

FESTIVALIZING TRAGEDY THE CASE OF POST-REFORM CONTEMPORARY PERFORMING ARTS IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the century, after the fall of repressive regime of Soeharto in 1998, Indonesia has been experiencing a more open version of democracy. Some of these freedoms of expression are manifested in works of contemporary performing arts. The post-reform openness has brought more articulative approach thought on human tragedy. Although, within the same period the country has seen the rising conservatism and intolerance that are, paradoxically, threatening democracy and the freedom of expression.

The issue of human rights, corruption, and marginalized communities in performing arts have not only been advocacy of injustice, but also subjects of invitations from international festivals. The case of Papermoon Puppet Theatre's *Mwathirika* and Teater Garasi's *Je.ja.l.an* that allure international festivals.

This paper will explore such phenomenon to see the relations between creative exploration of human crisis and the aesthetic means of the spectacles. In what ways do art festivals claim the value of such transnational performances, and how they are perceived by the media.

Keywords: Performing art, festival, human tragedy, transnational

INTRODUCTION

The works of contemporary performing arts in Indonesia after the fall of Soeharto seemed to have lost its articulative powers having previously addressed or departed from the authoritarian new order regime. With all its form whether it was verbal or metaphoric, the performing arts scene during the Soeharto era were decorated by works of Rendra's Bengkel Theatre '*Mastodon dan Burung Kondor*' in 1970's, Teater Koma's '*Sampek Engtay*', Butet Kertaredjasa's '*Lidah Pingsan*' monologue in the late 1990's and Wiji Thukul's poetry works and performances that led to his disappearance at the peak of mass anti-Soeharto movement were among the few. Theater symbols used in Teater Koma were iconic to that representing the authority and the people. (Dahana 2001: 61)

In visual arts, Joko Pekik's '*Berburu Celeng*', was considered as a clear-cut example of how arts was medium to depict artist's discontent on the authority. Hence, the stancing of opinion. Performing arts in the new order era has a characteristic role in articulating fight against the national agenda. (Arsuka ed. 2014 : 17)

As the reform has brought a more open democracy, the Indonesian arts in general has seen a more various forms of social concerns as there were no longer a single public enemy. This paper will go through the cases of Papermoon Puppet and Teater Garasi's, two of the most prolific performing arts group after the fall of Soeharto. Both theater companies have a number of critically acclaimed works digging materials from past and current socio-political concerns in Indonesia. Papermoon Puppet has been a frequent line up in international events and festivals through their work '*Mwathirika*', an inquiry on the survivor of 1965 political unrest, while Teater Garasi, being laureate of the Prince Claus award for their outstanding work on social issues and a significant influence on the south east Asian theaters, has always shown new aesthetics forms and questioning nation's issues within the alternative frame of festivity. Teater Garasi's work from 2008 '*Je.ja.lan*' also hit the international scene in 2010 and 2015 in Japan and Australia respectively.

Theoretical Framework

This paper examines how the two performing arts works deal with social-issues, how do they do in doing that?, and its correlation to the international scene. This paper accomodates references of performances from the media to provide insight on how the works are perceived.

Materials and Methods

The author gathers information from the media, to enrich author's accounts in experiencing '*Mwathirika*' and participating '*Je.ja.lan*'.

A literature study into related issue of performing arts is conducted mainly within theories of aesthetics and experience. The paper consists of analyzes and reflections of the issues raised through accounts on the media and other relevant literature.

Mwathirika and Life as Told

Performing arts is a unique and complex artistic experience. It does not limit to analyzes definitions of forms such as theater, dance and music. If we look at the form of Papermoon's *Mwathirika* and Teater Garasi's *Je.ja.lan*, it raises question over mixed media and new forms - not often Papermoon is considered to be visual artworks. Moreover, it is about there and then, and, as quoted by Husserl, to provide form to experience (that are not clear in form) and to articulate what is in-articulate-able)

Mwathirika is a puppet performance by the Papermoon Puppet Theatre that does not shy away from difficult subjects. It deals with the anti-communist purge following a failed coup in Indonesia in 1965, when over 500.000 people were killed. This grim story was told like a fairy tale, imaginative and original, by blending the darker history of Indonesia with a rich artistic concept. (<https://latitudes.nu/the-tale-of-mwathirika-and-the-papermoon-puppet-theatre/>).

