

TRADITIONAL THEATRE *LONGSER* AS THE CREATIVITY BASE FOR PRODUCING MODERN THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

The study describes the creativity process of a theatre work entitled “*Menjelang Senja* (Toward the Twilight)” which is based on West Java traditional theatre “Longser”. In the development of Indonesian theatre history, modern theatre is defined as a theatre work referred to western dramaturgy. Meanwhile, the western dramaturgy refers to Aristotelian theory in which the dramatic structure and the plot should have presumption of cause and effect (causality principle). Being aware that Indonesian modern theatre should have specific identity showing Indonesian culture, the Indonesian dramatists like Rendra, Putu Wijaya, Arifin C Noer and Suyatna Anirun, have tried to produce modern theatre alluded to Indonesian traditional theatre in their respective regions since 1970s. The result of the study shows that the essence of *Longser* performance should cover dance, music, song, and a story presented by improvised dialogues and source taken from daily life. Meanwhile the structure of the performance is standard, the artistic design is simple and the nuance is humorous or comedy. The essence of *Longser* becomes the creativity idioms to produce a modern theatre. However, there are still problems in the process. Most of the modern theatre actors do not have adequate skills of dancing, singing, playing music, and joking in their acting.

Keywords: Traditional theatre, creativity, modern theatre, western dramaturgy, Indonesian culture

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mencoba mendeskripsikan proses kreativitas penciptaan karya teater berjudul “*Menjelang Senja*”, yang berlandaskan kepada teater tradisional Jawa Barat, “*Longser*”. Di dalam perkembangan sejarah teater Indonesia, istilah teater modern didefinisikan sebagai karya teater yang mengacu kepada kaidah-kaidah dramaturgi barat. Dramaturgi barat mengacu kepada teori Aristoteles dengan penggunaan struktur dramatik dan plot cerita yang harus mempunyai hubungan sebab dan akibat. Dengan kesadaran bahwa teater modern Indonesia harus mempunyai identitas yang khas kebudayaan Indonesia, mulai tahun. 19 70- an para drawawan Indonesia seperti Rendra, Putu Wijaya, Arifin C. Noer dan Suyatna Anirun, mulai mencoba untuk menciptakan teater modern dengan mengacu kepada khasanah teater tradisional Indonesia yang ada di

daerahnya masing-masing. Hasil penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa esensi dari pertunjukan Longser harus mempunyai muatan tari, musik, tembang/vokal, cerita yang dialognya dibawakan secara improvisasi dan bersumber dari kehidupan masyarakat sehari-hari, struktur pertunjukan yang baku, penataan artistik yang sederhana serta bernuansakan lawakan/komedi. Esensi dari Longser dijadikan idiom-idiom kreativitas untuk menjadi teater modern. Persoalan yang dihadapi adalah para pemain teater modern kebanyakan tidak mempunyai kompetensi menari, menembang dan menabuh perangkat musik serta cita rasa humor di dalam beraktingnya.

Kata Kunci: Teater Tradisional, Kreativitas, Teater Modern, Dramaturgi Barat, Identitas, Kebudayaan Indonesia.

BACKGROUND

According to Arthur S. Nalan, the truly purpose of theatre is convergence of communication, not a sensation. Therefore, the symbols presented by theater actors must be easily understood by their audience. Nalan in his book entitled *Kapita Selekta Teater* argued that:

“Teater is an ephemeral (lasting for a very short time), that means it lasts within a defined duration according to the artist’s work concept. Ephemerality is always be related to space and time of a theatre performance. The antonym of ephemeral is anti-ephemeral that means the opposite to a very short time. It is commonly contained in several performances of traditional theatre, such as *wayang* or puppet theater held throughout the night.

