

ONLINE WAYANG

Only the Shadows Know: the Evolving Performance of Wayang in Java

by Jody Diamond and Linda Hibbs

In the pandemic, wayang in particular has faced and met unique challenges. The initial impact on the Indonesian community in general and in particular musicians and performers was the sudden loss of income, as all public performances were cancelled indefinitely.

The wayang community responded to the artistic and economic challenges by inventing and refining new performance forms, and along with community efforts, raising funds for all those burdened by economic hardship. Forced to create performances online, with reduced personnel and no public audience, several dhalang came up with very creative ways to address this unusual situation.

Benefit performances

Ki Seno Nugroho, Ki Sigid Ariyanto, Ki Cahyo Kuntadi, and Ki Anom Dwijokangko were active in putting on benefit performances, usually with small groups of 10-12 musicians. The wayang performances were at the dhalangs' homes, where each had a full set-up of wayang, stage, gamelan, and sound systems already in place. During the performance, donations were requested to help local communities. In addition to the performance costs being covered by a sponsor, some events raised more than \$25,000 USD from audience contributions.

These two elements—equipment already in place and donations by audiences from Indonesia and elsewhere—ensured that everyone involved in all those dhalang troupes could be taken care of. The communities associated with each dhalang were extensive: musicians, sound and video documentation technicians, wayang artisans, stage hands, caterers, relatives, and their entire home villages.

Streaming live performances without an audience might continue when restrictions are lifted, with dhalang making their grand houses, with gorgeous wayang and gamelan sets, the main stages. The cost ends up being

Kitsie Emerson provided much of the information for this article, some of it collected from her posts to the Dartmouth Gamelan Listserv. The description of her wayang translation technique was drawn from an article in the newsletter of the American Institute for Indonesian Studies (AIFIS) at Cornell University, which has become a regular sponsor of Emerson's activities. Supplemental information on Ki Seno Nugroho was provided by Sutrisno Hartono.

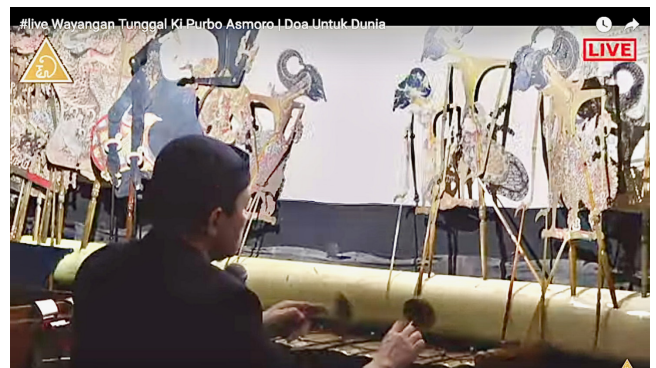


Ki Purbo Asmoro carrying an offering before his solo performance.

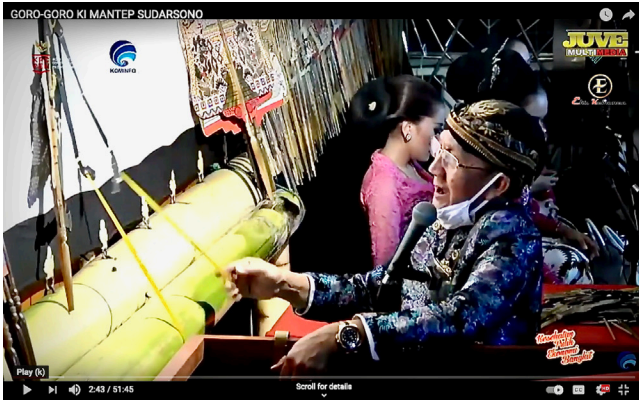
much less than putting on a full wayang in a public arena, and the “audience” can include international students and fans.

Ki Purbo Asmoro

Innovative in response to calamity, Ki Purbo Asmoro created a wayang unlike any other: just the dhalang alone—no musicians and no crew and no audience—and only one other person with a single video camera to document the performance. He has invented perhaps a new genre: *Wayang Tunggal* [One-Person Wayang]. This was his offering of hope for health and a prayer for the world situation as the extensive effects of the pandemic started to become apparent.



Ki Purbo Asmoro as the only musician.



Ki Manteb Soedarsono in performance.

Later in May, Ki Purbo Asmoro premiered his version of “The Life Story of Buta Cakil” with a very small group of 8-10 musicians, practicing social distancing, all dressed in Cakil dance costumes! No one was allowed to watch in person, and the front gate to his house was locked during the entire performance. Kistie Emerson provided a simultaneous English translation via Zoom.

Throughout the pandemic, Ki Purbo Asmoro has been extremely active in creating new work, as well as making tutorials for his students in the wayang department of ISI Surakarta.

Ki Manteb Soedharsono

Ki Manteb, a senior and highly respected dhalang, was involved in frequent online teaching, in addition to performing. He always wore a mask, even when it was sometimes only visible just below his chin! He also instituted an online series of conversations with his nephew, called “Ngobrol,” in which they talk together about various aspects of wayang.

