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## <Book Review>

Ward Keeler

**Kathryn Emerson. *Innovation, Style and Spectacle in Wayang: Purbo Asmoro and the Evolution of an Indonesian Performing Art*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.**

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The remarkable story of the BPP in Thailand's experience of the Cold War provides strong support for Hyun's indigenization argument. While the BPP may have been the brainchild of the CIA, the monarchy and its conservative supporters skillfully used it as a political tool to reshape Thailand's postcolonial political order in their own image. This is an important book which will change the way we understand the history of the Cold War in Thailand.

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***Innovation, Style and Spectacle in Wayang: Purbo Asmoro and the Evolution of an Indonesian Performing Art***

KATHRYN EMERSON

Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

In the 1970s, an influential Indonesian arts administrator was trying to introduce serious reforms in the centuries-old Javanese shadow play (*wayang*) tradition. Humardani, the head of a music, dance, and puppet conservatory in Solo, Central Java, railed against the hidebound conventions of nightlong performances that were filled with long, talky scenes in which the plot barely advanced, comic interludes that distracted from anything to do with the narrative at hand, musical accompaniments with little or no emotional valence, and an invariant structure that prevented any shaping of the performance for the purpose of conveying a message.

Having traveled to Europe and the US, Humardani was clearly influenced by Western ideas about artistic expression, messages, originality, concision, and dramatic effectiveness. He set about developing a new, "condensed" version of a shadow play performance (*wayang padat*). A puppeteer would not generate characters' words extemporaneously but rather memorize a carefully crafted script. He would not improvise jokes or puppets' movements sitting in front of the screen but rather plan out, in concert with a team of associates, every moment of the performance: what musical pieces to play, what scenes to perform in what order (omitting most or all of the conventional ones), what words to have each character pronounce in order to generate dramatic tension. Furthermore, he would get everything wrapped up in about two hours. Humardani was adamant that his goal was not to make performances shorter so that people could get up and get to work in the morning. Instead, he wanted to make a shadow play a focused, dramatically compelling event in which the audience's attention was unwavering and their minds stimulated. He wanted, in sum, to make of a puppeteer an artiste.

Carried out within the confines of the conservatory, creating *wayang padat* performances

preoccupied a number of students: some clearly were deeply intrigued by Humardani's suggestions (or demands) for aesthetic control in service of communicative power. *Wayang padat* did not catch on among wayang's fans, however, whether casual fans who most enjoyed comic interludes or more sophisticated and experienced enthusiasts who found it dense, often obscure, and generally dissatisfying.

One young man among the students at the conservatory in Solo was Purbo Asmoro. He shared Humardani's sense that dramatic focus should be a puppeteer's central concern. Yet after graduating, he made the surprising move of adapting the principles of condensed wayang and applying them to full-length, nightlong performances. It was as though he had boiled the water off a big pot full of ingredients but was still left with considerable quantities of a very pungent sauce.

According to Kathryn Emerson, Purbo Asmoro stunned an audience made up largely of fellow puppeteers who gathered frequently at the home of Solo's most famous puppeteer of the late 1980s, the golden-voiced Ki Anom Soeroto, by performing a known story in accordance with the strictures of *wayang padat*—and holding everyone's attention all night. Instead of the expansive but often disorganized, jokey, and only occasionally compelling sort of performance everyone was used to, Purbo Asmoro demonstrated, by virtue of his careful preparation, the dramatic possibilities that inhered in the genre but had been either largely forgotten or simply never fully exploited.

Since that night in 1989, Purbo Asmoro has worked, in Emerson's telling in *Innovation, Style and Spectacle in Wayang*, with single-minded devotion to developing the genre in such a way as to make it still true to its venerable past and yet adapted to the current age. Emerson refers to Purbo Asmoro's trademark style as "contemporary-interpretive" (usually shortened to "interpretive"), translating a Javanese term (*garap*) suggesting working something up, shaping or forming something. Topmost among Purbo Asmoro's aims is to make every performance dramatically engaging by highlighting conflict and debate. He wants to make sure that a performance has an impact on its observers—even if they attend only the first few hours of it. In a classically conceived performance, so much of that segment of a performance, lasting until about midnight, would consist of conventional elements that a spectator would come away with nothing to reflect upon. So little of anything distinctive about the performance would have come up, except perhaps for new jokes in one of the comic interludes, that the performance would seem to be like any other: a long initial scene in which any plot point would be revealed only about forty minutes in and would soon recede in favor of conventional segments of no narrative specificity.

On the last page of her book, Emerson cites Purbo Asmoro's reference to film as he explains how audiences have come to bring rigorous expectations to a performance. His own aesthetic illustrates his effort to satisfy the demand for compelling storytelling, dramatic intensity (a phrase that comes up often in remarks made by and about Purbo Asmoro), and deliberate planning in pursuit of both. In all of these respects, the effects of moviegoing appear powerful, and Purbo Asmoro comes to resemble a deeply thoughtful and original writer-cum-director of the best of

international cinema.

