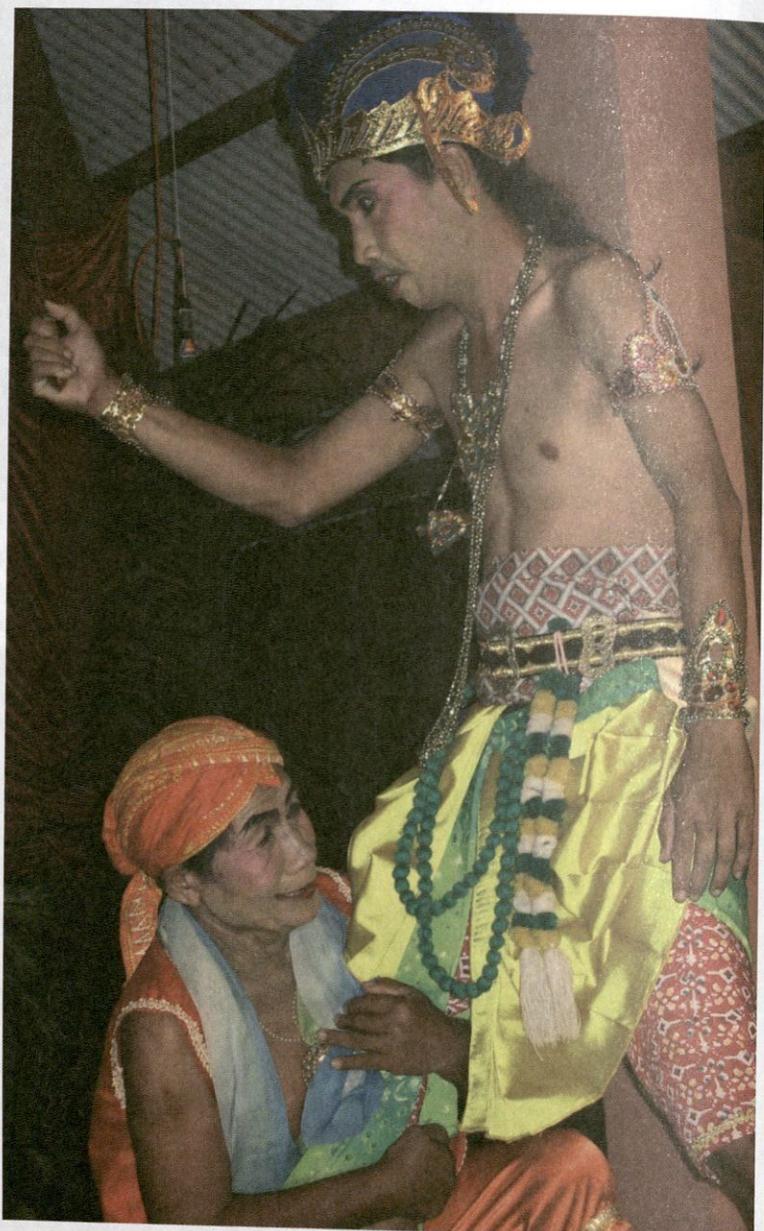


Figure 19 Servants maintain peace in the kingdom by restraining their masters from fighting.

