

Departing from Tradition: Insights from Java

by Sally Dean

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I came to Central Java—to the town of Solo—18 months ago, with the intention of creating artistic collaborations with Indonesian artists, to study with Suprpto Suryodarmo (Javanese improvisation performer and teacher) and to learn as much as I could from living in another culture and entering its traditional and contemporary art world. I not only was hoping for an alternative perspective— a “new” way of perceiving and experiencing art and the world— but I hoped for something larger: that art, and its collaborative, creative process, could act as a vehicle for fostering dialog and understanding between two very different cultures— something needed perhaps more than ever in today’s political climate.

I found that although this is possible, it does take time—perhaps a life time. As I began to teach movement in Solo, and to collaborate with local artists making new work, I began to learn not only about Java itself, but also about my own culture, yielding new insights into dance and performance practice in the West, and, more broadly, into how movement and performance relate to culture and society. This article shares a few of these insights and questions.

Tradition versus Modernity

In a rapidly developing country like Indonesia, tradition versus modernity is a theme running through many aspects of life and art. It was evident everywhere in Solo: in its new malls displacing the traditional markets; traditional Javanese batik clothing, still worn by elders and villagers, alongside jeans and t-shirts (with Muslim headscarf) favoured by the younger generations; the new McDonald’s next to the street food stalls offering goat sate and noodle soup. Even in the village where I lived, a boy taking the family cow out to graze will be busy sending text messages, and most houses have a TV.

The same theme appears in much of the current choreographic and performance work in and around Solo. An image from a recent work by Slamet Gunduno: two female performers side by side, one performing Tari Topeng Cirebon (traditional mask dance from West Java) in traditional batik costume, the other performing a modern sexy tango dance in a revealing black leather outfit. Another example from the work of “Sahita”, a popular all-women dance/theatre group in Solo: dressed as old women in traditional costume, they attempt traditional dances—but one of the performers forgets what to do and the other keeps adding flashy contemporary moves, while a ritual offering in the dance descends into a farcical argument over an illicit fart.

At the Insitute Seni Indonesia (ISI) the national arts institute in Solo, where I taught, there is active debate over the role of traditional dance forms in contemporary art and education. Many of the dances taught were originally sacred, performed in religious or court ceremonies. Since the early 20th Century, and especially since the 1970s, social and political modernization has increasingly resituated them in academic institutions and in public performances for entertainment, where they are preserved, but where their form and meaning subtly change. For example, shorter versions are created to suit modern schedules and attention spans. Students at ISI are actively encouraged to explore contemporary forms, not merely by copying the external forms of Western contemporary dance, but in ways based on their training in traditional dance. As Ni Kadek Yulia, young and upcoming choreographer and ISI postgraduate, affirms, “I’m interested in contemporary dance because it is not bound by certain rules or patterns. My works are based on the forms of traditional dance, but I can freely express my ideas in new ways.”

So “the traditional” is honoured, quoted, questioned, mocked; and “tradition versus modern” is very much an issue in contemporary performance in Solo. It is addressed in the content of performances, as the experience of daily life in a modernizing world is explored; in the form of performances, for example in the movement vocabulary and performance styles deployed; and in the context of performances, i.e. the site and nature of the performance event itself. For Western dance artists, there is much to be learned from these experiments. They can teach us both about possibilities for new performance work, and also, more fundamentally, about the relationship between performance practice and the values, beliefs and debates in the society in which it takes place. We can see that relationship in action in a series of examples of how performance forms and contexts are changing in Solo.

Performance Space

Traditionally, performances take place in the pendopo – roofed, open-sided pavilions. The audience can sit anywhere, so although the performance might have a designated “front”, it is seen in the round. And the performance space isn’t tightly delineated: art-making is integrated, in spatial terms, with everyday social interaction and with the natural world outside. Chickens wander in, geckos drop poop from the ceiling. Children might be running around making noise. It’s a far cry from the pure, sealed-in, “empty space” of a black box theatre. The symbolic parallels between the pendopo and communal, traditional village life, on the one hand, and between the theater and modern urban life on the other, are suggestive.

At Solo's main cultural centre (Taman Budaya), both kinds of performance space are used. And interesting work is being created which combines elements of both, particularly in site-specific contexts. Suprpto Suryodarmo has created a nature garden, "Lemah Putih", specifically for movement practice and performance. There are different areas, each with a different feel and function, and each inspired by the land itself or by sacred sites in the region, such as the Buddhist temple of Borobudur. For example, the "Mandala" site is an unroofed octagonal, concrete stage, with tall white trees standing at each corner, rising into the air where they seem to open the sky. He calls this site "nature's stage", and relates it to prayer, healing and purification, all of which can be carried out through ritual performance. In his movement practice and teaching, the site in which he chooses to practice depends on the student and what would help them grow as an embodied mover and person.

Although site-specific performance is nothing new in the West, the idea of creating intentional dance and performance sites, integrated with the natural environment and symbolically connected with a sense of the sacred, with cultural heritage and with values, was new to me, and deeply inspiring.

Performance Time

Traditional Javanese shadow puppet performances go on all night, literally—beginning after sunset, and finishing at sunrise. They rarely begin at the advertised time; they begin when enough of the performers are present and are ready. Such performances are still quite common in Solo; and so are more "modern" shows of 1-2 hours in length, perhaps with an interval, where the audience is expected to sit still and concentrate.

