INTERVIEW

Suratno: Recent Innovations in Javanese Wayang Kulit

Suratno, a graduate of and, until recently, director of the touring gamelan at the Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI) in Surakarta, Java, is known primarily as a gamelan director and gender player in Indonesia. He is also a dhalang (puppeteer), and while in the United States this year as a Fulbright scholar, he directed wayang kulit (shadow puppet play) performances at both the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Oberlin College. He is currently a graduate student and director of the gamelan at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. In this interview, conducted by René Lysloff and Kent Devereaux on August 19, 1985 in Ann Arbor Michigan, Suratno talks about traditional wayang, what is entailed in being a dhalang, and some of the recent innovations in wayang performance at ASKI.

Kent Devereaux: Tell us a little bit about yourself. You come from a family with a long tradition of dhalangs, don't you?

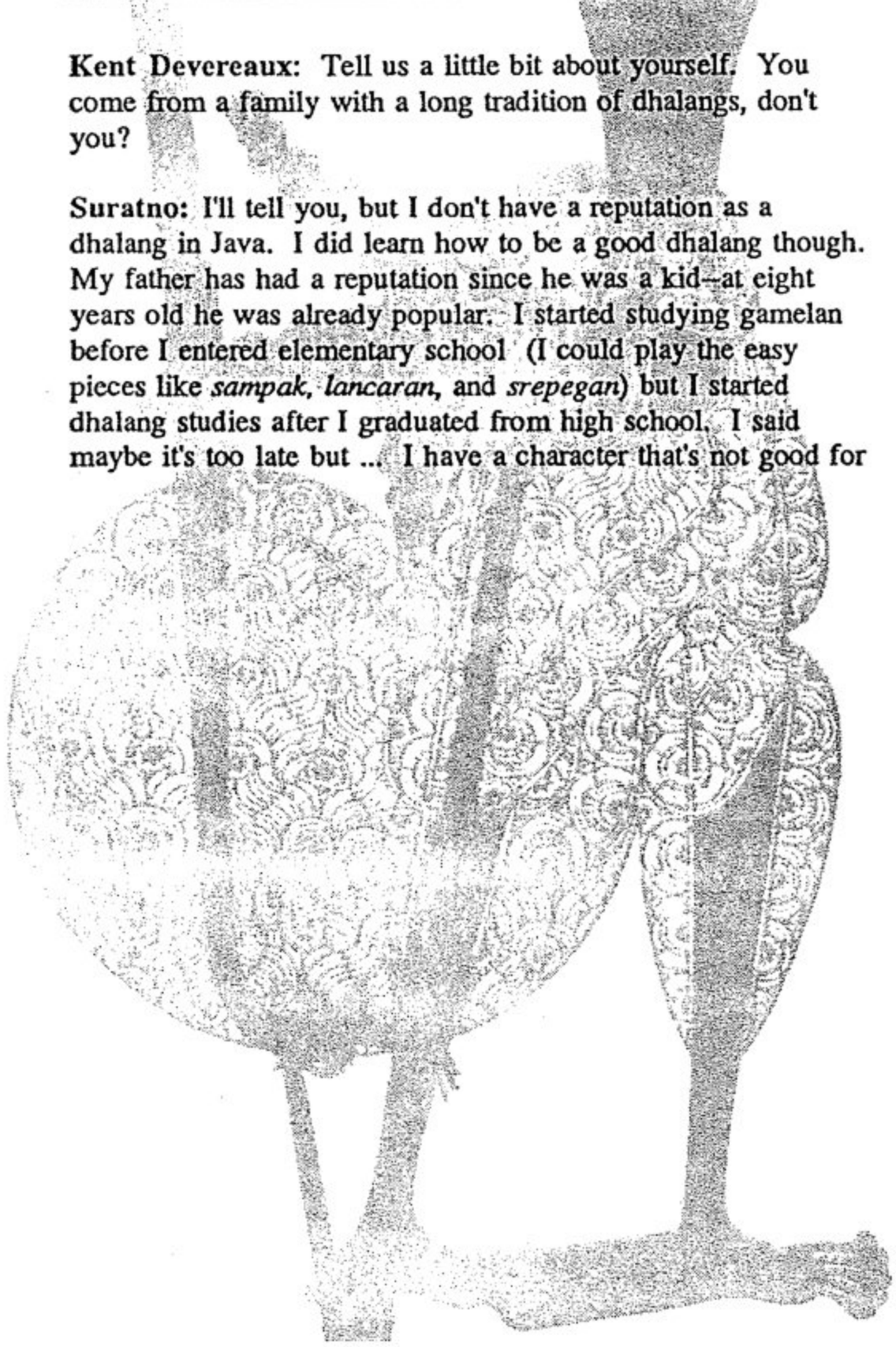
Suratno: I'll tell you, but I don't have a reputation as a dhalang in Java. I did learn how to be a good dhalang though. My father has had a reputation since he was a kid--at eight years old he was already popular. I started studying gamelan before I entered elementary school (I could play the easy pieces like *sampak, lancaran,* and *srepegan*) but I started dhalang studies after I graduated from high school. I said maybe it's too late but ... I have a character that's not good for a dhalang; I'm too shy. So, if I tried and somebody watched I was embarrassed. It's not good for a dhalang because a dhalang must be proud and outgoing. My character has not helped me. Mas Djoko [Djoko Rohardjo, dhalang and uncle of Suratno] is very outgoing, and he started to learn when he was a kid from his mother. My grandmother [Djoko's mother] was a court dhalang for Pakubuwono X [Sultan of Surakarta]. She was the only female dhalang at the time. It was the first time there had been a female dhalang.

