

INTERVIEW

Sardono Kusomo: a world without boundaries

by Jody Diamond

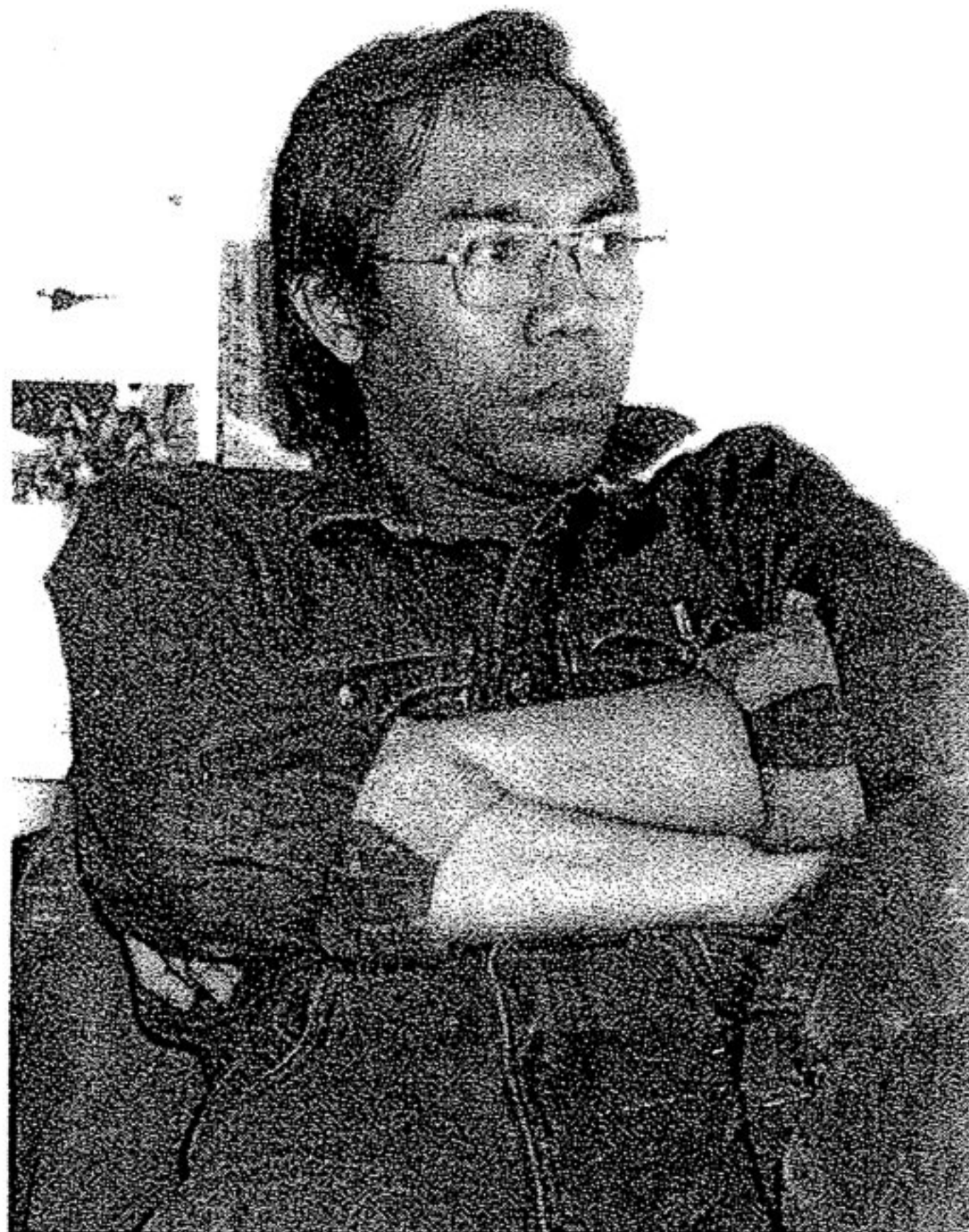
Sardono Waluyo Kusumo was born in Surakarta on March 6, 1945. He began dance lessons ten years later, studying with K.R.T. Kusumo Kesowo and Joko Suharjo, and became a principal dancer in the Ramayana Dance Drama at the temple of Prambanan, under the direction of K.R.T. Wasitodipuro. He has performed in many countries, and has conducted dance and theatre research in several cultural areas in Indonesia, including Minangkabau, Batak and Aceh in Sumatra, Dayak in Kalimantan, and the islands of Bali, Sulawesi and Nias. Sardono joined the faculty of IKJ (Jakarta Institute of the Arts) in 1980, and later became Vice President. As a choreographer, he is known for works that take a long time to prepare and which interact deeply with the surrounding environment and culture. His most recent project was directing the performing artists of the Indonesia Group EXPO '86 with his wife Amna Sahap Kusumo, and bringing together an international community of artists and scholars at the First International Gamelan Festival in Vancouver in August 1986. This interview took place on two occasions during his residence in Vancouver.