Fig

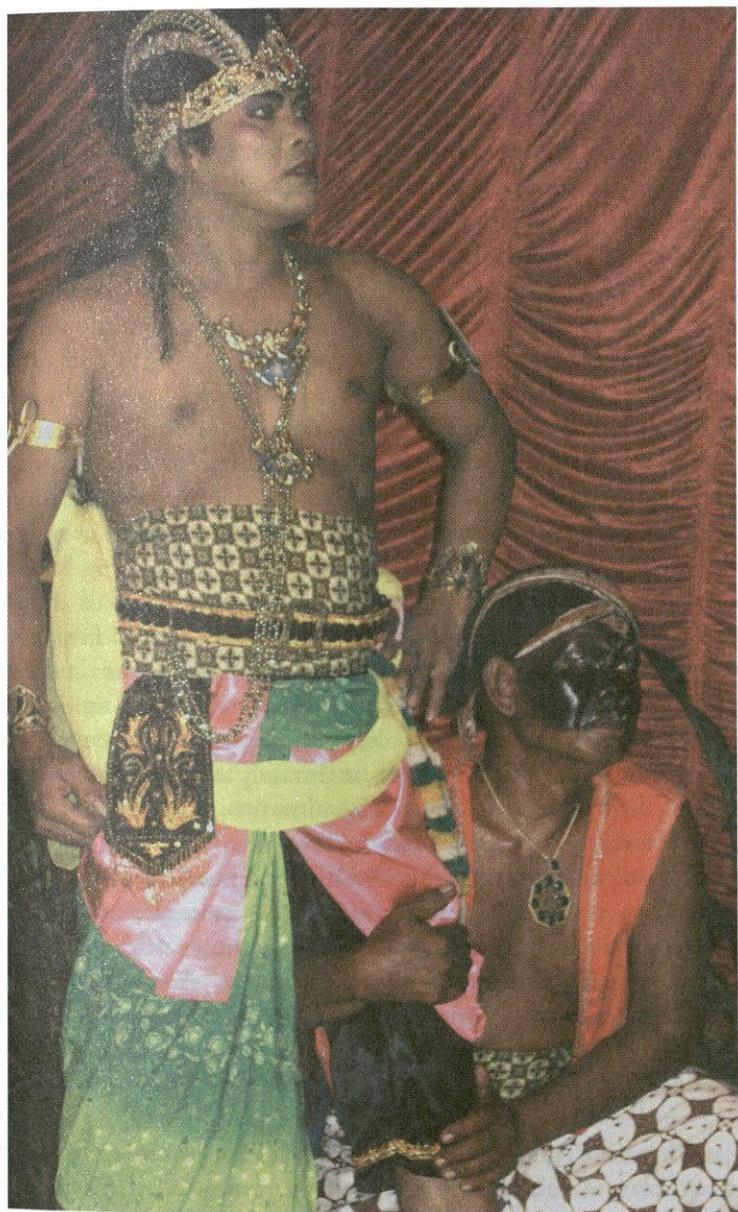


Figure 20 Another scene of servants restraining their masters.

her maid, who later sings and dances to entertain her mistress. Codes of physical appearance, dress and speech style mark the character type of the lady — either *luruh* (refined and demure), with an even-toned, somewhat plaintive voice and delicately coloured costume, or *branyak/kenès* (spirited, assertive and flirtatious), with an animated manner and sharp, staccato speech, dressed in brighter colours. Differences of rank between the lady and her companion are signified spatially, visually and verbally. The glamorous lady reclines on a chair or bench; the maid, plain-faced and plainly dressed, often comically fat, kneels at her feet. The maid addresses her mistress in respectful *krama* while the latter speaks in *ngoko*.

Yet the tone of their exchange is warm and intimate, punctuated by jokes and laughter, suggestive of a close, companionable relationship. Gestural codes signify friendly intimacy: the lady gives the maid a playful tap to emphasize a joking remark, or the maid places a consoling arm about the lady's shoulders when her mistress appears troubled. Frequently the problem concerns a man — a husband, a lover, the prince of a neighbouring kingdom. If the lady laments the long absence of her husband or the lateness of a sweetheart in arriving for a tryst, the maid often advises her to forget him — “men are all the same”, she says, “always open to distraction by another pretty face.” At this there may be derisive shouts from young men in the audience or muttered grumbles of *gombal* (rubbish). Eventually the man in question arrives, announced by a burst of *keprak* beating. A husband or long-term sweetheart is received warmly, intimately or sometimes with edgy coldness; if, however, he is a new acquaintance, the pair first greet one another in correct, formal fashion.

The smooth, soft tones and elevated speech levels of the two figures suggest noble refinement and a polite mutual respect, which is somewhat at odds with their physical demeanour. While their elegant costumes indicate high status and refinement, the snug fit of their clothes, outlining a manly torso and curvaceous female figure, together with skillfully highlighted eyes and voluptuously drawn mouths, radiate sexual allure. While they converse, codes of facial expression — the dazzling smiles of the handsome hero, the shy blushes of the refined lady or flirtatious glances and repartee of her assertive counterpart — set up an undercurrent of sexual attraction beneath the surface of their verbal pleasantries. Excitement builds as audience members wait for the moment of acknowledgment, when the couple will declare their love for one another.

When the gamelan orchestra plays a few soft notes, and the man begins to sing, the audience whoops and whistles with delight, for this song constitutes the standard signifier in ketoprak of amorous intent, leading on to intimate touching and declarations of affection. Musical codes are redolent with sensuality. As the man advances with extended arms in a gesture labelled *gandrung* (impassioned), and the woman slowly retreats, the couple's movements connote male sexual initiative and female reticence. Yet eventually the woman begins to sing in response. A change of speech codes, a shift by the man to the intimate ngoko speech level, signals the couple's newfound intimacy.

