

INTERVIEW

“Why do we dance at all?”: Liong Xi, dance drama performer and choreographer

by Allan Thomas

Allan Thomas: When we first started to play gamelan in New Zealand in 1977 we were aware of your performances of Balinese dance. Every few months the motor caravan would come through Wellington with all your possessions aboard and your son Zorrillo's bicycle strapped on the back. You would give a few performances and you were off, south or north, to perform somewhere else.

Liong Xi: The Balinese dances were a sensation in the schools. We used to end with the witch dance; it caused a riot: Faye, portraying Rangda, racing around the school hall, in the aisles, after the children. Faye had to take her mask off at the end to assure them she wasn't that dreadful creature. Once it backfired with a little boy who was absolutely enraptured by the performance. Faye took her mask off and he said “Oh, my God! put it back on please!”

We wanted to introduce dance drama as a viable subject for education in the schools. Not so kids would become dancers, but very much for the same reasons they study English. We don't teach English with the idea that children will become actors, but so they become more proficient, more eloquent, and better at whatever they do in their lives. We saw dance drama as doing the same sort of thing for students.

We realised that with such a new concept it would probably take 15 years for us to get our message across. We started in the schools with a five-year plan in 1977. Then we expanded into the community with the dance dramas “Night on Bald Mountain” and “Only a Butterfly.” The third five-year plan, still in the works, is to set up an institution for learning.

We started by writing about 500 letters to Intermediate and Secondary Schools all over New Zealand and we expected to be busy for maybe six weeks. But the response was fantastic — we couldn't fit the work into one year. So we bought a motor caravan and traveled up and down the country, reaching small communities, isolated workcamp towns, and each of the cities.

Thomas: These were not the first performances you had given in New Zealand, were they?

Xi: In 1968 I had a group in Auckland studying Balinese dance and dance drama and we worked with the Indian dancer Amala Devi, who was a teacher from the Paris Opera Ballet I had known in Ram Gopal's troupe in Europe. We gave performances in Auckland and Wellington, not unlike those we'd given in Europe showing



Balinese and Indian traditions together.

Programs often started with an explanation of Mudra. I would show Mudra and explain that this was one of the most sophisticated gesture languages in the world, with emotional content and endless combinations. As this developed we performed alongside, and could interact with, Polynesian gesture languages in dance. We had a dancer from Samoa who also had trained in Hawaii. I would say something in Mudra and she would respond in Hawaiian gesture language.

Thomas: If we go to the beginnings of this, to your

training in Balinese dance and your growing up in Indonesia, where do we start, Bandung?

Xi: No, I was born in Macassar, now called Ujung Pandang, in Sulawesi. When I was one year old my parents moved to Java, where there was more work for my father as a surgeon. I grew up with a younger brother and sister, Edo and Tamara, mainly in Bandung.

My mother was a concert pianist. Ironically, it was through western music that I came in contact with Balinese culture. A close friend of my mother's was the international concert pianist Lili Kraus, who was astounded that we children knew nothing about Indonesian dance drama. It wasn't done, you see, to take an interest in the culture of the natives in a colonial empire. She thought it was shocking. She said, "Balinese dance drama is amongst the most sophisticated cultural forms in the world and you know nothing about it?" She said, "I'll make sure your children learn about Balinese dance drama," She came up with two people, a younger man and an older man, as our teachers.

They were both masters, but the older had the special title *Guru-peng-Guru*, Master of Masters. He was highly respected in Bali. Lili persuaded him to come to Bandung, which was astounding. He lived in our house as a special guest for the period of the Japanese occupation, which was about four and a half years.

A wonderful man, I Gusti K'tut Sudana Nama, was his name. He said that he had come to teach us because we, as non-Balinese, would be likely to travel overseas and spread the knowledge of Balinese dance. An amazing man. My brother and sister and I had daily lessons. I was 12 years old when he came. The younger man had arrived several years before, his name was I Wayan G'de Sekan. He had taught me the martial arts, *pencak silat*, from about the age of 10. I wasn't interested in dance, I was interested in fighting, like all little boys are.

When I Gusti K'tut Sudana Nama came we gave him a demonstration of what we had learned in *pencak silat*. I'll never forget this, he said: "I think you have reached the stage now where you are good enough to start learning dance." Of course I had my own ideas of what a promotion was. But then I started intensive dance lessons. These went on until the Japanese surrendered, the war of independence started, and we left Indonesia for Europe via Australia. It was there that I realized the potential of Balinese dance drama as a means of earning money. I hadn't given it a single thought before.

Thomas: Now, how did they teach you?

