

INTERVIEW

Linking Past and Future: Asep Sunandar Sunarya, Irawati Durban Arjo, & Endo Suanda

by Kathy Foley

In October 1989 I had a conversation, in English and Indonesian, with three leaders of the Sundanese arts from the Bandung area: Asep Sunandar Sunarya, Irawati Durban Arjo and Endo Suanda. I asked these artists to explore their feelings about the relation of tradition to their current innovations. None of them view the tradition as static, yet all seemed to feel that change is probably more crucial for this generation of artists than it may have been in some prior periods.

Dalang Asep Sunandar Sunarya of Gamelan Giri Harja in Jelegong, near Bandung, is the top performer of Sundanese Wayang Golek Purwa, the rod puppet theater of West Java. He performs hundreds of shows a year to audiences of thousands at a time. His performances are featured on television and radio, and numerous recordings of his performances are available in stores. His innovations in music have included commissioning pieces from modern composers and incorporating jaipongan arrangements of traditional songs into his wayang performances. He is well-known for his ability to make the puppets breathtakingly lifelike and to infuse the performance with humor.

Noted dancer Irawati Durban Arjo of Bandung trained and performed with Raden Tjetje Somantri in the '50s and '60s. In the last two decades she has been one of the top choreographic talents in Sunda and a major teacher at ASTI Bandung. International touring has taken her to Europe, the United States and other Asian nations on a regular basis.

Choreographer/ethnomusicologist Endo Suanda's work has ranged from the avant-garde to the traditional. He was a guest artist at La Mama in New York and the American College Dance Festival in Durham. He has performed as a musician and dancer of the traditional wayang and masked dance of the Cirebon area, and has specialized for a number of years in the style of his teacher, Dalang Sujana Arja of Slangit, Cirebon. He has a Master's degree from Wesleyan University and is currently completing a doctorate in ethnomusicology at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Kathy Foley is an Associate Professor of Theater Arts and Provost of Porter College at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii in Asian Theater and is Southeast Asia Editor for Asian Theater Journal. She performs Sundanese wayang golek frequently and lectures and writes on Sundanese arts. Her teachers include Dalang Otong Rasta, Dalang Abah Sunarya, Enoch Atmadibrata, Abay Subardja, Irawati Durban Arjo, Pa Effendi Lesmana, Dalang Aji Wijaya and Rutjita Suhayapoetra.



Dalang Asep Sunandar Sunarya.

Prelude: Dalang Asep Sunandar Sunarya, Endo Suanda and Irawati Durban Arjo

Foley: Debate goes on in Sunda about Pa Asep's innovations: introducing ogres that vomit noodles, puppet heads that split into multiple pieces in battle, slow motion fight sequences, new musical compositions, and so on. Some people say this is "ruining the tradition." Others point out that Asep's immense popularity is keeping wayang alive. What are your comments on this controversy?

Endo Suanda: Pa Asep's wayang it is still very traditional. He comes from generations of tradition, but he creates something that is very new. His style varies from the classical or older generation, but it has the traditional soul. Pa Asep said once to me, "Our ancestors made traditions, why can't we? I am continuing my tradition." His puppet movement is more dynamic—more suited to today's people for whom, without modification, the tradition would be finished.

Irawati Durban Arjo: Maybe it is just a coincidence, but I have the same view as Asep. I try to do something different with my choreography, but I still maintain, as the root, the classical art. Tradition is not a static form. Life and

lifestyle change constantly, so do people. Only traditional expression that satisfies contemporary tastes will be spared from oblivion. It is fitting to define "tradition" not as a static form, but as something that is alive and adjusting to changes. Otherwise, people—mostly young people whom we hope will continue the tradition—will leave it and like modern or western arts more. We must try to attract their attention to our culture; keeping true to the root, we must also attract the young.

Asep Sunandar Sunarya: I am not trying to get away from tradition, because it carries important philosophy from the ancestors. Instead I am trying to keep the tradition popular, well-received, and alive. Each dalang applies his creativity to keep the form popular with the people. Wayang has so much meaning. For example, what is wayang? A "shadow." Wayang is a shadow of the human being. A human is the nine elements, and the tenth is the unity. [He counts to nine while pointing to the nine different holes—mouth, ears, nose, eyes, anus, urinary duct—through which food and stimuli enter and leave the body. On ten, he points above, invoking the idea that sensual faculties are ruled by and united in a higher force that comes from the principle behind them all.] The important thing is the tenth; this is the meaning of life and makes us alive. The principle of the tenth is life itself. In your form there is something that stays—the wholeness of your body and its life. So with my approach to wayang, there is change, but that main principle stays the same.

