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Reviving Wayang Orang Sriwedari in Surakarta: Tourism-Oriented Performance

Sri Rochana Widyastutieningrum

The heyday of Wayang Orang Sriwedari (Sriwedari), a central Javanese company doing traditional dance drama, was the 1960s–1970s, when it had great popularity and famous stars. From the 1980s the company lost popularity. In 2009, a shortened (padat), tourism-oriented performance model was tested which shows potential for reviving the form and reinvigorating the company.

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On 7 November 2003 *wayang*, which has both puppet (*wayang kulit*, etc.) and dance drama (Indonesian, *wayang orang*; Javanese, *wayang wong*) variants, was proclaimed a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, honoring the art on the world stage as a cultural asset to be preserved and developed (Solichin 2012: 181). However, it was apparent *wayang orang*, the dance drama of Central Java, also needed to be altered to be accepted by today's society.

Wayang is especially prevalent in the Javanese, Sundanese (West Javanese), and Balinese communities. In Java *wayang kulit* (shadow play), *wayang krucil/wayang klitik* (flat wooden puppetry), *wayang beber* (scroll narration) along with *wayang orang* presents stories primarily derived from the Indian *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* but with distinct

Indonesian interpretations. The genre may also include stories of Prince Panji, *Babad Tanah Jawi* (Chronicle of Java), and other narratives. *Wayang orang* (literally “human” puppetry) uses dancer-actors in the puppet roles and follows the performance structure of *wayang kulit*, using its *gamelan* percussion music as an integral part of a performance. A form similar to *wayang orang* is recorded in the *Wimalasrama* inscription dated 930 AD. But *wayang orang* as currently known took its present form only in the eighteenth century (Holt 1967: 151) when it was used by Sultan Hamengkubuwono I of Yogyakarta (r. 1755–1792) to represent the values of the palace that he had established (Lindsay 1991: 82). While *wayang orang* was presented as a semi-ritual performance in the *kraton* (palace) of Yogyakarta, it became an entertainment in the Mangkunegaran palace where Prince Mangkunegara IV (r. 1853–1881) is credited with adopting *wayang kulit* puppets’ detailed character iconography, which is still used in today’s *wayang orang* costumes (Susilo 1984: 117). Cohen notes the rise of the genre as a popular and sometimes troublesome public theatre form throughout Java in late 1900s:

The commercialized version of *wayang orang* known today as *wayang orang panggung* (“staged” *wayang orang*) . . . was eventually banned by Batavia’s authorities, though not permanently. Some historians consider Gan Kam to be the creator of commercial *wayang wong* [Javanese for “human”], a Chinese impresario who launched a troupe in Surakarta in 1894. (Cohen 2016: 55–56).

Wayang orang is considered the literal “person”-ification of *wayang kulit*. “There is strong evidence that *wayang kulit* (shadow play) and *wayang wong* (dance drama) in Java in the past developed side by side, the former influenced the latter, or in other words *wayang wong* was a personification of *wayang [kulit]*” (Soedarsono 1984: 1). The characters in *wayang kulit* stories are performed by a solo *dalang* (puppeteer) who performs all the manipulation and dialogue. These puppet roles are played by individual human performers in *wayang orang* and dance-actors present their own dialogue which is exemplified by lyrical prose (Soedarsono 1999: 256). Lindsay argues this puppet correlation makes *wayang orang* unique as compared to other dance-drama performances (Lindsay 1991: 84, see also Brandon 1993: 8 and Pemberton 1995: 253).

In the early days of *wayang orang panggung*, space, decoration, and lighting techniques were rough and dance was simplified due to limited space. The actors would appear from behind the wings, take up their positions, and depart when their parts were finished with one or two dance phrases. The actions, gestures, and dialogue were less stylized

than in performances in the more spacious *pendhapa* (palace pavilion) (Cohen 2016: 57).

Unlike the palace performances, which were subsidized by the ruler for an elite invited audience, *wayang orang panggung* entertained anyone who purchased tickets to watch. Such paid, popular entertainment has been referred to as “kitsch” art by Umar Kayam (1981): something that is neither a palace art or a true folk art but a commercial, urban genre of low taste and class. Kayam notes that a kitsch art must move with the times to attract the audiences’ ticket money and stay alive. Commerce drove the art’s birth at the turn of the twentieth century and continues to be crucial to its survival today.

