

Kerensa Johnston

Easy Rider

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to people of different cultures
has been theatre and dance.*

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At the age of nineteen my concepts of world theatre were non-existent and yet somehow I had set my mind on studying Balinese dance with a view to one day working with one of the greats. I am of a generation of young Australians who were bound to be influenced by the influx of cultures around them. It is now ten years since I began studying with I Ketut Tuter, a seventy-year-old master of Balinese dance. During those years studying and performing Balinese dance, I have used performance as a reason to travel.

The first time I danced in Bali, the audience laughed; I was so fierce and angry, breathing through my mouth, that it was almost comical. In many cases my sharing of what I had experienced through dance and theatre was the only way in which I could repay the families that had been so kind and generous with me during my travels.

In Australia, I found myself pigeon-holed as just a Balinese dancer, performing in folk festivals and touring schools. I was expected to explain myself and become an educator. We had to tell the history of Indonesia, of the population, of how the masks were made, of the cultural traditions and give explanations of each and every musical instrument as well as teach the children some of the Indonesian language. To me it seemed incredibly unfair that a Western ballet company could use their performance style as a way of artistic expression without having to give a history of their country, its population and how ballet developed; they could just tell the tale of *Romeo and Juliet* through dance.

One of the common threads in my travels is that generally speaking it is very old people and children, regardless of their cultural background, who seem to be able to understand the essence of what I am performing. Educated people in adulthood seem to be stuck in their heads searching for meanings and requiring explanations rather than responding to what they see in an instinctive way.

Once I travelled to Turkey. People asked what I did and I showed them. One carpet shop even closed its doors for the afternoon while I did demonstrations of Balinese dance. The employees of the shop in turn showed me dances from regional areas of Turkey. One of the young boys was doing his Ph.D. on Shakespeare. I did not know much about Shakespeare, my knowledge of literature was mostly directed by my fascination for the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. Consequently I spent the rest of the afternoon learning why Shakespeare was considered one of the greatest writers of all time.

Because I have always been self-funded in my study, the process of learning has been slow and I have often felt like I have not achieved enough. I come from a culture, where up to the age of twenty-four you have your whole life ahead of you, yet when you haven't made it by the age of twenty-seven people ask: "What have you been doing with your life?" In times of doubt when I question whether I have thrown my life away, it is my taxi driving uncle who says: "Don't worry, you haven't thrown your life away, you're like those guys out of *Easy Rider* and you dance okay too. If you love what you are doing, then just do it!"

In 1999, I fell in love with a Javanese performance artist and painter in Bali. He knew little of traditional Balinese culture and dance. Up until that time, I usually only mixed with the Balinese and shut off the part of me that was Western as much as possible. I had now come to a time where I felt a need to share a part of my own performance history. This led me to create small contemporary dance pieces with traditional musicians and friends and finally to the creation of the MAI Festival of Contemporary Theatre in Ubud, Bali. I performed in a show called *Swan Song* which was adapted from the poem *Nyanyian Angsa*

by Rendra. It was the first time that I tried to combine Western acting, two languages and a knowledge of Balinese dance and music. The piece is the direction in which I would like to head.

Since the age of nineteen, my reason to travel and relate to people of different cultures has been theatre and dance. There have been times when I have been incredibly lonely and inhibited, but nothing has compared to the loneliness that I have found as a performer in my own country. I find myself with no role models and few people with similar interests. In the last two years, I went in search of Western role models who have had similar experiences living in the West. In theory I had always believed that Balinese dance training should be able to enhance the work I do as a performer. My trip to Europe showed me that what I would like to achieve is certainly possible and that previously I probably just lacked the skills to make it happen. Today I feel I have gained enough to take the experiences that I have had on my travels in a new direction and develop new work.

KERENSA JOHNSTON (Australia/Bali) has a background in Balinese and Minangkabau dance theatre, Odissi and Western theatre. She regularly tours schools and travels. Living in Bali she is involved in traditional and contemporary performance.