

GO HUNGARY – GO INDONESIA:
UNDERSTANDING
CULTURE AND SOCIETY
BOOK 2

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The Immersed Steps for Understanding

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In 1998, I arrived in Indonesia with the purpose of studying the most essential form of traditional Javanese theatre, the wayang *kulit*. As a student in the Indonesian Institute of Arts in Surakarta, I started my studies with a major in gamelan music and then during a personal trip I have found the *dhalang* (puppeteer), who first introduced me into the wayang techniques, and many rainy weeks and months later he initiated me into the meaning and the message of the wayang. Before my life in Indonesia, I had already studied art, I had been dealing with theater for years. I played an active role in the Hungarian street theater in the heroic ages, I also worked in Switzerland in an international contemporary circus, I knew the repertoire of the Western classical theatre, the key plays/performances, canonized directors, artists and dramas. I thought all my previous experiences and knowledge would help me to understand the Javanese *shadow play*. But I was proven wrong.

After a while I progressively started to realize in Java that the limits of obtainable knowledge were finite, reference points were missing, the context was unknown, and the *form language* was unfamiliar to me. Behind the infinite politeness and kindness of the Javanese people lies a "closed, and a hidden-from-strangers'-eyes" kind of community life and knowledge. A system known and understood by everyone, from which the western, "observer" always remains excluded. However, I wanted to become part of it.

I wanted to understand Javanese people. I wanted to get to the deepest depths of the Javanese soul. Through becoming a part of the community, I wished to understand the wisdom of the wayang plays, finally find the answer to how a centuries-old analog artistic form could survive in the digital world, almost unchanged in our days. Where does the strength of Javanese shadow-play stem from, how do Javanese people really think, how do they feel and live, what is the eternal source of its magic?

Many questions to which until then I only knew one way to respond: to observe, and to ask the right questions, to analyze and conclude. However, the everyday events seemed to be inexplicable to me through the habitual forms of apprehension. How

should one logically react to a situation where on the last rehearsal day of a theatre group preparing for the exam-performance at the art academy – just one day before the performance itself – after long hours of discussion, the dean and other professors of the university declare with a smile on their face that there is not going to be any rehearsal on that day let alone any other substantive work, because the feeling (*rasa*) and the energies all around us are not favorable to the creative process?! Or when the neighbor tells us that a nice ghost lives around the banana palms in the garden, we can feel free to feed him/her, or when we get from our music partner a magic belt against bad spirits, to be worn underneath our clothes?! Magic, ghosts, spirits, feelings, energy, universe. And all this as an unquestionable certainty, as the only possible interpretation of reality. But this was neither the aspect, nor the approach we had got used to in Europe, which we were raised in, which we learned, which oriented the way how we think about the word. This is something totally different. A culture gap? The impossibility of understanding?

I was sure that the answers of Jewish-Christian cultural tradition could give to the mysteries of human life, the western norms of civilization identifying progress with excessive consumption and the *logocentric world view* form such a strong heritage that they would make it impossible for me to understand the Javanese way of life and ethical approach. If I really want to have an insight and immerse myself into the world that was unknown and incomprehensible before, I have to start with a clean slate. The suspension of "I", the oblivion of all norms learned and experienced before, giving up the praxis of reaching out for rational explanations and applying a critical approach to questions proved to be the only viable option. Is there a chance at all to understand the Javanese system, Javanism for someone coming from the West?! I had to ask myself whether such thing as understanding exists independently from cultural embeddedness? As Benedict R.O. Anderson argued:

"One of the most striking contrasts between western society and that of Java is the general absence in the first as compared with the pervasive presence in the second of compelling religious mythology. This one could define as a set of uniformity over a whole society, both horizontally through every region and vertically through every social class. Certainly, in contemporary western society there are no religious myths which have this kind of universal grip relevancy. The traditional Christian myths survive largely as imposing, melancholy ruins in the flat landscape of our secular civilization. It is, of course, evident that much of our behavior is still regulated by the residues of Christian norms and values. Nevertheless, these values increasingly lack a convincing imagery of persuasive symbolism to give them urgency. If one refrains from committing adultery it is likely to be because one feels it "wouldn't be fair" or

because one is too lazy, busy or timid, rather than because Paris suffered bitterly for his rape of Helen or because Moses brought down his graven tablets from Mount Sinai. Our morality grows steadily more pragmatic- without poetry or metaphysics." (Benedict R.O. G Anderson *Mythology and the tolerance of the Javanese* Cornell University Press 1965, p. 5).

