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Wayang and Gamelan as a Tool of Cultural Learning: Indonesian Puppets, Dance and Music in the Classroom

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Since 1980 I have been involved in experiments in cultural learning in California public schools using Indonesian puppet arts and performance practice. After detailing the history that led me to undertake the work I will discuss two projects which I have done or mentored students in developing. The material indicates the arts can be an strong model of cultural learning which introduces aspects of social studies and world literature into arts practice in elementary classrooms. The arts can promote theoretical understanding of and valuation of cultural diversity. The arts allow students to experience themselves as empowered and creative individuals moving, making music, creating visual imagery which is both their own and that of another culture they perform—it allows them to imaginatively cross borders. For myself and the ArtsBridge scholar I discuss, these were short-term projects—small aspect of our ongoing work at the tertiary educational level—but despite the short duration and the modest financial support required, their impact was substantive. They show how modest investment of resources can quickly expand appreciation of other cultures and their arts.

Background

During graduate work for a Ph.D. in Asian Theatre at the University of Hawaii I had the opportunity to work as a performer in the Hawaii public schools in an improvisational theatre troupe. I saw firsthand the power of bringing artistic practice to the schools through the performances and workshops in which I was involved . Similarly I had taken class work at the University of Hawaii with Tamara Hunt who used puppetry in early childhood education. In taking an assistant professor position in theatre arts at the University of California Santa Cruz I realized my advancement was dependent on high quality research/performance and university teaching.

But coming to California at a time when financial support of arts had been decimated with the passing of Proposition 13, I also looked for ways to continue some of the outreach work done in Hawaii.

When I arrived in California the Santa Cruz Cultural Council was in the midst of organizing its SPECTRA artists-in-the-schools program. I was invited to submit a proposal for student assemblies. Together with Undang Sumarna, a lecturer in music at UCSC and the leader of the Sundanese *gamelan* which trains students in the gong chime music of West Java, Indonesia, I proposed a program of Sundanese rod puppetry which presented stories from the Indonesian versions of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics borrowed from India. From 1980 I, Undang Sumarna, and student musicians (many of whom are now teaching in colleges and universities around the US) have given hundreds of school performances in Santa Cruz and Monterey County. Additionally we have done outreach shows around the US or in Indonesia when touring to give performances.

Occasionally as teachers became more interested, Undang Sumara and I would do more in depth workshops which deepened the learning possibilities. With the development of the ArtsBridge America program, I found it was sometimes possible to place students who had studied aspects of Asian puppetry, dance, or music during their time at UCSC to teach in local schools. The process of having someone in the class over ten-twelve weeks of time, clearly increased the impact on the elementary students exposed and artistically expanded the horizons of both the teachers and students involve. I noted that the ArtsBridge scholar who undertook the teaching made advancement in their ability to present an art form, in which they were engaged, but about which they were still learning. They gained significant skills in presenting the material and advanced their own learning by teaching. Children who participated had their work were validated as peers applauded aspects of their project showings.

Such projects showed what I call the multiplier effect: those who present the Asian theatre practice learn how to communicate aspects of the other culture and aesthetic system to a new audience even as they were forced to learn the material in a deeper way. At the same time the elementary students whose

voices, bodies, and minds had to move, sound, and think in new ways learned in an embodied way important new cultural principles, pushing out their frames of understanding. They noted that for the art of the Asian culture aesthetics, language, and narrative were different and learned that embracing that difference is embracing our globalized world.

Project One

I was contacted by a Los Gatos public school teacher who had seen my name in a Santa Cruz Arts Council catalogue. Due to the influx of Southeast Asians in the computer industry, she was finding a significant number of children of Asian descent in her class and had introduced the *Ramayana* story as a way of validating the new students' culture. Her students had read the story, but she wanted them to understand the story in performance.

Customarily music director Undang Sumarna and I have done performances with sections of the *Ramayana* story in our school performances. We found the animal characters from the playful monkey-general Hanuman to the beautiful but demonic golden deer make *Ramayana* episodes appealing to young audiences when we do assemblies. Sometimes after performances, we would allow students to try out the music instruments or manipulate puppet figures. Our customary performance of the *Ramayana* discusses how the monkey general Hanuman through his semi-divine powers leaps across the Ocean to Alangka (Sri Lanka) and finds the kidnapped wife of his master Rama imprisoned in the garden of the Asoka tree. While our short, hands-on workshops that sometimes followed our assemblies had some potential for chaos if the students could not master playing on the offbeat, I suspected that if we were dealing with 30 students, as this teacher suggested, and not our usual 300, we might be able to do something more interesting. We made an arrangement to have two days of workshop that would culminate in a showing of the work to the other classes in the school.

