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EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH THEATER IN INDONESIA

he presence of Indonesian women on stage is ambiguous. On the one hand they are admired for their sexual appeal, seemingly free lifestyle, possibilities of travel and being away from the home and surrounded by men not connected with their family. But on the other hand they come in for severe condemnation and contempt, and their lifestyle "attracts censure in their perceived deviation from the ideal of female modesty and devotion to husband predominant in Javanese conceptions of gender, celebrated in court literary works and everyday folk sayings". This two-sided image is often defined as something "between that of a prostitute and a film star".

Yet at the same time their persona and behaviour may be seen to tap into an alternate, more ancient and earthy conception of the feminine, a female sexual and procreative power complementary to the male principle, a necessary aspect of cosmic wholeness. With the development of courtly states in Indonesia, it has been argued, and the accompanying adoption of world religions such as Hinduism and Islam, the potentially dangerous force of autonomous female sexuality was tamed and contained by male control, in the construction of the ideal of dependent, subordinate wife.³⁾

¹⁾ Hatley (1995: 572).

²⁾ Hatley (1995: 572).

³⁾ Hatley (1995: 572–573).

In the post-colonial Indonesia the most widespread construction of woman is a woman as a guardian and "transmitter" of "indigenous tradition" that would remain despite change. The New Order described woman as devoted support for husband and family and took away from her any social and/or economic roles she could take on. Therefore, since the world of theatre, literature and art in general is dominated by male artists and critics, women can only create popular romantic fiction at best, but what is deemed to be "serious" is coded as male.

The way women are perceived in society is also connected with their ability to speak and the ability to express desire. Women are denied to be seen as the subject, they are only the object of men's contemplation. Devoid of subjectivity, devoid of the right to speak, they are also devoid of power. The possibility of speaking not only has a personal meaning, but also, or first of all, a political one. Although the dominant gender ideology seems to have a negative impact on female performers, they have started to introduce some changes. The politics of seeing/being seen of women in complicated net dependence among the tradition, religion, forming democracy and violence slowly becomes in nowadays Indonesia a subject undertaken by women-artists themselves and in their art works.

Theatre, the traditional and the contemporary, creates opportunities that were impossible not long ago, when women on the stage had a morally tarnished reputation. *Wayang*, one of the oldest theatrical traditions of the world as well as modern Indonesian theatre derived from the model of Western drama and contemporary puppet theatre are the areas of research undertaken for this paper. Three kinds of theatre are represented by three women: *dalang* Kenik Asmorowati, director Citra Pratiwi and director and puppeteer Maria Tri Sulistyani. I would like to see if it is possible and how the process of empowering women through theatre in Indonesia functions by taking these three artists as examples.

WAYANG. KENIK ASMOROWATI

Women are basically not present during *wayang* performances. In the past women and children could only watch the performances by sitting behind the screen seeing the puppets' shadows – the image of the spiritual world. The men could admire the work of the *dalang* accompanying him in front of the screen and watching the puppets – the material world. Even today, women rather rarely sit in the audience which is dominated by men, and even more rarely

do they play gamelan or become *dalangs* (puppeteers). Some of the presented *lakons* (stories) concern women, but with the exception of Srikandi, a womanwarrior using a bow, there are no strong characters among them; the majority are only a decorative background for the brave warriors and rulers.

The only women accompanying wayang performances are pesindhèn – female singers singing together with the gamelan orchestra. They sing highpitched slow lyrics that convey a mood of serenity and peace and are in contrast to the men's gamelan music. Gamelan as a manufactured instrument symbolises an object of culture, as women's voices symbolise nature. Despite their musical skills, their "sexual openness and availability" are the features which one pays attention to and explains their presence in an environment dominated by men. In the past they were from families of low social status. Their vocal capabilities were always admired, but their emancipation was mere ostentation; most of the pesindhèn were prostitutes or concubine of the musicians or men sponsoring gamelan groups. Although that is all in the past, still sexist and obscene personal allusions are the elements of nearly each performance, as comic as Punakawan's jokes or clumsy fights among ogres (Fig. 1).

