Do the Balinese have theatre?

Natalia Theodoridou

1. Theatre has been used as a way to represent and understand Bali and Balinese character since the early 20th century. On the other hand, Balinese theatre occupies a special place in Euro-American theory, not only about theatre, but about the polity and human nature itself.

Theatre has been variously used as a metaphor to explain Bali and 'the Balinese character' to the West, starting with the systematic documentation and recording of performance by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. In their study of Balinese character, Mead and Bateson pronounced that 'Balinese culture is in many ways less like our own than any other which has yet been recorded' (1942: xvi). This was by virtue of the Balinese propensity to trance, which they associated with schizoid personalities. But trance in Bali is connected to a large extent with occasions that observers perceived and categorised as theatrical; thus, theatre came to occupy a central place in the discussion of Balinese character as a whole. This was followed by Clifford Geertz's famous description of pre-colonial Bali as a theatre-state, which effectively extended the centrality of theatre in Bali to the entire polity (1980). Balinese social life was thus described as a constant theatrical performance. And through its recycling in various registers, from theatre studies to the tourist industry, this metaphor has ultimately trapped Bali between psychic alterity and essential theatricality. According to the image that European and American scholars, as well as artists and travelers, have painted, Bali *is* theatre, not only literally but also socially and ontologically.

Despite Mead and Bateson's assertions about the radical difference of the Balinese, there is one aspect of Bali that scholars from Europe and the Americas have had no trouble describing in familiar categories: theatre. 'Western' models of drama, theatre, and performance have been exported for the analysis of what those doing the analyzing took to be their Balinese equivalents.

The study of Balinese theatre *per se* starts roughly with Walter Spies in the 1920s and 1930s. Much is known about Spies and how unique he was both in his personal life and in his relationship with Bali. Yet, however unique Spies may have been, he was in fact a man of his time. But none of the current accounts, critical or otherwise, attempt to place Spies, or at least his interest in Balinese arts and theatre, within the context of the generalized foreign interest in Asian artistic forms at the time, the state of Western thinking about Asian theatre, or how Europeans and Americans wrote about, were informed by and to some extent shaped Asian theatre; in a word, what is missing is the *discours* around theatre in the first decades of the 20th century.

Time does not permit to undertake a detailed analysis of the theatrical *status quo* in Europe in the beginning of the 20th century. Suffice it to say briefly that, in the eyes of the theatre-making avant-garde, theatrical norm and urbanization had resulted in a loss of essence on the European stage, which was expressed in the creation of a dry and uninspiring star-system. Several distinguished theatre practitioners (such as Meyerhold, Copeau and others), were shifting towards the concept of physicality. They emphasized the structured training of the actor's body, while at the same time moving towards symbolism and stylization in the aesthetics that informed their works. This process was facilitated by an escape to the countryside on the one hand, and to Asia on the other—the latter because it combined both technique and attention to a spiritual truth which was concealed by the surface of realism in the West. As is

evidenced by his connection to the school and garden city of Hellerau and to Dalcroze's holistic approach to musical education (one of the aims of which, very much in accordance with the general tendencies of the European avant-garde at the time, was to overcome the 'arrhythmia' of the Industrial age), Spies was arguably a man that came out of this particular context (Wesner, Hitchcock and Putra 2007). It was in part this vision of an Asian theatre for the benefit of the tired European stage that Spies found in Bali. And it was in this atmosphere that Artaud saw Balinese theatre in the 1931 Paris Colonial exposition.

Artaud (1896-1949) started out as a surrealist exploring the unconscious in playwriting and on stage at the *Théâtre Alfred Jarry* (Zarrilli *et al*. 2010:367). However, Artaud's most substantial contribution was not his few productions but his manifestos, written during the 1930s and published in 1938 in *The Theatre and its Double*. Artaud encouraged the total rejection of Western, especially text-based, theatre, and conceived a new form of theatrical practice that he called 'the theatre of cruelty,' evoking extreme emotions and creating a 'primitive' union between actors and spectators that would liberate them from 'their rational restraints and individual freedoms' (Zarrilli *et al*. 2010:367). The Balinese dancers that he saw in 1931 played a key role in shaping his new vision of theatre. For Artaud, this performance embodied everything that most Western practitioners had identified as lacking in European theatre: physicality, rigorous training, a visceral symbolism that turned the performers' bodies into 'animated hieroglyphs' (Artaud [1938] 1958:54). Artaud sought to overthrow not only 'Occidental' theatre but Occidental society altogether. His new theatre would be the basis of a violence-, conformity-, and anxiety-free society (Zarrilli *et al*. 2010:367). This is precisely the society that Bali was called to embody for European imagination. Artaud's manifestos influenced a great many

theatre practitioners, most notably Grotowski in his emphasis on the 'holy' actor and the communion between actors and spectators, and through Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner and a whole range of contemporary theatre practitioners and theoreticians who dominate most writing about Balinese theatre both locally and internationally. All is well then; Europe came away with a re-envisioning of its theatre and an infusion with a vigorous new approach to both theory and practice, and Balinese theatre and artists gained international recognition and acclaim.