A Dancer's Perspective: Irawati Durban Arjo

Foley: Can you speak a bit, firstly, about how you came to dance as a profession; and, secondly, about your relation to your teacher and your development as an artist in your own right?

Durban: I do not come from an artistic family. My neighbor asked me to join a dance class where her uncle, Pa Tjetje Somantri, was the teacher. I liked it very much. Actually my mother forbade me to do this, because at that time being a dancer had a low connotation. Indeed, in folk tradition, to be a female dancer was to be associated with prostitution. The only high-class female dance was a court dance called *Bedaya*, which was only danced by aristocrats and could not be done by common people.

Then, after three months of my learning the dance, my mother got a letter from the leader of the group who was an aristocrat from Banten and the head of the cultural department in Bandung. When my mother saw that the letter was from a good person, she permitted me to dance in front of the governor for the first time. After that I performed for dignitaries in Bandung and also for the President [Sukarno] with his honored guests from other countries.

It was a new era for dance in Sunda because my teacher's choreography was a new style. Formerly, most of



Irawati Durban Arjo.

the dance done by women was just the folk dance associated with prostitution. And then this . . . leader of the cultural department formed a group and asked Tjetje Somantri to teach the girls in his family. His style of dance was preferred by everybody. Although it was new, it had older roots in Sundanese movement that had existed for years and years. Common people as well as high-class people were free to learn. His style of dance became very famous; in every cultural group sent abroad by the government, Pak Tjetje's dance was always performed, and I was always appointed to be one of the dancers.

Actually, I never chose dance as a "profession." I gained a degree in interior decorating, but when the national dance academy [ASTI] was founded, I was asked to teach there. Before that I never knew that there was another form of dance in Sunda, I only knew my teacher's style. At the dance academy I saw there were so many styles, like *keursus* style [a codified presentation of different character types developed by Wirakusumah to be taught to aristocrats in the early decades of this century] and masked dance style. I realized that Sunda has more than I had known.

When my teacher died in 1963, we, his students, wanted to do something new in dance. I didn't know where to go: I felt some emptiness when I looked at dance from other regions like Java and Bali. I felt there was something I liked, yet I could not borrow the movements or details from that kind of dance. So when I learned that in West Java we had more types of dance, I turned back and I tried to learn the most traditional forms in Sunda. Even my teacher learned wayang theater-style dance and masked dance in

Cirebon. When I saw these other styles, I recognized in them the root of my dance from my teacher. So I tried to learn on my own from the traditional dancers in the village.

Through this I made other dances. These choreographies are a mixture of old traditional dance, my background in the fine arts department, and my experience of going around with the other troupes, from Bali, Java and other places. I don't take the details of a dance and put it in my choreography: I take the essence. I even like to see modern dance or ballet, but I don't take the ballet, only the essence. These dances broaden my consciousness of expression, dance technique, characters and style. My fine arts knowledge helps me understand the dance costumes, choreographies, space design and the sense of it.

Foley: Can you talk about your experience of learning different character types?

Durban: When I first learned dance my teacher taught us a very refined female dance. The movement was very slow, with the eye sweeping the floor. The second character he gave us was a little bit stronger, like the Peacock Dance: the eye not only sweeps the floor but is higher, and the movement is a little bit more dynamic.

My teacher taught very refined characters to all his students, and he only chose a few of his students to do *topeng* [mask] or stronger character types. I feel very blessed that my teacher chose me to do this stronger character. After experiencing that stronger kind of emotion in dancing, I feel I can express my feelings more in dance. But in my teacher's dance even the stronger dance is not so strong. This is why I tried to create another dance where I can show that the female dancer is not always a weak dancer, but can do stronger movements. That is why some of us like to do the *Klana* [a very strong character] dance style, because in that kind of dance we can show our inner force and strength.

Foley: Only in the last few years have I started to see a new style of female choreography with very strong and dynamic, but still somewhat refined female characters. Strong gestures are no longer reserved for just the aggressive *Klana* character, but are used for female warrior types. These women characters are in command of their world. They are not out of control, but liberated and liberating models of Indonesian womanhood in this generation. You are one of the people who has been introducing this new character and, additionally, all kinds of new uses of the dance scarf.

