

N. K. Maringsih - N. M. Sarniani - C. Wistari

The Servants' Story

Interview by Julia Varley

In September 2000, the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) performed Ego Faust in Copenhagen. One afternoon I sat with the Balinese women of the ensemble (Ni Ketut Maringsih, Ni Made Sarniani, Ni Wayan Sekariani) as they were putting their make-up on. We talked about the use of voice and the relevance of text in Balinese classical dance and drama. Cristina Wistari, an Italian who has been living and performing in Bali for twenty years, contributed to the discussion as she helped with the translation, while Ni Wayan Sekariani, who had previously been interviewed for The Open Page, helped interpret the logic of my questions. Long discussions in Balinese and Indonesian interspersed with much laughter preceded the answers, since Ni Ketut Maringsih and Ni Made Sarniani usually just perform without asking themselves or their masters why they should do things in a certain way.

There are many forms of classical dance and drama in Bali. Gambuh (the most ancient), Arja (an equivalent to opera) and Topeng (the mask dance) are the forms mostly referred to in the following interview.

What were you taught the first time you used your voice in performance?

MADE - The teacher gave me a text and I started to learn it by repeating the sounds of the syllables he made, for example "a-du". The teacher would give the tonalities and show me exactly how I should use the voice, and I would write down where it went up and down. I learnt by moving with the voice. Later at home I practised opening my mouth and throat with those syllables.

CRISTINA - The first thing I learnt with the voice was Gambuh. My master, I Made Djimat, taught me the *ucapan* (dialogue), the way of speaking. He would say a syllable and I would repeat it. Later I worked on Arja with Ni Nyoman Candri, a very experienced singer and teacher, to help open my voice. The Balinese spontaneously use nasal sounds as part of

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their language, while I needed a lot of time to learn to take their high pitch. Ni Nyoman Candri would sing the first line without ornamentation, which in Arja is always the most complex, and through repetition slowly my voice changed. One is allowed to add variations only after the basic line has been learnt. The Balinese don't have specific voice exercises so all I could obtain were the tones. I remember I spat and coughed a lot. Ni Nyoman Candri also remembered that, at the beginning, her throat scratched and that she suffocated and had to spit many times. The search for the correct sound has been very difficult and I have found it only recently for the *ucapan*, but not yet for singing, perhaps because I feel self-conscious as a foreigner.

KETUT - I started to use voice in 1984, when I began Gambuh. At the beginning, the teacher, my father I Made Djimat, just gave me the text as he thought I had a good voice. I learnt by myself moving with the voice. I used to try Arja singing in the bathroom as well. I like to dance and use my voice at the same time.

Is it difficult to know where to place your voice when learning from a man?

MADE - In the *ucapan*, the speaking of text, I could easily follow the teacher's example. My voice is low, so I prefer to work with a man. When a woman, Ni Wayan Sudi, taught me I could not follow her high pitch. I force the high tones that don't come naturally to me. Now I just practise during rehearsals and performances.

KETUT - A man's voice is lower than a woman's, so I had some difficulties, but it is important to make an effort to follow the example and find your own voice. At the Academy I am also taught by a man, so I am accustomed to learning from men. I can

manage both very high and low voices, but I like to stay in the middle range. I don't have time to practise, even if I would like to, because I go to a school where we only do Arja, and I teach at home.

What difference is there between the voices used in Arja and Gambuh?

KETUT - Arja is more difficult because it has many different ways of using the voice, for example the *wilet*, the ending, when the voice has to go very high with decorations and developments in the final verse. If you master your voice in Arja, then Gambuh is much easier. In Arja you use the *kembang*, a different poetical phrase structure with rhyme and you have to know the exact number of syllables. In Gambuh, Condong, the character I usually play, never sings, she only uses the *ucapan*, the spoken text.

In performance, does the voice or the movement lead?

KETUT - The movement influences or accompanies the voice, but you must make voice and movement become one. I am beginning to have this feeling of unity, which makes me happy.

MADE - For me, movement has precedence over voice. I have been studying dance since I was nine years old, so I feel more confident and comfortable with the body and I am only starting to have a feeling of unity with my voice. The dance has become a part of me, while I cannot yet find a vocal expression I consider my own, because it has not developed. I don't yet have the feeling that my voice is free.

Made, in Gambuh, you usually play Rajaputri, the princess, one of the noble characters. Is this because of your physical shape or does the character fit your

voice as well?

MADE - I feel that role is correct for my body, but my voice seems too low to me and I ask myself why am I not able to do the part as it should be, which makes me a little unhappy. Another role I like doing is the Kakan-kakan, one of the four maidens of the Princess, who speaks less. Her voice is similar, but dancing with other people and being part of a chorus, I am not heard so much. Rajaputri's voice has to be very refined, changing from very delicate to high pitches with many variations.

Cristina, when you play Panji, a male noble manis soft character, or Rangga, the Prime Minister, your voice sounds very high to me and does not seem like a male character's voice. Is this because you are a woman or do the men also play with such high voices?

CRISTINA - These characters should speak in this way. It is very difficult to find men to do speaking *manis* male characters, so today these roles are often played by women. An old master known for his excellent voice capacity gave his Panji a very high thin quality. I remember that when I tried to make my voice smaller, another great master told me not to use falsetto, but my own voice. In the Topeng mask dance, I had to find male voices with strong intonations that Balinese women usually do not play, except in the group I work with now. But the women in that group are Arja singers, so they have worked with voice since they were children.

Do women ever use the kind of strong male voice that we would call throat voice in the West?

KETUT - A woman would never speak like that. It is not suitable for a woman to speak in that way, no situation would allow it.

If you were in Europe, with no Balinese men

around, would you like to try making that kind of sound?