2. There is, however, a fundamental problem with this approach. Unless we take for granted European ideas and examples of theatre, which is Eurocentric from the outset, what is meant by 'theatre in Bali' is in no way obvious. Heidegger has pointed out that identity between two things cannot be established except by pre-existing criteria (1969). Indeed, the question 'how can one think about or study Balinese theatre without comparing it or drawing examples from European theatre?' cannot be asked, because in asking it there is already an assumption of equivalence between practices called 'theatre' in Europe and practices that the analyst but not necessarily those involved identify as 'theatre' in Bali.

Current approaches prove problematic upon questioning whether the Western notion of 'theatre' is an adequate concept in order to engage with Balinese practices, or an imposed, Eurocentric idea that Balinese have been co-opted into using, indeed into showcasing and exemplifying, in the context of the international performance circuit. It is important to step back here and note that there is no class term corresponding to the English 'theatre' in Bali. Balinese use the terms *igelan* or *sesolahan*, which can be crudely glossed as 'performance' in a loose sense (even

though the term is neither unproblematic, nor an accurate translation[1]), or else they refer to specific genres (*Arja, Drama Gong, Gambuh, Topèng, Wayang* etc.). It is thus impossible to talk generically about 'Balinese theatre' except by massive essentialization and over-interpretation, which in turn seems to be primarily about articulating concerns over the Western world rather than Bali.

Bali has largely been appreciated and studied through a confusion between this supposed substantive (theatre) and a metaphor (the theatre state/social life as theatre). In this respect, Bali is not unique: Ron Inden has shown the various metaphors 'the West' has used to represent India (society as a mechanical body, religion as a jungle etc.) to be primarily about the aspirations, incoherencies, and interests of the Western world (1990). Combined with the absence of the indigenous class term for theatre in the case of Bali, this raises the question of whether scholarship has ever been able to approach what motivates Balinese or any society without acts of cultural translation so thorough that they end up in part constituting their object of study. Therefore a

[1]'Performance' and 'performativity' do not have one consistent usage in English, resulting in the conflation of a number of ideas. 'Performance' can refer to the presentation of a play, a dance, a symphony, to any event that calls for an actor (as in 'someone who performs an

Furthermore, a great number of scholars have theorized about it. In Schechner's 'broad spectrum approach,' performance includes virtually everything, with theatre, dance, music, and performance art as its subgenres, but also encompassing 'rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life' (2004:7). Social scientists have employed the notion to describe human interactions in terms of pre-established patterns and rehearsed routines (Goffman 1959), and to map all human behaviour across an acting/not-acting continuum (Kirby 1972). Blau (1992) differentiated between performing and doing in all human activity in proportion to the consciousness of the doer/performer, which presupposes a distinctly European theory of the mind based on the interiorization of experience (see Taylor 1985a and 1985b). In a different vein, Butler suggested that the repetition of performative acts through time builds the appearance of substance, that is, of a fundamental constituent of reality (1999). Butler's approach has the advantage of bringing to the fore the affinities between the theory of performativity and the theory of hegemony: 'both emphasize the way in which the social world is made' (Butler 2000:14).

If nothing else, what emerges from this overview is the fact that what performance is and what can be considered as performance is subject to representation, and is hence tied to a set of power relations and disciplinary practices. And any such representations are themselves subject to further articulation with all the entailments of power and practice.

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critical interrogation of theatricality in Bali is an interrogation of the adequacy of academic models and knowledge more generally.

If the theatrical image is to be taken critically, it invites an examination of whether Balinese treat or perform social life as 'theatre,' and also of what relationship, if any, the theatrical image of society as described by Geertz has to changing Balinese ideas about performance. To redress this lack, it is necessary to review not only how to understand 'theatre,' but primarily and fundamentally to address the issue of studying other people's practices, including indigenous practices of mediation and self-representation.