When the man declares his love for the lady, she may ask for assurances of his serious intent: he responds with fervent pledges of devotion. Sometimes one of them may assert that love and marriage between them are impossible because of differences in their background and status. There follows a standard response, expressed in very similar wording in all performances: "Love does not depend on position and status, wealth or poverty. What is important is that we love one another." (*Tresna menika mboten gumantung dhateng drajat lan pangkat, sugih utawa miskin. Ingkang baku menika tresna lan tresna.*) Soon the reluctant lover is convinced. The couple then talks of their future life together, of building a harmonious family and having children. The rhetorical tone and formal construction of these statements convey a sense of seriousness and virtuous intent. As these words are spoken, the sweethearts stand intimately close, holding hands and gazing into one another's eyes. Codes of gesture and facial expression signify warmth, intimacy, sexual attraction and affection.

Before long the fond encounter is interrupted. The lady's maid may return from the kitchen where she had previously retired to make tea, the prince's servants may arrive making cheeky comments, or outraged parents burst in with demands for explanation. Or the sweethearts themselves may bring the meeting to a close with tender farewells and promises to meet again soon.

6. Constrasting Types of Male-Female Encounter

Amorous encounters can take other forms and in different locations, in keeping with the events of the particular lakon. A common motif is the attempted seduction of the woman by an unwelcome suitor. An ogre king may attempt to abduct from her bedroom the princess of his crazed fancy; a royal minister may take advantage of the king's

absence to make advances to his queen; an old and trusted teacher expresses his passion for a female pupil a fraction of his age. As the pursuit commences, codes of gesture and facial expression signify the man's lecherous predation and the woman's horrified recoil. The man advances, knees bent, feet wide apart, arms outstretched and curved in an arc, in an exaggerated and menacing version of the impassioned *gandrung* gesture described earlier. He attempts to encircle the lady, leering suggestively in between phrases of his passionate love song, sometimes breaking into a crazy cackle of anticipatory delight. The lady backs away, her facial expression a picture of amazement and repugnance, weaving about the stage in order to evade his grasp. A gentle, refined figure will protest politely in *krama* that, "I don't yet wish to marry (literally 'serve') any man." [*Kula dèrèng remen ngladosi satunggal ing priya.*] As her pursuer persists in his protestations of love, proposals of marriage and attempts to grab her, she implores him to *éling* (literally 'remember, be aware'), to recover his composure, remember his station. An assertive heroine, after recovering from her initial shock, will roundly chastise her would-be suitor for sullyng the honour of his position and presuming upon her womanly rights. As the man blusters about his power, wealth and high station and may threaten to use force, both refined and assertive ladies are firm in their response: "Living together in marriage is not something that can be forced. It must be based on mutual love." [*Tiyang bebrayan menika mboten kénging dipun peksa. Kedah lelandhesan tresna lan tresna.*]

For the audience there is great excitement in the sexual tension and menace of such scenes. Young men respond with shouts and whistles and occasional cries of "Pick her up! Carry her off!" [*Dibopong waé!*] Players, too, often treat such scenes as a pleurably exciting game. A middle-aged professional actor, appearing as a guest star in an amateur performance, gleefully pursued the 'princess', acted by the teenage daughter of his neighbour, to the girl's quite genuine discomfiture and alarm. A more experienced amateur actress, reporting to a friend on a performance she had recently been involved in, was heard to boast, "I was *digandrungi* (passionately pursued) five times!" The frowning, troubled expressions of women audience members and their clucks of sympathetic concern for the beleaguered heroine, indicate a different response. They react strongly to the codes of the scene, which mark the male figure as lustful, selfish and cruel, while presenting his victim as innocent and virtuous, voicing approved sentiments about love and marriage.

The lady is never actually forced to submit to the amorous advances of her pursuer but at the last moment is either rescued or manages to escape, running off into the forest with the man following. She may appear in a following scene, alone against a backdrop of sinister dark trees, kneeling with her head bowed, sometimes with her baby in her arms, in tearful, plaintive tones lamenting her fate. The gamelan plays melancholy music. Here the stage setting, plus codes of gesture, speech and music, all work together to create a pitiful picture of wronged and suffering womanhood. Apart from unwelcome male pursuit, other causes of the lady's lonely, frightening sojourn in the wilds might be abandonment by a now wealthy and prominent husband, or a husband's belief in the evil slanders of a rival wife.

On occasion the opposite situation occurs, when a virtuous man or men suffer at the hands of a scheming and heartless woman. Such figures represent a variant of the assertive character type described as *sarak* (literally 'wicked', 'evil-hearted'). The physical appearance and demeanour of such women — tall, of statuesque build, with a commanding manner and strong voice — signify formidable power. In pursuit of a desired goal, however, they can be seductively feminine and charming. The contrast between their usual demeanour and the codes of gesture and speech with which they entice and manipulate men signals their deviousness and cold, callous determination.