The awareness of theater (especially modern theater) as an ephemeral performing art must be possessed by artists involved in theater production (playwright, stage director, actor, etc). When an artist’s work is performed in front of the audience, conducive condition is expected. At that moment, chiffers (special symbols), borrowing Karl Jasper’s term, can be felt by the audience’s senses so that the theater performance can be enjoyed and appreciated. There, theatrical atmosphere is created. This is actually a communicative communication.” (S. Nalan, 1996:4-5)

Therefore, theatre among society must be able to contribute to solve problem complexity facing by our nation nowadays related to social, economy, politics, culture, education and even religion. It is because theater, implicitly or explicitly, is the reflection of real life brought by the artist through artistic media into a new reality based on his or her contemplation. A gap between ideality and reality seen in life is a problem that would be brought up in a work and presented to society by the artist. Regarding this, Suyatna Anirun proposed that in theater

“Form always refers itself to space. There are spaces of thinking, feeling, dreaming, ideals and consciousness within every person. The embodied form

always refers to architectural appeal (Plato called it relative forms) that is part of nature, living things. Adjacent to architectural forms, there are symbolic or abstract forms (Plato called it absolute forms). In addition, we also have values (forms) of mystery, uncertainty and transcendence. Form and content are so inseparable in an artwork that they must be in balance. Form is equal to value. If a work is considered to 'have not acquired its form', it means that its value is below the minimum standard of value. Form is also identical to strength. Thus if a work is considered to 'have not acquired its form', it can also mean that it does not have an established structure." (Anirun, 1999:67).

As a creator, an artist must conduct a research (observation) and analysis before he or she makes a theater performance. All of his experiences are composed into numerous practices until he obtained the expected result. He elaborates his taste, knowledge and artistic skills on a rigorous long process of selection to create a new form of theatrical work. Thus, in theater we generally find themes closely related to the complexity of problems faced by our nation today.

However, theater, especially in Bandung, West Java province has not been able to fulfil the expectation and function mentioned above. Why? There are some underlying factors that can be identified. Firstly, a number of theater, particularly traditional ones, are going to perish and some even no longer exist or in idle condition. Secondly, some theater performances present form and content that are not communicative and irrelevant to spirit of the present days. Symbols of traditional theater are no longer known. On the other hand, symbols of modern theater are difficult to be comprehended by society as they are still exclusive and not well-known. Consequently, people are not interested in watching theater.

This was different in the past when traditional theaters like Longser, *Sandiwara Sunda* and *Wayang Golek* in West Java were popular and well-developed because of support from people that were mostly agrarian, communal and upholding several social-cultural ritual ceremonies.

However, after Indonesia entered industrialization era, the advance of technology of all types, especially information technology that shaped global culture, had marginalized traditional theaters such as Longser. Although traditional theatre of Longser persists and is still performed among young theater artists, its structure and form have been reduced to its comedy only. Whereas, according to Saini KM, the content of traditional theatre is so evident and communicative that audience can understand its point easily. In his book "Kaleidoskop Teater Indonesia", Saini KM argued that

"In terms of content, folk arts, especially folk theater, clearly expresses the people's experiences, ups and downs, expectations and behaviors. The theater portrays their life in the paddy, river, sea, forest where they face universal problems such as problems related to marriage, loss, death, birth and sometimes there are also social problems such as a struggle or fight against landlords or noblemen/scholars/rulers or criminals. Their relationship with God is also described, especially in prologues of some folk

theaters like *reog*, *ogel* and *pantun*. In those kinds of art, there is a part called “*ngarajah*” that means to say a salvation prayer. In an older art like “*gondang*” originated from Southern area of West Java province, the whole performance is dedicated to Dewi Padi (the goddess of paddy), one of primordial gods worshipped by societies that still adopt “folk” religion. Meanwhile, another art such as *dog-dog lojor* is an art held as the accompaniment of *tandan padi sulung* symbolizing “*Nyi Pohaci Sang Hiang Sri*” (Dewi Sri)’s visit to *lumbung umum*.” (Saini KM, 2002:26-27).

From a brief description above, to restore the function and position of theater in society, its three elements namely artists, theater works and society must support each other. In other words, although there are former theater artists like Rendra, Teguh Karya, Suyatna Anirun, Arifin, C. Noer, Putu Wijaya, N. Riantiarno who have contributed to theater art in Indonesia, present theater artists should also productively make theater productions since the existence of theater depends on consistency and continuity. In addition, they should develop the society’s concern and appreciation toward theater. Regarding this, the study focuses on producing a new or modern theater performance entitled “*Menjelang Senja*” in which the artistic elements are based on West Java Traditional Theater named “*Longser*”. It is aimed at

1. Producing a modern theater work based on traditional theater
2. Revitalizing West Java traditional theater
3. Cultivating and developing people’s appreciation toward theater.