JD: I'd like to talk to you about your work as the coordinator of the EXPO performances and your work as a choreographer.

Sardono: If I discuss the process of creating dance or theater pieces, I am not talking about matters of art, but of life and culture. I feel that one's performance, or the creation of a piece for performance, only has deep meaning if it is related to a certain aura or to certain activities of people. It should involve a lot of people, and have an element which can be developed and can depict many perspectives. That's what I feel. Maybe I am not so productive as an artist. Maybe in one year I will make one performance. Sometimes I feel that the performance is just one result of a larger process. Activities within the culture are a result of performance, but performance is not my main objective.

JD: What part of the process do you feel the most strongly about if it's not the performance?

Sardono: For me the dance space is, I feel, a cultural space. It is the most essential part of the creation for my dance. So if I want to make a performance, I go to a certain place. I want to know what really underlies that place. Sometimes I consciously go to a place where there



is still a strong indigenous tradition or religion. And I think this is one benefit of being in Indonesia.

JD: That there are so many different places with traditional cultures?

Sardono: Yes. So that's why I go to Nias, to Dayak, to Batak — and Bali of course.

JD: And at each of these places you just do one piece of choreography?

Sardono: Yes, sometimes one piece, but sometimes I just do a performance, like for instance in the village of Nias and other isolated places. I feel that I can always go there with just one mask and I can make a performance that lasts hours and hours. In the village of Nias they have a square in the center, like an arena theater, all made of stone. The people will gather together there and they will invite me to dance. I put on the old mask from Bali and I

just sit there and become one of the old people there. And from this mask I can improvise something. I go there very often and they always ask me to participate. For me this is one of my performances.

Sometimes I feel that I must join with what already exists there, with a process that already exists. Sometimes the job of the artist is to integrate himself in this very fundamental process. And then we surprise ourselves. When I was the dean of the dance academy at IKJ, I supported the teaching of the dance of Aceh in the curriculum. I brought the teachers because I really felt that this was a very important kind of dance. It took years and years of training and now those dancers are performing here at EXPO. This EXPO ensemble is really a long work in process.

JD: So this is a very big dance company that you've been contributing to in a lot of ways.

Sardono: Yes, it is something like that. This kind of work requires a different approach and attitude toward the idea of an individual choreographer or artist. Sometimes you want an individual identity for your work, and sometimes not. Sometimes we may not exist as an individual at all in creating a work.

JD: You started out as a dancer yourself. Have you performed at all while you've been in EXPO?

Sardono: No. My last solo performance was in 1973 in France at the Festival of Nancy. I went there because the new kecak I had worked on in Teges for one year had been banned. Many people had heard about this experiment, and they had invited the kecak group to perform in Jakarta, Solo and Yogya. But then suddenly, because of a rumor, the Bali Post wrote that "the 'Nude Kecak' experiment is going to be performed in Jakarta." Actually what happened is — well, maybe I should tell you about the how the kecak was created.

When I was a lecturer in Jakarta in 1970 I brought some of my students to Bali for observations and exploration. We went to many places. We studied the form of the kecak. And I hired a kecak in Peliatan and asked them to come. I only asked the kecak group, not the dancers who usually perform the Ramayana in the center for the tourist performances. I just asked the kecak performers to begin. I brought my students there, and we made an improvisation. A week later I wanted to do it again. Instead of Peliatan, I went to Teges. Sunday morning we arrived at the village. We were a little late, and when I came to the pura [temple], there were people already there. They had formed a circle and I sat there. I said to them, "I want to concentrate, and after that you can start and then I will join you." I asked my students to concentrate also, and we closed our eyes. We sat a few minutes, waiting for them to start the kecak, and nothing happened. I was curious and I opened my eyes and I saw the people were still waiting. I asked, "Why don't you start?" Everyone looked confused. And then I realized that there had been a miscommunication. They thought that I

was there to teach the kecak, because Teges had no kecak at all. At that very moment I got an idea . . .

