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Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theatre in Colonial Indonesia,
1891-1903 (review)

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few lone scholars might someday chance to encounter the six lines of diary text that will substantiate the existence of a playhouse two centuries earlier. That said, the same documents could confirm the genealogical range of a family name under investigation. Ultimately, that is the point. Not only do we listen for voices in the rubble, but many with different interests do. Perhaps the voices one might hear will not enable a specific project to proceed, but could provide evidence for something even more significant.

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Matthew Isaac Cohen. *Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theatre in Colonial Indonesia, 1891–1903*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 473. \$30.00.

This book is a vivid description of popular theater that developed in Indonesia during the late nineteenth century. It is also a thorough analysis of social change and emerging identities in both colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. Through an exploration of the popular theater company *Komedie Stamboel*, which developed in the hands of Auguste Mahieu, the text conveys a sense of what it was like to live through these specific times as it simultaneously foregrounds what may be seen as universal characteristics of human life such as greed, envy, and need for success and recognition. The story is presented in vibrant language through more than four hundred pages and constitutes an historical documentation of a theater that heavily influenced and continues to influence the art scene in Indonesia.

To fulfil this demanding task, the author has conducted impressive archival and detective work. By following the daily press in *Komedie Stamboel*'s contemporary Indonesia, Cohen pieces together factual movements of the theater as well as developments in the theater organization and paraphernalia. However, what is perhaps even more interesting, through these sources emerges a sense of a newly created public space where morality, social norms, and social behavior are scrutinized. Through this space we learn about gossip and conflicts that develop around the phenomenon of *Komedie Stamboel*.

The book is divided into seven chapters, starting with an introduction that sets the scene of popular entertainment in Indonesia at the time when *Komedie Stamboel* enters the stage. The following five chapters take the reader on a chronologically ordered journey through the initiation, establishment, the success, and the end of *Komedie Stamboel*. In the final chapter the legacy of Mahieu is

discussed, his theatrical oeuvre situated in postcolonial Holland and contemporary Indonesia.

Komedie Stambul was established 1891 in the Javanese port town of Surabaya. The theater was from its beginning connected to Eurasian and Chinese parts of the population but, due to a fortunate combination of personal ambition, creativity, and societal development, was soon to become a “common cultural possession” of the Dutch Indies. The organization transcended any ethnic or racial belonging and incorporated a wide diversity onstage as well as in the audience. The primary figure, around which the book and history revolves, is Auguste Mahieu, a Eurasian from a family of middle-class civil servants working in the colonial administration. Mahieu started his career with studies at the prestigious Hoogere Burgerschool in Surabaya. However, the most formative experience from this time may have been contacts with European art. Young Mahieu soon left Surabaya, as one obituary states it, out of “wanderlust,” and after a short sojourn as a civil guard he put all his energy into the creation of Komedie Stambul, soon becoming its acting director.

A typical performance of Komedie Stamboel staged a story from *The Arabian Nights* and the language onstage was Malay. The splendid properties and backdrops and the use of advanced technology were important means to attract audiences and were often commented upon by critics in the newspapers. The performance ended with either a choral number or a tableau vivant. These tableaux sparked lively debates as they were both seen as promoting virtue at the same time as other commentators rejected the predilection for tableaux including “semi-nude women.” The music of the show became bestsellers of its time, and people soon learned the latest songs through printed scripts. Outside the theater a buffet, which also sold alcohol, attracted a lot of interest, and the noise and turmoil at the buffet sometimes threatened to disturb the performance. People were fighting, shouting, commenting, and probably also singing along. This was a stage not only for theater but also for public interaction where social groups mingled in ways far from the “neat” administrative compartmentalization of colonial society. The official discourse and judicial system strived for a society where ethnic and racial relations were strictly regulated, commanding in detail how to behave, how to dress, where to live and handing out rights and obligations.

The enterprise started out as a resident theater but soon transformed into an itinerant company, traveling first Java and eventually outside Indonesia to Singapore and Malaysia. These travels seem to have intensified social interaction. The press reported frequently about fights among audiences and actors, moral scandals that erupted when youngsters ran away with the theater troupe or when actresses transformed into mistresses of wealthy citizens. Simultaneously, as theater was performed on the stage, a different performance was

taking place in the public space created by newspapers and in the social space created by the event itself. As today, show biz and the press developed a reciprocal relationship. The reports about scandals and the questionable morality of the actor's life spurred public interest and may well have served to increase ticket sales. Yet, it was an art in itself to walk the line between teasing public interest by playing out the extravagant and, on the other hand, to avoid hard disciplinary reactions that could result in, as it occasionally did, revoked performance permits.