In a sense, what is at issue is the question of cultural translation. It is the criteria of judgment and explanation by which to account for what people say (or think, even) and do. Whether such standards of thought and action are universal is at the centre of the debate around rationality and relativism (Wilson 1970; Hollis and Lukes 1982). Hollis, a proponent of rationality, argued that, for understanding to be possible, one has to posit the 'epistemological unity of mankind' (1979; 1982:84). Many anthropologists, however, faced with the breadth of human styles of reasoning, have ventured a critique of rationality as a universal yardstick (Overing 1985), while a number of philosophers and social scientists have pointed out the weak spots of such a sweepingly coherent, absolutist and Eurocentric view of the world: Quine on the underdetermination of theory by facts (1960), Derrida (1982) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on the use of metaphors in science and philosophy, and Lloyd (1993) on the dichotomization of the world by biased polarities such as reason/imagination, male/female, mind/body, or indeed West/East. On a closely related point, Foucault drew attention to the economy of power to which academic discourse and its universalizing tendencies is intimately tied (1970, 1972, 1977), thereby rendering any

attempt at articulating across-the-board truths deeply suspect of hegemonizing tendencies. It is in this sense that accounts of Balinese performance, for instance, cannot be examined as self-evident or neutral but in relation to the play of epistemological power of which they are part.

If Western thought (whatever that is) in general, and media and theatre studies in particular, cannot (at least not *a priori*) be taken as the ultimate frame of reference by which to study, i.e. to translate into familiar categories, Balinese theatre, then Balinese accounts of their own practices should constitute a central object of study. But could there ever be one Balinese frame of reference in terms of practice? Its existence would demand that a highly rigid structure or system be in place—however, there is no evidence that this is the case except insofar as structure is presupposed rather than inferred. The idea of a 'frame of reference' itself in fact belongs to the model of structure (Goodman 1978: 2-3) that may be inadequate or unsuitable to account for Balinese practices. To the extent that Balinese understandings might be irreducible to or even incommensurable with those of Euro-American analysts, such questions can potentially challenge the exportability of 'Western' presuppositions and assumptions. Moreover, this should raise obstacles to the tendency to universalize and naturalize one particular way of thinking, showing it to be nothing more than merely one possible translational scheme in Quine's terms (1960).

The problem can be further illustrated by looking at the idea of the audience in Balinese performance, where it does not have the status of positivity as it does in western theory. And why should it? Western theatre theories hold that a relationship between the performers and the audience is constitutive of theatre. By claiming this, it posits both groups as definite and separate, however much modernist and post-modernist performance attempts to blur the distinction. In my research in Bali in the

past 14 months, I have not come across an invocation of the audience in Balinese performance practices in any meaningful way, with three exceptions: 1. When I brought it into the discussion, directly or indirectly, which says a lot about the extent to which research can be made to conform with pre-existing narratives; 2. Broadcast situations (news and other television programmes), which have clearly migrated from Western models, and 3. Highly formal contexts such as the Pesta Kesenian Bali (PKB), where the platform is arguably derivative from the early RRI and TVRI modes of presentation. In the 34th PKB, incidentally, MCs tended to lump together both live and broadcast audiences, as many of the performances were broadcast live on the cultural program of Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) Stasiun Senpasar.

In other words, unless one abides by a European idea of theatre, of which 'the audience' is a constituent, researching 'the audience' in Bali, where, incidentally, no one word exists to describe the concept, does not make any sense at all. By maintaining the concept of 'the audience,' I kept myself trapped within the familiar, European idea of theatre. This, however, does not mean that there is not a whole range of questions that pertain to ideas of spectatorship in Balinese performance; but the important thing is that these focus on practices and commentary (by, about, and for 'the audience') and can tells us about the various ways that Balinese understand their performance practices. It is not about understanding what one of the two constitutive groups of theatre does, or how it fits within a structure that we can label 'Balinese theatre', but rather about exploring the whole range of practices that one can stumble upon when dealing with performance in Bali. It is about shifting the focus to the purposes, contexts and situations of performance, to a number of Balinese understandings of themselves in practice, namely how Balinese set about understanding theatre, and themselves through theatre.

The problem of approaching Balinese performance is not just a problem of translation, of English having grown into an enunciative language that interprets at the same time as it translates. Europeans have been able to fund and conduct a great deal of thinking on theatre for much longer than the rest of the world. This creates problems of both knowledge (propositional knowledge being a European mode of thinking that may be useful in some frames of reference but completely irrelevant in others)[2] and power. I am not advocating the wholesale rejection of European categories of theatre. But there are alternatives, even in Western theory.