There are two main stages where *wayang orang* is performed regularly, the national radio station Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) Surakarta and Sriwedari Park in Surakarta. Each group has their own audience. The Sriwedari theatre was specifically built for performing *wayang orang* and this company’s golden era was the 1960s and 1970s when the popular star performers such as Wugu Harjawibaksa Nalawibaksa and Rusman Harjawibaksa (both of whom played the fearless warrior Gatutkaca, son of the Pandawa hero Bima), Surono Ranawibaksa (who played Petruk, the long nosed clown and son of the god-clown Semar), Darsi Pudyarini (who played the warrior woman Srikandi), and so on flourished (see Soedarsono 2002: 226). However, by the 1980s, these star performers began to retire one after another, even as television had been introduced in Java, meaning people could find entertainment in homes.

Since then, numerous efforts have been made to revive Sriwedari. For example, the theatre has been equipped with much better audio and lighting and since 2000, art school graduates have performed, but audience numbers have remained low. Sriwedari performs nightly in an 800-seat house from Tuesday to Saturday from 8 p.m to 12 a.m. Although the admission fee is only 3,000 rupiah (\$.25), the average audience in the 2000s was twenty to fifty people.

Wayang orang in this period suffered internal and external setbacks. The internal factors included lack of *wayang orang* star players, a lack of motivation and creativity from actors, and an inadequate theatre facility. The external factors included competing shows (*dangdut* music and band performances) staged so nearby that anyone inside the theatre could hear. *Wayang orang* was still considered a cultural treasure of Indonesia, however, people had begun to abandon it. Without an audience, dispirited performers lowered their performance standards.

This article presents the history of Sriwedari and the efforts that have been made to conserve *wayang orang*. I offer a tourism-oriented

performance model of the present and consider how it can be further refined.

The Ups and Downs of Wayang Orang Sriwedari

Due to its long history in Surakarta, locals feel *wayang orang* is part of their local identity and a source of pride, in part because of the important tales and ideas in the performances. The stories provide insight into Javanese values. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have been developed further in Java to form sub-stories called *lakon carangan* (branch stories), categorized into five groups. The first is *lakon lahiran* (birth stories), which tell about the youth of figures, for example, *Bimo Bungkus* (Bimo's Birth Sack), which discusses how the eponymous hero is released from his amniotic sack. The second is *lakon raben* (marriage stories), such as *Sayembara Pancala* (Marriage Contest of Pancala) where the eldest Pandawa brother, Yudistira, wins Lady Drupadi's hand. *Lakon lebet* ("inner" stories) tell of mystical events, such as in *Dewa Ruci*, a tale detailing Bimo's spiritual enlightenment by this eponymous master. The fourth type is *lakon perang* (war stories), such as *Kikis Tunggarana* (Fight for Tunggarana, where the aggressor Boma confronts the noble Gatutkaca), and the fifth is *lakon pangruwatan* (stories that protect)—ritual *lakon* such as *Murwa Kala* (Origin of Kala) (see Solichin 2013: 69). The heroes and ideas in all these stories are considered part of Javanese cultural literacy and give models for living.

In the 1970s, audiences came to Sriwidari not only from Surakarta but also in groups from the surrounding areas, booking tickets beforehand as seats were limited. Stars boosted audience numbers. For example, Rusman Harjawibaksa (1926–1991) was a superstar from the 1950s: Soekarno, the first President of Indonesia, was one of his biggest fans. Motivated performers allowed the company to soar and they saw their work as conserving and developing their beloved cultural heritage. They were steeped in Javanese traditions and had a good knowledge of *wayang* in general and *wayang orang* in particular. Audiences were hungry to understand the meanings (Widyastutieningrum and Rusini 1998: 15).

By the 1980s, the older performers had passed away or retired. The nightly performances had become boring for both players and audiences. Both internal and external factors caused difficulties. Problems included a lack of (1) human resources, (2) facilities, and (3) professional management.