Ki Seno Nugroho

Ki Seno Nugroho presented *Wayang Climen*, a small-scale performance with conscientious attention to health protocols like masks, temperature taking, and social distancing for all participants. The wayang were short, only two or three hours, and the accompaniment was limited to ten musicians, each playing at least two different instruments in the course of the show.



An announcement for a wayang by Ki Seno Nugroho.



Ki Manteb Soedarsono in “ngobrol” with his nephew.

The online performances, twenty or more times per month, had an average of 11,000 viewers. Audience members made donations for a requested song, or to a general fund, and enough money was raised to sustain Ki Seno’s own group, as well as to help many members of the community in Yogyakarta.

In the midst of his creative efforts, Ki Seno Nugroho passed away on November 3, 2020. His group, Wargo Laras, did not disband, but re-imagined themselves as available to work with other dhalang as opportunities arose.

Ki Cahyo Kuntadi

In East Java, the dhalang Ki Cahyo Kuntadi and his wife, the pesindhen Sukesni, were also active in fundraising. Donations were received during frequent performances that included their entire family—their young daughter joined the pesindhen, and their little son took his turn at the wayang screen—plus popular transvestite comedians for the clown scenes. Due to their success, they were able to support artists throughout East Java.



A poster for Ki Mdiyanto’s collaborative distance wayang.

Ki Midiyanto S. Putro

Back in the United States, Ki Midiyanto was at U.C. Berkeley, where his classes fill with close to a hundred students each semester. In collaboration with musicians in Java from his own family as well as from ISI Surakarta, he created an unusual distance-defined collaboration. He was commissioned by America Bersatu, a group dedicated to the appreciation of Indonesian culture in America, to create a wayang performance of “Hanoman the Messenger.”

With a screen set up in the gamelan room at the university, and using only his iPhone, Midiyanto recorded the puppet movements, the dialogue, and—without benefit of any instruments—the suluk and other songs required for the performance. The final performance combined this recording with gamelan accompaniment added by the musicians in Java—with Midiyanto’s voice somewhat miraculously matching the tuning of the gamelan at the family home in Wonogiri!

A month of wayang

In July, The Ministry of Culture and Education announced that they would be sponsoring a full month of virtual wayang performances in August. With the 17 August Indonesia’s 75th anniversary of Independence Day, the full month of wayang was in celebration of Independence Day (reminiscent of when Indonesia put on 50 wayang performances to celebrate their 50th anniversary of independence in 1995). The thirty-one performances were online with no in-person audience allowed, and were held in rotation at the homes of Ki Manteb Soedharsono, Ki Purbo Asmoro, and Ki Cahyo Kuntadi. The performances featured a number of young dhalang as well as established superstars.

Simultaneous translation of Javanese wayang

For many of the performances mentioned here, Kitsie

Emerson provided simultaneous translation into English, using a technique she began developing in 2004. This made it possible for people who did not understand Javanese to have access to the beauty and complexity of this art form.

The set-up, facilitated in cooperation with the technicians streaming the performance, involves a split screen. The wayang itself is on one side, and the other shows Emerson’s computer screen, where she types a translation of the dhalang’s dialogue as it takes place. She also adds other information that enhances understanding of the performance: explanation of jokes, discussion of unusual aspects of the story, or details of special puppet movements. The translations do not aspire to be perfect, but to provide, as Emerson describes it, “a real-time interpretation of the performance—as though the listener had a friend whispering into their ear at the wayang site—offering meaning, context, and insider tips for appreciating the show.”

Since initiating this technique, Emerson has translated hundreds of performances, many with Ki Purbo Asmoro, as well as with more than 50 other dhalang in the area, using special software and a hardware set-up developed specifically for this activity. She has also trained others in the new art of the simultaneous interpretation of wayang, making an intimate experience of a complex art possible for speakers of Indonesian, French, Japanese, Arabic, Russian, Spanish, in addition to English.

The future awaits

As the pandemic continues to affect the lives of so many, only the shadows know what the future holds. The art of wayang encompasses worlds of possibilities; thanks to these exceptional artists, and many more, wayang in this strange time will continue to adapt and blossom. ▸

The image is a screenshot of a live-streamed wayang performance. At the top, it reads "Wayang Virtual International : English Version 'BIMA SUCI' Ki Gito Anduk". The main title is "Wayang Virtual International: ENGLISH VERSION" in large, bold, yellow and orange letters. On the left, there is a logo for "Ngripto Laras". On the right, there is a logo for "WAG Wayang Gagrag Wartawidhi". The central part of the screen shows a wayang performance with several puppets on a stage. A "LIVE" indicator is visible in the top right corner of the performance area. On the right side of the screen, there is a text box containing English translations of the dialogue. The bottom of the screen features a banner with logos for "Ki Gito Sabdho Carito (Gito Andhuk)", "Sadha Laras", "Anjani Solo", "JUNA KAWA", and "Diterjemahkan secara langsung oleh: Dr. Kitsie Emerson".

An example of the screen during an online simultaneous translation by Kitsie Emerson.