Nevertheless it is the isolation and vulnerability of the wronged female that emerges as the dominant motif in the ketoprak battle of the sexes. Women in the audience are often emotionally moved by the imagery of such scenes. One of my neighbours would occasionally report having trouble sleeping at night, thinking about the terrible trials of the heroine in the ketoprak radio broadcast she had been listening to earlier in the evening.

* * *

KETOPRAK SCENE TYPES — INTERPRETATIONS OF SOCIAL REFERENCE

Each of ketoprak's scene types depicts a particular form of interaction in its appropriate social setting. Palace audience halls display imagery of political leadership and of social order. Battles, disruptive of social order, take place outside these domains on an open square or in the forest. Likewise, outside palace order, simply 'along the way', appear the



Figure 21 Princesses and their maidservant.



Figure 22 Lady and her maid
enjoying a joke.



Figure 23 Handsome visitor becoming more familiar with the lady.



Figure 24 Teenage princess being advised by her father.

clown figures, servants — representatives of the underclass, humorously flouting rules of social interaction. Village homes extend the picture of the social and domestic world of the common people, while in the gardens and female living areas of royal palaces occur love scenes between 'hero' and 'heroine', as well as other male-female encounters.

Ketoprak's scenic structure is strongly grounded in Javanese theatrical tradition, exemplified most fully in wayang. Details of characterisation and dialogue have clear wayang equivalents.⁹ Like all forms of Javanese theatre, ketoprak draws on a common store of images — dignified kings, hot-tempered, red-faced foreign kings and ogres, refined knights and humorous, earthy clown-servants. As it reworks and supplements Javanese theatre conventions, it throws light on the understanding among actors and audience members of longstanding hegemonic Javanese values and on their response to other, newer ideological influences. References to old and new blend throughout the show. However, the settings that

display the strongest influence of Javanese theatrical tradition convey most clearly ongoing concepts of political order and social hierarchy. These include scenes in palace audience halls and other locations where political leaders and subordinates interact. Romantic encounters and emotional, melodramatic events such as sorrowful partings, joyous reunions and agonising deaths draw on models from modern media such as film and television drama. Through new theatrical images such scenes arguably connate changing values and standards of behaviour, particularly in the domain of romance and gender relations. The following discussion looks first at 'political' sites such as palace audiences, then at love scenes and other types of domestic encounter, as they reflect on different strands of lower-class social values and experience in the 1970s.

POLITICAL ORDER AND CLASS RELATIONS

In general terms, Yogyakarta *ketoprak* performances of the late 1970s reproduced palace audience scenes depicting the interaction of the 'good' king with his court so as to endorse traditional understandings of kingly power and social hierarchy. The ongoing aura of aristocratic title and connection, pride in Yogyakarta as a court centre and the power of an authoritarian government system identified as 'traditional' by its leaders, combined to create this effect; however, the familiar image of king and court also incorporated elements suggestive of more 'modern' notions of political order and state administration. As officials and military leaders participated in the discussion of strategies for handling political problems, their exchanges had a formal, speech-like quality, and sometimes escalated into heated debate. Actors spoke of *pemerintahan* (governance) as a key area of meaning of *ketoprak* performance. Perhaps at work here were traces of influence from the mass political mobilisation of the 1950s and early 1960s,¹⁰ along with more contemporary notions of modern, rational administration.

The circumstances of production naturally shape the image of the king and the court projected in performance. Inexperienced amateurs stumbling through their parts create a very different effect from a skilled troupe performing for an official event; yet, in the *ketoprak* performances I observed in the 1970s, no deliberate satirising of kingly power took place. Political play on the image of refined king may have occurred in the past,¹¹ and was beginning to appear in Indonesian-language theatre, but in the *ketoprak* of that time, tightly controlled

by military patrons and government authorities, it remained only a remote potential.

Images of enemy figures embodied intriguing ideological suggestion. Leaders of territories on the edges of the central Javanese cultural area were depicted with the same theatrical markers as demonic foreign kings — red faces, clumsy movements and lustful outbursts. Such portrayal seemed to reinforce both centrist political ideology and regional cultural prejudice. Meanwhile, scenes in strong, rough establishments (*ton gagah*), always contained assertions by regional leaders of their own version of the conflict with the central *kraton*. Their words might be minimal and perfunctory, wildly ranting, or persuasive and convincing. Such statements constitute a distinctive feature of *ketoprak* not inherited from other theatrical forms. Just how they were used by different troupes to contest contemporary political issues is illustrated in the following chapter.