The human resources include dancers, musicians (*pengrawit*), and stage and production management staff. The most common problem for performers was motivation. Most performed only to fulfill their responsibility as civil servants. They made little attempt to

comprehend the stories, bring the characters to life, develop artistic skills, or innovate. As the talented artists retired, they were replaced with appointees who just sought a paycheck.

Additionally, the theatre was not comfortable. Viewers in rear rows could not see clearly, and a low slung balcony loomed above. Acoustics caused reverberations and music from bands playing the surrounding park could be heard inside. Amplification and lighting systems were insufficient.

The management continued in traditional mode. The director wrote a brief scenario (*balungan lakon*, story outline) on a board shortly before the performance and assigned roles, based on who was there. Performers would work out their “stage business” in a short rehearsal to make sure they were in accord. Then they dressed and applied makeup according to the assigned character. Meanwhile, the musicians performed *nguyu-nguyu* (music welcoming guests) since the audience had already arrived.

The performers then improvised their movement, dialogue (*antawecana*), songs (*tembang*), and blocking, largely based on patterns from previous performances. Since performers were given roles mainly based on their availability for that night, competence to perform certain characters was not the determining factor. The casting did not always produce strong improvisation: audience understanding of the story suffered.

External factors were the competition with other entertainments, both inside and outside Sriwedari Park. Inside, pop and *dangdut* music attracted the younger audience. Outside, television allowed access to entertainment at all hours. Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI), the state television network, initially focused on supporting local and national culture. But commercial television stations proliferated from 1989 and mass culture dictated their menu, causing TVRI to shift its orientation to compete. Television offerings estranged youth from traditional arts, which were seen as out of date. *Wayang orang* was, thereby, challenged to innovate for acceptance by the television generation.

Conservation and Development Efforts for *Wayang Orang*

Conservation efforts in fact began early, but were not successful in getting large audiences. Groups performing *wayang orang* on a regular basis remain limited. While Sriwedari continues to perform five times a week, RRI Surakarta presents only every second Tuesday of the month. Additionally amateur *wayang* groups from dance studios—including Surakarta’s Sekar Budaya Nusantara (Archipelago Cultural

Blossom, SBN) and Persatuan Masyarakat (People's Union) in Surakarta and, in the national capital, Swargaloka Jakarta (Heaven Jakarta) and Brata Nali Kunthi Jakarta—present on an irregular basis. Meanwhile, development efforts include the following.

In the early 1980s, shows were accompanied by solo or group choreographies by star dancers or groups to attract larger audiences and scenic or other new elements were added. Workshops and seminars were held. Just a few examples are: Sarasehan Bimbingan dan Pengembangan Organisasi Pengembangan Kesenian Wayang Orang (Discussion on the Support and Development of Organizations for the Development of the Art of Wayang Orang, 1980); Diskusi Panel dalam Rangka Festival Wayang Orang Amatir se Indonesia II (Panel Discussion at the Second National Amateur Wayang Orang Festival [WOPA], 1991); and Seminar tentang Wayang Orang Sriwedari (Seminar on Wayang Orang Sriwedari, 2011). Notable were the series of Wayang Orang Amatir (WOPA) festivals for amateur dancers, which began in 1989, but were eventually discontinued due to lack of sponsorship.

From 1988 a group called Wayang Orang Seniman Muda Surakarta (Young Wayang Orang Artists of Surakarta) that included representatives from STSI (the arts college) Surakarta, SMKI (the arts high school) Surakarta, Sriwedari, RRI Surakarta, and various dance studios in the city presented at Taman Budaya Surakarta (Surakarta Cultural Center, TBS), once a month. Despite a rise in audience numbers, the effort faltered in two years, due to funding and management problems.

Since 1990, Festival Wayang Bocah (Festival of Children's Wayang) has been held annually, with participation from numerous dance studios in Surakarta. The event aims to develop *wayang* performers and, even more importantly, improve children's awareness of the art. Studios that often participate include: Soeryo Sumirat, Sarotomo, Sarwi Retno Budoyo, Pagutri, Metta Budaya, and Arena Langen Budaya. In addition, *wayang orang* performances by adults are sometimes mounted by dance studios.