As we, western people and the evolution of our personality defined by cultural space are characterized by the total lack of religious mythology and the magical sense of community as they were formulated by Benedict, in the insecure and sometimes inconceivable situations we have to face within the Javanese community, interpersonal connections could have offered us points of reference. Nevertheless, the unwritten laws, coding system of the social contacts of Javanese people perfectly reflect and display the signs just waiting for realization. Social achievements Western cultures are proud of, such as the freedom of speech, self-advocacy, outspokenness, openness and sturdiness can lead to seemingly bizarre and offensive behaviors in situations where Javanese and Western people meet. As a friend of Niels Mulder from Yogyakarta claims: "We Javanese are a closed people. We show and tell what we hope will please you, but we'll never expose ourselves, what is inside of us. Your impressions and interpretations are only based on what you have seen and been told but you cannot look behind our posture. We open ourselves to the extent we want to, but You'll never know our true motivations" (Mulder, Niels *Reflection on Southeast Asian Personhood* 2011).

In addition to speaking to friends, acquaintances, teachers about Javanism, during each wayang performance I felt that I would find the ultimate answers in wayang. That through the understanding of wayang I will reach the understanding of Javanese ethics, philosophy, cosmology, system of belief at the same time. That I will be able to make a big step towards the deeper understanding of wayang and partially leave my stance as a Western outsider behind in order to get closer to the community. As reaching the conclusion that Javanism and the research of wayang is one and the same thing for me, being a professional dealing with theater I wanted to know where those universal codes can be found within the treasures of wayang, which carry meaning for both Javanese and Western people? Do universal codes exist at all? I didn't know the answers to these questions at that time. I only knew that I would like to get all the knowledge available about wayang.

I couldn't surely say that I have reached my journey's end which had started back in Autumn 1998. But what is for sure is that in the last 20 years passed since, my relation with wayang has been continuously reshaping, deepening, changing. I created

several wayang performances, I picked wayang as the topic for my master's dissertation, I am preparing for my doctorate, I most often stream live wayang performances and after so many years I am getting ready to return to my second home, Solo.

My admiration and respect for Javanese people is unchanged, and I am still attached to wayang kulit with strong ties. In the future I will try to recall the stages of the evolution of my understanding, the changes occurred in the past which have deeply affected my life while, despite the embellishing distance between Indonesia and myself, I will try not to fall into the trap of "the romantic glance thrown at a foreign culture" (Edward Said).

1. The suspension of knowledge

So we are in autumn 1998, on the *jumat kliwon*, where I see my first wayang kulit in the Pendopo of TBS. I am constantly asking my Javanese acquaintances about the actors, the story, I am trying to follow the events in front of the canvas, interpreting the community life that the audience shares. So, what is happening? People are talking to each other, eating, drinking, laughing, men are smoking, drinking coffee. A fair-ground atmosphere during a theatre play? Some people stand up and go home or get up and sit down on the other side of the folding screen, and as time passes a number of musicians, singers lean on each other's shoulders, the audience huddles together and falls asleep. Meanwhile one single person makes the countless puppets move while conducting the orchestra sitting behind his back, calls out the audience, improvises, makes them laugh, speaks, narrates. Miracle. The next day I ask my maestro a few questions about the dhalang, the stories, the past, the traditions. And I also want to know why all the women have to sit in the shadowy side of the folding screen?

And sometimes he answers with a complicit gaze other times he doesn't, sometimes he asks a question, other times he remains silent, and seldom he shares a little secret with me: where would women sit? Men are obviously seated on the side of the men dhalang and the gamelan orchestra likewise consisted of men, but don't I think that women are the mediators between the visible and invisible world when they are pregnant and give birth to their children? We exchange questions and answers, practice and learn a lot during our classes. On rainy afternoons, he gradually initiates me into the knowledge that was handed on between generations, the techniques on how to manipulate a puppet, the scenes of fight, the introductory songs, the dramaturgic possibilities of improvisation. He speaks about the character of the actors, their missions, their fights, the importance of unity and humility, faith, good decisions, the supporting

powers... During the passing weeks and months of our classes we progressively get closer to the world I was trying to get to know. It is not just about wayang itself, but also about Javanese ethics, philosophy and Javanism which underlie the wayang; about the fact that people consist of two different parts: one part is visible for the others, the *lair*, while the other is the *inner essence*, the *batin*.

Lair belongs to the realm of the five senses and rational thinking, while the inner self, the *batin* is hidden from other people's eyes and is the essence linked to the common roots of all existence, to the One. The *batin* is related to the intuitive inner sense, the sixth sense called *rasa*. Developing the *batin* is a basic need, because a well-functioning intuitive "self" helps people acquire the ability of inner vision and recognition. I got to understand through the talks I had with him what "living an ethical life" means according to the Javanese people. How they understand the role of an individual within the community, how they subordinate their personal interests to the interests of the whole community, how they are able to form a harmonic state of being through the harmonization of the goals of the community, the family and the universe. Why is it important to realize that one is not only responsible for one's own life, but also for the well-being of the whole community? Why are selflessness and humility inevitable, the *Sepi Ing Pamrih*, according to which the individual doesn't bother the members of the community with his/her problems, doesn't do or think of anything that would disturb the harmony of the community. I have also learnt that the kind Javanese people consciously practice and develop their personalities in order to be able to control their negative feelings, to practice tolerance, support, the ability of acceptance and understanding. Why is it essential to realize and accept one's own goals and missions as defined by the community? That one as unique and active part of the cosmos is aware of the laws of self-determination? Every single moment is a moment of decisions – as it is exemplified by the heroes of the wayang stories. One can decide right or wrong depending on whether his or her choice was coming from anger, fear or wisdom and harmony.