JD: You wanted to interact with the kecak performers, but they thought you were there to teach them?

Sardono: Yes, so it was just us at the time. One of my students, a Balinese named Made Netra, knew about kecak. He said to the people, "just go 'chak chak-chak!'" They all repeated, "chak chak-chak!" Of course suddenly they could do it because they were good musicians and had heard kecak before. I'm sure everybody in Bali knows "chak chak-chak!" It then became very intense. I suddenly stood up and then everybody stood up — I ran, and everybody else ran! I understood quickly by instinct that, now, the dance had begun! I tried to stimulate them with many different qualities of movement and expression, and introduce techniques they had never seen before, like the slow movements of Javanese dance. I ran outside of the temple and everybody else ran there, turning upside down and everything. Then suddenly, I climbed up a tree. Sal Murgianto (a Javanese dancer) was there at the time. He quickly climbed another tree and we had a dialogue. I made a gesture of shooting an arrow and Murgianto fell down from the tree. Suddenly, the kecak was finished. Everybody became very happy and sort of surprised with themselves, and Made Grindem came to me and said, "Ah, we will continue, you can stay here!" So I thought, alright, I'll stay here. I didn't go back to Jakarta and I stayed in Teges for one year.

JD: Was that the first time you had used just the kecak itself as a dance form?

Sardono: Yes, first we tried to break the circle, to make it more open. The process of the rehearsal was funny because I lived there and did nothing more for maybe two months. I studied gender wayang with Grindem and just played with the children. We started rehearsals after I had been there two months.

When I arrived for rehearsals, I always saw the children imitating what they had seen the day before. So before our rehearsal, I always saw a performance of the children doing the new creations for the kecak. Sometimes I would add the children to the kecak. Ketut Rina and Made Badung were the dancers, they were maybe only 4 or 5 years old, and they were very funny. And of course at that age, the kids in Teges didn't wear anything. One day, when we practiced, I came up and put Badung inside the kecak. Because he was nude it was very funny, everybody was laughing. It was very striking, those moments. At the time the children were always nude. Of course, I did not plan to have them appear nude for the performance in Jakarta, or do anything that would be scandalous. I never intended to do that. But before we left Bali, the Bali Post had already printed that the "Nude Kecak" would appear in Jakarta.

JD: Did that create trouble for you?

Sardono: Sure. The day we were to go to Jakarta had



Phinisi welcoming ceremony at EXPO.

come. We had hired two buses, and were to leave about one o'clock in the afternoon. The buses were waiting in the center of the village, in front of the pura. At ten o'clock in the morning I got a call in Den Pasar from the government, and then I got a letter that said we could not go. I was very shocked, no, not even sad, almost crazy, because I could imagine all the people, already on the bus. When Pak Sudra (the village leader of Teges) and I arrived in Teges, all the children were already on the bus.

JD: They were ready, everything was packed, they'd been working for a year . . .

Sardono: Yes, and for weeks they had been preparing the food and everything. At the very moment the bus was to leave, Pak Sudra told them there was a letter from the governor saying they could not go. The whole village cried! Everybody was angry, hysterical. The children were hysterical. And then all the people made a decision to make an offering at midnight in the temple. They felt there was something wrong that had happened in the village, with the spirits, or perhaps there was something unclean. They asked forgiveness of the gods. They just brought the matter to the gods. More or less they became tranquil, peaceful again. Of course, I was not. Because I know this kind of mass media, why this happened. I was very angry. I went directly back to Jakarta.

JD: That same day? You just left Bali?