Inspired by the harrowing events of the infamous Year of Living Dangerously, a dark period of genocide in Indonesia's history, *Mwathirika* – a Swahili word for 'victim' – explores themes of identity and society. The company uses a whimsical yet intimate style to explore deep and controversial themes in Indonesia's history and the challenges Indonesians face in their everyday lives. Their style of puppetry stems from two distinct forms –shadow

puppetry, a traditional Indonesian art form often found in Java and Bali, and doll puppetry.

(<http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/papermoon-puppet-theatre-92952>)

The creative process of *Mwathirika* certainly allow a considerable amount of possibility within the form. As puppet theatre that are affiliated to children audience.

“For us, puppets are the perfect medium to bring an unexpected moments or difficult subjects to the audience. Puppets always have the image of cuteness, happiness, sometimes scary, but mostly FUN. So when people come to the theater, with a certain expectation of puppetry, they can be surprised, because what they see is totally different from what they thought.

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/09/papermoon-puppet-theater-n_1865644.html)

Mwathirika's reminiscent of the 1965 mass killing tragedy was created from a number of testimonies from Papermoon's family members which the team observed and processed. The outcome of it was a serious account on imprisonment and violence using puppet in an artistic manner and gained artistic experience from audience outside Indonesia. Huffington Post's interview with Maria Tri Sulistyani stated that audience experience *Mwathirika* as a new reality. Something which raises a question on culture, as the piece derive from Indonesian tragedy performed outside Indonesia.

Such a notion is indeed a cultural issue “experience is culturally constructed while understanding presuppose experience.” But justification to experience as formulated by Edward Bruner, is the critical distinction between reality (what is really out there whatever that may be), experience (how that reality present itself to consciousness), and expressions (how individual experience is framed and articulated). In life history, the distinction is between live as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expression). (Turner 1986 : 6)

In taking notes of the reality of the 1965 tragedy, Papermoon has its own version of life as experienced, their account on the tragedy was compiled through family members, friends and book and films which they have read or seen. (Both directors, Maria Tri Sulistyani and Iwan Effendi, the directors of Papermoon Puppet, are generations who were obliged to see New Order government's film version of 1965 annually shown in national television) As for the audience, the dynamics doesn't necessarily go along with the expression conveyed by Papermoon. As understanding presuppose experience, the look into the tragedy may only go as far as life as experienced, as some may have already different references on the reality, or life as told where audience finds a disclosure on certain aspects of the performance.

In doing so, Papermon puppet realizes the audience had both experience and understanding into their account, as written on the Reviews Hub. “The most impressive aspect of the production is undoubtedly the puppetry on display. The four puppeteers display exemplary skill and really manage to bring the puppets to life. The design of the puppets themselves is sublime with faces that seem to shift from joy in the early happy moments of the piece to a pained expression once the drama begins to unfold. The storytelling is simple yet wonderfully expressive, and the puppeteers manage to tell an incredibly complex story using just a handful of puppets and props, something which has to be greatly admired. They manage to turn the political

personal, and create a story with which audiences can really connect.”
[\(http://www.thereviewshub.com/mwathirika-c-edinburgh/\)](http://www.thereviewshub.com/mwathirika-c-edinburgh/)



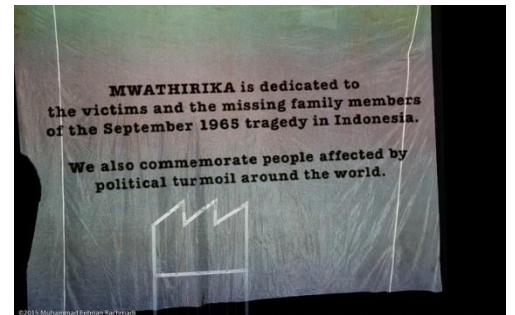
Picture 1. Mwathirika
 Photo : MF Rachmadi