In order for the harmony to remain stable on the level of the individuals as well as that of the community, everyone has to work on their inner self, on the *batin*. A person blessed with a strong inner self has always control over his or her feelings, perfectly aware of the law of causality, embraces everything happening in the world with patience. A strong *batin* lets you know the right moment to act, which is in perfect harmony with the rhythm of the cosmos. A wise, ethical and harmonic life is reached through the development of the spirit and the inner self. The inner self is in continuous contact with the God living in our heart, therefore life is nothing but a continuous prayer. There is no difference between profane and sacred, everything exists in an

inseparable unity. This is Javanism. These lessons, stories filled our days devoted to the study of the wayang.

We learned a lot about the iconography of the performances, the parables, the symbolism of wayang and about all the complexity that characterizes it. I gradually understood that the wayang is not simply a form of entertainment, but a repository of community knowledge, a "code of ethics", a guide to the life, an essential part of our everyday lives and education. I also learned that the acted stories, the personalities of the characters on display, the paths heroes follow, their doubts, their struggles, the organic unity of good and beautiful are parables for Javanese people that provide them directions. That a wayang is an important social event where long time no seen acquaintances, family members meet, talk, gossip and discuss the questions related to them. Every night I was watching with amazement and jealousy that even the youngest children know and recognize the different characters, actors, and they know the myths, legends passed on orally, which are still present in the community's knowledge. I was also amazed by the virtuoso technique, sound, beauty, energy, steadiness, humor of the great dhalang maestros, Ki Manteb and Ki Anom Suroto, and the way it maintained the attention of the audience for 9 hours. As months passed by I got to understand that every technical movement of the wayang, the place of the tools, the saint bird hanging above the dhalang's head, the Garuda serving as a lampion, as well as the tree of life has a spiritual, mystical meaning. The changing of the days and seasons, the human entity and the unity of the world, its harmony, the supporting will of gods, the wise lifestyle focusing on the inner part of the soul are represented in every wayang play. And everything that I thought I knew about the inner forces moving people, about the objectives of art and its function, an individual as a sovereign entity and its relation with the community was challenged. I progressively learned to accept the Javanese ethics, the basic teachings because I knew that the demand for harmony and happiness is a basic human need, it has nothing to do with the development of civilizations, country borders, and national identity. As a Western researcher falling in love with the Javanese culture once said: "*The world-view of the Javanese provides an all-encompassing answer to questions about the ultimate structure of reality. It acknowledges a meta-empirical ground of reality and offers this view not only as a theory, but also as a meaningful human practice.*" (Franz-Magnis Suseno: *Javanese ethics and worldview* Gramedia, Jakarta 1997. p.132.)

Impatience, anger, games people play. We all know the traps of our western life. The wayang was the steady pillar, the holding force, the benchmark, a road-sign. Many – and many times – have asked me since then, and still ask me today why Javanese shadow puppet theatre is interesting for a European apart from its beauty? And I'm

always trying to tell that the knowledge which is the basis of Javanese people's lives, could have once been ours too.

Maybe it would be worth finding the way back to the state of being when we still believed in the eternal laws of the universe, the invisible powers supporting humanity, the intertwining fates of individuals and community derived from the strength of choices, and we still knew that life is not difficult at all if we follow the sound of our heart. But us, western people are used to the fact that the clever brain, the wise self and social expectations or the morality always silence the sound of the heart. Compared to the Javanese people living in harmony in the intersections of the web of the universe, we, western people, believe in logos and rationality instead of God and think that man is nothing else than "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* New York, Basic Books 1973).

2. The dilemma of evocation

The experiences in Java, the time with the investigation of wayang and later my studies in theatre directed my attention to an important professional matter to clarify. I hope that the following issues will not only make historians of the theatre as well as all the researchers in the humanities revisit their concepts. I am also convinced that western thinking patterns, the evolution of western sciences and its sets of definitions are in many cases unable to precisely describe culturally different phenomena – in this case the Javanese. As wayang remains in the focus of our analysis, we have to take a look at how European theatre traditions and the scientific life define the wayang? What is wayang? A theatre of sorts? A puppet theatre? A music and dancing event?

It is no coincidence that wayang kulit is a part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2003, as its profusion of forms, tradition, artistic value are unique phenomena. The origins of wayang, its iconography, the role of dhalang, the set of instruments of the gamelan orchestra, the meaning of the tonalities, the social effect of the pieces and the narrative parts were researched by cultural anthropologists, historians of the theatre, music ethnologists, artists, art historians and music historians too.