3. Goodman and Hobart argue that one can never represent something as itself, but only as something else, on an occasion, for a purpose, with an outcome (Goodman 1976:27-31; Hobart 2008:12-13). So an alternative to perpetuating the study of Balinese theatre (or audiences, for that matter) as a substantive, would be to examine, instead, under which conditions, on which occasions, by whom, to whom, for what purposes, and with what outcomes various Balinese practices have been represented as theatre.

Let's take for example the study of Balinese audiences, again. Hobart, arguing the case for treating audiences as relational practices, challenged the positivism inherent in most accounts of audiences, by proposing that the idea of 'the audience' holds a position parallel to that of 'the people' in Laclau's account: its status as an 'empty signifier' is obscured by discursive-institutional attempts to fix its meaning (Hobart 2010: 201; Laclau 2005: 102-07). In this light, to investigate Balinese

[2] In fact, the metaphors people in a culture live by are implicated in how they talk about and evaluate what they and others do (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). To recognize them would therefore require switching between different translation manuals, or growing the famed second brain of the ethnographer.

audiences, either in live performance or television, would be a double impossibility, because what it means to be Balinese is also subject to articulation,[3] not insignificantly via the route of imagining and addressing 'the Balinese' as audiences, i.e. as a mass undifferentiated category. In this sense, the success or failure of the constitution and articulation of totalities such as society, 'the audience,' 'the Balinese' and so forth, to a large extent depends on the way these are 'mediated' (Hobart forthcoming). That does not however entail that audiences are unresearchable. The study of audiences in Bali becomes a study of a site of contestation and antagonism, of the various ways audiences are articulated and represented. Articulations and representations, though, do not exist in a vacuum—ontologically, they are nothing but practices in particular occasions and contexts. In this sense audiences, as much as specific modes of Balinese performance, are best treated as situated practices. And, to return to the title of my paper, whether 'The Balinese' have 'theatre' is not (or cannot be) the issue, because neither of these two substantives ('the Balinese' and 'theatre') have any meaning outside of a particular frame of reference. It is, in many ways, a nonsense question that is only useful when taken as an answer to the questions that do matter, such as who are the agents of representation of each of these things, and as what are they representing them in the given circumstances.

On a broader scale, one of the most intriguing arguments comes from the study of Javanese theatre, and I think marks a turning point in the way to approach other people's theatre: it is Becker's essay on text-building in *wayang kulit* (1979). Becker argued that rather than employing western ideas of text and plot, one should start with

[3] Hobart suggests taking the argument one step further, putting forward that 'to be Balinese [or anything else, for that matter] is to be subject to articulation' (personal correspondence, 29/06/2012) and thus moving towards a radical reconsideration of such issues as identity and difference, (self-)representation, and the human condition.

considering the metaphysics-in-practice of the subjects of study. He then noted that in contrast to the temporal linearity of the standard Aristotelian plot, Javanese theatre tends to be organized around coincidence. Interestingly, Artaud, prompted by Balinese theatre, 'sought to liberate audiences from linear storytelling' (Zarrilli *et al*. 2010:518). However, none of the studies of Balinese performance have engaged with either Artaud's or Becker's insights. Artaud may have revolutionized French thought through his impact on Deleuze and Guattari, but nobody has bothered to bring his insights to bear on the very thing that was his object of study. It seems that in this as in many respects, as Korn has noted (1925), 'Bali is apart.' Why is this the case? As far as Bali as a whole is concerned, this may be related to the Orientalist and romantic tendency to view, and market, Bali as a dying paradise.[4] As far as theatre goes, a possible answer may lie in the fact that, since Geertz, theatre in Bali has been used as a metaphor rather than as an object of study. The metaphor has become a thing in itself, an unanalyzable tautology, a simulacrum used to close down rather than to pose questions about theatre that ought to be asked. It has thus been doing a disservice both to the study of Bali and to the study of theatre. 'Bali as theatre' and 'theatre as Bali' have not been good to think with, and maybe it is time to do away with the metaphor altogether and start engaging with the metaphysics and practices of the people involved.

[4] Hobart has framed the issue as one of necrophilia. Rather than a dying paradise, Bali is already dead, its corpse feasted on (to use the least disturbing image) by academic and tourist maggots.

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