

**Live or Dead?**  
**Televised Theatre and its Audiences in Bali**

**In**

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**New Approaches**

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Balinese actors often say they much prefer performing before live audiences than in recording studios. In this chapter I shall examine some of the differences discernible in the same plays as acted in front of village audiences and as broadcast on Indonesian state television. Theatre involves not just ad libbing the exchanges between actors, but also a less obvious, but overlapping, dialogue between actors and audience. In a different and little remarked upon way, the audience also performs. Acting to camera, with or without a tame studio audience, therefore transforms the occasion. ‘Mediatizing’ therefore is a more complex issue than just the effect of television recording and broadcasting on theatre. For a start, it invites us to consider what is involved in dialogic models of social action and in communication itself.

An inquiry into what happens with theatre once performances start to be reproduced in different ways raises wider questions. For a start, from the moment that people become familiar with reading stories in newspapers, books or as cartoons, with hearing them on radio or seeing them on television, the idea of theatre itself is transformed. The possibility is born of discriminating nostalgically between authentic, ‘live’ performances and their mechanical or electronic reproduction. In fact, however, it is the contrast itself, which creates the conditions of possibility of a privileged, essential, originary form, against which divergent versions may be compared. Once theatre is reproduced electronically, live performance itself changes, because it is always framed against what it is not.<sup>1</sup>

Theatre in Bali is a vast topic. Not only are there many differing, changing and new genres, but until recently there were innumerable, local, part-time clubs of actors and dancers, besides the better-known professional troupes. My concern however is with one aspect of theatre in Bali, that is as a set of changing practices. This raises questions of how televising theatre affects performing and viewing as practices.

The impact of television on theatre can be judged by the fact that, on the best estimate, over eighty percent of theatre troupes in Bali disappeared during the 1980s, as audiences were bent on watching only the best, once they knew what it was like. With theatre becoming a mainstay of local television peak-hour scheduling, I found myself caught up in frequent conversations between actors, whether as performers or viewers, who used to complain about the rigidity of the medium. As a central part of the television project has been recording broadcast Balinese theatre, a way of testing and fleshing out the actors’ appreciations was to commission performances of the plays previously recorded from television.<sup>2</sup> We chose the occasion of local temple festivals in Tengahpadang, because that is when Balinese themselves put on theatre plays.

<sup>1</sup> This piece was originally written for a collection *To change Bali. essays in honour of I Gusti Ngurah Bagus* in 2000. For some reason, it seems to strike a chord, because I have been asked to republish it in different forms, including a much-truncated version in *Media worlds: anthropology on new terrain* in 2002. My former student, Angelina Karpovich asked if I would agree to write an updated version for this collection.

Although Balinese actors and audiences would on occasion speak of a performance being dead (*mati*) or, more rarely, alive (*urip*), there are qualitative differences with the English distinction, in which live is privileged. *Mati* suggests flat, pedestrian, indifferent, that the performance did not come off. *Urip*, as I have met it, refers to those special moments, especially when a particular actor is what we would call ‘inspired’ and which Balinese call *mataksu*. The live or dead dichotomy in the title is therefore my distinction, not one I have heard Balinese make.

<sup>2</sup> The camera-woman for the live performances was Dr Felicia Hughes-Freeland, who had extensive experience in ethnographic film and who collaborated on the television project during its first three years (see Hughes-Freeland 1992).

By the time it came to record the temple performances, we had the problem of how to decide which examples to request from the large range of possibilities in the archive. Again, the obvious way was to involve local aficionados of theatre and ask which plays they had enjoyed the most and which they also considered to be good examples of their respective genres. The choice of plays excerpted below is partly theirs.

Primarily for reasons of cost, we restricted ourselves to the two most popular and commonly performed genres. The first, *Derama Gong* (hereafter simply *Derama*), sprang up in the late 1960s, not coincidentally after the abortive coup d'état in 1965. The plots are sometimes adaptations of written stories from the Pañji cycle, more often they are fictive creations. Sometimes, they are notionally set in the Javanese kingdoms of Kuripan, Daha and so on of the Pañji stories, sometimes not. Although the period in which they are set is pre-colonial Java or Bali, they are 'modern' in the sense that the characters draw upon new fashions, such as the hero and heroine holding hands, and introduce contemporary themes and interests. *Derama* is in spoken Balinese; song and dance are fairly incidental.

