

The Complexity of *Wayang Wong* Performance and Its Dynamic Artistic Development

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This paper aims to examine the practices and performances of *wayang wong* – an art form of Javanese shadow puppet performed by humans in forms of drama and dance – in relation to the reinforcement of practitioners' developments. Traditionally, *wayang* means shadow, and *wong* means human. On-stage performance presents the beautiful aspects, but, off-stage practices remain compelling and dynamic to observe.

I build on Judith Hamera's (2007) work on a dancing community that provides a space for artistic cultural development through creative learning process. Fieldwork was conducted over nine months (November 2012 – July 2013) that included direct and participant observations to Panca Budaya community, Yogyakarta. In-depth interviews were also deployed for data collection. This paper will analyze how the work of *wayang wong* creates new social arrangements as well as how it improves developments as articulated by the actors. Analyzing so, I argue that this modified dance drama is purposely re-made for the sustainable survival of *wayang wong*.

Keywords: *wayang wong*, Pancabudaya community, social arrangements, human development



The Complexity of *Wayang Wong* Performance and Its Dynamic Artistic Development

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A. *Wayang Wong* Performance

Wayang wong performances were popular in the era of Sultan Hamengku Buwana VIII.² *Wayang wong* is a Javanese art form of puppet story performed by humans and presented in forms of dance and drama. This drama takes stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata epics. For the performance, it uses Javanese language for the dialogues. To stage the so-called *wayang wong*, practitioners with strong capacities provide particular elements in order to manage a stage performance. Here, practitioners involved are a *dhalang* (puppeteer), dancers, musicians and persons behind the stage working together to produce an artistic structured arrangement within a period of time of process. As Judith Hamera says on her book,

In performance as a final product, and especially as a daily discipline, dancers reach across multiple dimensions of difference to incarnate new shared aesthetic and social possibilities. the work of dance exposes aesthetic spaces and practices as social and vernacular, as sites where participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporeality, and irreducible difference.³

Wayang wong performers aesthetically present beautiful aspects on-stage. Costume elements, body ornaments as well as decorative makeups show high man-made production. They communicate the uniqueness of particular characters based on puppet visualisations. Also, the strong music composition expound the energy of an orchestra supporting the dancodrama. Thus, musicians present themselves in

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² Sutaryo, *Wayang Sebagai Tontonan dan Tuntunan (Rangkuman Beberapa Pemikiran)*, Makalah, Seminar Wayang dan Generasi Muda, 20 Juni 2013, pg 1.

³ Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection In the Global City*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pg 1-2.

special outfits which add the beautifulness of a performance. The background settings, sounds and lights set bring about a more remarkable stage presentation. All these are to make senses of a commodity for a public consumption⁴ as wayang wong engages human creativity and production which result to a lively presentation. Audience will be the ones who consume the production and by chance, evaluate the art works whether or not they find the drama satisfactory.

The off-stage circumstances remain compelling and dynamic to observe. Among those practices were rehearsal process, characterization, and personal implications towards the actors in respect of artistic creativity and economic issues. Dialogue rehearsal is considered as difficult as it could have been eventhough most of the dancers are Javanese by ethnicity, but, speaking Javanese becomes the hardest part to undertake to several young artists. Financially, wayang wong may provide an economic space for the artists to earn money while to the others it lacks of monetary appreciation.

Observations were undertaken to Panca Budaya Wayang Wong Community Yogyakarta from November 2012 to July 2013. Panca Budaya was established in 2012 and has more than 60 members of both management personnels and artists. Starting last November 2012, the group has performed 11 wayang performances. This year of 2013, the group has decided to perform in all regencies in Yogyakarta and the municipal city. Most performances were undertaken in the middle of village atmosphere, not in the city. Each performance requires 35 – 45 actors. The duration is also shortened to 2 to 2,5 hours in the city, and 3 hours outside the city. Traditionally, a wayang wong was performed exactly similar to the length of a shadow play, from 9 PM to 4 AM in the next morning.