Sardono: The second day after that. I thought I would be more peaceful to have some distance from Bali, but actually I was not. I was almost crazy. The banner was already there in the Art Center of T.I.M. [Taman Ismail Marzuki] for the kecak performance, and I came to the empty theater. The publicity had been very good. For a month I could not sleep at all. If I tried, I heard the voices of children crying. In my room I found a program from the Nancy theater in France — suddenly I remembered that in 1969 a group of musicians had seen me dance in Jakarta: Xenakis, Takemitsu, Betsy Jolas, and a writer, Lagrang, who wrote a biography of Mahler. They were accompanied by a music critic from Le Express in Paris. When he returned to Paris he recommended that the Festival at Nancy invite me. At the time I didn't want to go because I would have had to pay my own expenses. When I was very sad about Teges I found this invitation again. I was really unhappy and angry with Indonesia. So I started looking for things to sell to buy a ticket to Paris. The Art Center knew I wanted to go to the Nancy Festival, so they bought a ticket for Sentot, a very good dancer from Solo who frequently worked with me.

I arrived in France unprepared, still very angry. The festival had already begun by the time I arrived. It was a very big festival, with more than forty groups. I went to

Nancy. They said "You have come very late." But it's a good festival, they really respect artists. They said there was no room in the schedule, but there were many theaters and a performance in the park that would end at 11:00. If I wanted to, I could dance after that and they would announce that there would be a performer from Indonesia at 11:00. I said OK.

I had prepared nothing. I made an improvisation. I created something with some things that I found in Paris, with just two people. I got inspiration from the atmosphere also. Usually it was very crowded at the festival, but one morning, I went there early when it was empty. And there was a very old church in Nancy that was very striking and had a special atmosphere. One of my performers expressed this feeling during our improvisation.

I hadn't been aware that after my performance, many good reviews appeared in the papers. All the big newspapers in Paris wrote about it. And in *Le Monde* there was a dance critic who said "there was five minutes that was the most important five minutes in the whole Nancy Festival." It was when I danced, and gave a certain five minute silence.

JD: What was the performance like?

Sardono: Ah . . . I used whatever elements that I found there. There was a mask there that I got from a friend who told me he had an Indonesian object in his house. I said I was doing a performance tomorrow . . .

JD: And you just asked, can I borrow your mask?

Sardono: Yes, and many things like that. And then I reconstructed what I'd found when I practiced with the dancer. Only that. After the festival ended, the director came to me, and said "What are you planning?" I said, "Oh, I have to go, I have no money at all, I just have a ticket to go home. All I have now is 10,000 rupiah [about \$10] so I am flying home. " "But wait, do you know you are very successful?" "I don't know, I haven't read the newspaper yet." "Oh yes, you had good reviews. If you want you can go with me and I can arrange some performances in Paris. You can stay in my house." I said OK, so we went there. That night we went to Paris, slept in the train and arrived late at night. We went to the director's house. At the time I just had with me one *gunungan wayang kulit* [a large leaf-shaped shadow puppet that symbolizes the tree of life], two *kemanak* [bronze hand-held banana-shaped gongs] and one gong.

I went to the living room, put my things down and slept. And while I slept, I heard a strange noise that woke me up, but I was not really awake. I tried to open my eyes, but I was very tired. I saw a strange vision of children. There was the *gunungan* on a girl's head, exactly in front of me, and there was music, very strange. I picked up this small child and I danced and moved with her. Then I really woke up. And it was true! There were little children, and I heard music. It was very funny. I realized where I was and we went to breakfast. I found out that the girl was the daughter of the director.

JD: And she was playing with the *gunungan*. But you thought you were having a dream?

Sardono: Yes. I hadn't realized that there was a child in the house. The director talked to me about performing and told me about a children's festival. I had an idea and asked, "May I ask your daughter to dance with me when I make a performance for the children?" This was very successful, they liked it very much. They gave me a rehearsal space in a ruined theater under the Eiffel Tower that was being taken down, only the steps remained. It was an ugly Elizabethan structure, but it was very interesting to see all the Greek sculpture. Only one space was cleaned out.

Then the director asked me what my ideas were. I told him I wanted to make a film. "What kind of film?" "About the destruction of this theater." He invited a television producer to listen to my story. He was really impressed because at the time the destruction of this theater had become a subject of debate in Paris. It was really scandalous that an old theater was being destroyed to build a new one. The director also had a file of other great artists in Paris discussing this theater. So I made a film about this.

After this, the director said that he would be in charge of a big festival involving artists from Italy and many other places. He said he had money to invite me, with a group. I had my mind set to bring my group from Teges. I gave him the production costs for practicing in Bali for one year and for bringing 36 people on tour from Bali and Java.