By contrast, *Arja* is of far longer standing. De Zoete and Spies described it in *Dance and Drama in Bali* as corresponding 'most nearly to our idea of opera, or rather of musical comedy... sentimental situations are developed as nowhere else on the Balinese stage [prior that is to *Derama*]. There is something of the comedy of manners in its construction' (1938: 196-97, my parentheses). Depending on fashion, some male rôles, especially refined ones, are played by women, while some of the coarser female rôles may be played by men. The plots of *Arja* are drawn from a wide range of literary sources, the Mahabharata, Javanese romances, Chinese tales of passion and others beside. The aristocratic figures sing, part of the time at least, in verse of different metres, *pupuh*, partly in *kawi* (a literary register of Balinese and Javanese), partly in high Balinese, and are paraphrased by their servants or ministers. For a time during the 1970s and 1980s, *Arja* lost out in popularity to *Derama*. By about 1990 however *Arja*, which retained a certain classic integrity, had come back into vogue. Audiences had become bored with *Derama*, which had become increasingly derivative. With hindsight *Derama* looks increasingly like an ideological form peculiarly suited to the New Order régime, like *Sendratari* (on which see Hough 1992). Based on invented stories in a never-never land, where the good win through and the bad get their just deserts, *Derama* bears little relationship to any contemporary social, political or economic realm of lived experience.<sup>3</sup>

The *Derama* in question was first serialized on Balinese television between March and April and the *Arja* between June and July of 1991. The *Derama* troupe was one of the best known on the island, *Bhara Budaya*, and the *Arja* actors were from the state radio company, *Radio Republik Indonesia*. The live performances were filmed as part of the television project in August 1992 during temple festivals in *Tengahpadang*. Both live and televised performances lasted some seven hours. The dialogue was extemporized in both, as was some of the singing

<sup>3</sup> The absence of genres which address the problems of ordinary people in contemporary Indonesia is a striking feature of Balinese theatre. This has not always been for lack of trying. The few attempts I know of to mount plays with social realistic themes were met with severe warnings by the authorities. A review of the television project's holdings show that local television has been more experimental. Before events in May 1998 however, these too remained conservative, not least for fear of censorship. This does not mean that theatre is incapable of social criticism and commentary. On the contrary, Balinese are skilled at developing analogy and extrapolating contemporary implications. However this gives a decided advantage to the well-crafted plots of the more classic genres (see Hobart 1991).

in the live Arja. The bare outlines of the plots were set, but the order of scenes changed somewhat, especially in the Derama, partly because there were slight differences in the cast for the live version and this encouraged them to play to the actors' strengths and preferences. I am not concerned here with the structure of the plots, but with the relationships between the various parties involved in the occasion as a whole.

If they found a play was interesting, my Balinese colleagues would tend to talk about it, sometimes for days afterwards. I spoke at length subsequently with several of the actors, but my translation and analysis of the performances also relies heavily on the commentaries provided by a number of villagers from Tengahpadang who were enthusiastic and often knowledgeable theatre-goers. As I have outlined elsewhere (e.g. Hobart 1999a), I shall mention only the immediately relevant figures with whom I worked as a group, the setting in which Balinese most often talk over theatre. Three were themselves actors. The oldest was a well-known Arja teacher and dancer, then in his early nineties. The ex-village head previously mentioned also happened to be a skilled player of ministers and servants in Derama. There was also a wealthy farmer and devotee of shadow theatre; a very clever, but poor, flower-seller; and a tenant farmer who knew a great deal about theatre, but who assumed a guise of naïve stupidity in company. His granddaughter, who was training as a actress-dancer at the Academy of Performing Arts (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia) in Denpasar, also took part. Various other friends and relatives who had watched the plays would drop in and out of the discussions.

### **Warming up the audience**

A favourite theme among actors, and a corollary of interactive theatre, is the difficulties of getting the play started in the first place. Even if you are experienced and have danced in a place many times before, you do not know who comprises the audience that night, what mood they are in, nor what they will respond well to.

In Derama, it is commonly servants, either male or female, playing comic rôles whose job it is to warm up the audience.<sup>4</sup> So let us have a look at how the same pair of male servants worked a television audience to a local live show. The play was about Gusti Ayu Ratih (the title of the play), the sheltered and beautiful daughter of a minister to the court of Daha to whom the heir to the throne becomes attracted. He seduces and impregnates her but, ensorcelled by a princess from another kingdom (who lusts after him), he abandons her. Ayu Ratih goes mad and runs wild in the forest before a wise hermit realizes the nature of the problem and sets her and the prince to rights. The opening half-hour or so has virtually nothing to do with the plot other than setting the scene.

### **The televised version**

Two close servants of the prince, Gangsar and Gingsir, entered and began talking about the state of affairs in the kingdom of Daha (a section known as *Angucap-ucap*). The scene was set, the audience knew where they were narratively. The servants then tried out various routines to establish what would make this particular audience laugh. They started in low key with two

<sup>4</sup> In Arja the task falls again to a servant, the demanding female rôle of *Condong*. The word for her male counterpart, *Panasar*, nicely suggests what is involved. The root is *dasar*, basis, foundation: it is the anchor rôle.

jokes about there being many food-sellers around the theatre, which depended simply on saying the same thing but in different formulations.

This provided the springboard for their first routine. They moved to listing the kinds of cakes on sale in the stalls round about the open theatre stage, so laying the foundations of a patter which would lead them to a popular Javanese song on television via a pun on a kind of cake, *Ketuk Lèndri*, which is close to the title of a song, *Getuk Lèndri*. In the course of this, an interesting exchange took place.