This paper will analyze how the work of *wayang wong* creates new social arrangements that connect individuals⁵ as well as how it improves developments upon practitioners and the wayang wong itself as articulated by the actors. The elements of wayang wong offer its practitioners more inclusive, complicated, and productive engagements with urban environments, which however reinforce them to artistic cultural development through creative learning process. Analyzing so, I argue

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg 1.

⁵ Ward Keeler, 1987, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pg 17.

that this modified dancodrama is purposely re-made for the sustainable survival of *wayang wong* itself beginning from creating human puppets. Based on participant observations, I argue that off-stage process purposely supports and improves self developments of the actors.

B. Preparation Before Performing

The on-stage success is likely determined by the success of off-stage practices. Off-stage process controls the actual performance on the showdate. It becomes influential when actors in a theater will connect and interact one another. Each actor has his/her role and parts that must be easily read by the audience. It is, therefore, actors have to provide more energy under repeated practices in order to build particular circumstances within a plot set by the director. Richard Schechner wrote on his book, saying,

A performance consists of ritualized gestures and sounds. Performing arts frame and mark their presentations, underlining the fact that artistic behavior is not for their first time, but enacted by trained persons who take time to prepare and rehearse. (2002: 52)⁶

Practitioners involved in this very *wayang wong* performance take time to prepare and rehearse. For a performance, it demands people to be responsible for the infrastructures of *wayang wong*, not only those who perform on stage. In Panca Budaya, the management set time for pre show preparedness within one or two weeks. The group has to manage the puppet actors, musicians, rehearsal elements, properties, consumptions, etc. However, the setting of ideas of upcoming show has been arranged beforehand.

For this paper, I presented results of research observations to two *wayang wong* performances by Panca Budaya. The first was on 1 June 2013 in Pendapa Kajengan Kotagede which took “Gathutkoco Sungging” story. The second was in Balai Desa Wiladeg Gunungkidul performed on 4 July 2013 with the title of “Gathutkoco Krama”. I allow the single individuals speak for themselves. This is because we could better understand their distinctiveness and self-sufficiency, and also it persists in maintaining their perceptions more efficiently clear of the

⁶ Richard Schechner, 2002 *Performance Studies An Introduction*, New York: Routledge, pg 52.

unintended meanings, suggestions, implications, and cultural nuances of the ethnographic participation.

1. Prior meeting

The meeting⁷ aims to explain the order of wayang wong and its comprehensiveness they will do. The group discusses when and where the wayang will take place, pre-preparedness, schedule of rehearsal, and casting. Here, scripts are distributed to each actor. The meeting is attended by puppet actors, musicians, and non-artistic persons. At this meeting, the director of wayang wong, Tukiran, and dance choreographer, Widodo Kusnanyo, lead the meeting. Also as a script writer, Tukiran presented the story or story as well as the plot and the characters. Assisted by Widodo, he casts the actors into the puppet characters.

The meeting provides the initial process to achieve final products as it gathers the elements involved in the drama. The practitioners would go over the discussions of possibilities on how to do the performance. Here, they dialogue on natures of characters and somewhat negotiate the roles among dancers, and shorten or add scenes. Hence, Tukiran as a well-experienced wayang wong actor takes the utmost lead to run the plot whereas Widodo concerns technically about stage performance, on how to look good when performing.

2. Characterization

Characterization is mainly based on the dance skill, physical observation upon the actors, voice possession, actors' personal character, and mix-and-match system. Fitra Setyaji owns a little girl's voice that gives her chances to role as a young princess, Bratajaya in Kulon Progo (13 April 2013) and Pergiwati in Wiladeg, or a more dynamic princess. Along with this criteria, wellknown local artists who take full memberships in the community will take central figures. For example, Rini Widyastuti, a famous *kethoprak* local artist, casts as a female leading role of the story: Sumbadra in Kotagede and Pergiwa in Wiladeg. Gathutkoco at both shows

⁷ For Gatotkaca Sungging show was on 22 May 2013 and Gatotkaca Krama on 28 June 2013.

was likely to be performed by Anter Asmaratedjo, also an international-leveled dancer. Besides his long existence at danceworld, he masters levels of dance skill and devotes himself to this special figure of Gathutkoco.