Picture 2 Tupu - Main Character
 Photo : Indra Wicaksono



Picture 3 : Appause in Edinburgh
 Photo : MF Rachmadi



Picture 4 : Papermoon’s dedication
 Photo : MF Rachmadi

Experiencing the Street in *Je.ja.l.an*

All Jakarta life throbs by, fast and busy, sad and hopeful. People scurry under umbrellas, ride bikes, jostle, roll, flee. There are raunchy sex workers, stern Muslims, hawkers, protestors, all colours and creeds overlapping in the seeming chaos of the vast Indonesian populace. There is even a wedding ceremony, a lively band and singer celebrating at one end and at the other, a groom sitting in solitary state. People dance with plastic bags over their heads. The bride, Nur, is not present. She has had to go and work as a domestic in Malaysia, the groom explains. So it is, these days. A hard life. This scene is followed by the most perfect moment of the show, an older woman in classic Indonesian garb, singing solo a song of philosophic fatalism. It segues into a death dance, a silent topeng duo. (The Barefoot Review)

The above review are readings of *Je.ja.l.an* from an Australian media on Teater Garasi’s *Je.ja.l.an* performed in OzAsia Festival 2015. The piece was first performed in Indonesia in 2008. *Je.ja.l.an*, which was translated as ‘The Streets’ on OzAsia publication was an artistic output from observations and research executed by Teater Garasi team that saw the street as an arena of contestation (between the rich and the poor, elite - countryfied, those in power - common people, etc.) The dance-theater piece did not present only choreography and mis-en-scene from director Yudi Ahmad Tajudin, but include collaborative contributions from actors as well as visual artist Mella Jaarsma and musicality of psychedelic music outfit Risky Summerbee & the Honeythief.

The icons and symbols found on the streets such as *kasur* (cotton-filled bed), *seng* (zinc), *daster* (domestic loose clothing worn by women), karaoke and dangdut cart, were used in the piece as manifestation of their research. In a devised manner, Teater Garasi artists have managed to present a presentation of multi layered text. For the case of Indonesia, it is inevitable not to mention colonization when talking about streets, for it was the building of streets in Java where traditional culture shifted to modernity. Previous social orders changed at the establishment of streets. Added to that, the Javanese society assent to the changes in a festive manner. It was always on the streets people always celebrate significant happenings such as the fall of Soeharto

in 1998, as was the Malari incident in 1974, the anti-communist PKI of 1965, etc.) Teater Garasi manifested the idea to an opening scene where audience come in and mingle over servings of beverages. As the audience crowded around the empty playing area with thematic visual displays of actors, a marching band enters and split the audience into two, a street was formed, the play then began.

To mark the beginning of the performance, a band of musicians, led by conductor Rizky Sasono, marched through the crowd, who allowed just enough room for the performers to continue. Then the actual stage unfolded, a narrow platform extended to divide the audience into two. An actor then opened proceedings with a short welcome speech, while installation works by Dutch-born Yogyakarta visual artist Mella Jaarsma were dragged onto the stage by crew members wearing municipal security outfits. Minus the classy vehicles and glossy buildings, the mock street on the stage in *Je.ja.l.an* is as busy as its real-life counterparts, complete with rushing pedestrians, deteriorating roads, bodies rolled up in mattresses and construction site barriers. The design of the street reflects the poorest of city life, making the lives of passersby, who scurry to meet appointments, schedules and secure future expectations, seem trivial. (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/05/24/teater-garasi-looks-meaningful-encounters-039jejalan039.html>)

On festival publication, the OzAsia committee opted to raise the issue of different experience in seeing *Je.ja.l.an*. The dance-theatre piece is one of the few works presented in Adelaide which present a different experience for the audience. (OzAsia : 2015)

In some scenes, audience were asked to move or change position in order to accommodate new properties and sets to the scene. The scene with narratives of “Aku Berkisar di Antara Mereka” (I run around with them) vocalized by Erythrina Baskoro and the choreographed dance involving performers Ajeng Solaiman, Erythrina Baskoro, Sri Qadariatin, MN. Qomaruddin, and Arsita Iswardhani, raise conscience on modern cosmopolitan issues. Hence, the opting of Chairil Anwar’s poetry. The transnational (as performed) magnified the ambivalence of the contemporary Indonesia: to preserve old tradition and to set stance on cosmopolite lifestyle - another contestation.