In Indonesian shadow puppet theatre, *wayang kulit*, the main person is the *dalang*: puppeteer, playwright, conductor, director, philosopher and teacher. In an interview conducted by Walter L. Williams, one of the *dalangs* recalls:

Dalangs are admired for their mastery of the complex cosmology of the wayang stories, their voice control, and their skills in telling stories in a dramatic and sometimes humorous way. Their ability to perform for many hours is considered a spiritual gift. (...) Of course, for a person to be a dalang, he or she must have a magic condition. A real dalang will never be sleepy or have to take breaks while playing the night-long shadow-puppet performance. (...) A dalang should look for magical abilities to resist feeling hungry, sleepy, and so on.⁴⁾

It is significantly important to underline special, spiritual and magical abilities, which are required from a *dalang*. This part was traditionally played by man, although we do not exactly know the origin of *wayang kulit*, it is commonly believed that *wayang* as a dramatic form has its roots in animistic rituals in prehistoric Java. In those days the cult of ancestors was dominant and it was believed that during the rituals their spirits came to the gathering as shadows,

⁴⁾ Williams (1991: 116-118).

to communicate advice or provide their magic protection. Shaman, priest or priests went into a trance, during which they communicated with spirits and gods. In the course of time, shamans became *dalangs* who, while hidden behind the curtain, spoke about folk rituals and introduced the characters representing local heroes, gods and spirits⁵⁾. Now and then, it was their duty to communicate to the audience the basic of Javanese philosophy, teaching morality or explaining the rules, which should govern the life of each Javanese. A *Dalang's* training starts in the early childhood and lasts for some years in order to learn and understand all the skills: mastery of the repertoire which consists of hundreds of stories and all the heroes and the philosophy included within them, precision in manipulating and animating puppets, using *kawi* – an old Javanese language in which the stories are narrated. The requirements for *dalangs* are clearly defined and described in the "instruction" from the 19th century – *Serat Sastramiruda*.

Preparations before the performance are still traditional. This is a time for spiritual preparation which involves the repetition of special mantras, making offerings and following strict fasting. Many *dalangs* practice nocturnal meditations, called in Javanese *kungkum*, during which for some minutes or hours they are in water: in springs, waterfalls or rivers. This is for the purpose of strengthening them to give them the inner power needed to cope with the hardship of the performance. It is believed that all these actions on the one hand engage the world of ancestors and spirits in the performance, on the other hand they serve to justify all mistakes or imperfections of the *dalang*. He is incorporated into supernatural world but has to remember that he belongs to the human beings world as well.⁶⁾

The strong connections of *dalangs* with the magic, spiritual and supernatural world mean that not long ago it was a tradition passed from father to son only, inaccessible to women. Although *kejawen*, the complex of beliefs and cultural practices confessed by Javanese talks about equal rights for men and women, it was commonly believed that women are not physically and mentally strong enough to cope with the difficulties of an overnight performance, fasting or long periods of meditation lasting hours or days. Watching the performance from the "shadow side" excluded them from observing the art of the *dalang* and from learning how to manipulate the puppets. But for a few decades, women have tried to become *dalangs* more often.

⁵⁾ Irvine (1996: 129).

⁶⁾ Ness (1980: 46).

Kenik Asmorowati comes from a family in which wayang has been present for some generations. Her grandfather was a dalang; her father carves puppets and her brother makes gamelan instruments. Wanting to continue family traditions she decided to become a dalang. She is not the first, but women-dalangs are still in the minority, every year schools educating future masters-dalangs accept only 2–5 women to study in all Indonesia. Based on my own experience and observations as well as conversations with young dalangs, the women's training differs from that of the men. At the beginning especially, they can only hold the puppet; seldom can they practice with the screen and music. After their studies the situation does not change much. In one of our talks, Kenik Asmorowati said that she seldom presents her performances as dalang, perhaps 2–3 times a year, with at least one of the performances being presented during family celebrations. She also added that she runs the family shop near ISI Surakarta with puppets and musical instruments to have contact with wayang and gamelan and to help the family in business.