Group invited local guest stars for several shows such as Yati Pesek, Yu Beruk and Susilo Den Baguse Ngarso. These people are known for their intellectual knowledge on humor. However, eventhough they were not always set to do clown scenes, their jokes automatically covered their scenes.

Tukiran has his own objective concerning characterization. He appoints and gives chances to actors to experience other figures in order to develop their skills. By doing so, Tukiran is able to see the potentials of each actor.⁸ Winarno, one of male actor articulated,

By joining Panca Budaya, I have chances to do roles. Before this, I only danced in a group, not played an independent character, for instance, in Ramayana dancedrama I cast a monkey or an ogre, but not leading role. In here, I did Pandawa character as Puntadewa, a protagonist. And for Wiladeg, I'm challenged to do a role which I think of it as a weird figure, the antagonist Sengkuni. I'm very happy. As a leading role, there must be challenges; the dialogue, dance moves, music adjustment, expression and drama improvisation. For this role, I don't do much dance, but more in physical expression of keep bowing and wearing ugly makeup. Unfortunately, I still ask someone else to do my makeup.⁹

Nevertheless, characters changing and double casts in the last minute could happen due to the absence of the actors. When this occurs, Tukiran has to be strategic in putting the right actor to replace the vacant role. In Nglipar Gunungkidul (19 May 2013), Widodo was suddenly sick and decided not to participate. Anter had to take his role, and another actor, Wasis, had to double cast taking Anter's role. Complains were actually delivered, but actors who experienced such circumstances could only understood at the end, that the show must go on. Like what Anom Hartoyo said,

For this Wiladeg show, I got a role. But then, close to the show date, I was asked to do another role. I complained about this actually. I disagree with the idea of changing the casts in last minute. To me, process of practice is quite important.¹⁰

⁸ Tukiran, interview, 2 July 2013.

⁹ Winarno, interview, 4 July 2013.

¹⁰ Anom Hartoyo, interview, 4 July 2013.

Getting into a new role as requested by the director, this means an actor has to temporarily transform him/herself into someone new. Such multiple transformations could be how to act, how to voice and how to dress and makeup based on the characteristics of the puppet. Actors with certain dance corridors may take time and energy to get into one character that is beyond their corridors. The fundamental differences, like the styles of movements, voice, dress and makeup between Surakarta and Yogyakarta traditions could be rejected, fitted into place or combined to create a new style.

3. Rehearsals

To become a human puppet actor, Anom Hartoyo, a male actor, argued that one is required not only can dance, but also sing traditional songs and do dialogues.¹¹ Tukiran has similar ideas as Anom's but he adds the possession of wayang literature. Moreover, what wayang wong needs towards the actors are the ability on how to respond other's improvisation, be spontaneous and know how to improvise.¹²

Rehearsals become the most important part of a performance process for the coming success of the performance itself. During the rehearsals, practitioners practice script reading, dancing and singing, practice their characters, understand and run the plot with exit and entrance parts, and practice with live gamelan music. As noted by Anom Hartoyo:

A rehearsal is very important. Eventhough one is a skilled dancer with all his knowledge and professionalism, he needs to rehearse. The rehearsal, though done once one day before the show, one can assure himself what he will do, that he's ready for the dance. Particularly, if one works with other dancers, a rehearsal is a must. Moreover, wayang wong demands a great energy that must be supported by adequate rehearsals.¹³

At rehearsals, they learn how hand and eye movements, body gestures, dance steps music and costumes express and communicate specific emotions, dramatic situations and character types.¹⁴ Mastering performing skill takes years of training. To get a specific shape, the dancers practice rigorous exercises to train each part of body. One must begin very young when both mind and body are flexible. Acquiring

¹¹ Anom Hartoyo, interview, 4 July 2013.

¹² Tukiran, interview, 2 July 2013.

¹³ Anom Hartoyo, interview, 4 July 2013.

