

Wayang performance

Wayang kulit shadow play

Wayang is a generic term for puppet theatre (*golek*), shadow puppet theatre (*kulit*), masks (*topeng*) and dance (*wong*) from Indonesia. Wayang kulit, which was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Status, is a unique form of theatre that makes use of light and shadow. It is probably over 1000 years old. A very important fact is that the story is told using moving shadows, which can be seen but not be touched. It was common belief that the souls of ancestors were brought to life as shadows that provided advice and support. As a result, these performances have spiritual and magical significance for Javanese and Balinese people.

Dalang

The performing *dalang* [2] is a puppeteer who also directs the gamelan orchestra. He presents the great Hindu Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* on his screen. During the *wayang kulit* performance, he is seated cross-legged behind a large *kelir* (white cotton screen), facing the audience and with his back towards the musicians. The *dalang* moves the figures, speaks their roles and sings, thus creating the illusion of conversation. With a small wooden mallet (*cempala*) wedged between the toes of his right foot, he strikes the *kotak kayu* (a wooden chest for carrying the kulit puppets) to set the tempo of the music. A copper or bronze oil lamp (*blencong*) is mounted between the *dalang*'s head and the screen, which serves as the only source of illumination. In this way, the spectators will see the puppets as shadows. All the figures that are not used are stuck in the *gedebok* (a banana tree log), whereby the evil characters are arranged to the left and the noble ones to the right.

Contemporary forms of wayang kulit

In contemporary forms of wayang kulit play, the 'shadow screen' serves as a background/backcloth. The *dalang* and his assistant are sitting with their backs towards the audience. In this way, the beautifully coloured *kulit* figures can be seen in all their splendour. In addition, new techniques have been introduced. For example, modern computer adaptations of gamelan music can sometimes be heard instead of music played by a gamelan orchestra.

Gunungan

The *gunungan* [16] is held up to announce the beginning and end of a wayang performance and to indicate a change of scene and strong emotions, as well as the elements of fire, earth, air and water. The *gunungan* is an ancient tree motif that originates from India and consists of two parts: a mountain and a tree. The tree motif is rendered as a combination of two different trees: the fig tree rooted in heaven and the earthbound lotus tree rising from the waters. The *dalang* also waves the *gunungan* about when natural forces are at work in the story. It is considered the most important requisite in *wayang* theatre: it is a magical and protective element representing the world of the past and the future, and symbolises its creation.

Blencong

The *blencong* [5] used to be used during wayang kulit performances. Where the lamp is held up behind a screen, shadows are cast on it. If the puppet is held tight against the sheet, its shadow will be sharp and stable, but where it slightly bends away from the screen, it gradually fades away.

□ **G**od and consort

Bataru Guru

Bataru Guru [18], often referred to as Shiva, is the supreme god who reigns over heaven, the home of the gods. He is described as having four arms, long fangs and crippled legs, and is usually depicted standing on his mount *Andini* (Nandi). He is also known by other names: Sang Hyang Manikmaya, Sang Hyang Caturbujana, or Sang Hyang Otipati, which refer to different aspects of his godhood. Bataru Guru has two siblings, one is ruler of the world of Ogres and demons, the other - probably the jester Semar, one of the *Punakawan* - is sent to earth to guide and assist human beings.

Batari Durga

Batari Durga [17] is Bataru Guru's (Shiva's) consort in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories. She actually is the demonic form of Uma or Parvati. This character of sacred personalities is quite adaptable in Javanese religion. Uma can become Durga or Parvati, or a number of other mother goddesses, depending on the context. As Uma, she is the mother goddess, creator of life, while as Batari Durga she can be a fierce protector, or an enraged demon. As Parvati she is the loving wife of Shiva. It is interesting to know that to young women in Indonesia Batari Durga represents 'girl power'; she can fight any demon and stand up against any man or demon.