For many women-dalangs the greatest dream is to create a performance which can be described as wayang kontemporer, contemporary wayang. Gradual changes, the period of so-called "newer innovations" began in wayang over 20 years ago. Even though the audience accepted disco lights instead of oil lamp, the electric guitar and percussion instead of gamelan or elements of kung-fu in the fight scenes, these changes are accepted only in performances created by men. Women are expected to be faithful observers of tradition and strict rules, they must prove to be as good dalangs as men.

Yet the position of women in traditional, regional performance, even in these contemporary times, seems still qualitatively different from that of women actors in 'modern' national theatre⁹⁾.

The most important centres educating future *dalangs* are Institut Seni Indonesia in Surakarta and Yogyakarta, there are also schools led by sultan palaces (*kratons*) in these two cities of Central Java.

⁸⁾ The term "newer innovation" was introduced by *wayang* researcher Jan Mrázek to underline the newest changes in the theatre being the answer to the social changes in the country: Mrázek (2005: 359–536).

⁹⁾ Hatley (1995: 573).

THEATRE. CITRA PRATIWI

The position of women in the theatre despite the fact that the theatre is also coded as male is significantly different.

In fact the prominence of women's bodies and behaviour constitutes a key feature of theatre practice in the early years of the twenty-first century in Indonesia. Highlighting gender issues and women's roles exemplifies and rounds out the narrative of changes in society and performance from the 1970° until today¹⁰⁾.

Even though women still rarely rise to the ranks of independent directors or take part in the discussions of actors and directors about the form of a performance, and their careers are mostly connected with theatres run by their husbands and last up to the birth of their first child, more and more often the artist who cross these borders and stereotypes appear.

One of them is Citra Pratiwi who was born in 1981 (Fig. 2). In her childhood she acquired a comprehensive artistic education, her parents assured her extra dance lessons, took her to performances by groups such as Teater Koma or Bengkel Teater in Jakarta or to contemporary music concerts. It was at high school which she attended not in her home town but in the capital, where her mother sent her in the hope that she would become an "independer and disciplined young woman", that Citra had her first direct contact with the theatre. However, unlike many other theatre artists who say that their first introduction to theatre at high school had a lasting impression, Citra found that it was not what she had wanted or expected. "At the time, our drama coach told us to be sad, then happy, explains Citra in a tone of annoyance, because that was not what she had imagined theatre to be like". "Also her theatrical and artistic passions were not treated seriously by her family but rather as a hobby helping in self development.

The turning point in her career was moving to Yogyakarta and joining Teater Garasi in 2001 where she was involved in numerous productions, such as the series *Waktu Batu* which was produced from 2001 until 2006, or *Je.ja.lan*, which was also performed on several occasions after the *Waktu Batu* series. Teater Garasi was also the place where she learned basic acting techniques, in

¹⁰⁾ Hatley (2008: 249).

¹¹⁾ Kelola database (Citra Pratiwi).

particular related to movement and the use of the human body and where she had the opportunity, during their travels and collaboration projects, to learn and share experience with artists from Asia, Australia and Europe.

[In 2007] when Teater Garasi held a program that was given the name "Solo Project", in which its members were given the opportunity to design the concept for their own productions, Citra began to design a performance that would reflect her own self. She presented a performance of *Ophelia: Rahasia Kolam Kematian* [Ophelia: The Secret of the Death Pond]. The text was an adaptation of William Shakespeare's Hamlet that she wrote together with Ugoran Prasad. In that work, Citra attempted to present Shakespeare's work through the eyes of Ophelia, who does not appear much in the original version. The importance of women's views began to attract Citra's attention in this solo project. She began to use feminist issues as a reference for her day to day work.¹²⁾

The performance was inspired by the death of Ophelia described by Shake-speare and consisted of several, alternative versions which could explain the mysterious drowning of the heroine. It also presented a critical view on the problem of presence/absence of one of the main characters of the drama. We learn the most important details about Ophelia from other heroes who seem to direct her doings, without taking into consideration her thoughts and feelings.