JD: So when you returned to Bali it was a different situation.

Sardono: Certainly. I worked on a *Calonarang* story (*Dirah*). It was very successful too. Now that I had good reviews and was bringing good publicity to Indonesia, I got a letter from the Ambassador supporting my work.

So we went on tour. We performed in Paris every day for a month. After that we made a tour of Italy. Then we were called back to Paris for two more weeks. This was in 1974. And then we performed in Tehran. All the people of the Shiraz festival saw the performance. They asked me to open the 1976 festival with a special work. I said I could, and I asked the festival committee to come to Bali. There, I showed them the *kecak*, and they agreed to bring it. This is the only festival rich enough to bring 75 people, of course. And they sent the royal airforce to Bali to bring the people over.

JD: So you took 75 people from Teges to Iran to do the *kecak*.

Sardono: Yes, all the people who were crying on the bus got the chance to do it, after six years. Not one single person was left behind; every one who was on the bus came to Tehran. It was fantastic because it was a very rich festival. I asked to do the performance at the tomb of *Circes* in the desert. The idea was that it is the first temple of Zoroaster, and I think that Zoroastrianism is the first

religion in the world. The fire temple was in the front of the tomb of Circes, in a very high cliff made of one rock, a hill. They cut right into the hill, the temple is there. There is a space there and in front of it is the fire temple. I made the performance there. We made a fire on the flat plateau in front of the cliff, and did the performance in the center. People seemed very little there. The idea of the kecak is the effectiveness of the fire, real fire. At the climax there was a rope that was burning, and the fire climbed up the rope. This kecak became life because it was related to the idea of something which was already in the mind of the people, in their consciousness.

JD: So the kecak became a part of the spirit of the place with the fire temple. It wasn't just a Balinese art form being done in Iran, it became part of the environment.

Sardono: That's what I mean about this process. I feel that there is a certain atmosphere, a certain value in the world that exists without boundaries. That's what we have to find. Actually, that was also one of my fundamental feelings when I worked on the Gamelan Festival. I think this festival is just one aspect of this kind of happening, like with the Zoroastrianism and the Balinese kecak. Just another manifestation, but of course in another form, in a different level of consciousness, a different paradigm. When the process is happening, I just try to integrate with the process itself. Maybe this can explain what underlies the Gamelan Festival.

JD: So the International Gamelan Festival was like a piece of choreography for you, your work for this year. It was like one piece that lasted three days. Has directing the EXPO group been a performance for you?

Sardono: Yes, because there are a lot of opportunities for the process of making events that combine cultures. For instance, when the Phinisi boat arrived here in Vancouver after sailing from Indonesia, I made a welcoming ceremony that combined all the artists of different Indonesian cultures in the EXPO group and dancers from the local Indian culture as well. The idea just happened. And I am quite sure that maybe next year I will create a performance, a real production or performance, that will come from this idea. So, as I told you I am not productive at all because every idea takes a long time. But what is interesting with this kind of work is that it is everlasting — ongoing, like the kecak from Teges.

JD: Is that the same kecak that was performed here at EXPO before the International Gamelan Festival?

Sardono: Yes, and I still feel that wherever I go the space is there. The kecak and the people of Teges are still my friends, and so are the people in Nias.

JD: So the pieces you've done live on by themselves.

Sardono: Yes. Like when there was the the kecak and the Zoroastrianism and the fire temple and the fire of the kecak. Ideally, I think everyone feels this. That's why suddenly everyone will understand that the International Gamelan Festival will be everlasting and will happen again. Maybe we can not describe it, but we believe it. It

doesn't matter about the variety of forms, different skills. If it is real, fundamental enough, it will make us, me and everybody, need this kind of thing.

JD: When you were choosing the Gamelan Festival participants from Indonesia, did you select certain people because they are choreographers or composers, and you thought it was important that they be here to see the Festival?

Sardono: Yes. In my experience, there are certain conditions that we always try to share and experience together. Maybe because, personally, I am consciously aware of a network of interactions between so many different things in Indonesia, so many different cultural areas in Indonesia with such different personalities.

JD: Like Sulawesi and Minang and . . .