□ **L**overs

Rama

Rama [10] and Sita are protagonists in one of the most famous love stories of all time. Described as being deeply in love, Sita and Rama are theologically considered incarnations of Lakshmi and Vishnu, respectively. Rama is a key character in the *Ramayana* story. Since childhood, he has been trained to protect the oppressed and to combat tyranny. He tries to preserve truth and justice, and rejects savagery. He values honour above his own desires and those of his family, which leads him to make uncomfortable and sometimes heart-breaking decisions.

□ **S**ita

Sita [11] is the central female character in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. She is Rama's consort (avatar of Vishnu) and an avatar of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, and wife of Vishnu. She is valued as a standard setter for wifely and womanly virtues for all Hindu women. Sita is known for her dedication, self-sacrifice, courage and purity. She is abducted by Rawana, Ogre king of Alengka, who also tries to seduce and marry her. After their reunion, a seed of distrust had been sown in Rama's heart, because he feared that Sita might succumb to Rawana's sweet talk again.

□ **O**pponents

Rawana

Rawana [12] is the primary antagonist in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, where he is depicted as the Rakshasa king of Alengka. In this story, he is usually portrayed negatively, kidnapping Rama's wife Dewi Sinta. Rawana wanted to wreak vengeance on Rama and his brother Laksmana for cutting off his sister Dewi's nose. However, in other texts he is portrayed as a respectable man and a responsible king full of all royal qualities.

□ **Hanuman**

Hanuman [13] is a central character in the Indian epic *Ramayana*. He is the white monkey character who fought in Rama's war against demon king Rawana. He is loyal and noble. In his search for Dewi Sinta, Rama's wife, who was abducted by Rawana, Hanuman burnt down Alengka (Sri Lanka), Rawana's kingdom. Besides the famous *Ramayana* story, Hanuman is also referred to in the *Mahabharata*. Several texts also present him as the incarnation of Lord Shiva. Hanuman is a humanoid of the Vanara clan.

Mother and son

Dewi Kunti

Dewi Kunti [9] is a small, beautiful and compassionate princess and King Pandu's first wife. She is the mother of three of the famous *Pandawa* brothers, Yudhishtra, Bima and Arjuna, and became the loving stepmother of the other two, twins Nakula and Sadewa, after their mother died. As a girl, she studied religious philosophy and was given a *Batara* chant, which could be used to summon a god, who would impregnate the person who chanted. As a result, the *Pandawa* brothers were all fathered by different gods.

Bima

Bima [8] is the second son of Dewi Kunti and Pandu Dewanata. His biological father was the god of Wind and Desire, Hyang *Batare Baya*. This explains his numerous mystical powers and characteristics. He is blessed with towering strength and a huge appetite, capable of blowing down mountains and surrounded by a whirlwind wherever he goes. Bima also has very long thumbnails, the *kuku pancanaka*, that can be used as a weapon. He is protector of the natural mountain springs that irrigate the rice fields, which he creates by scratching the earth with his thumbnail.

□ **Mother and daughter**

Cangik

Cangik [14] is a character in Javanese puppetry, who appears in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories. She is a servant at the court of one of the Javanese kingdoms. Cangik is a small, skinny, long-necked elderly lady servant, or a 'lady in waiting', with a soft 'toothless voice' and the mother of big Limbuk. It is not clear who her husband is. She is pure, honest and faithful, loves jokes, and is both vain and flirtatious. She observes society, politics and cultural affairs. Like the *Punakawan*, she is an excellent adviser, even superior to the Brahmins. It is generally understood that she is skinny, because she is - and always has been - a hardworking woman.

□ **Limbuk**

Limbuk [15] appears in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories. She is a fat, young lady servant at the court of one of the Javanese kingdoms. She has a low, deep, booming voice and is Cangik's daughter. She is pure, honest, faithful and comprehensive. She is not married and not really pretty, but she and her mother frequently discuss potential partners. Both women are flirtatious and Limbuk loves jokes. Like the *Punakawan*, Semar and his sons, she is good at social, political and cultural affairs. Limbuk and her mother usually dress the same, are vain and often carry a comb. They are the epiphany of faithful servants.