In recent years, a new effort was undertaken. In 2011, the first Wayang Orang Seribu Bintang Festival (Thousand Stars Wayang Orang Festival, WOSBI) was held in RRI Surakarta with professional—Ngesti Pandawa (Semarang), Bharata (Jakarta), Sriwedari (Surakarta), and RRI Surakarta—and amateur groups—Sekar Budaya Nusantara, Indonesian Arts Institute [ISI] Surakarta, Sanggar Darma Giri Budaya (Wonogiri), Sanggar Sarotomo (Surakarta), Sanggar Metta Budaya, and Komunitas Seni Tribuana (Surabaya). In November 2014 the second Wayang Orang Seribu Bintang Festival was held, with even more

amateur/school groups, including Yayasan Pamulangan Beksa Sasminta Mardawa (Yogyakarta), Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan 8 (Surakarta), Sanggar Patria Loka (Blitar), Himaswariska Institut Seni Indonesia (Surakarta), Graha Seni Mustika Yuastina (Surabaya), Sanggar Sarwi Retno Budaya (Surakarta), Sanggar Soeryo Sumirat (Surakarta), Yayasan Swargaloka (Jakarta), and Komunitas Seni Tribuana (Surabaya). Widening of the geographic area and increasing the number of local studios, bodes well for perpetuating the genre.

Notable among these groups is Sekar Budaya Nusantara (SBN) which was set up by Nani Soedarsono in 2011. It has impacted the general development in both establishing aesthetic values and highlighting moral ideas inherent in stories. The group is committed to *wayang orang* as cultural heritage and to preserving it through a clearly planned program. Madam Nani Soedarsono herself selects skilled players from different *wayang orang* studio/school groups, adding a supporting cast of dancers who have the talent to become *wayang* players in time. The training process is organized with infrastructure and funding handled by Soedarsono as the main sponsor. Therefore, each performance reflects the aesthetic and moral values of the art. Audiences show up and applaud.

Tourism-oriented Model

In 2009, a group of researchers from the Indonesian Arts Institute in Surakarta, in collaboration with the local city government, developed a tourism-oriented performance model for *wayang orang padat* (compact *wayang orang*, wop). The performance would have a carefully planned process with systematic rehearsals and produce high-quality performances. The idea was to develop the story, dialogue, dance, music, staging, sound, and lighting, while condensing performance time. Tourist art was the concept: that meant the work would have the characteristics of the original genre, but needed to be presented in a concise form. Tourist art often may ignore some primary cultural values, but needs interesting variety and must be inexpensive (see [Soedarsono 2002: 274](#)).

The idea was to emulate the *Ramayana* that has been performed regularly on the open stage in front of Prambanan Temple since the 1970s. There the emphasis has been on story conveyed through dance, music, and other aspects. The plot is well known, and therefore easily accepted by spectators, making the offering attractive for both Indonesian and foreigner tourists.

Whereas, Nani Soedarsono's concept at SBN emphasized dialogue as an essential component to express moral, philosophical, and aesthetic values, for tourists language is difficult: Javanese language

has a rich vocabulary which can communicate by language register high philosophical values. Such implications vanish in a tourist performance. As part of the group that worked on the project which shortened the playing time from four to two hours and envisioned a non-Javanese spectator, I was aware of the complexity and potential for loss; however, I believe our efforts on this project worked to create a varied and interesting experience for viewers, that I will argue should be extended (Widyastutieningrum et al. 2009: 70–71).

The committee felt story must be the basis for the show. We tried to retain *wayang orang* scenes that would be of interest, including: (1) Pandawa and Kurawa scenes, (2) the “flower battle” (*perang kembang*) (the fight against demon Cakil by the noble knight Arjuna accompanied by his *punakawan* [clown-servants]), and (3) love scenes. These parts we considered accessible in a cross-cultural context.

The Pandawa, of course, are five noble brothers—Yudistira, Bimo, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sadewa—who represent justice. The hundred Kurawa, who include the eldest, Duryudana, his malicious sibling Dursasana, etc. represent more savage characters. We felt the struggle of justice against evil would impact audiences.