If we sum up the definitions of "wayang" given by the Javanese, we will see that there is no consensual definition: for instance, Benedict R.O.G Anderson defines wayang as a metaphysical and ethical system (Benedict R.O.G. Anderson: *Mythology and the tolerance of the Javanese* Cornell University Press, 1965. p. 5.), while Prof. Dr. Ben

Arps perceives it as an audiovisual spectacle (Prof.Dr. Bernard Arps: *The sound of space* Mrazek, 2002. p. 316.) and James R. Brandon understands it as a moralizing comprehensive artwork displaying the traditional values of the community (James R. Brandon: *Theatre in Southeast Asia* Harvard University Press, 1967. p.116.- 118.). The definition used and accepted for wayang in Hungary is puppetry or puppet theatre.

Puppet theatre refers to the comedian manipulating a single puppet, as well as to the actor playing with puppets sewed from small socks, but also describes the showmen pulling a ping-pong ball on their fingers. Puppet theatre colloquially means the same as theatre for children or as nice little tales played behind a (folding) screen. The fact that wayang was put in the narrow category of "Puppet Theatre" out of the countless possibilities is problematic, but also whether the wayang – according to the set of definitions formed and constructed by the western social values – is a theatre at all is also a question looking for an answer. As all the topics, concepts and areas, which guided the development of the European theatre history – as the relation between literature and dramatic texts, the interrelation of visual elements, the progression of the *mise en scene*, the artistic creativity, the technical development, the tradition of criticism, the history of reception, adaptations – appear hardly or not at all in the wayang.

Here we talk about an art form which does not require a director, it only has an organizing principle of sorts, no dramaturgist, only dramaturgical parts, no actors, only a single master of ceremonies, the dhalang and the puppets manipulated by the dhalang. Erika Fischer-Lichte's perception on wayang is increasingly valid, according to which the definition of theatricality is only conceivable as an element of an interdisciplinary discourse of cultural sciences (Erika Fischer-Lichte: *A színház mint kulturális model*, Theatron, 1999./3. pp.67.-79.). Based on the above-mentioned and already discussed parts of the nine-hour long performance, we know that the Javanese moral, ethics and metaphysics are presented sometimes in a symbolical, other times in a metaphorical or quite pragmatic way.

For Javanese people, the relation of the micro and the macrocosm, the order and the decoding of signs of the invisible world is a process lived and handed over through generations. The wayang in the perspective of Javanese people is defined as magical acts of the community, as a phylogeny of an individual and the group, as guidance, as a moral parable where the divine One guides the dhalang, the audience and the heroes of the stories.

"To a Javanese Allah created Adam, and from Adam descended the Prophet Mohammed, Batara Guru (Shiva), and Vishnu. Vishnu was first incarnated as Rama in the Ramayana

and later as Krishna – adviser to the Pandavas – in the Mahabharata. And from the Pandavas are descended, generation by generation, the kings and sultans who have ruled Java down into the twentieth century. Thus, the Ramayana and more especially the Mahabharata comprise a vital link connecting the Javanese present to the great mythological, religious past." (James R. Brandon: Theater in Southeast Asia, Harvard University Press, 1967. p.92.)

The precondition of understanding the wayang is the syncretism which Bradon refers to. The animist ancient-Javanese, the Hindu-Buddhist systems and the Islam had created unity cumulatively and they all live in the magical thinking of the Javanese today.

Without the presence of the ancestry, the pervading invisible order and power, the unquestionable realities of the glorious past, the incarnation of the superior One, no wayang performance is possible.

Humans move to the rhythm of the cosmos just as the dhalang manipulates the puppets to the rhythm of the gamelan music. As it was already discussed, one of the main ideas of the wayang stories is that human life is not independent from the law of the universe, there is a need for a divine guidance, a knowledge of the consequences of the acts, a harmony between the visible and invisible world. So, is the set of definition applicable for the western world applicable to such social and cultural phenomena where individualism, logical thinking, the separation of profane and sacred spaces, the power of the logos is seen differently as in Europe? The history of the European theatre and the theatre studies born in the XX. century, got separated from the study of literature and is thus considered as an independent discipline, using two known and accepted definition for theatre, neither of which is adequate to define and describe the essence of wayang.

