

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Bernard Arps (2016). *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind: The Javanese Shadow-play Dewa Ruci Performed by Ki Anom Soeroto - A Study in Performance Philology.***

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Of all forms of Indonesian artistic expression, and they are numerous, the classical Javanese shadow play (*wayang kulit purwa*) stands out supreme. There are many reasons for this. To put it simply, it is a highly composite form involving all the visual, literary and performing arts. Even by saying this one has barely touched the surface, for there are social, political as well as mystical elements in the wayang that, for the discerning Indonesian mind, far outweigh its purely external or apparent significance. The possibilities of interpretation are many and diverse, depending upon several elements—the story or episode (*lakon*) selected for a particular evening, the puppeteer (*dhalang, dalang*), his abilities, the character and capacity of his audience, as well as the purpose of each and every performance. The wayang thus operates on many levels and plays multiple roles in Indonesian society at the level of village, town or city, at Balinese temple or Javanese *kraton*, at tourist centres, and at the level of national consciousness. This is possible, due to the antiquity of the wayang stretching over a period of more than a millennium, its status within Indonesian society, its innate strengths, the changing nature of the art form itself, adapting and yet, at least in the traditional or classical forms such as wayang kulit purwa, remaining consistent in its core.

While all elements that make the edifice of the wayang—its many performative elements including, in particular, the puppets and the music, both vocal such as that of the *pesinden*, and instrumental of the gamelan orchestra, its many artists, and in particular the puppeteer, often a highly venerated figure—it is undeniable that at the heart of his whole complex that is wayang kulit purwa, stands the story or play (*cerita, lakon*) based upon literary material or totally improvised, but in the case of the wayang, transmitted orally. This narrative of the wayang is the most intriguing of its elements, and this is the element that one has to come to terms with in trying to appreciate a particular performance, while still keeping the performance in view.

The particular performance used as the basis for this study was staged by the famous dalang Ki Anom Soeroto in Amsterdam in 1987. Bernard Arps, the author of the volume calls this a “cross-cultural performance of the emblematic play *Dewa Ruci*.” There are, as he indicates, many different ways of approaching wayang. The methodology depends typically, upon the background of the researcher, and his or her discipline. Typically the approach would be anthropological, theatre-based and, on occasions but rarely, literary.

The author decided to use the philological approach, typically concerned with texts. But he extends it in this study, to what he describes as the philology of performance. The ground for this and its bases are developed in detail in chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 focuses on Philology, Performance and Wayang Theory, seeing this genre of theatre in the context of folklore and performance studies as well as Wayang theories and criticism. In the following chapter, “A Philology of Performance”, the criteria are developed in some detail. This is a fascinating approach. One of the key sections of this chapter the Wayang is presented through the viewpoint of “Artefactuality, existent and emergent, lasting and transient.” An intriguing idea, perhaps even stunning, one might say, is that wayang is an artifact, existing like any other art object, but at the same time continuing to grow, real but also transient. This is a novel approach, making it possible for a wayang performance, an artifact that can be and should be viewed from different perspective as well as interpreted. The approaches include intertextuality, contextuality and historicity.

There are many sources for the *lakon*, indigenous, such as those used in local versions of the shadow as well as those developed in recent decades to serve specific purposes. But when it comes to the classical *wayang kulit purwa*, the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, provide several hundred *lakon* in all. Undoubtedly among the most fascinating and significant of these, not directly based upon any episode in the *Mahabharata* must be *Dewa Ruci*. This is the subject of the book under review.

Bhima’s (Javanese Bratasena, Werkudara, etc.) search for a meaning to life or existence, entails a long and arduous journey undertaken by the central figure, on the advise of Durna, the wily teacher of both the Pandawa and the Korawa, traditionally cast as being anti-Pandawa. Bratasna is sent on a mission to find what is referred in the title of the book: Tall Tree, Best of the Wind” on Chandra Mukha mountain. Both the Pandawa and the Korawa camps hold the view that Durna’s intention was to get rid of Bratasena. For the Korawa, Bratasena’s death will mean the possibility of getting rid of the Pandawas, who will be considerably weakened without him.

On the mountain Bratasna meets a pair of giants, Rukmuka and Rukmakala; battles them and when he is about to kill them they are transformed into a pair of gods, Endra and Bayu. The gods tell him that he is searching the wrong place of the tree. Bratasena returns to his teacher, Durna, for clarification and further instructions. He is told that the first attempt was only a test to establish Bratasena’s sincerity. He must go on a second mission. This time to search is for the holy water *banyu tirta pawitra* found in the ocean. Once again, he sets out and this time, following further adventures, reaches a little island where he meets a tiny being, as big as his little finger, the god Dewa Ruci. Following instructions by the god, with whom he is at first amused, (until the god himself explains who he is) given his tiny size, and old by Dewa Ruci that there is no other way to obtain what he seeks, Bratasena enters the body of Dewa Ruci sees a great many things, interpreted for him by Dewa Ruci himself.

Now enlightened, Bratasena, is, in fact, an altogether different person. No longer wishing to return home to his parents, his siblings, and so on, he desires to become a

hermit, a sage and to continue his self-development to the point of perfection. Dewa Ruci tells Bratasena that the time for such a development has not yet arrived, but will in future. For now his mission is to go return to Astina, and to continue the struggle on the material plane, a struggle that must go on to its conclusion with the great Baratayudha war. The message of mysticism, dressed in Islamic mystical (Sufi) terms clearly emerges from the text of the performance.

Lakon *Dewa Ruci* as performed by Dalang Ki Anom Soerito and recorded in Amsterdam has been transcribed in Javanese language as well as translated by the author of this volume into the English language in a way that is easy for the reader even unfamiliar with wayang kulit purwa or the story itself can go through it with considerable ease. The fact that contemporary references occur in scenes in which the *punakawan* appear add to the humour and charm of the performance-text as well as the translation.

The book is thus a detailed examination of the processes involved in documentation, the methodology used, the compilation and writing down of the text in old Javanese as well as a parallel translation into English. This is perhaps the first such attempt to document and translate the highly important story of Dewa Ruci, as well as the translation of the Javanese dramatic text into English (done in parallel columns).

The volume is replete with abundant elements apart from the various Introductory chapters and the Annotations which are immensely informative and beneficial for the reader unfamiliar with the tradition of wayang as well as Javanese culture. It allows one to follow through the volume such a manner that one is able to appreciate it without trepidation and with ease. All in all, *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind* is a remarkable achievement and a great addition to the literature on the shadow play and particularly on wayang kulit purwa.

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