Sardono: Yes, those kinds of things. I always try to put together a certain situation where people can share an experience, an important experience.

JD: So you are trying to bring together people from different areas of Indonesia who are involved in the arts.

Sardono: Yes, for instance, Franki Raden was one of the students in the Music Academy at IKJ. He is the one of the only people in Indonesia who continues to write as a music critic for the biggest newspaper. He reviews western music, and writes about the symphony orchestra. He has studied Western music, actually. In 1976, when I was in charge of an interdisciplinary workshop in IKJ, combining music, dance, etc., Franki Raden went to the Dayak area. It was the first time he lived in a traditional environment and listened to traditional music. He lived there for a few months. After he came out of that environment he had another perception, another vision of music. He started using the traditional music in his own pieces.

JD: It seems like you have a lot of respect for people who immerse themselves in other traditions. Do you encourage students to do that?

Sardono: Yes, very much. Three times I brought students to Bali, to the Dayak people, to Nias, to the Batak. And I involved students from different fields, like cinematography. This has become a mode of working for me.

JD: To mix different cultures and media?

Sardono: Yes, and I think only with a group of people from different disciplines can we really study the traditional arts. For instance, if a dance student has already trained in a specialized approach, or a music student has already specialized only in music, it will be difficult for them to see how music is related to dance. But in Aceh, for example, it is difficult to produce music without movement. Or if a student from the modern fine arts department comes to Bali, she may say that some things are only decorative art. They will be prejudiced like that. But with an interdisciplinary system, she will get input from other artists. The students can study traditional art if they have come from a group that is already interdisciplinary. Otherwise it will be very difficult,

because they come from a specialized modern system.

This kind of integrated approach is not a matter of aesthetic form only. I remember the teaching of I Nyoman Pugra, the great dance master of Bali, who explained to me about the three criteria for an artist. He said that a good dancer is he who can play the music, who can make and paint the costumes, and knows how to sing the songs in Kawi. But the better one is he who knows all of these things plus he knows what the religions are, and can participate in the social life and have a social function. And the best is he who has everything but is just an ordinary person. That is the most important thing, he has to be a plain person first, and then an artist. Maybe Pugra would say the most important thing is the person because he lives in a person's society. He has to be the common denominator of the society.

JD: And also understand the highest knowledge. That's the best artist?

Sardono: Yes, sometimes even if they don't produce art. Just by living in society they give an increasing value to the life surrounding them.

JD: Like living daily life as an art form.

Sardono: Perhaps Pak Nyoman Pugra's theory can be criticized, because maybe life in Bali is harmonious, everything is still in order. But for me it is the same everywhere. It is a matter of point of view, whether we want to categorize ourselves, to specialize, or try to be more frank with ourselves and see that actually we are just ordinary people. And then start from there. It's just a matter of choice. But actually, I never choose. I think life is not just a matter of making a choice. Sometimes we are chosen.

JD: Sometimes someone chooses you?

Sardono: It can be someone, it can be the situation. Ecological things can be part of it. I feel that I always face a certain reality that can be approached through several different layers of consciousness and many different angles and dimensions. Like in my experience with the *kecak*, there are many different dimensions that I can use. I can follow the magical spirits while I am structuring this thing, and it is manifested in a very concrete way. And it is also a matter of social conditions, individual creation, and

The story of a lost Balinese mask

One day in 1970 I was in the house of Nyoman Kakul in Batuan, Bali, with some students. I had read in a book by Dr. Goris that there was a Balinese temple in Pejeng called *Purnama Sasih*, the full moon temple. At the time I was aware it was the full moon, so I said, let's go there because I was sure there will be an *odalan* [temple festival] for the full moon. We went to Pejeng by *bemo* [a small truck with covered back and benches inside, used for local transportation]. We arrived around 7:00, but there was nothing happening. It turned out that the name of the temple has nothing to do with the full moon *odalan*. Transportation was difficult in Pejeng at the time so we had to go to Ubud to get the *bemo*. We walked from Purnama Sasih. Everybody spread out, I just had two students with me.