In one scene, citations of Goenawan Mohammad’s *Catatan Pinggir* ‘Slamet’ was presented in juxtaposition between bare-torso man in broken gestures and a couple of socialites and middle-class in suit and *peci* (Indonesian headgear worn by men) moving in a comical gestures. The narratives itself was strongly stated by a man with karaoke box. It depicted the life of Slamet, an in debt fried-food street vendor who committed suicide in Pandeglang, West Java. Slamet’s life was not judged in Pandeglang but was a dependant to the ministry of trade and agriculture, by the flair of world-trade, by the food centre in China, the supplies in the USA, and judged by the harvest and weather condition in Brazil, and by the agro-business structure in Argentina. The whole scene was guided by live music playing a *scherzo*-like composition.

Je.ja.l.an was a series contest of attention between buskers and street vendors, citizen playing badminton fighting with police guards, Islamic figure of terrorist with balaclava challenging a *Haji* who wore a *peci*; dangdut singers singing and dancing. These were all scenes subsequent to the opening in which the narrator talked about the speed in life, where people overtake one another on the streets. The narrator posed a grand question, “Where are we heading to?” (Hatley 2015 : 36)

“It is important for them to experience the street life with their body, so it’s not just observations from the distance ... they have to feel it; they have to be in the space.” - Yudi Ahmad Tajudin (<http://indaily.com.au/arts-and-culture/festivals/2015/08/25/a-slice-of-modern-indonesian-street-life/>)

Je.ja.l.an is a performance on the issue of space which, aside from explicating the crossings of vehicles and goods, depicts crossed narratives, clash and negotiation of culture. Not a mere sole path from one place to another but big streets in Indonesia are historical sites and archive of events that changed and constructed Indonesia. Its dark or noble history, hidden or revealed. Today the streets in Indonesia has become a stage of contestation between the traditional and the modern, the elite and the commons, and those who are ahead and behind globalization. *Je.ja.l.an* was designed to reconstruct real environments and visual images found on the big streets in Indonesia. An environment where the audience can not just see but experience street life in Indonesia's big cities.



Picture 1. Audience mingle in *Je.ja.l.an*
Photo : Teater Garasi



Picture 2. One of *je.ja.l.an* scene
Photo : Teater Garasi



Picture 3. Choreography of *Je.ja.l.an*
Photo : Teater Garasi

Picture 4. The Streets in Adelaide
Photo : Rizky Sasono

TRAGEDIES FESTIVALIZED

The performance of *Mwathirika* in the UK was considered by cryptic as a cultural diplomacy, as people wanted to know what was the piece about. This correlate with Maria's statement in the Huffington post "This intricate work explores new and unexpected ways to engage present-day audiences with Indonesia's troubled past, telling highly personal stories and promoting shared values that transcend our cultural, political and societal differences." (<http://www.cryptic.org.uk/papermoon-puppet-theatre/>)

Meanwhile, the complexity of *Je.ja.l.an* saw multi-layer text from the verbal street visual umbrellas of the traditional market, to street *dangdut* orchestra, from recorded Soekarno's speech layered by long structured music composition to live

Indramayu's tarling vocal techniques. This raise critical question on how the audience (foreign audience) perceive the work.

In the context of performer-audience relations it is possible to define meaning of the works through ways of thinking, acting and behaving in the personal and socio-cultural level. Artists tend to run ways in artists and audience can understand. Good works of art should have clear root on living and life itself. (Sayuti 2014)

Seeing it from semiotics perspective, the options of disclosure does not end in Peirce's semiotic models for its output are not meaning. If arts were to be appreciated, it should not display the process of semiotic but moreover pose alternative thoughts to the audience to enter an aesthetic experience in order to disclose upon reality.

What is meant by reality here is when appreciator is conscious or aware of a new thing. A good art must be able to make the audience enjoy. As Bambang Sugiharto stated, the audience need not to understand instantly, but should there be something new and disclosed, the hidden materials will be revealed. Art works in that way. A unique definition of the value of art is not on "What it Means" but on "What it does." Art sees the world differently, it does not exploit nor manipulate the world but present the truth. (Sugiharto 2014 : 19)

The use of logical operations in international audience is no longer important. In the case of *Mwathirika* and *Je.ja.l.an* the audience can be enchanted and experience the sensation from the forms of puppets or the cute characters in *Mwathirika*, or the dancing of *dangdut* singers or the hustles in finding a new space to watch after change of scene in *Je.ja.l.an*, as cited by Alfred Gell and referred by Simatupang, of art being technology of enchantment (Simatupang: 2014).