¹⁴ Scechner, *op.cit.*, pg 184.

a second body is not easy. Each form has its own demands. A person is born with the disposition toward a specific body.¹⁵ I suppose, It is like a body dictionary. Each body part has a variant of moves and symbols. More importantly, moves value meanings although there are moves without special meanings, only as additional moves. One has to go to a school of art such as Yogyakarta State University and Indonesian Institute of Arts, both in Yogyakarta, like most Panca Budaya members did, to get more skilled or start learning an art form. Nevertheless, dancers still need guidance from the choreographer or seniors though dancers are let to make their own moves. The latter can be problematic as complained by Fitra Setyaji,

I think, besides the director, all people under stage management are not maximal. A dance choreographer is assigned to make a dance choreographer. For example, giants group make its own moves and pattern, so does the group of women. Particularly, the later group, no new moves and not fully developed, including position patterns.¹⁶

Rehearsals are divided into regular practices for several days, one-day *gladhi kotor* and one-day *gladhi bersih* practices. The last two special practices are before the show date. *Gladi* means to rehearse, *kotor* is dirty and *bersih* means clean. During *gladi kotor* phase, the wayang wong story can be ‘seen’ although some practitioners (dancers and musicians) may find problems. But, at *gladi bersih* or the grand rehearsal, they are expected to minimize mistakes, that they are ready to showcase.

For wayang wong, as observed since last year episodes (November and December 2012), time of rehearsal was run for at least a week, maximum 2 weeks prior to the date of performance. To several actors, the time allocated was insufficient due to their lack of knowledge about how to perform their roles. For Kotagede the length of schedule was 22 – 31 May 2013, and for Wiladeg 27 June – 3 July 2013. Panca Budaya established itself as professional that they are deemed to be well prepared, believed to show well within the limited time of preparation. Not all actors are able to fulfill all schedule of rehearsals. They also belong to other dance communities who sometimes have programs which makes this wayang actors withdraw their participation. The nature of lateness upon actors also becomes personal complaints among members. To some people, artists are known for their

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg 186.

¹⁶ Fitra, interview, 4 July 2013.

habitual lateness for rehearsals. Eventhough rehearsing at 2 PM as announced, eventually it started at 3 PM due to incomplete participants. Fitra Setyaji commented on this,

Too much wasting time during rehearsal process. Rehearsal started at 1 pm, but practically it began 1 hour late due to incomplete personnels. Those who came early had to wait for those who came later, which I think we wasted so much time.¹⁷

The claim of being professional is challenged due to non-professional attitude showed by the actors and management. The more shows the group has performed, the more critical the member could be. I would regard such performance as militaristic. The idea of disciplinety is strongly encouraged but lacking of actual practices. Persons work for an art project, in particular this wayang wong case, are in a teamwork. One does not show up, it will influence others. In a group of several dancers, one missed the moves, h/she will effect group's harmony and dance floor pattern and choreography. One plays the gamelan instrument incorrectly, then the music may stop and shall repeat from the start. Performers must be at the site hours before the show, to do stage orientation, to makeup and to costume which can take some time.

It is, therefore, analyzed that both Hamera and Scechner's idea fits into a fact that a number of trained practitioners engaged in open new dialogues through dance practices as observed in Panca Budaya community. At this point, social possibilities of interactions among actors present facts that the community becomes a social space of confronting one another as well as the artist's self-traditions.

4. Script and Dialogue Practices

Some of the wayang stories derive from Indian Ramayana and Mahabharata plots. Although the Javanese feel and believe the stories to be their own. Most of the stories are Javanese creations (*carangan*), using the indic hero figures but putting them in Javanese manners.¹⁸ According to Tukiran, who basically pursued his practical wayang wong knowledge from Cipta Kawedar Group Surakarta, Surakarta

¹⁷ Fitra Setyaji, interview, 4 July 2013.