About a kilometer from *Goa Gajah* (Elephant Caves) was a big rice field. The moon had almost come up. I saw a big mask, half burned, lying near the road. It was interesting because it was a good mask but half burned. It was very big. I washed it with water, and wrapped it in a leaf blanket I had brought to sit on, because I thought I was going to see an *odalan*. I covered the mask and we brought it with us. At a road crossing, suddenly I turned and saw a very big moon, so I sat there for a while. From the village I heard the sound of a ritual, many voices going up to the sky. For me, this moment was very important. I sat there for almost half an hour to meditate. Then I walked down to the village of Mas, where there was an *odalan*. I ate there and returned to Batuan and Kakul's house. Late

at night, while I was asleep, I felt very sick. My stomach hurt. It was a very strange sign, the sickness. I felt that I could come and go from my body; I could see myself and observe, but still feel the sickness. Suddenly I said to my friend, take me out of this village back to Den Pasar. So we went to Den Pasar, and then I felt more relaxed.

Then I recovered from the sickness. A week later, I was doing the *kecak* in Teges. And do you know what happened? A year after the scene with the children on the bus, after the people meditated that night to become tranquil, I felt suddenly that I had to go after these people and join them. I asked to stay in the temple alone. At 3:00 someone came; it was Pak Lunga, who danced the trance in my *kecak*. He is the assistant of the *pemangku* [priest]. He sat in front of me and told me all about the temple, the meaning of each part of the temple. "The most eerie place is there," and he pointed to the rice fields, "there is the *pura galung*. Anyone who takes something from there will get sick." I had a flashback to the mask I had taken from there and told him about it. I said, "I've taken a mask from there. What was it?" He said, "It is the mask of the priest, from the cremation of the Teges spirits. He is the priest and also the leader of Teges." That's why I was sick. In the morning, I went to Made Netra's house and I said, "A year ago I brought something here." They said, "Oh yes, it's still here!" And there it was, still covered up. I brought it to Teges and that very morning we made an offering and put it back in the rice field. They said one interpretation was that it was the spirit of this priest that brought me to the village of Teges.

the social, political and geographic aspects of life. I can tell of many hundred coincidences; if I put them together it becomes a structure. Like the story of the mask. (See box.)

JD: I like the Indonesian word kebetulan better than the word "coincidence" because betul means correct, and kebetulan means a grouping of correct events. In English when we say, "it was a coincidence," it means it was an accident and doesn't have meaning. But everything that happens has meaning.

Sardono: Kebetulan is the existence of the right. Right has its own existence sometimes. Not only the right, but the truth. It has its own existence which is completely different from our truth, our rightness, our righteousness.

JD: Kebetulan means truth has its own existence. It's not our decision. Have you approached leading the EXPO group with this attitude?

Sardono: Actually, the fact that I was asked to be the EXPO group coordinator shows that everything happens like that. It has been a long process because all the seeds were actually planted a long time ago. I've known the core members of the group, like Supanggah, for a long time. Pande Sukerta and Sadra, for instance, were two of the youngest in the group I took to Paris in 1974. When I was exploring in 1970, Pandé Sukertha was a young student in KOKAR, and he accompanied me everywhere. And also the group from IKJ — Deddy Luthan is from Minang, but he was one of the students that I brought to Bali; he was Muslim, and he learned the kecak. Pak S. Karjono, the lead Javanese dancer, has worked with me for a long time. I have often worked with Supanggah, with Pande Sukerta, with Subono. When I made film music, for the historical film November 28, I worked with Franki Raden. I had consciously used gamelan music in the film. We formed a group to play the music, and then I invited Supanggah, Endo Suanda, Subono, Rustopo . . . always the same people.

JD: You could call on a community of people interested in doing experimental work . . .

Sardono: In 1970 when I made the first kecak, Sal Murgianto was there. And he was there in 1969 when I made a work in Solo called Samgita Panca Sona, which people say is one of my first controversial performances. Some people threw eggs and stones at us. I gave an interpretation of part of the Ramayana, the story of Sugriwa and Subali. I started with singing, but without any music. When we practiced, I sang Pangkur palaran, and just danced, without the music. It started from this and developed into the piece. So I avoided the musical structure of the ladrangan and lancaran. It is the first time I felt that I could produce different things, use different techniques. Karjono was there, and Sal Murgianto; Sumarsam was responsible for the music. He was the first one to try to do something experimental with me.

JD: The audience was upset that you ignored the structure of the music?