René Lysloff: Even now it is extremely rare, isn't it?

Suratno: Yes, there are very few, but Mas Djoko's mother is well known outside the court, and of course inside as well because she was the favorite dhalang of Pakubuwono X. She succeeded in making many jokes, until one day the King said to his court, "Don't laugh when she makes a joke. If you laugh I will fine you!" So, she made jokes and finally the King couldn't resist and he laughed. And he paid more.

Devereaux: How did you learn to be a dhalang?

Suratno: I learned through the program at ASKI, but that's not good. A dhalang must start to learn when he's a kid. He must learn not with a book but just orally, following the dhalang and just listening because the traditional dhalang doesn't give you a text. You must "spread your ear" and watch and listen to other dhalangs. My father learned by oral



tradition. He said that he liked reading the *babads* [the local histories] and the *pachems*, [synopses of shadow plays] but he learned mainly orally. I just learned because, when I graduated from high school, my father wanted me to study wayang. But besides that, I would watch many wayang performances. I would go and watch every performance of wayang and play. The problem is some people told me that if I had really wanted to be a dhalang I had to do all the reading. But, I just don't have the character. I'm very shy and this makes me not good for a dhalang. I'm very concerned about the wayang situation in Solo now because the society likes just the popular dhalangs but not [necessarily] the best quality. They like the rhythmic *gendhing* [musical compositions] and many jokes, not the essential of wayang--how to make a good story. The society likes the shallow [aspects] not the deep. So, I decided to learn to be a good dhalang but not to be a dhalang in society. I'd have to admit, society is very different now from the past.

Devereaux: What has changed?

Suratno: It is changing because people don't have enough background and people just like light entertainment.

Lysloff: Isn't even the structure of wayang changing? Aren't they becoming shorter?

Suratno: No, that's for a different reason. The *lakons* [the stories of the shadow play] are just the same. The typical lakon is the same--the Pandawas and Kurawas--just done a different way. Now lakon *yang ramai banyak*-- lots of action.

Devereaux: What qualities are required of a good dhalang?

Suratno: Of course he must know many of the *kidung* [Old Javanese songs] and be very familiar with them. He must know gamelan very well, not as a musician but the structure. Of course he has to have a good voice and be able to manipulate the puppets. He must articulate. And he has to be sensitive to what society is now, so he can make jokes and people can follow the story.

Devereaux: How are other young dhalangs learning? Do any of them go to ASKI?

Suratno: No, actually, I agree that ASKI can not make a good dhalang because it's just one way. Like a musician can not train just by formal education. But the young dhalangs, like me, their father, their grandfather, their great-grandfather were dhalangs. They follow a dhalang when they are a child. And there is a tradition that, before the father plays, his child plays for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. He plays just the simple wayang, a small section, before his father. So they learn more. My father wanted me to study though. He prohibited me from following him if not on a weekend. He wanted me to study, to concentrate on my education.

Devereaux: And did your father learn from your grandmother?

Suratno: My father learned from my grandmother and from his uncle. Wherever there was a popular dhalang, he stayed with him as a servant. If the dhalang performed he followed. It's just the traditional way.

Lysloff: Weren't the more traditional dhalangs almost more like *dukuns* [spiritual healers]?

Suratno: Yes, the dhalang is sometimes a dukun.

Lysloff: Is that changing now?

Suratno: No, just the performance. Many dhalangs are of very good quality but people don't like them. Some might have had a reputation in the past but don't play now because the younger dhalangs who are very good in [puppet manipulation] and use many *gendhing dolanan* [light songs, or children's songs], and lots of jokes, the people like that one. That was my experience in the project where I helped Laurie Sears make recordings of dhalangs. As far as I know there is a dhalang that is very good in the *kraton* [palace]. And Laurie likes my father, but I can not judge him because he's my father. I don't want to judge him.

Lysloff: I think what you are saying is that previously the dhalang would teach and he would have many other functions, and now the audience just wants entertainment.

Suratno: With the first dhalangs the lakon was the focus. How to make live drama and the reason [or moral of the play] was most important. How to be a creative dhalang. How to make life and reality [within the context of the performance] so, in a sense, people can follow the play as if it were like life but not like life.

Devereaux: Are there dhalangs like this now?

Suratno: Yes, there are dhalangs now who still have this but they don't perform much. They are not popular. So, for many reasons I decided, maybe it's easy being the popular dhalang, but I prefer not just the light entertainment. The problem is the society.

Devereaux: And this is true not just in any one place, but all throughout Java?