Durban: Yes, you see this in one of my dances for the President's palace, *Kandegan Cinde Laras*. The traditional kicking movement is like this [she demonstrates the traditional way of grasping the scarf with the toes and tossing it over the head by a thrust of the foot]. But I tried to think of this scarf as a dance prop: "What can I do with this?" It can strengthen and enlarge the dimension and expression of the dancer. For example, you can make it an

arrow [releasing the scarf with her hand gives the impression of an arrow flying] or also as a spear [demonstrating how two dancers, each using their scarves pulled taut, can create the illusion of spears clashing against each other].

Foley: What do you predict for the future of Sundanese dance?

Durban: I feel we have to retain our tradition, whether it is folk or classical style. For example, the traditional mask dance of the Cirebon region lasted an hour or two. The *Losari* mask dances that I studied with Dalang Ibu Sawitri were one-hour dances. I shortened my version of the dances to 15 minutes, but I did not leave out the main elements of the tradition. In new choreographies, we are challenged to make something new. What is the new thing in it? The music? The costumes? Movements? Sunda is very rich in performing arts elements. I believe Sundanese artists can make hundreds of new things from their artistic tradition, developing new ideas out of it. I am eager for creative Sundanese artists to make good pieces, but hope that they will still maintain the root or the flavor of Sundanese art. Otherwise their art will not be recognizable as Sundanese art, just as a new piece of contemporary art. I have maintained the interest of younger people in order to continue the tradition. I try to preserve the tradition and carry it on.

The Artist as Ethnomusicologist: Endo Suanda

Foley: How did you come to your art as a profession?

Suanda: I'm not really sure anymore whether I'm an artist or a scholar. I'm not from an artistic family, though some of my relatives are important in supporting the arts. But since I was little, I was really attracted by gamelan and, later on, to dance.

Foley: Why didn't you stay with wayang, one of your early interests?

Suanda: I knew my voice was limited for wayang. I went to the dance academy, and I shifted to dancing.

Foley: Do you think that dance is considered more acceptable in an urban environment?

Suanda: That may be true, and it is more easily learned by a lot of people. Puppetry is very special. In the tradition and to the present, puppetry is more *keturunan* [inherited in a family tradition]. If you are not *keturunan* [a descendant of the family] you will not be able to be a good dalang. You know that as soon as you go into the wayang. There is so much to do, to know—not just the technical but the spiritual too. In dancing this is also true, but it is not as direct. In wayang you have to express the ideas in words, in philosophy. Also, dancing was introduced into academic training earlier than puppetry.

Foley: Do you consider yourself more an artist or a scholar? How does your family feel about your career?

Suanda: Back in 1964–66 an artist made a lot more

than a government official. That was when my father first started to support me in my decision to be an artist. I was optimistic that one could make better money as an artist-teacher. From the beginning, I didn't like to be formalized. I felt the artist's life was freer. My father was a school teacher; you couldn't say a dirty word or make a joke in the house. Among artists, well you know [he laughs].

When I got into ASTI Bandung, I got more institutional philosophy. Pa Enoch Atmadibrata taught me. He introduced me to notation, a system. For a while I did that, and then I ran back to performing again. I found a dryness in that kind of system—if you move a certain way it gives a certain impression, and so on. For example, with wayang I tried to observe *patet* [different musical modes for different parts of the performance]. I thought, perhaps that is what happens, but after I observed [practitioners in Sunda and Cirebon] more, I saw nobody does that.

Foley: Is it true that Sundanese dalang do not use *patet* to structure performance, even though ASTI teaches about wayang as if *patet* were used? I always thought that academies in Bandung taught *patet* to make it seem that Central Java's ideas applied in Sunda. Perhaps because teachers at ASTI got degrees in Central Java they feel obligated to teach ideas about gamelan that don't really apply in Sunda.

Suanda: Definitely, but at the beginning I didn't know. I thought it was, perhaps, true. But after a while I asked myself, Who is doing this? [using *patet*] Nobody! Even in dance, if you compare ASTI's style to Pa Parmis' [an expert in wayang-style dance] in Babakan Tarogong [an area of Bandung] or to [styles in the city of] Karawang—looking back to the village, something sparks more in those places. It is less refined, less standardized. At one point I hated standardization, and I said: "That's all bullshit!" and went back to the village. I was going to do research on Cirebon topeng, but I didn't finish my research as scholarly research. I just went and danced with them. I was surprised that people could make a thesis for an academic degree so quickly. I thought: "It is not right, it doesn't [really] go that way."

Foley: Do you feel this way about the scholarship going on in Sunda, or all scholarship?