The most popular definitions in the western part of the world are that of Eric Bentley who defines theatre as "a personifying B watched by C" and that of Erika Fischer-Lichte, who perceives it as A (actor) embodying X (roll) watched by C. A dhalang gets prepared for a wayang performance. He sits in front of the folding screen as a spiritual, mental and physical leader. Purgation, prayers precede the performance considered as a serious spiritual, intellectual and physical effort. "Om. May nothing give hindrance, O spirits of this house, flying over the Earth, Mothers of Generations. Allah, assist me, fulfill my wish, gratify my intentions. Creatures, male and female, look at my work, be pleased, and love by God's will. Oh, Allah! Oh Allah! Oh Allah!..... O Great Serpent who supports the Earth, O Spirits all here, I ask Your help. Let not the onlookers disperse before I have finished performing my art.....Om. O God of the Soul,

Essence of the One, O God of Light, may the flame of the lamp shine over the world. May those who come be silent, show pity and love, and may they stay to look at me!" (James. R. Brandon: *On Thrones of Gold* Harvard University Press, 1970. pp. 83-84)

A dhalang uses his body and spirit in to transfer the wisdom of the invisible world through sanctified puppets to the spectators in a way that would be worth of his ancestors. Without this spiritual background, there is no wayang performance. Both Fisher-Lichte and Bentley's definition of theatre are inadequate for the description of wayang, so a new definition has to be created.

From a European perspective, the Javanese wayang kulit can be described as follows: A (dhalang) evokes and impersonates Y (infinity, God, cosmic consciousness) in order to personify X1, X2, X3...-X100 (puppets) while C is watching. The evocation not only precedes the process of impersonation and embodiment, but it is also a precondition to it.

This act of evocation makes the performance to become a genuine theater, one that that represents the essence of Javanese morality and ethics. There is no wayang performance without evocation. And although the wayang has changed in terms of its formality during its evolution through centuries, but it has still remained a point of reference for the Javanese philosophy, belief and moral life. The ritual act of evocation created and still creates the archaic sense of value of the wayang kulit for the Javanese people.

As I wanted to check the correctness of my statement, I made a survey research on how the wayang is defined by the Javanese people? The questions "What is a wayang?" and "What is theatre?" were sent to the dhalangs living and working in Java, musicians, art teachers as well as to those who are professionally dealing with the wayang, gamelan music in Europe. Several different approaches and viewpoints prevailed among the returned responses, but in generally speaking, all those who defined wayang as theatre also talked about it being only a form which cannot grasp wayang properly. Answers to my initial questions mostly included the presentation of everyday life, community experience, teaching various art forms and the presentation of Javanism. Many has pointed out and drawn the attention to the fact that unlike European practice of reception, the reception of wayang is not realized in terms of "I", but is rather dominated by "We". They also referred to the definition offered by Prof. R.M. Moerdowo:

"As it is widely known in this country, the wayang is one of the dramatic arts that contains elements relating to community life and all the problems found in it. They are presented

in a symbolic, illustrative and visual way as a story with a deep background, analyzing the physical and spiritual problems of life. The individual as well as social life of human beings are continuously demonstrated with all their problems accompanied by an ideal conception of a secure and harmonious community of life. Man is also faced with the problems of moral standards, and with such basic elements of aesthetics, truth and beauty." (Prof. R.M Moerdowo, *Wayang: Its significance in Indonesian Society* Pn. Balai Pustaka Jakarta, 1982. p. 63.)

And now let us return to the first problem raised in our study: if wayang is a form of art displaying the values of Javanese people and their society, how can European people understand it at all? What could be done in order not to eliminate differences between the reception of Western and Javanese people? Based on my own experience, inner journey, the result of the suspension of the, "I" and my knowledge I can state that the rationalist praxis of European scientism can be bracketed and you can get close to the real meaning of the wayang kulit. If one deals with this issue during a long spiritual practice, one can have a chance to find the answers to basic questions underlying human existence regardless of geographical position, cultural tradition and skin color. One is confronted with the fact that every wayang performance represents a given order blatantly incompatible with the values of the western world, though not with the human being as such suddenly reveals itself, and that the wayang essentially includes the absolute values present in human history in a way that along with an uncompromising aesthetic perfection, it sets up an unquestionable moral standard.

3. The ultimate understanding – How can wayang be performed in Europe?

From what has been said above the question whether understanding the wayang helps to integrate it into the traditions of western theatre logically follows. In other words: can wayang be adapted to the European stages? And, if so, how?

I had been dealing with the question for many years. The obvious gap between the contemporary Javanese wayang and the contemporary European stage made the question irresolvable for a long time. It was feared that any attempt of wayang could at best appear on a European stage as an exciting cultural experience, an exotic miracle, a "cultural monkey" locked up in a cage in the zoo. As it is true for every theatrical form in the Far East, without decoding the cultural and theatrical signs a performance can only offer aesthetic enjoyment, but under no circumstances can it become a moral or intellectual challenge. As to the adaptability of wayang, besides