During this traveling period Mahieu managed to buy out the former owner Yap Gwan Thay, and he became the sole possessor of Komedi Stamboel. However, ultimately the scandals and friction in the company seem to have caused its bankruptcy in 1896. This was the end of Komedi Stamboel, though not for Mahieu or the genre of Stamboel. Mahieu continued to work as an actor and director in slightly reformed constellations of Stamboel theaters such as the Komedi Sri Stamboel. From these platforms he continued to develop the theatrical form. Eventually, when Mahieu again reached the rank of actor manager, this time in Komedi Stamboel Boenga Mawar, the realism and social drama with "contemporary Indies setting" became part and parcel of the repertoire. It was also at about this time that Mahieu began to engage himself in the Indies League and the theater started to take a more active part in identity politics, presenting itself as an Indische theater. Although the Indies League was related to the Eurasian section of the population, that move drove Stamboel to become the first theater, perhaps, with aspirations of representing an "Indonesian theatre." At the same time, improvements in infrastructure allowed Stamboel companies to reach into the countryside and visit rural areas on a regular basis. In that way that art form, developed mainly in urban settings, became a habitual part of village experiences.

After independence the genre of Stamboel continued to influence performances by creating art forms that represented and exploited emerging identities that worked in between recognized and accepted structures of belonging. In Holland the legacy of Mahieu ultimately established an art that was thought of as representing a specific Eurasian "culture" in contrast to the Dutch. In Indonesia the legacy of Komedi Stamboel and Auguste Mahieu took a different turn and continues to assert influences in "trans ethnic" theater.

The numerous details, the descriptions of fights that regularly break out among members of the audience, the economic troubles and success, the intense feeling of the performances, the rain drowning out the sound of the actors, fires breaking out, and how the piano and violin fills the tent with music all work to draw the reader into the world of Komedi Stamboel.

However, the details are not only meant to create a sense of presence. For example, the notes on lighting of the stage, which in the first instance seems to

be just an embellishment of the text, is followed up by notes further ahead about how the technology develops from gas lamps to more modern utensils. By minor details such as these the author conveys a process of technological development, linking the *Stamboel* to the historical period of modernization. The developments in technology affect the staging of the performance. The new media landscape creates publicity that can both help and overturn show biz. Improvements in transportation allow for extensive touring. All these changes are intrinsically linked to the development of popular theater and the phenomenon of *Komedie Stamboel*.

By weaving together life stories and social processes, by restoring life into individual persons and their ambitions, the text describes what might be considered a universal striving for prestige, power, and wealth while at the same time we learn about a specific multiethnic society. This society is not without conflicts, though it has a different way of socializing and structuring ethnic differences, distinguished from today's debate about multiculturalism. Europeans involved in public fighting, as one example, disturb the "orderly" division between a white European elite and lower indigenous classes in colonial societies. There were strict rules of conduct regulating relations between races when it came to how to dress, what to work with, where to live, and economic relations. Nonetheless, in this system of regulations *Komedie Stamboel* creates a "space" of interaction among actual individuals that seldom is brought to the forefront in descriptions of multiethnic or colonial society.

The combination of theatrical imagery, the development of a public discourse and factual social interaction created what Cohen terms "a site for escapism and discipline" (137), what might be considered a paradoxical but productive site. In the long run this site produced, or at least became a means to represent, a sense of belonging in hybridity and in-betweenness. Hybridity is definitely not a postmodern phenomenon but was highly present in the late nineteenth century. Cohen states this in a most distinct way when he tells how "the ways it [*Komedie Stamboel*] rubbed together men and women of different backgrounds and social orientation—Chinese entrepreneurs, Eurasian and Malay performers, multiethnic audiences, moralistic newspapermen, sardonic European cultural observers, engaged Eurasian activists—produced a hybrid cultural form that borrowed on the conventions and technologies of other forms but demanded room of its own" (346).

In a distinct language the text provides unique insight into a specific time and conveys an unconventional picture of colonial society. The bringing together of global forces with developments of unique cultural forms and individual aspirations provides every reader an opportunity to grasp complex contexts on different analytical levels. The book should be included in teaching on globalization and diversity. However, bearing in mind the strict time limits put on

education today, the demand for easy-to-digest study materials which in short texts convey measured “knowledge,” the question is, who will read this? It would be most unfortunate if it were restricted to a small field of experts. Although written in an easily accessible language, building on solid ethnography, and including juicy anecdotes, the book demands close reading in order to understand its complex arguments and the minutiae of the social dynamics it communicates. This is four hundred pages well worth that time and effort.

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