

## FIELD NOTES

# The New Order and Reformasi: The Wayang Scene in Semarang

by Tjahjono Rahardjo

Shortly after General Soewardi was appointed as governor of Central Java in 1984, he embarked on a project to make the whole province yellow. Yellow was, of course, the colour of Suharto's ruling Golkar party. Soewardi ordered all government buildings, and also public facilities such as telephone booths and bus shelters, to be painted yellow. Even curbs and pedestrian crossings were painted black and yellow instead of the usual black and white. In many cases, over enthusiastic government officials ordered people to paint the fences of their home yellow. When the fences surrounding the two holy banyan trees at the alun-alun of Surakarta were painted yellow, that was too much for some members of the kraton family. So, with the blessing of the Susuhunan, they repainted it back to white, their original colour. This encouraged people to do the same thing to the public facilities. The government immediately painted them yellow again; thus starting what was later dubbed "the battle of colours."

This *program kuningisasi* ["yellowizing" program] also affected the monthly wayang kulit performances in front of the gubernatorial office in Semarang, supposedly held for the purpose of preserving the art of wayang kulit. The performers (*dhalang*, *niyaga*, and *swarawati* [shadow puppet master, musicians and female singers]) had to wear yellow costumes. The stage was covered with yellow carpet and the audience sat on yellow coloured chairs. These performances were organised by a government-sponsored organization for dhalang and other wayang artists (whose chairman was not a wayang artist but a high-ranking government official): the *Lembaga Pembina Seni Pedhalangan Indonesia* (GANASIDI). The GANASIDI performances, however, were more like variety shows than wayang kulit performances. Instead of one screen, they had two, with two or three dhalang performing together, sometimes even at the same time. As if that were still not enough, they also would have dangdut singers, comedians and jaipong dancers joining in the lakon.

The general public loved those shows, but many dhalang and serious connoisseurs of wayang were not at all happy. Most of them, however, suffered in silence. One of the few people brave enough to stand up was Ki Timbul

Hadiprajitno, a senior dhalang from Yogyakarta. He said "I will never share the stage with a comedian even if the President, let alone a mere governor, ordered me to do so." In those days you needed a lot of courage to make such a statement and of course Ki Timbul was never invited to perform at the governor's office.

Today Soewardi is not the governor any more. He might even be tried for corruption. Gone are the monthly wayang performances in front of the governor's office. There are in fact considerably fewer performances these days, as very few people can afford to have a wayang kulit performance. Of the few performances held in Semarang recently, the most interesting one was the one at the local headquarters of Megawati Sukarnoputri's Democratic Party, to mark the successful ending of the party's congress in Bali. A well-known dhalang from Klaten seemed to be more interested in making a political statement and criticising the Habibie government than presenting a lakon. Despite the drastic decline in orders to perform, many dhalang are enjoying their newly found freedom. Ki Manteb Sudarsono, for instance, was seen at several political meetings and rallies. Many dhalang have left GANASIDI and declared that they will never be willing to be used by the government anymore.

*Wayang orang* [dance drama telling wayang stories, i.e. with people rather than puppets], on the other hand, is enjoying a sort of comeback (although not a very dramatic one). At least that is the case of the Wayang Orang Ngesthi Pandowo company in Semarang. It might be because they have moved to a new location on a busy street, it might also be because the price of movie tickets are now so prohibitively high that many people go see the wayang orang instead. Wayang orang is one of the few kinds of entertainment ordinary people can still afford in this time of severe economic crisis. In any case, Ngesthi Pandowo is able to attract at least a hundred people on Wednesday nights (when the tickets are sold at half price) and Saturday nights. On other nights there are at least twenty five people. And fortunately Semarang is still much safer than Jakarta, so people are not afraid to go out in the evening to see a wayang performance. ▀

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