the form and the content, time is also a difficult issue. Although the nine-hour long Mahabharata of Peter Brook presented in Avignon in 1985 was on tour for years in Europe, it still cannot be stated that the spectators could find a traditional wayang performance as interesting as a Brook adaptation. Even in the latter case the fact that the story, the plot, the heroes of Mahabharata forming the basis of wayang stories are almost totally unknown to the European spectators is quite problematic. Not to mention that the heroes presented in wayang are far from being interesting to the postmodern theatre. How would the story of a Judistira having lost its empire on dice look like on a European stage dominated by traditions of Greek dramas and great king-dramas? Depending on the era and/or the directorial concept Judistira would be betrayed by his wife, or his son would end his life with a classical parricide. Or the four siblings would first fall out with each other over the legacy and then one of them would turn out to be a traitorous killer. Or one could imagine a version where Judistira divides against himself, gets mad, sells and denies his past. Incest, revenge, cruelty, parricide, treason, betrayal, existential anxiety, neurosis, breakdown, emptiness. All these dramatic situations – well known for European spectators – are non-existent in the wayang. They have been presenting and representing the same values for hundreds of years. Camaraderie, family, community, engrossment, belief, inner power, intellectual and spiritual greatness, asceticism, purification. Some would say this is boring. Where is the intellectual challenge, the postmodern social criticism, the political theatre, and the reflexive practice?

The shadow is still used in European theatre to represent the unearthly world or a dreamworld, an abstract space or an absurd situation comedy. But without any doubt, the most exciting contemporary reading is the analytical theatre organized along the shadow aspect of personality by Jung.

Although I have seen traditional wayang performances in Europe, none of them triggered cathartic experiences in the spectator, it didn't open up intellectual perspectives beyond pure exotism. In both cases a shortened version was performed, and in one case the dhalang – an experienced puppeteer working a lot in America and Europe – added harsh and obscene scenes into the story. When I asked him why he had done that, he answered that this was what western people like; rudeness, aggression and overt pornography. It is without doubt that all wayang performances include erotic elements – especially if the puppeteer flirts with the singer, or if Arjuna is present as an erotic icon. But rude, overt pornography is present neither in the everyday life of the Javanese, nor in the wayang plays. I felt distressed when I understood that this is how many people see us...

4. Wayang in Hungary

I have been wondering for years how a wayang performance, deprived of its traditional context, could be staged, especially given the fact that the spectators are totally unaware of the puppets' personality traits. Indeed, the puppet of Arjuna is not only the visualization of the most heartbreaking member of the 5 Pandawa siblings, but, "being Arjuna" is also the symbol of charming, sexy, but noble, decent masculinity. The puppet of Bima is not only the mightiest sibling, but "being Bima" is the symbol of brute force and determination as well. So how could these decontextualized puppets be used on the Hungarian stage?

After several attempts and a long search for solution I have decided that some content has to be omitted, as the whole message simply cannot get through even if flyers are handed out before the performance. So, puppets have to be manipulated by using the techniques of wayang, the personal traits of the characters have to be kept, but it is better not to insist on the original character traits.

The question also demanding a solution was how can a performance be created – worthy of wayang, reuniting generations – in a country with theatrical traditions, where puppetry is destined for children.

So I found a tale that includes a range of interpretations with multiple layers, which is able to perform the tale's ancient functions, in a way that the children understand one level of the tale, while adults can interpret the performance at another level of interpretation. Finally, I have chosen a Javanese tale, which is on the one hand a beautiful, eventful story about love, at the same time it is a creation myth on the rain and the monsoon, and in a more subtle sense a beautiful allegory of the inner peace and harmony to find, about the struggle between the mind and the spirit with the manifestation of the ego: with fear, lust for power, greediness, gluttony and the complicity of silence. The dramaturgical arc of the beautiful Jasmine flower and the Rain King followed the dramaturgy of classical tales. The story had to be divided into dialogues in order for the play to be understandable and to avoid trying the spectators' patience. At the same time, I was worried about the fact that even if they understand the story and the plot, they will never understand the original meaning of the puppets' moves. The same applies to the European spectator while watching a traditional Javanese dance. The spectator admires the beauty, refinement of the dancer and the moves, but understands neither the story, nor the meaning of the dancers' moves. A rather unconventional idea struck me, namely of merging the two fields of interpretation by complementing the classical wayang with a parallel dance performance, where

the dancers simultaneously animate the characters of some puppets and parallelly perform their – very similar – moves, while the story, the event, the passion, emotion, gesture hidden behind the moves are exactly understandable and traceable due to the narration. The heroine of the fable I have chosen and staged was princess Jasmine flower, and the wicked main character was Nasiman, the servant's evil son. They were impersonated by flesh and blood actors. When the two central character puppets were moving behind the folding screen, the actor being in sync live with the move of the puppet in front of the folding screen animated the ongoing scene. The folding screen – according to a three-part altar-piece – became a triple-aisle space, in whose middle part the shadow play was presented, while in its two-side aisle the dancers accompanied the performance. As to the musical accompaniment, gamelan pieces were combined with contemporary elements and some motives of the Hungarian folk music tradition. The actors were playing in traditional costumes. The tale was all along narrated, and – accordingly to the wayang traditions – in different keys as well. Similarly to the classical wayang plays, in most cases there it was possible to watch the performance from both sides of the folding screen, and the puppeteer was working in accordance with the drum/kendang throughout the performance. The show was presented during 3 years in many places and to a variety of publics, there was even a performance for blind and visually impaired people.