- Gingsir:** Bullet cakes. (*Jaja batun bedil*)  
**Gangsar:** What?  
**Gingsir:** Bullet cakes have been just been going like wild fire.  
**Gangsar:** Where's that?  
**Gingsir:** (*Delivering the punch line.*) In Kuwait and in Iraq, bullets have been selling well!  
**Gangsar:** You've only seen the image (on the television screen) and you're saying they sell well. Huh!

The song made the spectators laugh, not because of the words, which were Javanese and they did not know, but at Gingsir's dancing a Javanese pop song and movements in the style of *Jogèd Bungbung*, a genre in which a female dancer invites and dances flirtatiously serially with male members of the audience. In the middle Gingsir wove idiosyncratic noises into the song: *Kaing! Kaing!* which is the Balinese verbalization of a dog barking (Woof! Woof!). Gangsar told him to shut up, *Cèk! Cèk!*, the rebuke used to silence a dog. They switched to a take-off of the sort of pop group which performs *Getuk Lèndri*. Gingsir swung his arms and hands out to his sides ever more wildly in a take-off of disco dancing, until he finally grabbed Gangsar - who looked suitably mortified - by the genitals.

At several points what the spectators are to make of what happens is not clearly determined. For instance, is the goosing of Gangsar just clowning around, an 'accident' of Gingsir's exuberant performance? Or, in the context of a Javanese song, is it a rude comment on the loose, and ambivalent, sexuality, which Balinese stereotypically attribute to Javanese? Is Gingsir's barking dog in the middle of the song merely any incongruity which will make the audience laugh? Or are there potential resonances about the fact that dogs are known to be *haram* to Muslims, which most Javanese are? To what extent is the song about broadening Balinese horizons, or about domesticating, or making fun of, Javanese popular culture, which Balinese sometimes fear is becoming dominant in Indonesia?

The range of interpretive possibilities at many points in the play is left open, as is the possibility of not bothering to think too much and just to enjoy what goes on. If interpretive closure of the text hinges in some way on the original intention of the playwright, then it is often impossible in practice to know what this might be and how we would decide upon it (Hirsch 1967). In what sense then is it useful even to try to determine validatable and unambiguous intentionality (as Ricoeur insists is possible, 1976) in these quick-silver, ad-libbed, unrepeatable exchanges which depend so much upon the moment? The response in media studies to the problems of interpretation has been to shift the emphasis from closure of the text to the audience and its 'preferred reading'. This still leaves awkward questions, because

the audience is as problematically an idealized entity as is the text. How do you determine exactly who, or what, the audience is (Ang 1991), let alone what they are thinking? In what sense, and under what circumstances, is it useful to talk of audiences 'reading'? How, and on what authority, do you extrapolate unitary, coherent preferences from this? And what underwrites the equivalence of what spectators experience or think and academic 'readings' of these? In answer to the last two questions, I prefer to give significantly greater weight than do most media scholars and even anthropologists to what the performers, local experts and lay people had to say as part of the analysis.

So what did members of the audience make of this scene? Rather than centring about a clear reading or interpretation, the commentators treated the scene as providing an occasion for talking about a whole range of issues from how well the cast acted compared to other performances they had watched recently or remembered vividly; to discussing which bits they enjoyed, found funny, sad or moving; to expatiating upon cryptic sections of dialogue or remarks the actors made; while those who had themselves been actors tended to frame their remarks with comments on technique, timing and so on.<sup>5</sup> Even my apparently straightforward description above of the scene relies on extrapolating from the criss-crossing opinions, judgements, divagations, misapprehensions and arguments, resolved or otherwise, between the commentators. The idea that you could uncritically impose hermeneutic practices honed upon the credo of the eternal unchanging text to elicit a hidden and transcendental truth (exemplified by the Bible) on such labile, occasional, immediate and unrepeatable performances would be farcical, were it not still the normal academic way of proceeding.

At suitable junctures I asked the group of commentators direct questions. Did they find the exchange funny? Not particularly. Gangsar and Gingsir were often much better, but they had to be careful what they said in front of television cameras. More important, the audience (from Tohpati, near Denpasar) were 'raw' (*matah*). Why then did the television audience laugh? Because they were taken by surprise by the unexpectedly topical reference. Did anyone have an idea why they used that particular song? The group often gives live shows around Bali apart from their televised appearances. So they have begun to run out of fresh jokes and have chosen a song which they know is likely to appeal to the young, while the older spectators enjoyed watching the send-up of the song. The overriding aim in any event is to make the audience like them, appreciate their performance and want to pay to see them again.