¹⁸ Laurie J. Sears, 1996, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales*, London: Duke University Press, pg 3.

styled wayang wong provides more carangan stories than Yogyakarta-styled drama. He conveys that the importance of script is to run the story well.¹⁹ It must have structures within good organization in writing format. Red lines between scenes can be generated from the beginning to the end of the story. From this, both actors and audiences can see the plot. Muryanto, a male actor, shared his comment:

I like Remong Batik episode last November 2012. The story plot was clear and easy to follow. And the stage artistic management was good.²⁰

Actors are actually expected to learn the story and read the script beforehand when they received the script in the meeting. However, the fact is that most of them do not do as expected. This turns out, during the rehearsal, they still hold script on their hands. Tight schedules of performances were the utmost reason of why they lack of time to read. However, each actor has different experience towards this script issue, as said by Winarno:

I'm very textual. I read the script. And I speak the words exactly as written on the script. My way is, I memorize and I write down what I have memorized on papers, on and on. But, I'm always worried if I was on stage and facing those who spoke well, then I couldn't say anything out of the script. That's why I always ask other actors not to speak any spontaneous dialogues to me, because I won't be able to answer. I can't improvise.²¹

Fitra Setyaji, a female actress, also mentioned,

My biggest challenge upon my participation besides dance style, is dialogue. Although I'm a Javanese, I found it difficult to speak wayang dialogue. Moreover, the aspect of drama in wayang wong is very strong that requires responsiveness among characters. I'm still at minimum level in terms of dialogue improvisation that makes me very scriptual. If I happened to be at scenes with those who have good abilities in improvising, I got very nervous.²²

Performance may be highly stylized behavior like wayang wong, and may be improvised, contact dance improvisation, most improvisations consist of arranging and moving through known materials.²³ Above comments from the actors noted improvisation. In wayang wong, it is necessary to improvise as the dialogues

¹⁹ Tukiran, interview, 2 July 2013.

²⁰ Muryanto, interview, 4 July 2013.

²¹ Winarno, interview, 4 July 2013.

²² Fitra Setyaji, interview, 4 July 2013.

²³ Scechner, *op.cit.*, pg 52.

happens should be created as natural as possible. As shared by Hamera, in the community, actors go to a dimension that enables them to learn special language and voice different from daily practice. Such requirements are to present the drama which then thoroughly create new voices under the canopy of puppet tradition.

5. Wayang Wong and Creativity

Within Panca Budaya, members, particularly actors (dancers and musicians), are actively developing themselves upon their participations. The valuable implications towards them may be used or applied outside and or inside the group. Outside, they contribute their energy to foster local artistic communities. Inside, they create new creativities which impacts to the prominence of Panca Budaya.

Eko Purnomo, music composer, articulated,

I'm *kendang* drummer. I need to master dance so I can do the *kendang*. For this Panca Budaya group, musicians rarely performed for wayang wong, however, through routine performances, now they could recognize scene by scene, the dynamics of both shadow puppet and human puppet. They gain new knowledge and information here. I can say, whenever and wherever these musicians are invited to perform for wayang wong, anytime, they won't be hesitate, they can do it. Sometimes the women singers asked me about several unknown classical Javanese words in the song lyrics. Also, I compose new compositions special for this group to differ from other wayang wong groups. I modify classical notes with more contemporary ones without leaving the basic rules of wayang wong music structures.²⁴

Besides dance moves, performers are marked with makeup and costumes elements to identify characters.²⁵ Fitra Setyaji articulated her experiences concerning what she has gained during her time in Panca Budaya,

My dance foundation is Jogja classic, so when I joined this Surakarta styled-wayang wong, I felt I lack of ability. But, as time goes by with a number of performances as well as the rehearsal process, I become to know what Surakarta style is. Outside the community, this new knowledge and ability enhance my confidence when performing Surakarta. Furthermore, it enrich my dance moves that I can use for making new dance pieces. About costumes and makeups, I learned a lot about elements on Surakarta-styled costumes and how to wear those. Also about makeups, at first I couldn't draw *godheg*

²⁴ Eko Purnomo, interview, 4 August 2013.