I began the work with this group as I usually do with a short *Ramayana* episode and Undang introduced the different drums and gongs in the orchestra. Students watched intently in the demonstration, knowing that they would be required to select a role or instrument which they would

present before their peers. They were a rapt audience. Immediately after the short introduction, I explained how in Indonesia the puppet theatre is the model for human performance. During our hours together we would be working on *wayang orang* ("human puppetry"). I had performed as the *dalang* (puppet master/narrator) for the story, so I would continue to do this section for our planned performance. But we would need students to take the parts of puppets and move in the stylized dance. Undang would continue to be the *gamelan* leader, but students would need to help as musicians by learning interlocking rhythms of the tunes for *perang* (battle) and *lagu jalan* (travel music). Instrumentalists would also need to be responsive to what was happening onstage. If a monkey delivered a slap or a joke, this would need the sound of a gong stroke or a *senggak* (cry) from the musicians. The concept of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) which lay at the base of this Indonesian interlock was shared.

Soon the students had selected levels of participation with which they were comfortable. A more rambunctious and primarily male grouping opted for the monkey army, with the class clown immediately volunteering for the role of Hanuman, the heroic monkey general. The elegant look of Lady Sita and her companion, Lady Trijata, immediately attracted the would be female models in the class. Boys were less sure about volunteering for the refined King Rama and his noble brother Laksmana. I explained that, unlike western realism where the gender of the performer trumps all, the gender of the dancer is never a function of biology in Indonesia, but always a function of how one moves. I assured the students gender was not a barrier to playing refined males. Indeed the refined male heroes were often played by females. We ended up with one girl and one boy playing the male heroes. Students found it interesting to consider that men who, to their western eyes, were feminine should be the ideal types and that the great heroes might be acted by a woman. Those who rejected the refined roles immediately raised their hands to be the demonic opponents, Rawana and his followers. As I worked transforming characters into monkeys, demons, and incarnations of the preserving power of the universe (Wisnu/Rama), Undang taught students the simple musical interlocks for fighting and dance.



In the second meeting I gave characters their short signature dances and reminded them that when I spoke the lines of their character they must remember how I had waved the hand of the puppet to make it move slightly so the audience would know who was the speaker. The simple musical patterns were refined by the *gamelan*. Finally the dance and music came together for our first and only rehearsal. As students learned the simple but highly structured movements for dance-battle, the potential chaos which can occur when demon and monkey meet was forged into the strict structures of formal fighting in *wayang orang* human puppet style.

The stage in the gym was our final performance space. Elementary students hit their gong or xylophone-like instrument as I talked the audience through the introduction which I usually did with university students as musicians. I showed viewers the puppets which I usually presented, but let them know that this particular performance would be "human puppet" theatre. I let the audience know that part of the way that viewers judged the success of performers was their ability to manifest the clear moves of the puppet model. I explained that although my "puppets" were their schoolmates the aim of the performers was to be as good as the puppet at dancing.

Students proudly wore the dance drama headdresses and demon masks which we gave them. The *gamelan* came together on their gong strokes and the monkeys, for all their monkey business knew to make their falls or hits on the gong. Keeping the *dalang* role and cueing my *gamelan* kept our newly trained performers in line. Everyone knew that the gong was a freeze frame moment.

After the show a young Indian student who had been watching in the audience came up to me, as the enthusiastic classes—thrilled to see their peers transformed to monkeys and demons—left. "I know that story!" the child exclaimed. "Of course you do," I responded.

If California were responding more swiftly to the socio-cultural changes of our globalized society everyone would be as conversant in the *Ramayana* as we are with Shakespearean narratives.

Through efforts of a teacher who wanted her students to be aware of the story of other members of the class, a school was introduced to an Indian epic. In the context of preparing the performance students learned *gotong royong*, mutual collaboration, as a cultural principle. They contemplated societies where puppets do not try to look like humans, but humans try to dance like puppets. They learned that percussion is more than a drum set and found that rice pounding songs may be at the base of musical performance in Southeast Asia. They worked on movement, from the smooth esthetic of the hero and heroine to the jerky hits of the villain, recognizing it manifests social and asocial behavior. They saw that movement and actions, not gender, define who takes the valued roles. They understood that by following the *dalang* and meshing with the music a large group can show how different energies clash and reconcile in a narrative structure. And they had a lot of fun. Though this project was only the work of a short workshop it impacted those who participated and those who viewed in ways that will probably remain. As these students grow up and move into companies run by Indians or they themselves outsource functions of their own operations to India and or Southeast

Asia they bring this cultural collateral to the table. Though this was merely a class of fourth graders led by a motivated teacher, the ultimate outcomes can be great.

