

Ni Nyoman Candri

The Hero Disguised as a Servant

Interview by Cristina Wistari

When did you start to dance?

I was seven years old when I started to dance. My father, I Made Kredek, first taught me the Baris, a vigorous warrior dance that develops stamina, resistance and muscle power.

My father was a renowned dancer who knew several genres of the Balinese repertoire: Topeng, the masked dance drama; Arja, the operetta; Gambuh, the most ancient form of dance drama; and Parwa the masked dance drama that narrates the *Mahabharata* epic. My father played the Wijil, the king's servant in Topeng, Arja and Parwa. He was small and thin and therefore this role suited him very well. At that time only men danced Gambuh and therefore they played all the female roles. In Gambuh, my father played the Condong, the maid of the princess.

Whose choice was it for you to learn Baris?

My father decided I had to start with Baris, because this is the traditional way in Bali, at least for young boys. Baris incorporates a lot of the dance vocabulary of the male repertoire. Once you have learnt it correctly, with all the different basic positions, walks and expressions, the other dances are easier to learn.

At that time I was too little to be able to decide for myself, and my father said that it was important to strengthen the muscles in my legs. Later I decided to learn Legong Keraton, the basic female dance for young girls. Legong Keraton was taught in the *banjar*.¹ Since I was thin and small, I learned the role of Condong. In Bali the role is chosen according to the dancer's morphology. Each character requires a specific type of body. For example, the Condong requires a short, thin dancer with a round face.

I like him because he is gracious, polite, kind, delicate and charming. I do not like people who are impolite and talk rudely. I like gentle refined people. Mantri Manis sings at a very high pitch and in a very sophisticated way. I identify with such a character because he embodies all the qualities that for me are of main importance in a human being and he portrays them through both dance and voice.

1. The *banjar* is the community place where all village activities are held, including the teaching of dance and music.

Did you learn other styles of dance?

I studied several other dances, like Panji Semirang, but only performed Baris and the Condong in the Legong Keraton. When I grew up, as I liked to sing, I studied the role of Mantri Manis,² the refined King of the Arja or, as I was small, I played his son. I often played these two roles while my father danced Topeng in the role of Wijil with I Ketut Rinda, another famous dancer, in the role of Panasar.³

The size of my body has always strongly influenced what I played, confining me to a character that I would not have chosen if only I had been taller. If you are the wrong size, you cannot play the hero according to Balinese tradition.

But you chose the role of Mantri Manis?

Yes, because of his high refinement in dance and singing. I love to sing, and Mantri Manis never speaks. With dance and great variations of *tembang* (sung or recited poetry), he expresses a large range of different emotions like love, anger and sadness. He can be *manis*, delightful, and *keras*, powerful.

In contrast to other more dynamic and extrovert dances, Mantri Manis has a refinement and depth that you can experience only with Panji, the hero in Gambuh from which Mantri Manis derives, and with the Dalem, the King in Topeng.

I danced Mantri Manis until I was about twenty years old. I would never have given up performing it, but my father once more restrained me from continuing because the size of my body no longer matched the char-

2. *Manis* means refined and gracious in contrast to *keras*, which means strong and vigorous.

3. *Wijil* and *Panasar* are the two servant characters with the function of storytellers in Topeng.

acter.

We always have something in common with the chosen character. What attracted you the most in Mantri Manis?

I like him because he is gracious, polite, kind, delicate and charming. I do not like people who are impolite and talk rudely. I like gentle refined people. Mantri Manis sings at a very high pitch and in a very sophisticated way. I identify with such a character because he embodies all the qualities that for me are of importance in a human being and he portrays them through both dance and voice.

When did you change character and become a Condong?

I was about twenty-five years old and I already had two children. I was too old to keep on dancing Mantri Manis, though still today he is my favourite character. My father was categorical: if I wanted to continue dancing I had to choose a role which would suit me better. Not only the size of my body would interfere with the general opinion and expectation, but also my face looked too old to play romantic scenes. I had to change to the Condong. Since I was a child, my father wished me to play this difficult role. Once you have mastered it you can easily learn all the other female dances.

At first I was very sad, I felt that the role of Condong was imposed on me, but I would have never given up dancing all together, so I accepted and in the end I liked it. I changed my mind primarily because my figure fitted the Condong perfectly, but also because it is an important, interesting and complex role. She has to translate the singing of the Galuh, the princess, from Kawi to the Balinese vernacular, so that the public can understand what is being said. Kawi is the ancient



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Javanese language that is understood only by a very few literate people. The Condong has to know all the different *lakon* (stories), she has to be able to sing, speak and dance. You have to be a very skilled artist to cover all these different aspects.

I like to study languages and to be able to talk about philosophy. This character gives me the freedom to choose what I want to say during the dialogue.

When finally you liked performing the Condong were you able to identify with her?

What I found most interesting is that she can give moral advice when I perform for both children and adults. I like her because she is humble and that is how we should be with friends or when we visit people at the *puri*, the palace. It is very important to learn to respect everybody.

For four years you have been part of the Topeng Shakti, the first Balinese group of only women dancers and musicians who play a traditional male dance, where most of the roles are male. With this group you play Wijil and Bondres, the comic characters. Why did you chose them?

My father played Wijil, I had the mask and this character is small and thin. It is a way of remembering my father, to keep in touch with him, as if he were still alive. I am reminded of when I accompanied him to perform in the temples. In this way I keep the family tradition going.

Wijil is the male equivalent to the Condong. They both are translators and storytellers. In Balinese dance drama there is no written text and all the dialogue is improvised so these characters must both be knowledgeable and have a sharp mind in order to give worthy points of view and translate whatever is being said on the spot, adding funny comments.

Which character do you prefer to play: Condong, Wijil or Mantri Manis?

I like the Condong, but... Mantri Manis is still the deepest in my heart.

Translated from Indonesian by Cristina Wistari

NI NYOMAN CANDRI (Bali) is a very well known Arja (Balinese Classical Opera) singer, and is famous for her Condong role. Since her childhood she studied with her father I Made Kredek. Ni Nyoman Candri is one of the few *dalang* (shadow theatre puppeteer) in Bali, an art usually reserved to men. Since 1988 she has performed with the first Balinese female Topeng company, Topeng Shakti.