

# Our Identity and Our Heritage: the Preservation of Javanese Dance

by Dewi Galuh Sinta Sari

At the beginning of March in Indonesia, all dance practice and performance activities were forced to stop, with no indication of when these restrictions might be lifted. As an artist, this hit me hard, and filled me with confusion.

In the beginning, I followed the government guidelines. But after two months and no sign of the end of the pandemic, I started to feel distressed—my creative spirit rebelled at not being able to do anything connected to my art. To cope with this, I tried to create activities at home.

I invited some close friends, who I was sure had been careful about being safe from COVID, to come over and practice Javanese dance. Then I had the idea to work on dances that are rarely performed today, and document them.

After several practice sessions, my desire for knowledge was stimulated and I really wanted to know more. So I put together a team to start a research project. We planned to interview master dancers who knew this classic repertoire, and search for anything that had already been written about these dances.

I came to the realization that as dancers and working artists, we didn't know enough about the history and philosophy of the dances from the past. When we started working with the experts who did know these dances, my team and I were filled with a sense of awe and increased curiosity about the how elements embedded in these works revealed their history, philosophy, and deep meaning.

That is when I had the urge to create virtual concerts of these dances, and to share the knowledge we had discovered about them with lovers of Javanese arts. In addition to performing the dances, we also interviewed our dance maestros, including Bapak Wahyu Santosa Prabawa, Bapak Daryono Darmorejono, Ibu Umi Hartono, and Ibu Rusini. I also thought that at the same time, this might be a way to give a little assistance and appreciation during the pandemic to these revered artists who are so close to our hearts.

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*Dewi Galuh Sinta Sari, born in Solo, specializes in Central Javanese court dance, and is in the dance company at the Mangkunegaran. As a choreographer, she draws on many regions of Indonesia as well as contemporary styles. She has performed and taught Javanese dance in Asia and Europe, and is a principal dancer and co-founder of Dan's Dance Studio in Solo. [Translated from Indonesian. —Eds.]*



*Danang Panungkas performing Topeng Gunungsari.*

After a couple of these virtual presentations, I started to feel that this might be a chance to re-establish important dances that today are often performed in only abbreviated or shortened forms in order to appeal to a modern audience. My team and I felt really inspired; we were determined to find dances that over time had come to be only partially performed, and to search for the master teachers who could reveal the deep physical and philosophical knowledge that would reveal the meaning of those dances in their original form. I also believe that each master dance teacher has a unique way of understanding the embodiment, affect, and meaning of each of these dances and I wanted to uncover this knowledge as well.

My hope is that what we are doing today will be useful and beneficial to younger generations of dancers as well as to the wider public, so they might all sense that the art we are preserving is what makes us who we are today. Besides that, it is my hope that as artists we will be able to comprehend what we are conveying through the dance, and that this will become a spiritual path to return us deeper into the art that is both our identity and our heritage. ▸



Serimpi Tamenggita with Dewi Galuh Sinta Sari, Fitria Trisna Murti, Fajar Prastiyani, and Resita Ayu.

### THE PROGRAMS

These three online presentations were part of the Preservation Project for Javanese Court Dances and Artist Relief, organized by the dancers Dewi Galuh Sinta Sari and her husband Danang Pamungkas. All performances were livestreamed from Solo at the studio of Ndalem Sunartan, which was formed in 2020 specifically for these events. Each program ended with a Q&A session with the artists and the observers who had joined on Zoom.

#### I. Serimpi Tamenggita, 12 July 2020, sponsored by Yale University.

##### Program

1. *Serimpi Tamenggita*. Serimpi dances, for four dancers, are part of the female dance repertoire of the Solonese Royal Court, the Keraton Kasunanan, although they are rarely performed today.

1. *Beksan Topeng Gunungsari*. A solo dance piece with a mask, in a traditional style, depicting a princely character from the Javanese Panji legend. Choreography by Wahyu Santoso Prabawa, a prominent choreographer and dance teacher at ISI (*Institut Seni Indonesia*), Surakarta. Music: *Gendhing Bondhet Pelog Nem*.
2. *Beksan Bromastra*. A new work by Wahyu Santoso Prabawa.

#### II. Javanese Songs, Gadhon, and Dance from the Mangkunegaran; 8 August 2020; sponsored by friends.

The second virtual concert focused on Mangkunegaran style dance and music repertoire. The program included interviews with Bapak KRT Hartono and Ibu Umi, as well as Bapak Wahyu Santoso. Several musicians and dancers from the Mangkunegaran, participated in the performance, joined by the honored teachers Ibu Umi and Bapak Hartono.

##### Program

1. *Tembang* (songs)
2. *Gamelan Gadhon* (chamber ensemble)
3. *Gambyong Pangkur* Mangkunegaran Style (female style solo dance with singing)
4. *Sancaya Kusuma Wicitra* (two dancers, representing refined and strong male styles)

#### III. Javanese Dance, Philosophy, and History; 7 November 2020; sponsored by public donations.

Featuring three masters of Javanese dance: Wahyu Santosa Prabawa S. Kar. M.S.; Rusini S. Kar., M. Hum.; and Dr. Daryono S. Kar., M. Hum.

The dances were performed, and then discussed in terms of philosophy and history, according to the interpretation of each highly experienced dancer.

##### Program

1. *Bedhaya Sukaharjo*
2. *Female style dance*
3. *Sri Pamoso*



Left to right: KRT Hartono, Umi Hartono, Danang Pamungkas, Wahyu Santosa Prabowo, and Dewi Galuh Sinta Sari.