In terms of benefits, the theater performance “*Menjelang Senja*” is expected to be a model of creative process in producing a theater performance based on traditional theater. This theater production may prove that traditional theater is potential to be explored and developed into a modern theater by studying and grasping its essence and spirit in the first place. Thus, the impression that traditional theater will be outdated and perish is still debatable. Traditional theater can remain original as a reference and yet can be creatively adjusted in terms of form and content to the advance of the era. Otherwise, traditional theater without innovation will perish and modern theater without alluding itself to tradition will be lost.

In addition, the theater performance of “*Menjelang Senja*” is expected to contribute to the method of modern theater creation that has been referred to the western method of theater creation that is systemic and rational, adopting the dramaturgy theory of Aristoteles and theater techniques of Stanislavsky.

ABOUT LONGSER

Longser originated from West Java. The word longser was derived from “*melong*” that means to see and “*seredet*” that means to get inspired. In general, longser means that anyone who sees or watches the performance will get inspired.

Longser can be performed anywhere. In the past it was presented in the market, arena near business area and could be held through the night because traditional theater like Longser does not need an intricate decoration. Audience could watch by sitting in

circle. Speaking of longser history, the golden era of Longser theater took place from 1920 until 1960. The prominent figures were Ateng Jafar, Bang Tawes, Bang Tilil, Bang Soang, etc.

Longser performance consists of dance, *karawitan* (Sundanese traditional music), comedy, improvised acting, stories taken from daily reality, artistic design of a simple yet symbolical stage with an *oncor* (a portable means of illumination like a three-branch torch symbolizing underworld, middleworld and upperworld), daily costumes of agrarian society, lighting given by *oncor*.

The formal pattern of plot consists of *tatalu* (*karawitan* music performance as a sign that the show is about to begin), opening (*ronggeng* dancers are appearing on the stage and introducing themselves), *wawayangan* that presents *eplok cendol* (a typical longser dance), *cikeruhan* dance and other dances according to the needs of situation and condition, comedy and finally story to conclude the show.

The formal pattern of longser plot refers to Longser “Panca Warna” led by Ateng Jafar that is a developed pattern of Bang Tilil’s Longser which is simpler and only consists of *tatalu*, *ronggeng* dance and comedy.

PERFORMANCE FORM AND CONTENT DESIGN

The scope of performance concept is content and form. Content is a message to be conveyed and form is an artistic appearance as a medium of message delivery. The content of this performance is not based on a written script (drama literature/text drama/prosaic drama). Instead, it takes death as its theme that explores visuals with gestures, property, stage set, and sounds to create the atmosphere of emotional turmoil, phantasies, spiritual confusion, the existence of heaven and hell, torment and delight, past romance, good and bad deeds of a marriage couple as the main characters of this performance. The minimum description of performance script is used as a guidance for practices (exploration and experimentation) and the actors/actresses may improvise to communicate the script to the audience. Stage design functions as a support and not to reduce (‘kleptomania’, borrowing Jerzy Grotowsky’s term) the presence of the actors. The scene and structure are written simultaneously in a rehearsal process so that all actors/actresses and supporting team can refine them by deconstructing the structure of Longser first and then reconstructing it according to the needs. For theater that emphasizes acting, acting is not kleptomania by visual artistic design. Visual design is made to support actors’ performance.

Content and form of a performance refer to work concept (directing of theater), namely the formulated draft of ideas, general view of a director to realize every aspect of the work. Draft of ideas and general view are defined as a framework and rationale as a basic reference to go through a creative process of directing a theater.

Regarding the concept of directing, Edwin Wilson argued that “the director must begin to formulate all important concept of the production. The concept comes from the idea, vision, point of view, or metaphore, which will result in a cohesive production and present the spectator with a unified artistic experience” (Wilson: 1976, 282).

Based on the definition of theater performance concept mentioned above, this study produces a modern theater that is not conventional (theater that does not count

on a written script), having a symbolical form, tragicomic nuance, and metaphysical theme taken from personal experience filled with absurd thinking. The artistic appearance will be enriched by the strength of *longser* traditional theater (West Java) such as kinetic/dance, sound/music/vocal and spectacle.