KETUT - Yes!

Ketut, in Gambuh you play the Condong, Rajaputri's chambermaid. What are the characteristics of Condong's voice?

KETUT - I was chosen for that role because of my physical appearance. Her voice has to be *keras*, strong, so you can hear it well, but also delicate and refined in the transition from one note to the other, and then strong again. It should touch high and low pitches, and cover a great range of intonations always with a very loud volume. A good Condong uses the voice fully and I have to be in control of these variations all the time. My character speaks Balinese, like all the servants who translate the noble characters who speak Kawi, the ancient language nobody understands any longer. I have to translate what Rajaputri says. Generally the text is almost fixed, but there are variations. Especially when you are more experienced and accustomed to the text, if the noble characters say something different the servants will translate accordingly.

Is it difficult to learn a text in Kawi?

MADE - Yes, although I understand a little bit. Both the Princess and Kakan-kakan speak Kawi. We use Kawi only in performance and when I speak it my voice is different from when I speak Balinese. The meaning, timing, sound, notes and melodies are different from everyday Balinese. It is higher and lower in pitch and we have a special tempo. Both happy and sad feelings and the end of sentences finish with a downward inflection.

Cristina, you don't speak Kawi or Balinese, but Indonesian. Is it difficult to learn a language that you don't understand?

CRISTINA - In the beginning, when I had to speak Kawi without understanding anything at all it was terribly difficult. I had no points of reference and I had to learn everything by heart. It is a very complex language that only a few people study seriously, for example those who study to become Dalang for the Wayan Kulit (shadow mask performance). Few people really speak the proper high-class Balinese. Although I would never say I understand Kawi, one learns certain sentences that are often repeated. It is like Latin for an Italian. My teachers did not consider it to be important that I understood the words, but that I should understand the situation, the musicality and the feeling of the character. Within the same situation different sentences can be used. For example, in the final duel scene, I now have a series of sentences with which I can improvise. Gambuh performances today can be full of improvisation, while repeating etiquette sentences like "come here", "go there" or "don't do this". The sentences must respect the rank of the characters and make some reference to the story, reacting to the situation. If my partners in the scene don't keep to the text and improvise in Balinese style, depending on the

intonation of what they say, I can choose one sentence rather than another. To improvise is fun and gives a much greater freedom. The story is always explained in the action and not in the text.

How do you work with the text?

KETUT - We are free to make variations, although there is a specific way to say the text, that is the same from one performance to the other. You cannot improvise totally: for example we know we have to go up and down in tone three times in one verse. The variations can depend on the character being happy or angry.

CRISTINA - When you find your vocal score, you keep it. The text can change, but you keep to that way of using the voice.

So one day you can talk about love and another about food, but you keep the same intonation?

KETUT - Yes! In a normal situation, for example when the Princess is going to make herself beautiful to receive the Prince, or the Princess is



Ni Made Sarniani in *Ego Faust* Photo: Fiora Bemporad

going to meet her father, the text will change and the use of the voice will remain the same. But for some characters the quality of the voice will vary when they get angry or when they are very happy. This doesn't happen for the Condong so much, as she speaks Balinese and she is never angry. But she can have a special teasing voice when the Prince or the Princess play their romantic scene, that is difficult to do, because you have to add an extra acting quality to what you are doing.

MADE - Rajaputri is never angry!

CRISTINA - There is a standard style for each character. Generally speaking you would not say that the intonation is connected to emotion, but if Prince Panji gets angry with his brother, a strong *keras* character, their voices will change and become sharper. When the emotion is over, the voice will return to the tonality that is correct for the character.

How do you learn the stories of Gambuh?

CRISTINA - The teacher brings a story that has been passed down for many generations and everybody more or less knows what it is about. Within the tradition no new texts are written. In the past the master based the *ucapan*, the text that the different characters speak, on a story, and the dancers learnt it by

heart. It was not a written tradition: the master prepared the text for a special occasion; it was not something that would be published or kept.

In Arja the stories are quite banal, although the voice-work is beautiful. In both Gambuh and Topeng, the main narrative is carried by the servants. The noble roles have the responsibility of character, voice and speech, but the servants tell the story and explain. They speak about all that has to do with society and religion. Contemporary comments are never put in Gambuh, but always in Topeng. So the servants' roles are very difficult and important and they are given to expert people, who have studied and know the stories very well. They must be very quick. In Gambuh, it is very new that women dance since, as recently as twenty-five years ago, men played the female roles. Women have never played Topeng, except now in my new group, because women are traditionally mute. Apparently this was because women did not know the language and the texts, and they had not studied, but now they all go to school and artists like Ni Nyoman Candri must learn Kawi. In the new Topeng group, women can at last improvise texts that speak of their own way of seeing their life in Bali.

Translated from Indonesian by Cristina Wistari

NI KETUT MARINGSIH (Bali) was born in 1978 and she is the youngest daughter of the renown master I Made Djimat. Since her childhood, Ni Ketut Maringsih has studied dance with her father and at the National Academy. She is known for her interpretation of strong female roles and especially for the Condong character.

NI MADE SARNIANI (Bali) started to study dance at nine years old with her uncle I Made Djimat. She has practiced different dance styles such as Legong, Gambuh, Calonarang, always playing the refined female roles. Today she works with the ensemble of Gambuh Pura Desa Adat Batuan.

CRISTINA WISTARI (Italy/Bali) has lived in Bali studying classical Balinese dance for twenty years. In 1993 she started the Gambuh project with the aim of preserving the most ancient dance form in Bali. She regularly performs Gambuh and Topeng in the temple festivals in Bali as well as leading workshops and performing abroad. In 2000 she published the book *Gambuh*.