A remark by Gangsar neatly exposes the fatuity of interpretive analysis, which do not fully take into account the presuppositions of the actors and spectators. Why, I asked, in the middle of the exchange about cakes, did Gangsar suddenly cut in, breaking the flow, to remind Gingsir that he didn't know what had actually happened in the Gulf War, he only saw the *lawat*, image, impression, shadow. Without an appreciation of Balinese epistemological ideas about the relationship, and consequent practices of discriminating, between verifiable perceptions and appearances, the reprimand makes little sense and appears just another example of the irrationality or superfluity of the native mind. However it is only if you reverse normal

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere I have argued (1999b) that, in theatre, Balinese elaborate rather than translate. Both intention and preferred reading models presuppose some version of the copy, or correspondence, theory, the task of interpretation being a more accurate, valid or full re-presentation of something. Theory and practice are then both bent to the demand of this perfectible repetition (Rorty 1980; cf. Deleuze 1994). My concern, by contrast, is to focus on the intellectual practices by which people engage in commentary and criticism.

procedure and review the analytical presuppositions using those of the object of study that the shock occurs. The Balinese comedians, delightfully, find support in Baudrillard's infamous work, *The gulf war did not take place*, a neat and parallel critique of Euro-American habits of conflating what they see on television with reality.<sup>6</sup>

### The live version

The play took place in front of the Pura Dalem Kauh in Tengahpadang during the temple festival there. The seating for several hundred was packed out and there was a further large crowd floating between the play, temple, stalls and gambling groups.

The play started conventionally, with a deep voice through the microphone offering an apology, *pangaksama*, for any mistakes or faults on the part of the actors, a request to Divinity that the audience enjoy the performance and to bring *prama santi*, peace of mind.

The same servants, Gangsar and Gingsir, were the first on stage. There happened to be two people of the same names in the village. So the servants started by joking about how I Gingsir (who worked for the Bintang beer company in Denpasar) had to get permission to come home for the festival. They then made a play of confusing the fact that I Gingsir and I Gangsar in Tengahpadang are in-laws with their own relationship. They proceeded to show an equal fluency with the names of the stall-owners round the stage. The aim was to surprise and please the audience by showing that they are *au fait* with the local scene.<sup>7</sup>

After this preamble, Gangsar and Gingsir started complaining that they were poor servants, who just got leftovers (*lungsuran*) to eat and one chequered (*polèng*) sarong each to wear. How much better the audience was turned out than they! Obviously the audience appreciated what is fitting according to Hindu religion and were dressed suitably for a temple festival. While comic characters often comment on what is appropriate, dress and current affairs, I found this rather heavy-handed, although the commentators seemed less worried about it. It sounded like a sermon by organic intellectuals on state religious policy as refracted through local government.

Gingsir protested that he was ashamed (*kimud*) to go to court in old clothes. But how was he to get new ones? He had no money. They despaired, until they suddenly came up with the idea that they could get money if one of them pretended to be dead. Ni Wayan Suci (a stall-keeper) would give Rp. 1,000 (then about U.S.\$ 0.50) when she heard her relative, I Gangsar,

<sup>6</sup> Balinese distinguish carefully between the reliability of different kinds of ways of knowing about something (Hobart 1985; Matilal 1986). Some scholars have apparently used Baudrillard's book to argue that he is committed to idealism or relativism or both (e.g. Sokal & Bricmont 1998). This requires such a naïve realist reading that it would seem more likely to be a postmodernist ploy to discredit their opponents, were it not for the fact that postmodernism is effectively an imaginary. The process of imagining itself is a fine example of the displacement, fracture of desire, fragmentation of identity and failure of representation conventionally attributed to postmodernism by self-confessed experts. Those who champion or deride this empty category are hard pressed to name anyone who will admit to being a postmodernist, as opposed to being labelled as such by their admirers or detractors. As far as I know, the only person who claims to be postmodernist is Gayatri Spivak, which rather makes the point. The acclaimed arch-priest of postmodernism, Baudrillard, quite reasonably says he does not know what it would be were it to exist (see 1993).

<sup>7</sup> On a small matter of ethnography, Clifford Geertz argued that Balinese 'anonymize' personal identity, by ensuring that the personal names of adults are never used in public and are not even known to most people (1973). If Geertz were correct, then the joke would have fallen flat, which it did not. Nor does it square with quite mature adults' names being bellowed across the stage to a mixed audience of 500 people or more.

was dead (a further play on local knowledge). With some splendid mathematics, they worked out that, if they could manage to persuade two people to give Rp. 1,000 each, they would have *two million Rupiah* and be rich! After some persuasion Gangsar agreed to mimic being dead. Gingsir whipped out a length of white cloth and put it over Gangsar, who promptly leapt up and ran in fear off stage (because witches would think he really *was* a corpse and come and eat him). Gingsir had to go off and entice him back<sup>8</sup>

No sooner had the white cloth been put over him again than Gangsar had to get up to have a very public pee in the shrubbery which made up the back of the set. The two then sat down for a moment and gloated over what they could buy with all the money they would get. They would buy a car! Gangsar lay down again and promptly got an enormous erection. Gingsir asked him ‘what dead person stands up like that?’ and detumesced Gangsar hard with his foot, to a bar from the orchestra. Gingsir then threw himself into a wild fit of mourning, lifting his sarong to expose a vast pair of red underpants (not the sort of thing you do in a televised performance) and hurled himself about the stage howling in grief. Gangsar ran off again in fear and had to be dragged back by Gingsir, who explained that he, Gingsir, had to cry realistically if they were to get people to believe them and so pay up.