Did we manage to create a performance which obtained the original objective: to give an insight into the deeper meaning of wayang beyond pure aesthetic pleasure? I do not know. Based on spectators' feedbacks they have surely understood – regardless of their age – the dynamics of the plot, they could identify the actors, they realized that the dancing puppets they see are meant to represent the two protagonists, and most importantly: they were all rooting for the Rain King to win the heart of his love.

Beyond the dramatic wayang adaptation, I also made experimentation with wayang in a different direction. In the "Wayang Experimental" performance we examined the textures which can be created by the shadows cast by the puppets illuminated from different angles. Unlike for traditional performances we used one steady and two moving light sources to create visual textures. I asked the big classical gamelan orchestra accompanying the performance to improvise starting from the vibration caused by these movements. Through establishing the organic unity of the music and the visual content I wanted to follow the wayang tradition according to which the orchestra and the puppeteer create the performance in constant and continuous interaction with each other.

With the improvisation, the confluence of textures and by offering a plot without narration my intention was to make western people experience the wayang's time structure. The improvisation of the orchestra and the movement improvisation created a dream-like state of mind. The performance was staged outdoors and the stage itself was surrounded by trees. As to its ambiance, it was similar to the Javanese traditions in many ways, as the spectators did not stop eating, drinking and talking to each other, just as it had happened during the nine-hour long Javanese performance. My intention was to find out which elements adopted from wayang can be understood by the European spectators in the framework of an improvised performance. The spectators' feedbacks clearly reported on the unusual time experience, and a more diverse, more experience-based, more impressive reception different from the usual reception.

We created a similar performance with the students of the Academy of Drama and Film in September 2015, when I held a course on wayang as an invited lecturer. With the students coming from different fields of theatre work – stage manager, costume designer, dramaturg, stage designer, wire-puller, actor, cameramen – we were looking for an ideal what dramaturgical and visual framework for a text-centric and contemporary music centric performance. In this experiment, the wayang puppets were only characters appearing on the canvas without any reference to flesh and blood people. With the students coming from different fields of theatre, we were trying to find out which images, contents and audio signs of the wayang could be reorganized into a new symbolizing system by transposing them into a new context. At the end of the course a sort of inner journey, a self-analytic process of the puppeteers appeared on the canvas. As opposed to the Wayang Experimental, here we had more puppeteers and only a single steady light source. Behind the folding screen each puppeteer was performing with their own puppet, one after the other or several people at the same time

Currently I am teaching a course requested by the Dharma Gate Buddhist College and I am undertaking a research project with my students, which will be followed by a creative process. We are elaborating the story of Sutasoma written by Mpu Tantular in the 14th century and translated by Kate O'Brian. In the first part of the course, besides the technical and theoretical knowledge of wayang, we focus on extending and deepening our knowledge of Javanese ethics and philosophy. The textual analysis of Sutasoma is preceded by an extended reflection on the history of philosophy: we look for the messages and transcendental elements common in Buddhist philosophy and in Javanese teachings. This learning process is followed by the textual analysis of Sutasoma. The text complemented with the translator's comments has so many

possibilities of interpretation that we had to set a framework for interpretation in advance. The next stage of the joint work is the elaboration of the means to present and render visible the teachings hidden in the text, using the classical elements of wayang. The biggest challenge was to find the actuality of the story and the form language. My aim here was not to create a reconstruction of a traditional wayang performance, but rather to unveil the hidden message of the story and the eternal dilemma of the hero exploring intellectual and spiritual paths, and to create a modern, contemporary performance displaying some elements of the traditional wayang.

I hope to contribute to the increase of the number of the artists and researchers studying and using the wayang (even if they are only familiar with its form language).