Xi: When I started learning dance drama, immediately I was told to learn to play at least one instrument from the gamelan, like the *gender*, and also *kendang*. We had these instruments and learned them with intensity equal to that of the dance training. I realised that the music was not an accompaniment to the dance but a partner.

He taught in dance traditional motifs, not set choreographies. These were woven into a whole dance, and repeated because the dance is three dimensional — to the front and two sides. Then over and above this you reacted on each other as dancers.

Thomas: Were they very rigorous teachers?

Xi: I remember working terribly hard. I wanted to do my utmost; they were exciting, inspiring. They told us about the characters: Rangda had the power to be a giant and then as small as an ant; we did it, in our imagination.

Thomas: At this stage you were learning, but was there any chance to perform?

Xi: Well, gradually the two Balinese teachers became well known in the community in Bandung and were invited by the Javanese to give performances, and gradually we found ourselves performing too, to Javanese audiences.

Thomas: And to the European community?

Xi: They were restricted during the Japanese occupation. All the Dutch were in concentration camps (my mother escaped that, being married to a Chinese); but the French and Germans were not.

Later when we became more proficient we gave recitals ourselves at home and we invited anyone interested to come. It would be a combined recital. Lili Kraus would give piano items and we would dance Balinese dance with our gurus.

Thomas: In the foreign community there must have been no one else who involved their children with Indonesian culture in this way.

Xi: We were eccentrics, total eccentrics. When we finally went to Europe, to Holland, there were a lot of expatriate Dutch who had spent virtually all their lives in Indonesia. These people were terribly envious that we knew so much about the culture, and they knew nothing. It was just not done to take what the natives did seriously.

In Europe my father took a position in the Hague where he had done his training, and I taught Balinese dance at the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, later renamed the Tropical Institute. This was the beginning of my European time, of touring with my own dancers. I had never really taught but they gave me guidelines to work along; I got a real structure for teaching. The students were Indonesian and Dutch—Bernard Yzerdraat was one of them. The classes grew and performance began. An impresario came to the Tropical Institute, saw the dances and said, "I can organise tours for you." His name was Ernst Kraus, an elderly Jew who had been the impresario for Anna Pavlova. All he needed to do was open his mouth and people would do anything for him. For years he organised our tours of Germany, France, Spain, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and England.

Thomas: How would you describe the audiences you performed for on these European tours? Were they society audiences, or concert audiences? Was Indonesia their main

interest or were they a ballet-going audience?

Xi: In those days there was a hunger for anything from Asia. It was shortly after the war; it was like a pop music phenomenon. We needed police protection in our dressing room. It was astonishing, especially in Scandinavia. I remember in Stockholm a girl got through the police barricade and we were just going on stage for our part of the program and she just clung on to us — she had to be pulled off! What kind of audience do you call that? The enthusiasm was just amazing.

Thomas: The performances in Europe included Balinese and Javanese dance and the Indian dance of Ram Gopal, and some of your modern compositions in dance. How did you develop the modern ideas?

Xi: I met Kurt Jooss, whom I taught at the Folkvingschule in Essen. In exchange I learned about what was then called Central European Dance Drama, and I felt I must have some of those items in my program.

They were done in a modern costume and involved many of the company (about 20 of them) and western music. One I remember particularly well because it was a difficult one. I used "Coriolanus" of Beethoven. Another I remember had the Balinese name *Puputan*, "The End." It is the name the Balinese gave to the terrible struggle, slaughter and mass suicide when the Dutch came to Bali. We portrayed the Balinese in their dance drama and the Dutch in the European dance form and that mixture was most exciting.

Thomas: The Dutch audience, who knew this incident, and had just been tossed out by the Indonesian War of Independence, must have been incredibly involved?

Xi: Yes, the Indonesian audiences liked it too.

Thomas: So after ten years in Europe, when you came to New Zealand, you had experience in teaching and performing Indonesian and Indian dance, and a much wider frame of dance drama. You must have found New Zealand very backward at that time in its awareness of Asia.

Xi: When I first began teaching Balinese dance drama in New Zealand I became very aware of how raw the whole experience was for New Zealanders—it was almost an alien experience. A small group at Auckland University were interested in learning and we did performances. But that raw experience forced me to ask the questions: "Why do we dance at all? Do we need it?"— and to re-examine the Balinese: "What is it that makes them so incredibly powerful in their dance?" Millions of tourists, scholars and audiences around the world experience this intensity. So I was forced to ask what would excite New Zealanders; and I think our Intrinsic Dance Drama, developing work from amateurs and everyday body language and expanding it into dance and portraying issues like the Nuclear Free World, is really the answer there. ▀