

Wayang Kulit in the Javanese Performing Arts:

Wayang Kulit Background

In the traditional Javanese and Balinese performing arts, *wayang kulit* (leather puppets) performance is considered to be a cultural product which has a significant impact not only in the aspect of *tontonan* (entertainment), but also *tuntunan* (education), as well as *tatanan* (rules of conduct).

History of Shadow Puppets

Shadow puppets may have come from India with traders and priests who used them to explain the Hindu religion; however, they could predate Hindu influence, as all the terms are Javanese or Balinese. Puppet theater was established in the royal courts by the 1st century A.D. The first documentary evidence appears in the 11th - 13th centuries. The highly stylized form of Javanese puppets is usually considered to be Islamic, but a similar style also appears on earlier Hindu carvings at Candi Panataran.¹

Plays in the wayang cycles on Java and Bali encompass mythical origins through the present. There are hundreds of plays in the repertoires. Some exist only as outlines of plots with narration, musical clues and sound effects suggested. New plays are created in some cycles or scenes added to old ones.

Java

- **Wayang Pura cycle** contains the four oldest stories that relate Java's legendary history. All are performed with wayang kulit (shadow puppets). The Ramayana and Mahabharata are also performed using wayang golek (rod puppets). Most are nighttime performances.
 - The oldest cycle** has motifs from pre-Hindu times that deal with plant cultivation, fertility and death. It features battles between gods and giants. Plays from this cycle might be performed at rice harvest to ritually cleanse the village. A senior dalang uses the Murwakala play from this cycle during a daytime performance to exorcise evil.
 - Arjuna Sasra Bau** is based on events from the Indian epic, the Ramayana.
 - The Ramayana (Serat Rama)** is the classic story of Sita's abduction by Rahwana, her rescue by her husband, Rama, with help from the monkey king, Hanuman. The setting is Sri Lanka and India.
 - The Mahabharata (Serat Bratayudha)** is based on the Indian epic but set in Java. The Pandawa brothers are banished by their 100 jealous cousins, the Kurawas. The Pandawa princes establish another kingdom in the forest. The Panakawan are their servant clowns. Eventually the Pandawas triumph and regain their kingdom. They are descendants of Vishnu and are considered the ancestors of the Javanese kings.
- **Wayang gedhog cycle** contains adventure plays set in the Javanese Majapahit Empire which was at its height during the 14th century AD. Heroes are Damar Wulan, Puyengan and Prince Panji who is the Javanese equivalent of Arjuna from

- the Mahabharata. Nighttime performances use wayang golek or wayang kulit. Daytime performances use wayang golek or the less common wayang klitik.
- **Menak cycle** recounts the many adventures of Amir Hamzah (Wong Agung Jayagrana), Muhammad's uncle, whose moral strength comes from Islam. The stories are said to have been created by a Javanese ruler in the late 16th century to help spread Islam. The setting range from Arabia to Europe and involve both historic and mythical characters like the Queen of Fairies. The nighttime performances use wayang golek.

Bali

All plays use wayang kulit for both daytime and nighttime performances.

- The **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata** in the Balinese versions.
- **Chalonarang** plays are performed in the daytime to placate **Rangda**, the witch widow and prevent or avert disasters like cholera or malaria. The plays are magical and only performed by strong, senior dalangs since everything must be absolutely correct to avert death.
- **Chupak** plays present indigenous Balinese tales with some influence from the Chinese.

The performance lasts about 7 hours and is divided into 3 parts:

- It starts around 9 PM with the introduction of the main characters and the problem between the two opposing sides. Each side expresses its point of view.
- About midnight the action speeds up as the clowns appear, joking and giving advice. The hero and his forces battle the enemy. Around 3 AM the hero and his allies finally defeat the enemy in the biggest battle, rescue the princess and declare victory.
- The celebrations of the victors continue until dawn.

Dhalang Training

The *Dhalang* is one of the most respected people in Javanese society. From ancient times, the art of puppetry has been passed down from father to son within an oral teaching tradition. A *dhalang* would usually be born into a family that was practicing the art of *wayang kulit* and would learn all of the many aspects of his craft from a very young age. Since 1954, aspiring *dhalang* have been able to study their craft at a high school of traditional Indonesian performing arts, and after graduation, the Indonesian Institute of Arts, or in a Royal Conservatory located in the Yogyakarta palace. Although these institutions have allowed those who are not born into a family of *dhalangs* to study the profession, some still maintain the traditional practice of learning through oral tradition.