Suanda: I don't know if it is true for all scholarship, but most. However, in ethnomusicology people are not just trying to find the rule—the surface level—but the deeper level. For example, at one time people didn't talk about improvisation. But, after all, improvisation in our arts has actually the highest value and level in performance. It is very easy to set choreography, compared to this [improvising]. Still, I think people are getting to be more aware of this fact, and it is different than the early 1970s, [when scholars ignored the importance of improvisation in Sundanese arts].

Foley: I have always wondered if everything in



Endo Suanda, right, with Kathy Foley.

Central Java is really like people describe it in articles, so set and clear, so different from Sunda, or if in the villages it is more diverse or related to what you find in the Pasisir area. I've wondered if it might be beneficial for ethnomusicologists to start in the villages and only later look at the academies and palaces.

Whom do you consider to be your teacher or teachers?

Suanda: That is a difficult question. I consider the older people in the gamelan group I started in to be my teachers, though they didn't really "teach" me. Instead, I tried to imitate them. I had a good rebab teacher in Majalenka who came from Ujung Burung near Bandung. After I entered the dance academy, I studied with Pa Nugraha [an important dancer and teacher of this generation]. I would go to his house almost every night after class. He's really good as a dance teacher and tries to know what you need, special things: how to work on your body, what kind of choreography is more suited to you. And, of course, Pa Enoch was my first scholar-teacher who inspired me to go further and study academically. Pa Kandeg [a dalang of *wayang wong* who lived near Cirebon] taught me mask-making both spiritually and practically and a lot of different things. I learned dancing from Ibu Suji and Ibu Dasih [two sisters who were noted dalang of topeng style dance in Palimanan, Cirebon]. Of course, Pa Jana [Sujana Arja, a dalang of topeng Cirebon from Slangit, Cirebon] was my main teacher in the mask dance style.

Foley: What responsibility do you feel toward your teachers, toward preserving their work?

Suanda: What I feel concerning my responsibility to

my teachers, for the art or to the artists, is always changing. At one point I felt that I should find my own style so I studied with five or so teachers, whoever I felt like. But I didn't find satisfaction in that kind of work. I changed to doing just one style. You know, to create in one style is very important; to create your own style is not easy, it takes time. I'm not saying today I don't mix styles, but much less than I used to. Mostly, I have danced in the style of Pa Jana for many years now. If you try to go back and forth, it confuses you very much. I think, why? It is good to concentrate in one style and really work on it.

Foley: What kinds of transitions have you seen in the arts of Cirebon or Sunda?

Suanda: On one hand, people are more and more aware of traditional arts as an expression of oneself. In dancing and choreographing you project yourself. In the past I think it was more just "dancing," not much emphasis on choreographing. The idea of trying to "choreograph" something started perhaps with Tjetje Somantri and Pa Wirakusumah. Later on, more and more, people thought of making something different in terms of style. For example, Tjetje Somantri made *Tari Merak* [Peacock Dance], *Tari Tani* [Farmer's Dance], or *Tari Tenan* [Weaving Dance], with a sort of movement that was very new and never explored before. In this generation someone like Pa Enoch Atmadibrata created in *sendratari* [dance drama] style, a different approach, or Sardono [Kusumo] created *Sanggita*, which was influenced by freer movement. You can really read the contextual and social change quite clearly there. Before, it was very much the traditional arts for wedding and circumcisions, and festivals. It was not like the more

modern style performances for opening buildings and for the governor's office. In the 1960s people performed on the modern stage, with tickets being sold to the audience, etc. Before there were not so many formal institutions involved in the traditional life, but now ASTI and KOKAR [high school and college arts conservatories] are involved in making cassettes, sponsoring performances, etc.

Foley: Do you feel your own personal work is carrying on tradition or changing it?

Suanda: I carry on my tradition. I've been involved in music, dance, and even theater. When I was involved in modern theater with Julie Taymor [an American designer/director who had the company *TeaterLoh* in Indonesia in the 1970s], I didn't have any training in any western theater, music or dance. It came from what I knew—the traditional form. Now I have experienced a lot of influence from here [the US], and that aspect is growing. But I feel the root [of Sunda] is there inside me. Whenever I dance or act or play music, I feel that my original aesthetic is the root or essence of everything. I feel strongly attached to it.

For example, when I first created my non-traditional pieces in Sunda, I tried to create from zero. In *Badawan*, which I did for the first Young Choreographers' Festival, all the performers but one were from Sunda. We shared an artistic source, an expression, a dance style. Even though we said we started from nothing, from improvisation, we actually started from the same root: tradition. It was Sundanese—even though we didn't perform traditional pieces or even one full traditional phrase of movement, the elements were from our tradition. ▀