Now Balinese are noted for their restraint in mourning.<sup>9</sup> So, once again how the audience is to take this exchange is left open. There is no final interpretation. It could be a commentary on, or caricature of, the difficulties, at times impossibility, of ordinary people so rigorously repressing their feelings. It could be a play on what the actors have seen on television and so frames Balinese practice. Even if it is a play for laughs by inverting ‘normal’ behaviour, we are in the realm of a potentially complex commentary. By this stage, it should be evident that the task of theatre is not simply about attempting to represent the normal, or ideological, but at the least is about encompassing quite different points of view, a double-, or multiple-voiced commentary. It is a singular form of commentary, because the commentators do not set themselves above what they comment on. On the contrary, they exemplify and embody it. In other words, we are dealing with the coexistence of different points of view, even epistemologies, where the actors, who are at once their own authors, refuse to allow themselves that ‘surplus of vision’ which so distinguishes the authoritative author. The complex author of the play, the actors with the help of the audience, has no superior point of view, nor do they predetermine, except in the minimal terms set by the plot, how the rôle shall develop.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Once again, it is central to much of Geertz’s view of Bali that public life is a sort of stage, in which being embarrassed, *lek*, is really ‘stage-fright’, a fear that one will not perform adequately. Yet there is little sense here that Gingsir suffers from stage fright at the idea of appearing at court in rags. Geertz’s analysis, if anything, draws attention away from considering the range and circumstances of publicly recognized emotion. Rather more to the point, Gangsar’s pretended fear at playing dead has echoes. The play is taking place, after all, next to the graveyard and a temple closely associated with witchcraft. Live corpses (*bangké matah*) are used in Calon Arang plays, where there is a very real danger, as happened in Tengahpadang some years after, of several people dying very shortly afterwards.

<sup>9</sup> My thanks are due to Linda Connor, who has worked on representations of death in Bali over many years and drew my attention to how sharply this scene departed from conventionally appropriate behaviour.

<sup>10</sup> This, I think, is what Alton Becker was trying to get at in his intriguing argument to the effect that Javanese shadow theatre involves multiple epistemologies (1979). My complaint is that he never fully carried through his remarkable insight, but slipped into equating epistemology with Geertzian worldviews, which rather spoiled an important and innovative argument (see Hobart 1982).



### Some local comments

The evening after the play I invited a group of people round and asked them what they thought of the play. The flower-seller said that he liked the version in Tengahpadang much better than the televised version (which I had showed them on video some weeks before). The farmer said that he did not really like either, because he did not like *Derama* on principle, but confessed that the live performance had made him laugh, while the broadcast had not. The old actor disagreed sharply with them, although he did admit the jokes were far funnier in the live version. He specified in detail the differences and his reasons for preferring the televised version: the dancing was better, their expressions (*semita*) were more developed, their movements (*ambek-ambekan*) were more appropriate to dance and they followed the plot, with the correct stages of its introduction. These are *Panglembar*, the introductory dance which establishes the space for subsequent performance; *Angucap-ucap*, describing the state of affairs; *Mapaitungan*, deliberation, when servants talk over things before attending their masters; *Ngalèmèkin* when the elder of the two servants gives (moral) advice to the younger; *Panangkilan* when they go to the court.

The ex-headman arbitrated. Because he was a professional, the old actor, and only he, realized all the faults. The scene of playing dead was very clever because it hit several targets at the same time. The development of the jokes was much better in the live performance because the audience helped the actors much more than the theatre audience in the televised version, who were stiff and unresponsive.

### Setting a trap on stage

By this point it should be evident that a full comparison of two versions of the play would require a book in itself. The same would be required for the performances of *Keris Pusaka Sakti* (roughly: The Magical Heirloom Sword). Instead I would like, using a scene from the live version of *Keris Pusaka Sakti*, to develop the point about the openness, what Bakhtin called ‘the unfinalizability’, of dialogic interaction. The scene is significant for what Euro-American theatre people and scholars might call ‘breaking frame’. The image presupposes that the structure of the plot and the actors’ lines are sharply demarcated from the actors’ and audience’s lives. In other words, what we are pleased to call ‘the dialogue’, of the play is all-too-often effectively a fractured monologue, which would be threatened by the possibility of non-mock interaction (rather as most academics dislike students interrupting to ask questions when they are in the full loquacious flow of a lecture).

