Extending Practices of Translation and Collaboration

For News from Australia and the Pacific, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research interests and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences and teaching, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a broad overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia in the region. Our preferred style is subjective and conversational. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and the region. In the current edition, we explore varieties and practices of translation and collaboration between artists, writers, and translators in Indonesia and Australia.

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Yogyakarta theatre reaches out

Barbara Hatley

For many years I’ve been observing and writing about theatre in Yogyakarta, Central Java. Focusing first on the Javanese popular melodrama ketoprak, then also modern Indonesian language theatre, I’ve explored the ways in which these forms draw on Javanese theatrical and cultural tradition in engaging with contemporary Indonesia.

In the late 1970s, ketoprak’s performances of historical and legendary stories celebrated the Javanese cultural heritage, while its improvised dialogue resonated with daily life experiences. The leftist, populist political connection of much ketoprak in the 1950s and 1960s had ceased with the takeover of the New Order government, turning to modern Indonesian language theatre that problematized Javanese cultural tradition, depicting past kingdoms ruled by corrupt leaders, and exposing intolerance rising everywhere. They decided to go outside Java as the centre of Indonesia, to see how things looked from elsewhere.

Madura and Flores were their first destinations. Garasi’s major aim was to encourage young people to look around them, to identify important social issues and engage with these themes in performance. In strongly Islamic Madura they encountered relatively large numbers of theatre groups, encouraged by an emphasis on literature in the state-run Islamic school system. In Flores theatre is generally less developed, although in Maumere there is an active group of writers and artists, mostly students and former students of the local Ledalero Catholic theological college. Garasi teams were asked by local artists to share their own theatre process, so they visited again some months later, holding workshops about researching social issues, then exploring them through improvisation to develop a full performance. Used to presenting conventional written scripts, local performers found Garasi’s method new and stimulating, and wanted to emulate it in their own work.

Local representatives undertook residencies at Garasi’s studio in Yogyakarta, discussing and developing their planned projects with Garasi members, observing studio activities and attending arts events in the city. At the Garasi studio in July 2017 I met the two Flores representatives, Ibu Veronika, from Adonara Island, whose women’s theatre group stages plays about women’s experiences, and Eva Putra Nugro, a theatre writer and activist of the KAE arts community in Maumere. In August 2018, I also met Moch. Yarid from Singkawang, a transgender artist who encountered theatre while at university in Pontianak; then returned home to teach drama in high school and set up a theatre group, as well as appearing in local films. The residency-recipients returned to their region to work with other local artists.

On Garasi’s website the ‘Antar Ragam’ project is described as ‘a new initiative that aims to build contacts and new meetings with different traditions and cultures as well as with emerging artists and young people in cities outside Java, as an unlearning and relearning process on being Indonesian Asian’. In conversation, Garasi members explained that they were seeing radicalism and intolerance rising everywhere. They decided to go outside Java as the centre of Indonesia, to see how things looked from elsewhere.

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