CLOWNS AND THE PEOPLE

While the doings of kings and rebels reverberate with state politics, clown servants and their masters evoke the immediate, familiar politics of hierarchical relations in everyday life. The signification of clowns, as servants of the heroic characters and symbols of the mass of ordinary people, has been much discussed in writing on Javanese performing arts. Observers debate their potentially critical, satirical function. Clifford Geertz sees *wayang* clowns as conveying “a rather general criticism” of the values of the dramas in which they appear, and reports that in popular stage dramas of the 1950s clown figures “nearly swallow the heroes entirely, leaving the latter rather as overbred fools than the descendants of *satriyas* (noble knights)” (Geertz, 1960: 290–3). By contrast, Ward Keeler locates the key role of *wayang* clowns in their freedom from the normal constraints of social interaction. Clowns offer no alternative viewpoint to the “heroic ideals and structures” that dominate their form. They are simply unfettered, because of their rock-bottom social status and dependence on their master, by concern with status, etiquette and proper speech. What appeals so much to Javanese audiences, who are themselves constantly constrained by status rules, is the clowns’ “relaxed, unself-conscious and spontaneous mode of interaction” (Keeler, 1987: 210).

Clara van Groenendael describes *wayang kulit* performances where clowns and foot soldiers give expression to the views of lowly audience

members in ways that contrast with the dalang's instructions from the elite sponsors of the show (Groenendael, 1985). Richard Curtis confirms this picture of the dalang speaking through the clowns in voicing social critique from the masses but emphasises that the clowning segment of a wayang performance has no inbuilt, invariable meaning. In particular contexts it can be appropriated by elite figures to convey propaganda messages, or turned into superficial commercial entertainment (Curtis, 1997: 232–3).

Many of these observations may be applied to ketoprak. Variation in clown sequences according to context was clearly evident during the 1970s. In commercial shows government propaganda themes were briefly mentioned amid clown banter, in keeping with the conditions for obtaining performance permission. In government-sponsored competitions the short clown segment was necessarily packed with ideological messages, while in performances for village weddings, didactic concerns could be dispensed with and clowns and audiences simply had fun.

In ketoprak much of the banter of the clowns is indeed just light-hearted play, their singing and dancing pure fun. Their appearance represents an eagerly awaited theatrical break from the structured, formal exchanges of the 'serious' characters, constrained by theatrical codes, which are in turn grounded in the dominant social rules of Javanese life. Inasmuch as the clowns are styled unequivocally as village figures, while the formal interaction they are defined against takes place in noble courts, there is an inbuilt reference to distinctions of social class. Refined formality is associated with the social elite, earthy fun and spontaneity with the little people. The caricature by the clowns of high art forms and interaction between ruler and ruled reinforces this suggestion.

Yet the clowns' interaction is double-edged. Codes of gesture and speech convey not only the intimacy and familiarity of their relationship, but also its abrasiveness, venality and selfishness. When they make ludicrous errors in reproducing high art forms and refined speech, audience members laugh both *with* them, as they expose the pompous artificiality of the forms in question, and *at* them as they display their ignorance and incompetence. The routine where the master enters the stage and watches, unnoticed, as his servants engage in a ludicrous parody of their relationship with him never fails to evoke uproarious laughter from the audience, despite or perhaps because of its familiarity and predictability. The priyayi master, the "overbred fool" of Geertz's description, is a telling focus of derisive laughter.¹² But there is also

much to laugh at in the situation of the clown servant, unwittingly, inattentively courting disaster. Audience members, along with the smiling noble, are aware of what is happening while the servant is not; they laugh together at the servant's squirming embarrassment at being caught out. Audience members seem likely to experience a mixture of sentiments watching this scene: shudders of empathetic horror at the thought of being caught out in this way by a superior; enormous relief that this is happening to someone else rather than themselves; satisfaction at the effrontery that the subordinate does, after all, manage to get away with.

Javanese of all social levels are constantly engaged in hierarchical social interactions and are constantly subject to concern with status, etiquette and proper speech. However, members of the *wong cilik* underclass arguably experience the pressures of hierarchy particularly sharply in their daily encounters with people of higher status — employers, *kampung* and village officials, richer neighbours — to whom they must display appropriate subservience and respect. Hence they identify with the clown figure, socially, emotionally and 'politically'. Class antagonism is clearly a strong potential reference of the codes of representation of clown servants and noble masters; however, to what extent are clown servants and other subordinate figures, with their ambiguous suggestiveness, earthy humour and bumbling ignorance, able to represent underclass interests in a positive, transformative way? This is an issue addressed in the next chapter.