Furthermore, regarding design and structure, in general it consists of sounds produced by *karawitan* instruments and actors' voices as the opening, movement visualization, voice/sound, stage design and property exploration that express the time when life is coming to its end, anxiety, phantasies, romanticism, spiritual turmoil, music and closing *rajah*. It is performed in an arena theater (horseshoe) inside a theatrical building.

Production Process and Its Problems

Production process included pre-production, production and post-production. Pre-production covered a research on a traditional theater focusing on *longser*. The production was an exploration of idioms that are the essence of *longser* performance (movement, music/vocal, improvised acting) in order to be the speech of a modern theater that suits its content and form. In this stage, the directing method emphasizes on experiments in which all the production team involved had to contribute to convey their ideas, yet the decision was up to the director. The production stage was concluded by a preview where all artistic elements of performance that had been designed and rehearsed were going to be put together in a trial performance by inviting limited audiences that were likely to give inputs for the next production. Post-production was an evaluation to assess the way the research result can be applied into a modern theater performance. In this context, inputs from audience were the main concern. It could be concluded from the evaluation that the main weakness lay on the actors who did not get used to act by improvisation and emphasizing more on language through body and movement. Thus, their acting in terms of visual was mechanical without sublime appreciation and graceful body movement. However, it was understandable since most of the actors involved were those usually took part in a script-based theater where room for improvisation was limited.

SOLUTION

Through the theater production process of "Menjelang Senja" it can be concluded that to produce a modern theater that is based on a traditional theater like *longser* is not an easy creative process. It is because it contains a transitional meaning of culture between ethnic culture with its established patterns into a new culture in which the established patterns are no longer be attached, instead they are explored and developed into new forms. In addition, technical skills that are the essence of traditional theater such as improvised acting, dancing and singing are not the primary competence required from the actors of a modern theater. Therefore, they need more intensive practices to achieve the designed form. The recommendation for next production is that all production crews, especially actors must grasp the essence of traditional theater and improve their skills greatly because the practitioners of traditional theater have involved in the theater world since childhood and been trained for a long time through numerous

performances. On the other hand, most practitioners of modern theater join theater after they are in their teens and have not been trained intensively since they have another activity and profession.

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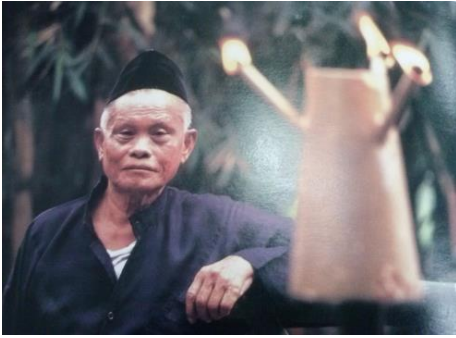
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Attachment of *Menjelang Senja* Documentation



Ateng Jafar, a prominent figure of *Longser*, and an *oncor*



Longser performance in the past



Longser performance at present



Longser performance at present



Longser performance at present



Process I of *Menjelang Senja* 1



Process 1 of *Menjelang Senja 2*



Process 1 of *Menjelang Senja 2*



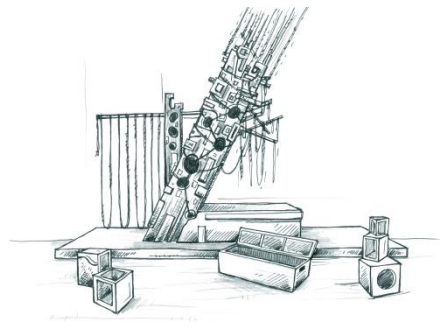
Process 1 of *Menjelang Senja 4*



Process 2 of *Menjelang Senja 1*



Process 2 of *Menjelang Senja 2*



Stage Design Sketch of *Menjelang Senja*



Artistic design process



Music arrangement process



Performance of *Menjelang Senja 1*



Performance of *Menjelang Senja 2*



Performance of *Menjelang Senja 3*



Performance of *Menjelang Senja 4*