The scene takes place in the court of Jenggala, where a meeting (*paruman*) is in process between the Queen, played by a famous Arja actress, Ni Rèbu, and her two servants, the Panasar and Wijil, and her Chief Minister, who is however marginal to the following exchange. From what transpired, it looks as if the actors playing the Panasar and Wijil must have plotted beforehand to try to embarrass Ni Rèbu on stage. It is probably not coincidental that this happened while we were recording with several well known local actors, including the old actor and the ex-headman, in the front of the audience. It is also fitting that the exchange occurred

during a scene set in Jenggala, the kingdom of the Mad, where the otherwise unsayable is uttered publicly.<sup>11</sup>

It began innocently enough. Wijil started singing and begging the Queen's pardon. She, not realizing what was afoot, told him not to abase himself too much, just to say what he wanted. He sang he wanted to ask for something - a gold ring. Up till now he had only worn silver, he would like to try gold. She asked him angrily if he has any idea how much gold is a gram? He replies:

**Wijil:** My Lady. I thought you were going around selling gold!  
**Queen:** (*Suddenly realizing what all this preamble has been leading to*)  
 Useless creature! What a gob you've got on you!

Without understanding the associations and context, it might at first sight appear odd that Ni Rèbu reacted by looking discomfited (*congah*). As the commentators explained to me later, her face indicated fleetingly that the remark had got through to her. As they put it, she *negakin debong*, literally she had sat on a banana stem: you suddenly realize the damp has got through to you. To understand the significance of Wijil's statement requires some prior knowledge, not least about the actors themselves. By way of background, the exchange relied upon the knowledge that Ni Rèbu, who was old and had never married, was widely believed to have taken an oath that she would remain unmarried in return for the gift of becoming a superb actress.<sup>12</sup>

When Wijil began to sing, it marked a break from the previous theme of the dialogue. Was it merely a development of the plot or something else? Rather obviously, scripted theatre effectively excludes such possibilities, which keep Balinese actors on their toes at the best of times. To begin with it was not clear, why he was apologizing: it could have been a development of the plot. (Remember the narrative is almost entirely ad-libbed. Much of the play is built up on such off-the-cuff digressions.) Wijil referred to wanting to have a gold ring. He had never tried something like that. When Ni Rébu asked him how much he thought gold was worth, she stepped into the trap. She indicated how high a price gold had, but it could as well have been something else that she had of great value to offer, on which however she put an exorbitant price. Wijil's reference to a gold ring, which has of course a hole in it, pointed to the possibility that its referent was the fact that she valued her virginity, or her freedom from marriage (the words the commentators used was ambiguous here), as others do gold - in other words, very highly. That she grasped something was afoot was clear from her reply, followed by her kicking him. As far as I, and the Balinese I have spoken to, know there is no fixed, or generally known, association of rings with women's genitalia. It relies upon a context internal to the performance in question.

She turned then to her other servant, the Panasar, who leapt up kicking his legs out behind him, snapping to attention and replying in Dutch. She told him off and then asked him to sing (everyone knows he has a lovely voice). But he had to smile and not show his teeth at the same

<sup>11</sup> It is important to remember that both plays were performed at the height of the New Order repression of free speech, when theatre becomes a privileged, if potentially dangerous, occasion to articulate, albeit it indirectly, otherwise unairable views. The present exchange however has a different purpose.

<sup>12</sup> The same was said of a fellow actress, which may tell us something about the constraints on able women in what remains in some ways a pretty patriarchal society.

time - an impossibility. She had started to exact her revenge. He too was useless, she said, and he would be reborn as a toad hopping about under banana palms looking for food. The Panasar made as if to pull himself together and started to sing. The audience was expecting it to be: 'Singgih Ratu Sri Bupati - my Noble Queen'. Instead he sang 'Singgih Ratu Sri...Rébuwati', her real name, Rébu, with the common suffix '-wati' for a woman. The queen promptly punched him on the chin and he made as if to stagger off, shaking his head like a boxer who has received a hard punch from his opponent. Boxing at the time was one of the favourite programmes on television. A complicated mixture of shock, merriment, sympathy and perhaps more was elicited when the victims were on the receiving end of hard blows, which were then often mimicked by the viewers.

The Panasar immediately retorted. The exchange hinges on a pun on *sarap*, which is both 'brain' and 'leapt upon by'. The exchange assumes the first sense until the punch line. This time the Panasar manoeuvred her into setting herself up, while Wijil was now telling him to lay off.

- Panasar:** Ooh! My brain. (Or 'I've been leapt upon'.)  
**Queen:** You'd be better off dead anyway.  
**Panasar:** Ow! My brain  
**Wijil:** Leave off.  
**Queen:** What brain? ('Leapt upon by what?')  
**Panasar:** Leapt upon by a tiger. (*A remark aimed at Ni Rébu's character as just demonstrated.*)

I have no ground to think the unfolding sequence had been worked out beforehand. Being a good actor in Bali is knowing how to proceed in an open-ended dialogue.