Sardono: Yes. Then I developed this, and tried to

more consciously do experimental things. Humardani gave me a lot of support. In 1969, he was my patron and asked me to make an experiment at ASKI, using many instruments and doing crazy things. Al. Suwardi was there also.

JD: It seems that Humardani was very important in encouraging people to try new things. Why did he believe so strongly in experimentation?

Sardono: He was a man with a political position, the head of ASKI. That's why Sasono Mulyo [ASKI's earlier location in the Kraton Surakarta] became the center of excellence in experimentation. Maybe he was exposed to a lot of modern ideas and art and understood that experimentation and improvisation can also be valuable.

But in my work it is not the experiment itself that concerns me. I am concerned with realizing the dialectic process between areas of culture. So for me it is important to bring Javanese students to Minangkabau and Aceh students to Bali. Not only to learn different dance techniques in a school, but to enter the life that exists in different areas, become involved in different culture areas. I think this is the most important approach to art education in Indonesia. This has been very important to me. Usually it is just through the school that people are exposed to traditions of other cultures, like at ASKI. But then it becomes just an ethnic aesthetic, a dance technique, instead of provoking the individual with certain values through intense interaction with the culture. I don't want people to only study in school, but to go where art is part of life.

Of course there is a certain danger in bringing students from the outside into the village life. If we are not careful, we can destroy the atmosphere there. That is why I believe in a very long process, not just a short visit. And it is important to give the authority to the village itself, to make it clear that they are not just some object, but that we need active participation from them. Like the young people in Teges — they see the world differently from Grindem, for example. We can not just relate to Grindem, our teacher, and ignore the young people. Grindem has no relation to television and radio and the motorbike. Sometimes we relate to Grindem's perception and way of life, and sometimes we see the village as an exotic thing, more from the outside.

JD: You always try to see things on many levels, from many perspectives?

Sardono: Yes. That's why involvement of many people of many generations is important, not just as a conceptual idea, but as a matter of really complete involvement with the people.

JD: So you are teaching people more than dance or choreography. You are teaching about a way of life. Do you get a new consciousness or awareness from each event or situation and then just watch that to see what happens?

Sardono: Yes, and usually so many things happen. Sometimes I can not make choices quickly because there

always are so many possibilities. I can think about many different ideas at the same time, and I enjoy exploring many ideas at the same time. Like my obsession with Borobudur and reading about Zen Buddhism, and expressing these ideas in movement. While I was still in Java practicing for EXPO, I brought a dancer to the top of Borobudur and tried to catch the form of the reliefs. Meanwhile, I was still writing about the story of Puputan in Lombok in 1840.

JD: What do you think of the Gamelan Festival now that is all finished? What will live in your consciousness after those three days when so many people were here?

Sardono: It is related to my interest in the culture of the Indians of this area. I saw a film about the life of the Indians since Vancouver was established, and it deeply touched my emotions. It is the same with the Gamelan Festival. I don't know how they are related, but there must be something connecting them. It is another level of consciousness I feel, like the relation between Bali and the fire temple in Iran.

JD: Do you want the International Gamelan Festival to happen again?

Sardono: There is a certain continuity, a certain stream which must be developed. It is something moving. That is what is important. If we ignore this movement, we will lose something.

JD: Will the gamelan music and instruments made in other countries become a tradition of their own?

Sardono: Gamelan is a cultural area. What you are talking about is not an instrument, not a kind of music. American gamelan is not an instrument or a composition. It is a certain perception of life. That's what you are talking about. If you fall into the trap of talking about American gamelan as a form of instrument or kind of music, then it

is something that is easily talked about, easily made, and easily lost. But I think American gamelan is the perception of a culture . . .

JD: Something that comes from within the people in the culture?

Sardono: Yes. But people must work to make it happen. Maybe we don't know what form it will take, but our intention must be to have more sharing and more awareness, otherwise we will just live in a very small context. But life doesn't need to be small — it should belong to everybody!

The gamelan Kyai Mentul at Wesleyan University in Connecticut is the manifestation of the Javanese way of life. Each instrument, played individually, sounds out of tune, but when they are played together, the sound is beautiful. In Javanese philosophy, we feel that even if each person is bad, when they all work together they will be in tune. It is the way of gamelan to manage with many different versions of the truth. This is a realistic approach to life. ▀



Sardono and Amna S. Kusumo.