ROMANTIC LOVE AND OTHER MODERN EXPERIENCES

In the blend of old and new characteristic of *ketoprak*, different situations bring to the fore particular elements of the mix. Battle scenes, as suggested earlier, introduce techniques from martial arts movies and promote an active and robust image of the 'hero' in place of the ultra-refined noble knight of Javanese performance tradition. In the palace garden, the encounter of this Javanese version of the Hollywood hunk and his alluring partner display various markers of modernity.

The experience of romantic love endorsed by *ketoprak* sweethearts — an emotionally thrilling and deeply spiritual attachment that outweighs all other ties of family and status — is widely celebrated in modern Indonesian culture. At odds with traditional notions of a parentally arranged partnership embedded in family and community, the concept of a marriage based on love and individual choice found

expression in Indonesian cultural forms from the early twentieth century onwards. Novels of the 1920s and 1930s depicting youthful romances thwarted by parental wishes and customary rules symbolised a wider clash between modernity and tradition. After Independence, portrayals of romantic love flourished in mass media such as films, popular songs and magazines.

That aspirations of romantic love were widespread in everyday life, not just among the urban elite but also among villagers and kampung-dwellers, is suggested by James Peacock's study of the East Javanese popular drama ludruk. On the ludruk stage, stories of love and marriage involving generational conflict predominated as dramatic plots. Meanwhile numerous young kampung men recounted their experience of youthful romance, referred to by the Indonesian word *cinta*, with girls they had met at school (Peacock, 1968: 144). Yet the extent of social acceptance and practice of romantic love as a basis for marriage is less clear. In the 1970s in Central Java marriage by individual choice was said to be customary among educated youth, especially in the cities, while among the poorer and less-educated, and in rural areas, arranged marriages were seemingly the norm.¹³ In the case of marriages based on individual choice, parental blessing was still essential. None of the young men interviewed by Peacock had actually married their sweethearts, because their parents did not approve (Peacock, 1968: 145). Marriage based on individual choice, free from parental restriction, was evidently a source of divergent expectations rather than a universally accepted good.¹⁴ Associated sources of tension were the freer mixing of young people, widely decried as likely to lead to loosening moral standards, and the role of modern media in representing love and passion.

Ketoprak love scenes and their reception by audiences provide interesting insights into the complexities of contemporary Javanese understandings of love and marriage. Progressives in the ketoprak world of the 1970s spoke approvingly of the appeal of ketoprak love scenes to modern tastes and expectations, particularly among the young. Daring stage representation of romantic intimacy was justified as being in keeping with contemporary behavioural trends.¹⁵ Actors compared their romantic encounters with those of films, boasting proudly that ketoprak, too, contained "bedroom scenes" (*adegan ranjang*), with lord and lady sitting on a divan together and on occasion lying down to sleep. But there was much criticism of ketoprak — in the media, in speeches and discussions in everyday conversation — for seducing young

viewers into licentious behaviour through its daring representation of physical affection.¹⁶ Some performers expressed unease about appearing in love scenes. Many husbands and wives imposed strict conditions on their spouse's participation in such encounters and were willing to travel long distances and endure many hours watching a show to make sure these limitations were observed.

Some viewers may have been troubled also by the contrast between the stage portrayal of romantic love, arising from brief acquaintance and strongly influenced by physical attraction, and the slowly developing feelings of trust and empathy that Javanese reportedly identify with a stable, lasting marriage (H. Geertz, 1960: 135). *Tresna*, an idealised concept of love as deep, abiding selfless affection for another person, rather than romantic passion, *gandrung*, with its volatile, unstable quality, has traditionally been regarded as the appropriate basis for marriage (Keeler, 1987: 52). The amorous pursuits and fond embraces of ketoprak love scenes, like the modern media images referred to by the Indonesian term *cinta*, might well have had connotations of dangerous, ephemeral sexual passion at odds with the notion of abiding love.

This conflicted context may help explain the striking contrast between the intimacy and warmth of the looks and gestures of ketoprak lovers and the serious, formal style of their dialogue. Visually they radiated romantic attraction. Verbally they declared their high-minded love (*tresna*) for one another in formal statements, delivered in the wooden style of memorised quotations. They routinely asserted that wealth and status were irrelevant to choice of marriage partner, even in stories where no differences of status were involved.¹⁷ A mixture of factors may have influenced these interactions — the remoteness of ideal concepts to actual experience, a lack of appropriate terms to describe romantic feeling, or an attempt to balance sensuality with serious, worthy sentiments to appease audience concern.

Rhetorical declarations of love were followed immediately by talk of establishing a family (*mangun brayat*) and "having harmonious relations with the community" (*bebrayan ing tengah masyarakat*). Even in modern times, long-established conceptions of marriage seemingly held sway. For all its individualistic implications, romantic love led on to marriage still understood as strongly oriented towards family and community.