Performance making is a back and forth process of the reality to stage with the outcome being reality on stage. And one of the most important element in art process in sense. Borrowing Jakob Sumardjo's term where sense can be stimulated from within the appreciator or stimulated from outside. There is an obligation for senses to come from the performance and entering the audience.(Sumardjo 2000 : 73-75)

That is why in both cases, *Mwathirika* and *Je.ja.l.an* attempts to provide space of disclosure are seen as festivalized. The reality is as it is, the history of 1965 tragedy in Indonesia are still very much hidden from social exposure and even kept and maintained from one perspective. The reality of the streets in Indonesia can be experienced everyday in Jakarta, Bandung, Medan, Yogyakarta and other big cities in Indonesia. The works are manifestations of life as experienced, in Papermoon puppet and Teater Garasi respectively. Here both theater company is perceiving theatrical performance as representational theatre and at the same time presentational theatre, (De Marinis 1993 : 46) where theatrical performance does not merely refer to stage plays but also theatrical phenomena off stage. Referring to what Richard Schechner called as social drama, it is possible that actors in *Je.ja.l.an* are actually playing presentational theatre for theatre is there and then. Borrowing Sal Murgiyanto's view on art as education where artist's or researcher's experience and thoughts will result in humanizing human being regardless of the means of educating. (Murgiyanto 2015 : 246) Performing arts in this case must therefore present experience as means of education. The first phase of it would be providing space for disclosure. As one of Australia's media stated the word 'beauty' to state its disclosure in imagining Indonesian streets.

Although Indonesia is one of Australia's closest neighbours, many Australians have never walked the busy streets of Jakarta, or any of Indonesia's large, bustling cities. The vast majority of Aussies who have an Indonesian stamp on their passport favour Bali beaches over crowded capitals. However, Indonesian arts collective Teater Garasi and Artistic Director Yudi Ahmad Tajudin are hoping to show Australia the beauty and power of Indonesia's public, urban spaces with their production, *The Streets*. (<http://aussietheatre.com.au/features/hitting-streets-teater-garasis-streets-comes-2015-ozasia-festival>)

In order to provide space of enchantment, Mwathirika's dramaturgy was based on personal accounts. The personal accounts are then made into a storyline and visual arts practices in making the characters with the approach of it all being heightened reality. The performance itself was a festival, whereas in Yogyakarta Papermoon played for two days (with one added performance to accommodate those who could not make a reservation in first attempt). The festivity involved audience young and old, most were born in decades after 1965. In bringing the issue back in the limelight, although there were many attempts from artists, Mwathirika is considered the most festive. This by all means are measured by the quantity of performances in various events.

International Festivals And Transnational Issue

As I have stated in the beginning that both *Mwathirika* and *Je.ja.l.an* have been performed outside Indonesia, here we will look at why both works allure festival directors.

By looking at the OzAsia 2015 Program book which focussed on Indonesia there seemed to be a notion of otherness when looking at the line up and works : *Cry Jailolo* (Eko Supriyanto/dance), *The Streets* (Teater Garasi/theatre), Mwathirika (Papermoon Puppet Theatre/puppet theatre), Topeng Cirebon (Nani Losari/dance), *Sacred Sita* (Gamelan Sekar Laras/dance), Risky Summerbee & the Honeythief (Music), Samba Sunda (Music), Melati Suryodarmo (Performance Art), *Beyond Identity* (FX Harsono/visual art), 100 Masks of Cirebon (Narada Art Gallery/visual art), *Alhamdulillah We Made It* (Mes 56/ Visual art), Inter Section (Tok Basuki/Visual art), *Landscape of Longing* (Jumaadi/Visual art), serta *Mooi Anomaly* (Eko Nugroho/Visual art). *The Looks of Silence* (Joshua Oppenheimer/Film) (OzAsia : 2015)

From the list of works and artists participating in OzAsia Festival 2015, we can categorize this into traditional culture as in Sacred Sita and 100 Masks of Cirebon, Exotic Notion of *Cry Jailolo*, Hybridity in music in the case of Samba Sunda, Religion in *Alhamdulillah We Made It*, political concern in Papermoon, Teater Garasi, and Joshua Oppenheimer with the three bringing the issue of 1965 to their works.

