

Extending Practices of Translation and Collaboration

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research interests and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences and teaching, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a broad overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia in the region. Our preferred style is subjective and conversational. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and the region. In the current edition, we explore varieties and practices of translation and collaboration between artists, writers, and translators in Indonesia and Australia.

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Yogya theatre reaches out

Barbara Hatley

For many years I've been observing and writing about theatre in Yogyakarta, Central Java. Focusing first on the Javanese popular melodrama *ketoprak*, then also modern Indonesian language theatre, I've explored the ways in which these forms draw on Javanese theatrical and cultural tradition in engaging with contemporary Indonesia.

In the late 1970s, *ketoprak*'s performances of historical and legendary stories celebrated the Javanese cultural heritage, while its improvised dialogue resonated with daily life experiences. The leftist, populist political connection of much *ketoprak* in the 1950s and 1960s had ceased with the takeover of the New Order government, turning to modern Indonesian language theatre that problematized Javanese cultural tradition, depicting past kingdoms ruled by corrupt power holders to comment critically on the state of the contemporary Indonesian nation.

The ending of the Suharto era in 1998, with a new freedom of cultural expression, was reflected in Yogya by vibrant performances dramatizing real-life occurrences staged in neighbourhood locations and connecting with communities. One group, Teater Garasi, staged a series of productions reflecting on the state of contemporary Indonesia as a whole – problematizing the haunting stain of Java's past (*Waktu Batu*), depicting people rushing headlong into the future (*Jejalan*), celebrating hybridity of identity (*Tubuh Ketiga*), and exposing intolerance (*Yang Fana Itu Waktu, Kita Abadi*).

Recent visits to Yogya have evidenced both a continuation of the focus on the local and a 'new' reaching out beyond Java to the wider nation. Veteran *ketoprak* figures stage performances, organise festivals, train young people; modern theatre groups perform in Javanese language aiming to evoke everyday experience and engage identification among audience members. At the same time three groups, Teater Garasi, Kalanari Theatre Movement and Bengkel Mime Theatre, have been involved in activities outside Java. Garasi's *Pementasan Antar Ragam* 'Performing Difference' project, involving connections with local actors and artists from four outer island locations – Madura, Flores, Sumbawa and Singkawang – is the focus of a brief review below.

On Garasi's website the 'Antar Ragam' project is described as "a new initiative that aims to build contacts and new meetings with different traditions and cultures as well as with emerging artists and young people in cities outside Java, as an unlearning and relearning process on being Indonesian or Asian". In conversation, Garasi members explained that they were seeing radicalism and intolerance rising everywhere. They decided to go outside Java as the centre of Indonesia, to see how things looked from elsewhere.

Madura and Flores were their first destinations. Garasi's major aim was to encourage young people to look around them, to identify important social issues and engage with these themes in performance. In strongly Islamic Madura they encountered relatively large numbers of theatre groups, encouraged by an emphasis on literature in the *pesantren* Islamic school system. In Flores theatre is generally less developed, although in Maumere there is an active group of writers and artists, mostly students and former students of the local Ledalero Catholic theological college. Garasi teams were asked by local artists to share their own theatre process, so they visited again some months later, holding workshops about researching social issues, then exploring them through improvisation to develop a full performance. Used to presenting conventional written scripts, local performers found Garasi's method new and stimulating, and wanted to emulate it in their own work.

Local representatives undertook residencies at Garasi's studio in Yogyakarta, discussing and developing their planned projects with Garasi members, observing studio activities and attending arts events in the city. At the Garasi studio in July 2017 I met the two Flores representatives, Ibu Veronika, from Adonara Island, whose women's theatre group stages plays about women's experiences, and Eka Putra Ngalu, a theatre writer and activist from the KAHE arts community in Maumere. In August 2018, I also met Mpok Yanti from Singkawang, a transgender artist who encountered theatre while at university in Pontianak, then returned home to teach drama in high school and set up a theatre group, as well as appearing in local films.

The residency-recipients returned to their regions to work with other local artists.



'Performance 92' (referring to the 1992 tsunami) staged by Teater Pilar from the Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Katolik Ledalero, at the Maumere festival, November 2018. Courtesy Komunitas Kahe and photographer Gusty Watson.

Arts events in Madura and Flores in late 2018 and festivals in all four regions in 2019 showcased the results. Garasi members came to observe and provide guidance. The Garasi-initiated project has brought together local groups, Catholic and Muslim theatre groups from neighbouring localities with no previous contact; it has witnessed NGOs consider theatre as a new medium for addressing social problems, and government officials impressed by a theatrical work and providing funding for its further staging.

The Madura event focused on land, viewed traditionally as a sacred family heritage, and now, after construction of the bridge linking Java and Madura, a contested economic resource. One festival in Flores focused on the theme of tsunami, both the literal tsunami which struck the region in 1992 and the current metaphorical flooding in of global capitalism and mass media. The Singkawang festival, with its theme of tolerance, featured a performance depicting transformation of the city's famous market Pasar Hongkong from a wholly Chinese site to today's centre of vibrant multi-ethnic activity.



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Such activities provide insight into the diverse, complex social conditions characterising the different regions of Indonesia, and a seemingly growing commitment to engaging with these issues among local theatre groups and other artists. Given the history of Yogya performance in connecting with its social context, might there be suggestion here of a more general shift in social attitudes to and understandings of 'the nation'? Do Garasi members envisage the current project feeding into their own creative work, inspiring future productions? "Certainly", they say, because every new experience enriches artists' ideas; however, they don't yet know what form this work might take. Watch this space!

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