Ketoprak love scenes of the 1970s celebrated 'modernity' in both dramatic imagery and ideological values. Styled as appealing to young people, they achieved the anticipated response. Youthful audience

members, particularly young men, frequently applauded the pronouncements of ketoprak lovers valorising freedom of choice of marriage partner, for all their stiff formulaic quality. At the same time, aspects of these scenes encoded a sense of discontinuity between new values and their social context, the ongoing strength of established attitudes and practices.

WOMEN VIEWERS AND THE WOMAN QUESTION

Along with young people, women of all ages are seen to take great interest in ketoprak's love scenes and in the form as a whole. The prominence of women in ketoprak audiences of the 1970s was indeed striking — groups of wealthy middle-aged traders watching nightly from the front seats when a big commercial troupe came to town; mothers with babies and young children crowded around the open stage at neighbourhood performances; withered grandmothers still alert and absorbed at four in the morning when the show finally came to an end. The particular appeal of ketoprak to women and how it might relate to distinctive qualities of female characterisation onstage warrants investigation.

Female interest in ketoprak is often explained in terms of its melodramatic emotionality. Ward Keeler quotes standard Javanese opinion that women, unable to appreciate the artistic subtleties of wayang, by contrast “enjoy weeping through ketoprak's shamelessly melodramatic twists of fortune.” Men, meanwhile, “profess to find these aspects of ketoprak foolish” (Keeler, 1987: 240). Such differences in taste accord with hegemonic Javanese gender ideology, which associates men with emotional control cultivated through spiritual exercise and women with more mundane activities and less controlled feelings and speech (Keeler, 1987: 77; Brenner, 1995: 28–31). The perceived lack of interest by women in the ‘high art’ of wayang kulit may stem most crucially from wayang's performance at ritual celebrations presided over by men and its embodiment of values and preoccupations regarded as fundamentally male concerns. The appropriate place for women at a wayang performance, as at a *slametan* ritual feast, is at the back of the house, preparing and distributing food, while the men are out front;¹⁸ ketoprak as a popular entertainment without intrinsic ritual connection, is open to participation by all.

A key aspect of ketoprak's appeal for both men and women clearly was and is sexual fantasy. Ketoprak love scenes of the 1970s, as suggested

above, were redolent with sensual suggestion and provoked excited audience response. Glamorous male and female stars were essential to the appeal of a performance.¹⁹ Stories were rife of affairs between these young male stars and rich female patrons, likewise between female stars and male admirers.

Female emotional involvement arguably reflects something more than the lack of emotional restraint supposedly characteristic of women. In highlighting the 'love interest' of historical and mythological tales and focusing on themes of romance and domesticity, ketoprak gives prominence to female characters. As we have seen, their adventures involve many difficulties and conflicts with which women viewers identify. The situation of women playing women's parts and improvising dialogue, rather than female characters being represented by men,²⁰ provides space for expression of specific female perspectives.

The two types of 'heroine' defined by codes of theatrical representation, the refined lady and her more assertive and vivacious counterpart, correspond in a general way to traditional patterns of female characterisation in Javanese performance. Wayang kulit and classical court dance both recognise this distinction. Sumbadra and Srikandhi, the two wives of the iconic wayang hero, Arjuna, are seen to embody quintessential models of refined, demure and more outgoing womanhood.²¹ In performance practice, the overwhelming majority of esteemed female figures who appear in the course of a shadow puppet lakon are of gentle, refined character. Assertive qualities are represented instead by female demons and raucous maidservants. Likewise in the world of classical court dance, the revered female group dances *srimpi* and *bedhaya* celebrate an image of controlled, restrained femininity.²²

In ketoprak, as popular entertainment without elite pretension, watched and performed by both men and women, the situation is very different. Glamorous heroine figures classified as both *branyak* (assertive) and *kenès* (flirtatious) seemed to appear more often than their refined counterparts in the performances of the 1970s, playing the main female roles in a majority of lakon. Of lead actresses, who always specialized in one mode or the other, the most popular and successful performed in the branyak/kenès style. A number of factors arguably contributed to their appeal. Their spirited interactions with male characters were often humorously entertaining, more engaging than the passive compliance of a traditional refined princess. And overt female attractiveness and assertiveness had an additional, controversial connotation, the concept of the 'modern woman'.

The qualities of assertive heroines were consistently described by actors as both “modern” (*moderèn*) and “like foreign women”. The alternate refined, reserved, female stereotype was, by contrast, classified as “traditional” and typically Javanese. Playing out this distinction, in one performance a lady soldier from a foreign country, dressed in a silver lamé pantsuit, challenged the hero to do battle. As he hesitated she asserted, “Don’t go thinking that I am like the women of former times!” (*Aja pikir aku iki wanita kaya dèk biyèn!*). Whereas in the past women might have been gentle and retiring, she implied, strong, assertive modern women can confront men on their own terms.