A person training to be a *dhalang* must learn several languages, such as Court Javanese and Sanskrit, to tell the traditional stories in their original form. Usually these stories are re-telling episodes from the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* epic which were brought to Indonesia by the Hindus from India in the 11th - 13th centuries. These ancient stories are part of the ceremonial aspect of the *wayang kulit* performance because few people understand the languages that the stories are told in, although most audience members know the stories. The music tradition of *gamelan orchestra* is very important to the performance and the *dhalang* must be able to direct the music as well as move the

puppets and speak or sing the dialog. Most *dhalang* also write their own material relating to current events and social morality. This material is usually in the local dialect or the Indonesian language so all the people can understand the content. Like stand-up comedians in the West, *dhalang* often speak openly about sensitive topics in a humorous way, expressing community opinions and spreading news or gossip. A successful *dhalang* must be able to engage the audience on many levels to educate and entertain.

Typically, the *dhalang* presents a play (*lakon*) during important social events, including public holidays, religious festivals, weddings, births, circumcisions, exorcisms and, on Bali, cremations.² The *dhalang* manipulates hundreds of leather puppets, provides all dialogue and narration, sings, conducts the orchestra and supplies percussive effects.

The *dhalang* sits at arm's length from the screen of white cotton cloth with a colored border stretched across a frame about 10 feet long (3 meters). The brass lamp called *blencong* is used for creating the shadow. The puppet chest is to his left. He knocks on it with one of two mallets to mark off sections of the story. The larger mallet is held in his left hand, the smaller one by his right toes. He also beats on a bronze *kepyak* plate to punctuate events.

Usually, before the play the *dhalang* meditates before the "Tree of Life." This tree/mountain (*kayon/ gunungan*) puppet is a link between himself and the gods, between the Upper and the Underworlds, and symbolizes the universe. This shadow puppet starts both shadow and rod puppet plays. It brings the puppets to life. Later in the play, it is placed back in the center to mark a change of scene, or fluttered to represent a strong natural force like a wind. At the end, it marks the finish of the play.

The puppets are always evolving, especially the clowns who sometimes ride motorbikes and smoke. The most important clowns are the *Punakawan*, who may represent pre-Hindu, Javanese guardian spirits. They do not appear in the Indian versions of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, but are among the more important characters in the Javanese versions.

They act as advisors and supporters of the aristocracy in the puppet plays, but they represent the village and also the spirit of the land itself. They are buffoons and jesters, sensual and erotic, yet they are also the voice of common sense. Semar, the leader and most beloved of the *Punakawan* clowns, is sometimes referred to as a grand *dhalang*, who mediates between the commoners and the gods.

Religion, History and The Puppets

Western civilization, together with Christianity, was introduced to the archipelago by the Portuguese, Spanish, English and Dutch, who came for the lucrative spice trade. If the Javanese kings recognized the importance of the *dhalang* to teach the philosophies and values of the Hindu Pantheon through the art of shadow puppet theatre, so did the Catholic and Protestant missionaries who had settled on Java. They commissioned

² <http://www.art-pacific.com/artifacts/indonesi/puppets/dalang.htm>

Javanese puppet carvers to create shadow figures in the image of Joseph and Mary and David and Goliath. The dalangs were instructed in biblical stories and performed what is known as "*Wayang Wahyu*".

A more recent version, called "***Testament Wayang***," is still performed in churches on Java telling of the birth and crucifixion of Christ. The image reveals *Wayang Purwa* expressions, such as Christ's black face for calmness and attainment. A snake wrapped around the cross with his head facing down, depicts Christ's rising above worldly attachment. A king's crown tops his cross.

Indonesia's Revolution and Politics told through Shadow Puppets

In 1945 "***Wayang Revolusie***" came into being. During World War II, Japan occupied the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). When the Japanese surrendered to the Allies, the Indonesian students begged their popular leader, ***Sukarno***, to declare independence from the Dutch. A war between Indonesian "freedom fighters" and the Dutch ensued. New puppets were carved. A new "*lakon*" (story), with a political message calling for the Indonesian people to rise against the Dutch, was told by the *Dhalang* with puppets that looked nothing like the earlier ones. Puppet images of President Sukarno, his cabinet members and Japanese soldiers marching with the Indonesian freedom fighters against the Dutch, were created in contemporary design and no longer required a shadow. The winds of change have not left *Wayang* untouched. The new Sukarno Government made good use of the ***Wayang media***. *Dhalangs* were instructed to promote birth control and family values in their performances and the demand for qualified *Dalangs* increased. Today, young men can enroll in schools to learn the storyteller's art and become certified *Dhalangs*.

Are there any women *dalangs*? The answer remains elusive like the shadow of the puppet. But, with changes occurring in Indonesia, including a growing woman's movement, professional women *dhalangs* cannot be far behind.

Link:

<http://www.art-pacific.com/artifacts/indonesi/puppets/cycles.htm>

<http://www.indonesianshadowplay.com/classes.html>