ArtsBridge

In the inaugural year of ArtsBridge at UCSC ArtsBridge Scholar Ben Arcangel a Filipino-American student was one of the scholars I sent into a heavily Chicano school in Watsonville, California. Ben had happened into my Indonesian dance class in his junior year as a history major at UCSC and continued his study of Indonesian performance by doing a Indonesian *dharmasiswa* scholarship in Bandung, Indonesia prior to beginning graduate study as a fifth year certificate student in theatre arts at UCSC.

After his UCSC graduate work he would be accepted at the University of Hawaii where he is now finishing a masters in Asian Studies. Among the honors which he would accrue were awards as the top dancer of the year from among all undergraduate dancers in the U.S. for the American Dance



Festival and nominations for the Soros Foundation Scholarship for New Americans. When Ben had first appeared in my class, I noted his ability to pick up movement. His interest in the Southeast Asia was clear. While there are differences between Indonesian and Filipino performance, it was apparent to me that he valued classes in Indonesian dance and *gamelan* as a way to learn about a Southeast Asian heritage.

Ben was a brilliant dancer, one about whom another faculty member noted: "You just can't take your eyes away from him when he is dancing." But teaching in a second grade classroom is different from dancing for an adult audience. Ben had the advantage that he was in the classroom of a supportive teacher, one who when she had been an undergraduate at UCSC had herself taken Indonesian dance. After her graduation, she spent a year in Nepal. She requested an ArtsBridge scholar in Indonesian dance because she was open to cultural diversity and thought the material would be good exposure for her students, many of whom were first generation Americans. Ben who came to the US as a preteen had a Filipino accent and continues to work on his academic writing in English. As I made the placement, I thought that sending a first generation Filipino who was "making it" in the UC system, but who knew the linguistic and cultural struggle that was involved in getting higher degrees in Anglophone society would be a useful model for his young students.

Ben borrowed my slides of Indonesian performance to use in lectures that preceded the dance classes he gave to students. He asked me to come in and give a demonstration of *wayang golek* (Sundanese rod puppets) so the children could understand the relation between the dance and the three dimensional wooden puppets. Passing that sacred barrier that divides student and teacher and learning how to break down the complex dances that he had acquired as a grant student in Indonesia so they could actually be done by a second grader, these were challenges that Ben met. Interviews with the teacher involved confirmed that her participation in his lessons reinforced and expanded the knowledge that she had gotten in her introductory course in Indonesian performance ten years before. For Ben, it was his first unsupervised experience of putting the lessons in Indonesian performance into a format to present to others. As I saw him move on to triumph at the

American Dance Festival Competition and other formats, I know that this ArtsBridge experience was a step in his learning how to assemble and communicate his own research. While Ben Arcangel is not an Indonesian, I think his identity as a Southeast Asian artist was strengthened by this opportunities. I know that he created a role model for the many children of immigrants who learned the refined character that he taught in his dance classes. Ben taught the children of farm workers about Southeast Asia. But he also taught them about himself. He taught them that digging into roots is useful and that in becoming artist-teachers in American society we can teach people about the arts and ideas of parts of the world we come from. I believe that this ArtsBridge project was impactful for the ongoing success of Scholar Ben Arcangel as he applied for grants to do graduate work in Dance Ethnology and Asian Studies. It also provided a model for the children who worked with him. California student of diverse backgrounds in constructing their arts of tomorrow should consider their own cultural areas and roots. While none of Ben's students will develop his expertise as an exponent of the *wayang orang* (human puppet theatre style) or have the same precision that he exhibits when he plays Gatotkaca, the strong hero of the *Mahabharata*, his students will still have learned much. Ben will have taught those second graders himself. Someone who comes to English as a second language and is raised in a diverse household can fit in and thrive in California higher education and teach it some of the richest arts of the world from his own area. He teaches them and us that the arts of California's future are being crafted by children of Russian, Filipino, Chicano, Chinese, Latino, and Euro-American descent. One must know the multiple arts which lie behind these societies to create the Pacific Rim art which is our future. Ben taught them his art, but, even more, he taught his students himself.

Conclusion

I have described two of many projects that have caused me to bridge my areas of research and public education and outreach. While I know that as a faculty member at University of California my research and writing are more central to advancement in the system than service or outreach work, another sense tells me the true legacy of my cross-cultural research may live on more strongly in the impact a workshop I did in Los Gatos in the 1990s or in the



work of a student like Ben Arcangel in 2001. I have taught long enough to have students who I don't even remember encounter me in odd parts of the globe and tell me that a course or performance I did somehow changed their lives. Some of those students have ended up on truth and justice commissions in East Timor in the wake Independence from Indonesia. Some have become assistant professors of Japanese or Indonesian art history. Some of them bring cultural diversity in arts and education to their teaching in public schools. Ultimately, I would not be surprised that the real payoff of my work in trying to get people to use arts as methodologies to explore and expand cultural understanding will come not from my carefully crafted articles or books, but from this work public education.

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