Both the Hollywood-influenced stereotype of bold, sexually liberated Western woman and the notion of female emancipation and achievement also originating from the West, are arguably denoted here. By the 1970s the concept of the independent, achieving modern woman, first adopted among the Western-educated elite in late colonial times, then promoted after Independence by political organisations and women’s groups,²³ had undergone a shift. The gender ideology of the New Order state highlighted women’s contribution to national development primarily through their domestic roles. Julia Suryakusuma (2004: 161–89) describes this process at work at the national level, while Norma Sullivan documents its implementation in Yogyakarta through the activities of the Family Welfare Movement (*Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, PKK*) (Sullivan, 1994: 64–82). Nevertheless increasing numbers of women continued to gain education, work outside the home and participate in the changing parameters of modern life.

To what extent female audience members at *ketoprak* performances, the majority of whom were small farmers and farm labourers, market traders and *kampung* housewives, were able to participate in such trends is debatable. But the main exponent of assertive female characterisation in *ketoprak* of the late 1970s, the star actress of the *Sapta Mandala* troupe, Marsidah BSc, with her university degree and prestigious daytime position as an official of the Department of Education, could be regarded as a prime example of an achieving modern woman. In conversation she expressed a sense of “speaking up” for her fellow women in her stage criticisms of male behaviour and assertion of the views of female protagonists.

The issues which Marsidah and other assertive heroines addressed related not to formal female advancement in education and employment but to domestic conflict and the neglect, irrational jealousy or, most commonly, suspected infidelity of a husband or sweetheart.

Another focus of female protest was sexual predation and assault. Their stance in these outbursts — hands on hips, chin thrust forward, direct, staring gaze, sharp, challenging tone of voice — connoted both hostility and bold, assertive assurance. There were reverberations with the supposed lack of emotional control of women, represented onstage by loud maidservants and plain-speaking village wives; however, this was no village wife railing at her spouse, but a glamorous lady crisply putting her man in his place or denouncing male aggression against women in terms of impressively modern ideological statements about individual rights.

The protestations of wronged wives and beleaguered heroines evoked mixed audience responses. Their spirited statements were greeted with applause by the female audience but also laughter and derisive shouts from the men. Male performers often reacted to assertive woman characters with teasing provocation, playfully trivialising their heated outbursts. If the image of the outgoing 'modern woman' aroused some ambivalence in *ketoprak* performance, in all-male *ludruk* its portrayal was explicitly negative. The stereotype of the middle-aged, nagging wife appeared ubiquitously, performed with exaggerated gusto. More serious expression of hostile feeling occurred in a savage caricature of the modern, go-getting woman. Pushy, flashy female figures, exaggeratedly aping Western ways, evoked angry and abusive audience response, and invariably met an unpleasant end (Peacock, 1968: 77–8, 160–1). Representations of assertive female figures across performances and theatre genres drew on a mix of dramatic elements — glamour, progressiveness, humour — to reflect in varying ways on the impact of modernising ideology on the complexities of male-female relations.

* * *

That love, romance and gender relations have featured so prominently in this review of the social reference of the codes and conventions of *ketoprak* in the 1970s can be seen to connect with socio-political conditions of the time. Popular trends in the domain of gender and domesticity could be relatively freely expressed and depicted through varied, dynamic stage imagery. In other areas of experience, particularly the 'political' sphere, represented by kings and officials, rulers and their subjects, contextual reference was more limited and uniform. Factors of casting and differing acting skills produced small variations

in characterisation, but generally the roles of refined king and regional rebel, master and servant, were 'played straight'.

Performances confirmed the centrist, hierarchical political ideology of past Javanese kingdoms and contemporary state authorities. However, historical actions do not always fit easily within ideological frames. Included in the standard repertoire of ketoprak are several well-known stories drawn from Javanese history, the events of which would seem to challenge the image of a powerful and beneficent central Javanese king and court. The following chapter analyses performances of two such anomalous tales. By comparing renditions of these stories by troupes with differing geographic and social connections, we get a sense of how ketoprak performances afforded expression to varying political perspectives, even in the constrained ideological environment of the 1970s.



Figure 25 Actress Marsidah as modern-minded heroine having a few words with her man.



Figure 26 Ketoprak bedroom scene.



Figure 27 Middle-aged actor amorously pursues teenage 'princess'.



Figure 28 Women viewers enjoy the fun.