At the same time, though, much about contemporary shadow plays responds to the opposite pull of a different but powerful medium: toward TV talk shows and their grab bag of comedy (often lame and mostly sexual, indeed, misogynist), pop music, and unrehearsed chatter. Great portions of virtually every performance now incorporate some measure of these elements. Humardani would cry foul, but the onslaught of light and inconsequential entertainment seems unstoppable and overwhelming.

Purbo Asmoro's efforts to follow out but expand upon Humardani's instructions for ways to make wayang compelling have, according to Emerson, proved highly influential, inducing a number of younger puppeteers to imitate his approach to performance to one degree or another. The author believes that the glitzy, gimmicky, and vacuous performances so popular in the 1990s (think Las Vegas, not Broadway, let alone the Actors Studio) have been largely left behind. As a longtime fan, I hope that she is correct, and I must yield to her vastly greater knowledge of the genre's recent history. Yet I am somewhat less sanguine: the most popular puppeteer in the Jogjanesque style, Ki Seno Nugroho, prior to his untimely death in 2020, made comic banter absolutely central to his performances, crowding out narrative development, or interest, almost entirely. Even the greatly respected Anom Soeroto, considered the dean of the Solonese tradition, has lent little attention to dramaturgy in his performances, favoring light and accessible entertainment. Purbo Asmoro appears willing to buck that trend, but only so far. He still includes long comic interludes in his performances, saying that he knows many in his audience want comedy over dramaturgy and he must oblige them in their preferences. These segments of his performances can indeed be entertaining, but they run counter to his desire to establish and sustain narrative tension: such shenanigans contravene Purbo Asmoro's lofty artistic aspirations.

Emerson is James Boswell to Purbo Asmoro's Samuel Johnson: chronicler, admirer, and interlocutor. Indeed, when foreign spectators are expected in an audience, whether in Indonesia or abroad, she has provided running translations of his performances for many years, projecting onto a screen English text instantaneously matching his narration and dialogue, a remarkable feat attesting to both her absolute command of the Javanese language and her typing speed(!). She also enters into conversation with Purbo Asmoro during comic interludes, becoming an invited performer like stand-up comics and singers who may liven up many shadow plays in present times—an unheard-of innovation in a tradition that for over a thousand years featured only one, dominant, performer.

Emerson's knowledge of all facets of wayang is simply incomparable, at least among non-native Javanese observers. (I suspect she could hold her own against a great many Javanese puppeteers as well, any one of whom would know his regional version well but lack her comparative knowledge of several different regions and even specific lines of kin-linked puppeteers.) The stories themselves, the entire repertoire of the gamelan orchestra, the finer points of narrative

divergences: Emerson can spot any variant or innovation and reflect on their implications with complete assurance. Purbo Asmoro is extremely lucky to have found in Emerson such an able and discerning intermediary between him and an English-speaking world.

Emerson's attention to detail as a researcher is nothing short of jaw-dropping. To take one particularly striking, but hardly exceptional, example: late in the book she provides graphs analyzing the timing of different elements of performances by ten different contemporary puppeteers—how much time was taken up for narrative or “interpretive” sections, for comic interludes, for battle scenes, etc. We're talking *seconds* here, not just minutes. Working up these graphs has to have taken extraordinary amounts of very patient work, but the results are indeed enlightening, providing an easily legible comparison of performance practices among the most famous puppeteers of the day. Emerson appears also to have taken careful notes on every performance she has attended (over 1,500 of Purbo Asmoro's alone) and all the many interviews she has had with performers and commentators.

The contrast between this meticulously researched, highly informative, and lucidly written contribution to the field of wayang studies, on the one hand, and a great deal of what gets published in performance studies today—poorly edited, poorly copyedited, and providing only clichéd analyses—on the other, is striking.

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### ***Strangers in the Family: Gender, Patriline, and the Chinese in Colonial Indonesia***

GUO-QUAN SENG

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023.

Despite extensive scholarship on Indonesia's Chinese minority, *Strangers in the Family* offers a wholly fresh perspective. Spanning from the latter days of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to post-independence Indonesia, this elegant monograph reexamines the Chinese families of Java's northern coast through a focus on gender, sexuality, race, and the ways these aspects intersected and evolved under Dutch colonialism. While previous studies have emphasized Confucian patriliney as a defining aspect of Chineseness in Southeast Asia, Guo-Quan Seng foregrounds the women—often of Indigenous or multiracial ancestry—within creolized Sino-Southeast Asian families. By doing so, he introduces a much-needed gender dimension to the histories of overseas Chinese. The author shows that mothers, daughters, grandmothers, wives, concubines, widows,