□ *F*ather and sons

Semar

Semar [3], father of Gareng, Petruk and Bagong, is perhaps Indonesia's most famous, most beloved and most inscrutable character. He is the servant and adviser of gods and aristocrats. He is both a jester and a master strategist, simple yet wise. He is a perfect fool and all-knowing, famous for his openness and straightforwardness. But he often speaks in riddles. Semar is the personification of a deity - a supernatural being - sometimes said to be the guardian spirit of the island of Java. In Javanese mythology, deities can only manifest themselves as ugly or otherwise unattractive humans. Therefore Semar is always portrayed short and fat, with a pug nose and dangling hernia. He has a fat bottom and belly, a large face and only one tooth in his mouth. The family as a whole is known as the *Punakawan*, clown servants, together with Bagong, Gareng and Petruk.

*B*agong, Gareng and Petruk

Semar has three companions: his adopted sons. Semar was lonely and asked the god Sang Hyang Tunggal to create him a companion. The god replied, 'Your shadow is your best companion'. Semar turned around to look at his shadow and discovered that it had come alive: this was Bagong [7]. To obtain another son, Semar moulded a lump of resin into a person, who he called Gareng [6]. Gareng is short and has a club foot. The third son was a prince who he named Petruk [4]. He is tall and gangly and has a long nose.

□ *Ki* Ledjar Soebroto

Colourful wayang puppets

In the hands of *dalang* Ki Ledjar Soebroto (1938) and his grandson Nanang (Ananto Wicaksono), *wayang* shadow puppets are no longer the demure traditional Javanese characters, moving slowly and gracefully, casting their shadows on a large white screen. Their *wayang* puppets are vivid, colourful and full of life. Born with the name Djariman, Ledjar was the eldest son of Hadi Soekarto, a puppeteer in the small village of Sepuran in Wonosobo, Central Java. As a young boy, he loved to watch his father perform at village parties and ceremonies. 'I loved it when he staged the story of Mahabharata', he said. 'I'd sit there wide-eyed and watch the performance all night long.' In the old days, wayang performances often started late in the evening and finished in the early dawn. Ki Ledjar found himself captivated the whole time. After finishing primary school, he told his father that he wanted to become a puppeteer like him.

□ *Ki* Narto Sabdho

His father then introduced him to Ki Nartosabdo (1925-1985), a famous puppet master and *dalang* in Semarang. Upon seeing the determination of the 13-year-old boy, Nartosabdo decided to take him on as his protégé. 'He treated me like his own son', Ki Ledjar said. 'I lived in his house with his family. Whenever he performed, he would give me the responsibility of acting as his *Srati* (assistant who prepares the puppets and the stage for the puppeteer).' At Ki Nartosabdo's house, the young boy also learned how to draw wayang characters on buffalo hide and to use their horns to make the puppets' handles. 'He named me Ledjar Soebroto, which means "an optimistic person who doesn't complain"', Ki Ledjar said. He lived and studied with the maestro for almost 20 years.

□ **A puppeteer in Yogyakarta**

In 1970, Ki Ledjar got married and, with the blessings of his guru, began his own career as a puppeteer in Yogyakarta. But times were rapidly changing. In the 1970s, Western popular culture began to heavily influence Indonesia. Ki Ledjar said he was dismayed to see that the audiences of his performances were increasingly made up of old men, as young people turned to more 'modern' forms of entertainment. 'Young people preferred to watch TV and movies', he said. During these difficult times, many traditional puppeteers changed professions in order to survive. To make a living, Ki Ledjar joined a local drama group, Ngesthi Pandowo, as a make-up artist and actor. In his spare time, he also crafted traditional masks to sell at his workshop.



Kancil, a mouse-deer

But Ki Ledjar's passion for *wayang* did not let him rest. Deep in his heart, he still wanted to do something to revive the traditional performing arts. So in 1980, Ki Ledjar decided to try making new *wayang* characters and stories based on fables to attract the interest of little children. 'I called them *wayang kancil*, because I was inspired by the fable of the mouse-deer stealing cucumbers from the farmer's field', he said. The *wayang kancil* puppets were mainly animal characters [1]. To make them more interesting, Ki Ledjar steered away from the *sogan* (dull brownish hue) shades of the old *wayang* characters and used shiny and colourful acrylic paints to colour them instead. Children quickly came to love Ki Ledjar's *wayang kancil*. He was often invited to children's parties and schools to perform using his new style of shadow puppets. However, it was not only children who were excited by his shows.