Everyone greatly appreciated the evening. They agreed that it had a life which the televised version, performed in a recording studio with no audience, had not. The old actor was unstinting. The performers were excellent, he said, because they made the audience laugh constantly and they had no idea what was coming next. (Neither, for that matter, did most of the cast, it seemed.) Ni Rébu in particular was a seasoned (*wayah*) performer, which came out in the way she turned the ambush back on her fellow actors. The commentators all much appreciated how 'dry' (*tuh*) she was, a term used in the first instance because she did not burst out in a sweat, as a lesser actress would have. More generally though the term is used of a hardened professional, who avoids showing any feeling of discomfiture or embarrassment on being trapped, taunted or caught out on stage.

The ambush was not a private joke among the actors. The point precisely was to try and catch Ni Rébu out in public. In other words, not only the actors had immediately to catch an oblique reference (selling gold) and follow the twists and turns of the exchange. In order for the ploy to work, so did a significant proportion of the audience. Tengahpadang is known in Balinese thespian circles as producing, on the whole, sophisticated audiences who are adept at obscure sexual innuendo. What works is specific to a given audience though and the actors had gently tested the waters earlier in the evening. Imagine the sensitivity to nuance, associative possibility and the familiarity with the use of a range of speech genres required of at least a part of an audience. The contrast with the stereotypical American or European 'couch potato', gawping mindlessly at the television set, could not be starker. Audiences however are not natural entities but, as this last exchange should make clear, are the continually changing

outcome of particular viewing practices. The kind of practices required to produce the more sophisticated members of a Balinese Arja audience differ sharply from those which supposedly bring about the ‘dumbing down’ required of television audiences in the current capitalist era. That said, the vision of a global settee-full of viewers made idiotic by the vast machinery of media imperialism and endless bad Hollywood films is very much an élite representation, which itself requires critical examination. The argument is nostalgic. It yearns for a time when it was not thus, or looks to a utopia when the masses will be emancipated, whether they like it or not.

I hope it should be equally clear that the play is not a production which is finalized before its performance, even though the minimal parameters of the plot have, of course, to be set for there to be a play at all. There seems to be no comparable requirement to suspend disbelief as in European theatre. The interpretive version, of course, is the leap of faith into the hermeneutic circle. From my inquiries of spectators, there seemed to be no frame to break in the ambush on Ni Rébu. Each performance, especially ones before live local audiences is unfinalizable, and unrepeatable as the ambush indicates. The whole event hinges upon different sets of relationships working well simultaneously, notably that between audience and actors, and between the actors themselves. Actors continually stressed to me that unless they feed each other phrases, lines, puns and possibilities for others to develop a scene (*saling enyuhin*), everything falls flat. Balinese theatre depends crucially on others to make it happen.

### Live or dead?

At the time of filming the plays, the contrasts between television and live local audiences were probably greater than they are now. Local audiences increasingly expect plays to be as-seen-on-TV and actors replicate favourite routines. Casts become more adept at coping without audiences and so on. Certain broad differences remain discernible in the two plays discussed. There is greater restraint and formality in the style of dancing, the structure of scenes and speech is more thought through for televised performances. And there is far less attempt to improvise whole sections, although the dialogue is still extemporized. The jokes are more restrained. The actors do not set out to surprise the audience or one another as they may do in live performances. Most people agree actors on television are *aken*, serious, and feel weighed down, *sarat*, by the occasion. Partly, of course, this is because of the draconian censorship imposed by the New Order régime (a topic still in need of research) which takes the edge off the social criticism expected of theatre.<sup>13</sup> The actors themselves though stress that they suffer the constraints of broadcasting to a large, heterogeneous and unknown audience.

<sup>13</sup> As a famous actor put it, because newspapers, schools, universities and the other social institutions (of what is often dubbed ‘civil society’), which are involved in shaping public attitudes are under such tight government control, it is left to actors to be the effective social commentators and critics. Such comment and criticism on television is potentially risky. That is not to say that it is not done, but it is usually indirect: one speech, two objects (*raos asiki tetujon kakalih*). It is up to the audience as active participants to reflect on what is said. They must decide for themselves whether there is more to what takes place than appears at first and what, using the clues provided, they wish to make of it.

In the project’s archives, one of the finest plays is of the actor in question excoriating corruption in government and its effects, in the course of a Sendratari around the plot from the Mahabharata, where the Pandawa are condemned by their enemies, the Korawa, to exile in the forest. The actions in the play of the leading Korawa provided the basis for a neat analogy. Significantly, this play was televised from the annual provincial Arts Festival and was performed before a large audience. Once again the audience seems crucial.

When actors complain of performances on television being dead (the word they often used was literally dead, *mati*), they are pointing to the absence of dialogue with the audience. To the actors, the television studio makes their performances closer to monologue.<sup>14</sup> In such a dialogic world, we start to see how Europeans and Americans fetishize texts and presume the naturalness of producer-centred models. A Balinese theatre play is the product of a complex agent comprising most notably the organizers of the occasion, the managers and actors of the troupe and the audience. An allure of television is that makes the denial of the complexity of agency easy, by reducing production to creators and stars, and audiences to responses and ratings.<sup>15</sup> Because audiences are relatively silent compared to the actors does not entail that they are not agents. We confuse activity with agency at our peril. There are many kinds of quiet, including reflection, judgement and waiting. Balinese actors know only too well they have to convince and seduce each new audience.