Reflections On Festivity And Festivals

The contemporary performing arts scene in Indonesia has shifted its issue since the reform in 1998. The authoritarian regime that was once a primary theme in most arts productions has expired. But this does not mean that Indonesia's Performing arts on social concerns in Indonesia. Contemporary performing artists are now practicing a more open issues therefore diverse in its output.

Papermoon puppet, for example, has highlighted the 1965 tragedy for their work '*Mwathirika*' which was celebrated not only in Indonesia but also in international festivals. The form of which the idea is manifested also contributed to their success in making dialogue to younger audience who knew little about the 1965 tragedy that lost millions of lives. '*Mwathirika*' a borrowed term from Swahili language best described the theme as 'wound'. The sounding like a girls name to Indonesians may not be the key factor to audience's appreciation, but Papermoon managed to transform a usually dark manifested theme into a more friendlier visuals and popular festive manner.

Teater Garasi's social and political signature in their works were again manifested in *Je.ja.l.an* in 2008. Unlike Papermoon that depart from national tragedy, Garasi opted more issues departing from streets as a space of contestations. *Je.ja.l.an* which means two words (*Jejal* and *Jalan*) which literally mean cramped and street. Once the street was formed on the playing area, there are many issues that are cramped into layers of text in shape of dance choreography, explicit dialogues, interaction with audience, fun and parody, as well as music and poetry. The street in Indonesia, as said earlier, are historical sites and archive of what constructed Indonesia. The dance-theatre piece consists of excerpts from the colonial experiences, Soekarno's old order, Soeharto's new order and post reform society. Elements of 1965 tragedy were also performed in a mixed narrative in the early scenes.

Papermoon's festivalized tragedy was performed in a manner of popular culture, the icon used in the performance are of a popular aesthetics, with the likes of young audience likely to enjoy. Indeed the festivalization of 1965 tragedy has brought Papermoon into interactions for different intentions, for example the opening of ArtJog 2013 and various puppet workshops not necessarily related to the 1965 tragedy and the military coup which followed.

Teater Garasi however did not stop to festivalize. After the festival-like festivities manifested of the opening (end ending) scene. Teater Garasi's festive mood were raised again in their following 2011 work 'Embracing The In-Between' another multi-layered text that derive from Homi Bhabha's post-colonial notion of the third space. Embracing the in-between itself was a depiction of a festivity of a family in an in-between city of Indramayu where tarling and dangdut and javanese Wayang Wong highlighted the harvest. The piece was not much of a tragedy-based in the sense of *Je.ja.l.an* and was more of reflections of phenomenas related to the third reality. The theme of 1965 was processed again as part of questioning violence acts in recent times Indonesia in the 2015 production of '*Yang Fana Adalah Waktu. Kita Abadi*' - Time is Transient. We are Eternal.

Indonesia's contemporary theatre in Indonesia have been for long working to sustain works without the aid from the government. Relying on networks of peer theater practitioners in Indonesia and abroad Indonesia's contemporary art scene has always been in a transnational mode.

Both Papermoon and Teater Garasi's work have been performed in a number of international art festivals, it would take further studies to theorize what kind of issues are of international festivals interests. Take Papermoon puppet who performed at Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2015 was not curated in a devised manner and there were no themes to the festival that correlate to issues raised in *Mwathirika*. Their tour in the US were programmed as cultural exchange. Meanwhile Teater Garasi's *Je.ja.l.an* that was performed in Shizuoka 2015 relate more to the style of theater rather than the theme in which it carries. Teater Garasi's other much decorated piece of Waktu Batu that were performed in InTransit Festival 2004 - Berlin saw much of their artistic achievements rather than only theme of identity, and modernity.

International Festivals, especially in western countries by all means attempt to show new kind of otherness. The otherness here are not merely that of a post-colonial frame of hybridity and the exotic. Although post-colonial points of view still exist in curating international festivals, the otherness here refer to understanding the contemporary life in eastern countries such as

reflections of social and political life in other countries, and also artistic achievements in contemporary aesthetics. The changes of such a notion can be the door to soft diplomacy among arts practitioners and audience. Tragedy here is not tragic. Festivalizing tragedies has the potential to further understanding of the issue and, on the performer-audience relations, open up space of disclosure.

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