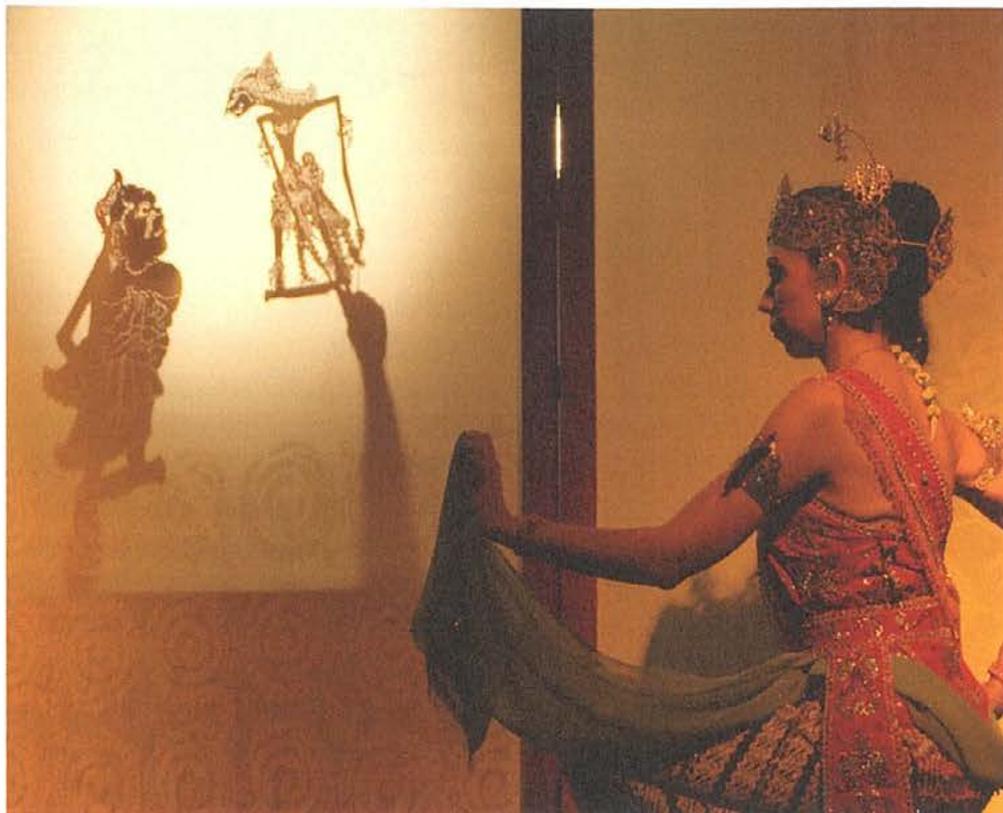
In the age of virtual communities and IT spaces more and more people are needed to preserve and continuously reproduce the messages and wisdom of communities cohesive on both physical and intellectual levels. Even if we can only provide outdated analogue answers to questions exposed by the digital world, let us make these answers be humanistic and in harmony with the thousands of years old laws of the universe.

Annexes

The beautiful Jasmin flower and the Rain King. Director: Polett Dus



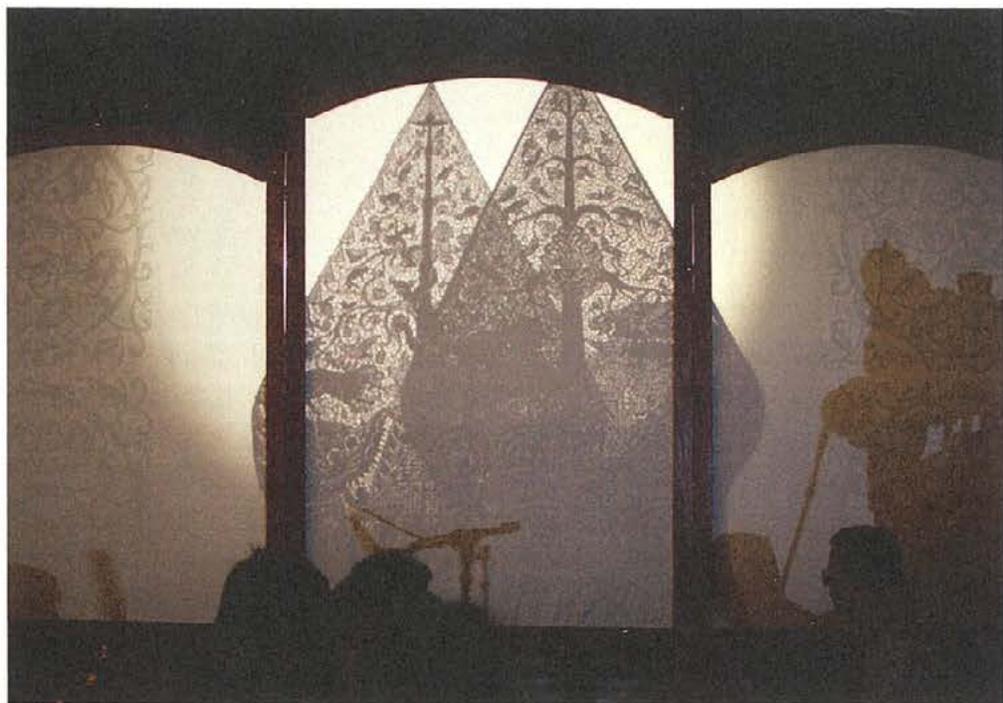
The beautiful Jasmin flower and the Rain King. Director: Polett Dus



The beautiful Jasmin flower and the Rain King. Director: Polett Dus



Wayang Experimental. Director: Polett Dus; Contributed by Tamás Kovács



Wayang Experimental. Director: Polett Dus; Contributed by Tamás Kovács