In the popular and mostly humorous *gara-gara* (world in chaos) scene there are a number of popular characters, especially the heroic Arjuna and his clown servants (Semar, and his sons Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong). The clowns serve as interpreters for the audience, explaining complex problems that Arjuna may encounter. Semar ensures Arjuna is thinking straight, preventing him from doing wrong (Damono 2011: 2). The clowns’ *gara-gara* is interesting both for adults and children. Their dialogue and actions can be both light hearted and significant. Their message can include contemporary topics or social criticism. Despite being sometimes tasked by officials with conveying government messages, the *gara-gara* scene delivers humor and insight (Waluyo 2000: 60). Clowns introduce topical issues in a way that is easily accepted by people.

Romance has its own allure. Therefore performances often feature characters who are in love, including, for example, Arjuna (with wives Sembadra or Srikandi) or Gatutkaca (with his beloved Pergiwa). The committee recommended such stories be included.

The next element was quality of performers. Nowadays, no actors are full-time *wayang orang* dancers, but also have other jobs. Four major criteria are considered when determining an actor: (1) *gandar* (physical appearance), actors should be suitable for playing certain characters (for example, Bimo must be big and rough; Arjuna slight and handsome); (2) *tari* (dance), the better a dancer’s vocabulary of movement, the more valuable he or she is to the company; and

(3) *tata rias* (make-up)/*tata busana* (costume), while wardrobe assistants take care of the costumes, the dancers must know how to do their own make-up and dress themselves to fit the character; (4) *antawecana* (dialogue), since dialogue is improvised by the performers themselves, dancers must be quick-tongued and have pleasing voices with a wide pitch-range to accommodate the different modalities for different characters (see [Susilo 1984](#): 121). On top of this, traditional dancers should know the basic repertoire, so they can take on characters assigned only an hour before curtain. This includes understanding *udanegara* (proper speech, behavior, and manner of address) *vis-a-vis* other figures. The actors must be able to sing and compose impromptu verses adhering to the traditional rules of versification. Powerful improvisation, ability to pick up on initiatives of scene partners, sharing the stage with peers, and *sambung rapet* (covering mistakes or filling in gaps) are needed. Actors should have *greget* (dramatic vitality, the spirit of the role) and *empan papan* (awareness of propriety, using euphemisms so that delicate topics may properly be introduced) ([Susilo 1984](#): 122).

The working process leading up to a performance involves scriptwriter, director, choreographer, musical composer, lighting designer, wardrobe assistant, and stage or property manager. The writer determines the concept and the interpretation of the story (*sanggit*), to ensure that the performance will be better understood and accepted by the audience. The director helps the players to understand the storyline. The choreographer works on the dance movements, especially if any new segments are needed. The music (*karawitan*) composer works on new music needs as required. Designers may come up with new scenic elements.

Since *padat* performances last only two hours, the script must focus on the core issues of the story. For example, the *bage binage* (politenesses) at the beginning of each scene can be cut. Since, for audiences today, Javanese may seem stilted and old-fashioned, there have been attempts to shorten dialogue and replace it with dance. Words based on Kawi or *Jawa Kuna* (Old Javanese) are generally eliminated. Dialogue, even of the clowns, is kept to a minimum and grounded in the core story ([Widyastutieningrum 2009](#): 9).

For the first *padat* performances, I noticed dialogue still changed during a show, even though the actors should have kept to the writer's script. This flexible dialogue change was normal for players previously. Delivering set dialogue, therefore, was difficult for the players but achieved through much practice, even if some variation continues. This may come about through a process of bargaining between the writer, the director, and players. If the language did not seem suitable to the

actors, it could be changed as long as they did not alter the meaning of the scene. The players were required to have a good understanding of the script to ensure the storyline would be presented smoothly (Widyastutieningrum et al. 2009: 58).

Another challenge was that the dance element became dominant. Since new audiences cannot understand the older Javanese language well, dialogue was minimized. This meant every actor needed to have good dance skill. Previously dance was an element of performance, but now it had become of prime importance. To create a compact story and tight dialogue, practice was carried out over four months with ten rehearsals, witnessed by a number of experts advising on how to develop an interesting show.