### Some implications

The scenes discussed make little sense until they are treated as an engagement with the circumstances and the context of that particular performance. In other words, you cannot extract the essence of a performance from the contingent circumstances of the occasion. That is what Bakhtin called ‘theoretism’, insisting on understanding events in terms of rules or structures and failing to appreciate how particular, open and unfinished they are. ‘We cannot break out into the world of events from *within* the theoretical world. One must start with the act itself, and not with its theoretical transcription’ (Bakhtin 1984-5: 91).

A related argument has been advanced by Mark Poster, who criticized transmission models of communication for reifying and fetishizing information at the expense of appreciating mediation as involving different kinds of social practice, which necessarily constitute knowledge, language and its subjects or objects differently (1990).<sup>16</sup> Television itself, he

Obviously though actors have a far freer rein to engage in criticism before a live audience, when they are not being recorded. Johannes Fabian has made the point that such socially critical theatre is quite common and that, when academics capture such live moments of intellectual guerilla warfare, as it were, in writing, they may imperil the people they work with (1991). Academic study in such situations is never comfortable or neutral, but part of the broader argument and so raises inevitable dilemmas.

<sup>14</sup> Balinese actors for the most part still adopt a markedly theatrical style on television in such genres as sitcoms and domestic dramas. The reasons deserve study. Lack of experience in the structured informality and intimacy of television as well as the lack of training in television acting may be important.

<sup>15</sup> On the notion of complex agents, see Collingwood 1942; Hobart 1990b; Inden 1990. The image of agents as being complex helps to counter the Euro-American obsession with condensing agency into a hero figure, the author, playwright, film or stage star. The result is to deny how complicated and open the practices of production themselves are.

<sup>16</sup> For example,

the mode of signification of the classical capitalist period was the representational sign. The social world was constituted in the figure of ‘realism’ through signs whose stable referents were material objects. The medium of exchange that held together signifier and signified was reason. The communicative act that best exemplified the representational sign was reading the written word. The stability and linearity of the written word help to constitute the subject of reason, a confident, coherent subject who spoke the language of realism through signs whose highest ideal was the discourse of natural science (1990: 61).

Poster develops an explicitly Baudrillardian argument, which undermines the solidity and self-evident referentiality of much academic writing. No wonder so many scholars have their knives out for Baudrillard. Poster

argued, belonged to a broadcast model of communication, a media age which is increasingly superseded by a new age of interactive media (1995), which requires us radically to rethink of our presuppositions about communication, its subjects and objects. Poster takes interactivity to be a function of new technologies. As the scene outlined above shows, it has presumably always been around, but has been sidelined by the dominant epistemological fashion.

### Conclusion

What can a study of Balinese theatre contribute to the issue of performance and mediatization more generally?

Perhaps all theatre and television consists of different degrees and kinds of dialogic performances, be these among actors; between scriptwriters, actors and producers; between actors and audiences; between the producers (however conceived) and their targets; among viewers themselves; between one performance and its predecessors and successors; between ways of imagining the world. Scholars tend to focus on dialogue and to ignore the other ideas in Bakhtin's constellation. In one sense Balinese theatre exemplifies a significant degree of polyphony insofar as the actors develop their characters as beings in their own right and do not just go through the motions of patching together bits and pieces from past performances. The singular nature of extemporized multi-authored theatre in Bali invites us to reconsider and develop the notion of polyphony to see where it leads. The miracle of academe is how this dazzling richness, diversity, unexpectedness gets cut down into a drab and tedious monologue.

Texts, media, form *versus* content, meaning, codes are the familiar language by which academics extrapolate from the way the world is (Goodman 1972) and hypostatize it, by inventing a tame, convenient, portable, studiable and almost wholly imaginary object. Up to now, we have been able to get away with the illusion that this was accepted, proper, indeed hallowed, intellectual practice. That it failed to engage with how Balinese set about performing, enjoying and criticizing their theatre was their problem not ours. The excuse that once such events might have been difficult to record, still less present, is now visible worn to the bare thread it always was now that multimedia formats are no longer nerds' wet dreams. By contrast, I am suggesting that we consider not just unrecorded theatre performances, but all the occasions on which they are reproduced and enjoyed, as congeries of practices. Such a dialogic analysis cannot be achieved by theoretical introspection or speculation, but requires new kinds of engagement with Balinese theatre and its audiences. The study of mediatization would be the inquiry into all the new kinds of practice, which electronic media have brought about, not least the authenticating of unrecorded performances. It is not television which has killed off 'live' performance so much as the activities of experts.

does not however take on board fully the implications of the Baudrillardian critique, which would require a more fundamental ontological revolution than he has yet acknowledged.

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