²⁵ Agung Sudarwanto, *Sanggit dalam Pertunjukan Wayang Kulit Purwa Story Banjaran Dasamuka Sajian Purbo Asmoro*, Jurnal Pengkajian dan Penciptaan Seni Dewa Ruci, Vol. 7 No. 3, Juli 2012, Hal. 482.

on my both temples, somebody else did for me. Now, I can make it though only right side, not left side.²⁶

Muryanto also gained the positiveness of joining the group:

What I gained from the community is that I could use my new knowledge and improvements to develop *reog wayang* (a combination of wayang and reog) in my region in Gunungkidul. From the moves, costumes, makeups, dialogues, musics, all can be valuable inspirations.²⁷

By joining the community, actors develop themselves learning and taking the advantages of the process. Gradually they make modifications and claim to be their productive creativity which then are incorporated to create new choreographies. In view of this, Hamera's notion on performance both as a final product and daily discipline can be applied. The dancing community opens widely the doors to its members to engage community's tradition just to obtain and practice vocationally the knowledge of wayang wong and all elements. It is members' authority to break the tradition and expose a new identity of a dance practice outside the community showing the facts that actors have gone through various dimensions.

C. Wayang Wong and its Contribution to the Actors' Economic Improvements

As a performance, wayang wong has implications to financial issues either production costs of the show or the economic effect to those who participate as performers. At this part, I have focused on how wayang wong economically influences the actors. However, the earnings may be perceived within different aspects depending on who and how deep the level of involvement in traditional dances.

The management distributed envelopes with money inside to each performer, dancers and musicians. The amount of money can be different based on the roles, level of difficulties upon a character and how many rehearsal they went to. Also, it depends on how much money provided for actors'. A refined character like Abimanyu can get IDR 250.000 – 500.000 per show. This amount of money is total

²⁶ Fitra Setyaji, interview, 4 July 2013.

²⁷ Muryanto, interview, 4 July 2013.

earning for all activities a dancer has devoted for the show: a week full of rehearsals, do own makeup with self property, and for the performance. Sometimes, bringing own costumes would not increase the amount.

Based on direct interviews, some actors shared their opinions in regard to economic gain over the performers. Fitra Setyaji shared,

Very helpful. It has been routinely performed every month. Sometimes, we did two performances in a month. I find it economically valuable to increase my savings.²⁸

Wayang wong becomes a fundamental issue for Winarno's economic basis as he himself decides that being a dancer is his profession. He articulated,

I dance for money, so I find it helpful. I'm a married man and have 2 children, which means I have to feed someone else's daughter (wife) and my kids. I work for my brother, any works given to me, but from the beginning I already made advance permission. If I got dance schedule, he would let me go for it. Salary system is daily basis, so if I do not work for a day, I lose my one-day salary.²⁹

Different from both above-mentioned articulations, Muryanto emphasized more on cultural preservation although he agreed that he could not make earnings from wayang wong,

Financially, wayang wong does not fulfill my needs because of its small amount of money. But, I let myself to think more on that this wayang wong can be a way to preserve culture so that it wouldn't vanish.³⁰

Anom Hartoyo found his participation within wayang wong projects as his social duty as a graduate student from a school of art. He understood that his academic knowledge should be contributed to people for further society development. That is why he concerned less on monetary appreciation from the project,

I don't measure a success with money gaining. I consider money as a bonus from a process of cultural production as well as culture preservation. I remembered my teacher's message when I was still in college. Graduates of ISI became lecturer and structural civil servants were common. But if the graduates could mobilize the surrounding people to do arts and that develops,

²⁸ Fitra Setyaji, interview, 4 July 2013.

²⁹ Winarno, interview, 4 July 2013.

³⁰ Muryanto, interview, 4 July 2013.

that is something extraordinary. More importantly, less people can do this and have strong willingness.³¹

It is apparent that it needs great efforts to sustain wayang wong as it engages a variant practitioners in a way to perform the dancedrama. As a cultural production, wayang wong presents human creativity in transforming leather puppets into human-actor puppets which go through sort of multiple dimensions. However, the community accomodate a space for the actors to interact and participate in aesthetic exposures which allow them to either keep or change the traditions in favor to their understanding towards wayang wong.

³¹ Anom Hartoyo, interview, 4 July 2013.

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