Suratno: Yes, I think this is a general symptom. So, I agree with the new idea to make a shortened, condensed wayang because the situation is different.

Devereaux: What brought about the shorter wayang?

Suratno: The reason is that you focus on the story, but at the same time it is necessary to leave out parts in the new wayang. It is a good duration for me. In practice it's hard to achieve, but I agree with the idea.

Lysloff: These shorter stories, they come from ASKI, yes?

Suratno: Yes. Before the performance we prepare the text and the supporting accompaniment, so we leave the signaling and the *karawitan* [form of the music] independent. Like in the film. Similar but different. So, sometimes the karawitan supports the action. This *garapan* [treatment, stylistic interpretation] is just the way that ASKI does it but people can do it differently.

Devereaux: So the music functions much differently than in

the traditional wayang?

Suratno: Yes, and the dhalang must be prepared beforehand just like in modern drama. He goes over and over it a number of times and he checks it. If it is not good he substitutes another gendhing.

Lysloff: So everything that is there is absolutely necessary?

Suratno: Yes, but we can not do it with just one person. Maybe one person does the karawitan and the other one makes the text. Perhaps, one makes the text and one is just a dhalang but doesn't make the text. So, we combine many skills.

Devereaux: Then are those plays written down and the other dhalang learns that just like learning a Western script?

Suratno: Yes, but the writer has to be in the group, so you know his reputation. I have a friend who is very good at writing and he makes many good texts, but when I was at ASKI, in my recital, I wrote the text myself and then I performed it. I had to write maybe four or five condensed lakon.

Devereaux: I know you've expressed some reservation that the Javanese language is not as strong in Java as it used to be, and you were worried about young people learning Javanese. Does this change how you approach using different languages in the wayang or how future dhalangs might?

Suratno: It seems very far away. Yes, with the wayang too. I think this is a problem. It's changing because since Indonesia's independence, the Indonesian language is common. We have to live in two ways now.

Devereaux: The modern wayang, are they still in Javanese?

Suratno: At ASKI, yes, they are still in Javanese, but society is still in process.

Lysloff: Won't they eventually have to change the language and make them in Indonesian?

Suratno: Oh, ASKI has already made them in Indonesian. They still use gamelan but new compositions. These wayang can be followed and are accepted.

Devereaux: In the modern lakon that are in Indonesian, are certain parts still in Javanese or Old Javanese? What about the *sulukan* [songs sung by the dhalang, traditionally in Old Javanese]?

Suratno: Yes, they are still in Javanese, but the sulukan are for accompaniment, especially just particular situations. But the situation or scene may not be finished and the sulukan just ends in the middle. Sometimes the gendhing may not be finished but we change to another. So, this is a problem for the dhalang in society outside ASKI because he can not just do it himself. Maybe can do a simple version but not the harder, more complicated versions like ASKI can do. But in the society there are still many reasons why the traditional wayang would be invited. Maybe someone wants the dhalang to stay all night with his horse [laughs]. There are many reasons to keep the all-night version, although I agree with the ideas behind the new shorter plays.

Devereaux: Are the stories still from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana?

Suratno: Yes, nowadays they sometimes make the reason [moral of the play] about contemporary values so it is still valid now. Sometime we make things different. If we just did what appears in the book it would not be valuable to people now. So, we make it different so the people can feel really good. Sometime we make it different just a little bit, sometimes a lot.

Lysloff: Are these shorter wayang popular now, or are they too new?

Suratno: They're still in the process of becoming known. The reason, I think, is that maybe society has changed a little bit, but not drastically.

Devereaux: In doing performances for Americans how do you adapt to the audience? Do you perform some sections in English?

Suratno: I perform in Javanese, but I use English for the *punakawan* [the clowns, Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong] . I agree that the punakawan should be translated, but in Wisconsin I did not translate the lakon. I made a synopsis and the audience just followed that. Also, in the punakawan section I make jokes in English. I pretended that Petruk was Reagan and that Gareng was Nancy, because I was performing right before the election. So, the audience knew that Reagan had problems with the deficit. If I had just performed the play entirely in Javanese, it would be too boring, so I don't like that. They watched attentively. I think they followed very well.

Devereaux: Traditionally the wayang would be associated with some social function. Is that changing?

Suratno: That's still the same. What's changed are the tastes. Maybe the people don't like the literary works they don't know. Maybe if an old dhalang is very literary they say, "What's he talking about? I don't know." I still use the literary works. They still have life in them, and we have a special feeling for these works. They have certain powers, like some *kakawins* [Old Javanese literary works written in Indian metres]. So I use a lakon, not because I know what it means–sometimes my interpretation might not be correct–but because it still has power. Of course people who study the literature know this, but if one doesn't have a background ...

Lysloff: It seems that is one very important aspect of wayang–what you say and how you say it . Like you were saying about the power of the words.

Suratno: Yes, we still use them because for that reason they are essential. So, the essential things we still keep. But maybe it's too "hurry-up" for now.

Devereaux: Society is much faster?

Suratno: No, the idea is faster than society. [laughs].