These two styles of performance relate to attitudes to time. "Rubber time", as it is called in Java, means that a given time is seen not as a specific point but an expandable area of space, adapting to circumstances as they develop. When it rains, Solo pauses. People will come late, when the rain stops, or not at all. In my artistic collaborations, I learned not to be surprised if I turned up for a rehearsal and no one was there. Schedules were always changing. Yet somehow, my Javanese colleagues always seemed to know quite quickly, without posted signs or overhead announcements, what the new schedule was. Then when "rehearsal" began, everyone might just hang out and chat and eat for the first few hours. It was frustrating at times, but it also made me realize how stressful and disconnected my more familiar way of rehearsing, performing and living life can be. It raised questions for me about the short, intense performance event we are accustomed to in the West. Where consuming the performance experience can be more important for the audience than the shared experience of being there together—a value-system that we, as performance makers, often support.

Role of the Performer and Performance Presence

This brings us to the question of the purpose of performance and the role of the performer. Traditional performances are still often seen as religious ceremonies or purifications; they may involve trance, for example, and are seen to have ritual efficacy. They are not only entertainment. Many contemporary performers still retain a sense of the spiritual or shamanistic function of their work. Fitri Setyaningsih, for example, a dance and performance artist based in Yogyakarta, near Solo, recently created a piece in which dancers, wrapped in plastic drinking water bottles, floated in a polluted river near Jakarta. She saw this not just as a social and political critique of environmental destructiveness, but as an offering and a ritual – a performance for god, humans and nature simultaneously.

This kind of attitude has major implications for the performer's presence, that quality of aliveness that can have such a subtly significant effect on the impact of a performance. It's a hard area to talk about, but one in which Western performers can learn a great deal from Java.

Traditionally, in Java, a human being is seen as part of Nature and of God, not as a being in their own right - a "shadow" of God and Nature, an idea captured metaphorically in the shadow puppet play. Suprpto Suryodarmo extends this metaphor to describe the typical performance presence of the Javanese performer. The "shadow" performer seems to be somehow part of their environment, quiet, their energy contained, blending with other performers in ensemble. Butoh dance often has this quality, in which dancers act like blank slates, in order to embody imagery, allowing them to become anything. Western trained performers, by contrast, are usually "light"- they stand out from the background, and from other performers, drawing the audience's attention.

It is quite possible to cultivate either the "shadow" or the "light" qualities of presence. A simple exercise, for example, would be to move with another dancer and, as you move, have either the space between you be the center of attention ("shadow"), or your bodies ("light"). With practice, the intention of the dancers does make a perceptible difference to what an audience sees. In my experience, there is a significant gap in performer training in the West in this area. Greater awareness here not only offers performers a wider range of qualities to choose from in their work, but also a greater sensitivity to each other in ensemble work. The Javanese seem to emphasise the collectivity over the individual much more than I'm used to in the West. They have a saying that "whether you have food, or you have no food, the most important thing is that you are together."

It's an attitude that shows in their performance work.

Use of Space

The traditional kind of performance presence is related to a particular way of using space in performance, which is, in turn, related to attitudes to space in daily life. Many of the performances I saw in Solo tended to use and represent space as a series of fixed points, to which performers tended to return – so movement through space was anchored. It's a very different feel from more Western movement patterns. You can try it: choose a 3 by 3 foot "place" in the studio to begin. Find ways to move within that space without leaving it for at least 10 minutes; after 10 minutes, you can leave it, but must always return. For me, this kind of exercise creates a new and unfamiliar sense of space, which is rare in West. How often do you see a dancer staying in one place, in a 3 by 3 foot radius, for long periods? In the Javanese Bedaya court dances, the performers do just that, making very slow and small meditative movements for the majority of the time.

Once again, it is tempting to relate the differences in movement patterns to different experiences of everyday life. In the West, we are more used to a world in which rapid, long distance travel is easy – people are always on the move. The world in which the Bedaya was created was one in which most people stayed in one place, their village, for most of their lives – a traditional lifestyle close to the land, centered on a home and family, which still survives in Central Java, but is rapidly changing.

Conclusion

What will Javanese dance and art look like in 15 years? How will the ongoing dynamic tension between modern and traditional in artistic and daily life unfold? In our increasingly modern, globalized, multicultural world, the value of artistic practice as a way of developing communication across cultural differences, and promoting mutual understanding through greater awareness of both self and other, seems essential. Whatever path Java chooses, its explorations can be a great source of insight and inspiration for Western dance artists, shedding light on our habits, assumptions and values both in our work and in our everyday lives.

Sally E. Dean is an American performing artist, choreographer, playwright and teacher whose work has been performed internationally throughout Europe, Indonesia, and the USA. She has taught at the Laban Centre and Central School of Speech and Drama in London, and more recently in Indonesia at Java's national university. She is the founding director of her own performing arts company, and the Kolaborasi project, whose mission is to bring American, British and Indonesian artists together to collaborate and tour internationally. She will be performing new work in San Francisco at CounterPULSE ("2nd Sundays", Feb. 8th), as well as teaching an improvisation workshop "Inside Out" (Feb. 1st, 1-5pm, Shotwell Studios), both inspired by her time in Java - see www.sallyedean.com for details.