Publicity was taken seriously. In the past, publicity meant merely placing a written announcement on the board in front of theatre. But for this *padat* (compressed) tourism-oriented performance posters, leaflets, and invitations were designed. Photos were not generic but matched the actual story to be performed. Posters were located in strategic places in Surakarta, while leaflets and invitations were distributed to ISI Surakarta, Surakarta Cultural Park, Sriwedari, and Vocational School (SMK) VIII in Surakarta where target audiences would see the placards.

The first performance of the *padat* model was on 28 November 2009 to an audience of over 800, a number which indicated that people still have enthusiasm for this art. At 8 p.m. exactly, the show began with the presentation of the “Gambyong Pareanom” a 1950s choreography of the Mangkunegaran palace performed by seven female dancers from ISI Surakarta. It ended promptly at 10 p.m. Keeping to strict timing was again something rather new for Indonesian performances.

The audience feedback, gained from questionnaires, recorded that the show was very attractive, a good length, and the innovation should be preserved as a cultural asset of Surakarta. This model of intensive rehearsals in advance of a show and precise dialogue could not immediately be adopted by Sriwedari in the company’s ongoing *wayang orang* performances. However, a new, shorter model has gradually prevailed at Sriwedari, and this has helped increase audience numbers. By 2015, audiences averaged 200 on weekdays with 400 on Saturdays.

Directions for Developing Wayang Orang Sriwedari

Surakarta or Solo, home to the Surakarta Keraton of the Pakubuwana lineage and the secondary royal house of the Mangkunegaran, is a cultural power with its own local wisdom/genius. *Wayang orang* has the potential to increase the tourism in Surakarta if it can be

marketed as a creative industry offering specifically packaged for tourists. RM Soedarsono divided tourist art into two groups, art by destination and art by metamorphosis. Art by destination is created by a community for itself in its own place (for example, Surakarta), while art by metamorphosis is packaged and taken to a specific public such as foreign tourists to a site where they congregate (2002: 271). I hope that *wayang orang* can become a show that suits the interests of the Surakarta community and, at the same time, the foreign community of tourists, drawing them (and their economic resources) to our city.

In order to survive, *wayang orang* needs to be interesting without losing its character. The Sekar Budaya Nusantara (SBN) model initiated by Madam Nani Soedarsono showed that, if managed in a creative way, *wayang orang* can be an alternative to the tide of nontraditional performances when readapted to suit the taste of the contemporary audience. Rather than just repeating storylines of old, *wayang* should find its storyline and logic to match people's minds today. Its choreography should be dynamic and its performance must be short enough that a busy public (or tourist) will make time to watch. Casting should be based on who can best characterize a figure and create the right visual impression. The stage and scene should use consistent color combinations to create an impression of beauty. The production development and budgeting must be managed professionally.

Actors must not just be civil servants "putting in their hours," but reliable artists with a strong commitment to *wayang*. Surakarta has both secondary and tertiary art schools that produce reliable, creative, and innovative dancers, musicians, and *dalang* (puppet masters), who can work toward an attractive spectacle. If *wayang orang* players are recruited by a contract and not just by entry into government civil service posts, a player who lacks the work ethic or adequate performance skill could more easily be replaced with someone with who will be a true supporter of *wayang orang* as an art. A professional production process, an improved theatre space, and educational endeavors that assign Surakarta children to watch *wayang orang* at least once a year are also needed to create a sustainable art form.

Conclusion

Wayang orang padat shortened the dance drama performance to two hours focused on the story; made character and group dances more dominant than dialogue or singing; correlated music directly to the scene, and enhanced set-, make-up-, and costume-design. Using graduates or current students from ISI Surakarta who are trained dancers, it highlighted the distinctive Surakarta dance style. The

complexity of the *padat* performance has meant that there has been limited progress in implementing the model in the government-sponsored troupe, though, as noted, some advance has been made. For full success the measures that I have suggested need to be implemented on a sustained basis and my institution, ISI, stands ready to assist. But those in charge must have confidence that *wayang orang* will become a cultural and a tourism asset.

Surakarta has trained artists ready to create a high quality of *wayang orang*. It has arts managers ready to sell the performance. What is needed is the strong commitment of the government of Surakarta to provide funding and improve facilities to realize *wayang orang* for what it is—a proud marker of local cultural identity.

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