□ **Rien Baartmans**

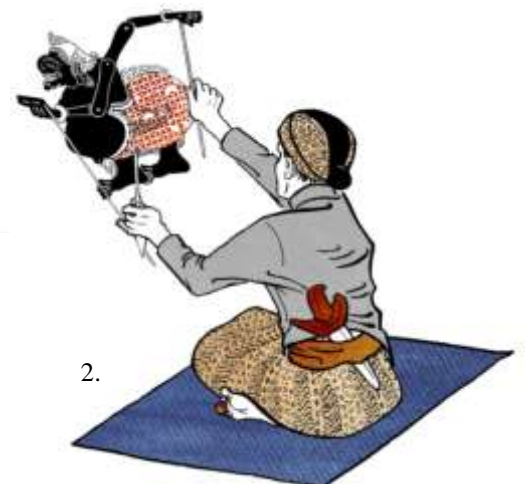
When Ki Ledjar performed with his *wayang kancil* in the main hall of Yogyakarta's Gadjah Mada University in 1980, a Dutch puppeteer named Rien Baartmans (1937-1993) was in the audience and fell in love with these puppets. After the show, Rien asked if he could buy a set of these puppets to take home with him to the Netherlands. Rien performed with Ki Ledjar's *wayang* puppets in museums and cultural centres throughout the Netherlands. Ki Ledjar's unique and colourful puppets soon became well-known and highly popular and orders for his handmade *wayang kancil* and *wayang kulit* puppets started to pour in from all over the world.

- *Text:* Otto van der Mieden ©, with thanks to Indonesian Heritage Society and JakartaGlobe/Sylviana Hamdani (2011). See also: www.heritagejkt.org and <http://www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/Wayang.aspx>.
Hyperlinks: click on the green words. *Picture:* dalang with wayang kulit figures. Fragment from the audiovisual presentation: 'Heb jij voor mij de baby van Katrijn?'/Have you got Judy's baby? Happy Families game on the theme of folk puppet theatre. *Illustration:* Hetty Paërl © (Amsterdam, 1991).

□ *Pictures I*



1.



2.

- *Pictures I*: wayang prop with dalang Ki Nartosabdo and Kancil the mouse-deer [1]. Created by: Ki Ledjar Soebroto © (Yogyakarta, 2014). Dalang with Semar [2]. Illustration: Elsje Zwart © (Haarlem, 2010). Digital publication on www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl: click on the green words for hyperlinks. Concept/text: Otto van der Mieden © (2014). This document is also available in PDF format. See: www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/pdf/pamphlet151d.pdf. Collection: Poppenspe(e)lmuseum/ Puppetry Museum ©.

□ *Pictures II*



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.

- *Pictures II: Semar [3], Petruk [4], Blencong [5], Gareng [6] and Bagong [7]. Puppets created by: Ki Ledjar Soebroto © (Yogyakarta, 2011). Digital publication on www.poppenspeelmuseumbibliotheek.nl: click on the green words for hyperlinks. Concept/text: Otto van der Mieden © (2014). This document is also available in PDF format. See: www.poppenspeelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/pdf/pamphlet151d.pdf. Collection: Poppenspe(e)lmuseum/Puppetry Museum ©.*

□ *Pictures III*



8.



9.



10.



11.



12.



13.



14.



15.

□ **Pictures IV**



16.



17.

18.

- **Pictures IV: Gunungan [16].** Created by: Ki Ledjar Soebroto © (Yogyakarta, 2011).
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Musée de Marionnettes et de Guignol Puppentheatermuseum Puppetry Museum
 Kerkweg 38 8193 KL Vorchten NL T: +31(0)578 - 63 13 29 F: +31(0)578 - 56 06 21
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