

Performing Arts of Asia

Presented by The Seattle Times and the University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies outreach centers in partnership with the UW World Series and the UW Ethnic Cultural Center & Theater. For more information please visit online at jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia.

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Thanks for joining us on Wednesdays for **Performing Arts of Asia**, our series focusing on one style of performance art in a specific region of Asia, and exploring the cultural context that continues to shape it. A complement to the **Exploring Asia: Performing Arts** project, our series concludes today.

Modern Day Puppeteers Tell Ancient Stories in Java, Indonesia

by Laurie J. Sears, professor, University of Washington

Did you know that puppeteers in Java not only have to study from the age of 8, memorizing stories without reading books, but must also — as an aid to their concentration — pass a number of nights meditating near graveyard shrines? They do this to gain the inner strength needed to stay up all night for the seven-hour performances. Not only do they have to perform without ever leaving the mat on which they sit cross-legged in front of the white cotton screen, but Javanese shadow puppet masters like Ki Surya, one of Indonesia's most respected puppeteers, also have to be able to perform the voices of over a hundred characters in each nightlong performance. The puppeteers can remember the different voices because they know the characters and the stories of this long-lived oral tradition so well.

The puppeteer must also lead the gong/chime "gamelan" orchestra that accompanies each performance. In the dry season in Java and Bali, the sounds of music and song often spread across the rice paddies on hot tropical nights. As one draws near, the lively scene unfolds as adults and children come together to watch the evening's entertainment. Female singers are also part of the show, and a lot of the enjoyment that the audiences derive from the shows involves jokes that the puppeteer makes about the musicians, the female singers or members of the audience. Puppeteers are known for their beautiful singing voices, their lively jokes or for their skills at manipulating the delicately carved puppets in exciting battle scenes.

Java is the most densely populated island of Indonesia. It is home to over half of Indonesia's 235 million people. Today, Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world, and the world's largest Islamic country. Shadow theater remains popular as the characters from the ancient stories move into the worlds of television, film and comic books even as they move across the seas to America, Japan and Europe. As Ki Surya recently observed, "I've performed in palaces and villages, in prisons and even in America." Ki Surya is a Javanese puppeteer who spent 15 years of his life in prison because one of his hundred voices was seen to be a political one. Like puppeteers over the centuries, he used the puppet theater to criticize the government.

The shadow puppet theater in Java goes back almost 1,000 years. The stories that remain most popular today are from a story-cycle from India called the "Mahabharata"; the stories tell the tales of Indic gods and princes, demons and clowns. Although there is a basic story line in these ancient tales, a story that leads to a great and terrible battle between two sides of the same family, the stories that are most often told in Java use the ancient heroes and heroines to tell contemporary stories.

In the old days, we might have compared the stories of the Javanese shadow theater to Homer's "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey." Today we might compare the Javanese shadow theater to episodes of "The Simpsons." Just as Homer, Marge and Bart appear each time in different guises and plots, the characters from the ancient Indic tales of Java take on modern day attitudes and props. Motorcycles, cell phones and tourists might appear in different episodes, just as snare drums, trombones or cymbals might join the gamelan ensemble that accompanies the performance.



Puppeteer, singers and musicians performing an all-night concert in Central Java, Indonesia. For more information on an upcoming Indonesian puppet and dance performance at Bainbridge Performing Arts on March 21, go to <http://www.bainbridgeperformingarts.org/Performances/GuestArtists/WayangGolek.html>. Photo courtesy of the Southeast Asia Center at the Jackson School of International Studies.

After the fall of Indonesia's oppressive military government in 1998, Ki Surya was allowed to perform again. He traveled to the United States in 2000, where he performed at UCLA, UC Berkeley and several colleges on the East Coast. Ki Surya is best known for his skills at storytelling: for being able to knit together the old stories and characters with new ideas and plots to keep his audiences enthralled and laughing through the night. The haunting sounds of the gamelan orchestra, the lively movements of the glittering puppets and the ways in which Ki Surya was able to bring the ancient Javanese characters to life for American audiences amazed him as much as his fortunate viewers.

Expand Your World

- * What are the skills that are needed to become a good Javanese shadow puppeteer? What kind of training do they get?
- * What are the different epic stories mentioned in this article?



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