Citra is qualified ethnomusicologist, and as she says these studies have given her a real background and knowledge of the world of art. She combines theatre knowledge gained in Teater Garasi with her dancing education. But more important than technique is making contact with the viewer, transmitting the emotions, thoughts, the content of the performance. The possibility to cooperate with other artists is more important for her than formal education. As she says:

most of my collaborators come from various backgrounds. They include sound artists, visual artists, researchers and many others. (...) I learnt how to connect ideas from different backgrounds into one coherent concept in creating a performing art piece.¹³⁾

¹²⁾ Kelola database (Citra Pratiwi).

¹³⁾ Karunanethy (2012).

In 2009, she created The Migrating Troop, where she worked as an artistic director and producer. "Migrating Troop is a dance, theatre, video, music and visual art kitchen and our special menu is Contemporary Theatre" - so runs the official advertisement of the group. Already in her first work, a dance-video performance called Three-0 where she danced alone against the background of passing cars, the artist expressed a strong preference for certain topics: a woman's body confronted with urban space and passing people as well as the position of a woman in traditional society. In the next performance in 2010, Soda Untuk Cita, four women dancers communicate through the medium of dance the everyday experience of women living in cities, their hopes, aspirations, dreams and anxieties. In the same year, Citra prepared the performance October Poem about the mitoni ritual - celebrated in the 7th month of pregnancy, a wish to God for healthy baby. At the same time, she married the visual artist Yuli Prayitno and she became a mother, resigned from acting in Teater Garasi and devoted herself to her own group, The Migrating Troop. She also became a lactivist, which is uncommon in Indonesia - Citra "is an active member of the Indonesian Breast-feeding Mothers Association. She is a lactation counselor, assisting mothers with breastfeeding problems. She also makes frequent visits to almost 20 integrated health service posts (Posyandu) in her area every month for consultations and campaigns".14)

After a 2-year break in 2012 she directed three performances. The first of them in particular – *The Pussy Foot: Learning To Make Fire* – was the next stage of her narration about the life of women in Indonesia. This project was set up in cooperation with Haseena Abdul Majid, a writer from Singapore and it criticised religion and the violence of which women are victims. The text was translated into body language, dancing improvisation, and with the help of recurring phrases, the main problems of the story were underlined – a heightened awareness of sensuality and an obsessive focus on the body, on violence, on manipulation.

In 2012 Citra received funding from The Empowering Women Artists program.

The selected women artists had the opportunity to create two performances within a period of two consecutive years. In this connection they were provided with training and workshops on artistic techniques, the strengthening of concepts and management skills designed specifically to

¹⁴⁾ Krismantari (2012).

meet the needs of those participating in EWA. They were also provided residencies and guidance within their creative working processes.¹⁵⁾

Each artists could choose one guru, who was to oversee the project both content-wise and artistically. The performance given through the help of a grant was *Mainan Dari Gelas*, based on Tennessee Williams *The Glass Menagerie*, in which the drama of Laura, a disabled young girl living with her abandoned mother and older brother, was incorporated into the Indonesian reality of the 1990s, the period of transformation which marked the fall of the old regime and the birth of democracy. The glass toys the girl plays with and which symbolise her world of dreams are as fragile and labile as the real world around her; moreover, the stage was designed out of cardboard. Once again Citra comes back to the subject of woman in and towards Indonesian society, to her role as silent witness of events, unable to direct her own life (Fig. 4). All Citra's artworks have one thing in common — they always bring women's issues to the stage. ¹⁶⁾

PUPPET THEATRE. MARIA TRI SULISTYANI

Born in Jakarta in 1981 Ria, the only girl in her family, was encouraged by her parents from an early age to be involved in various artistic activities, such as dancing, drawing, acting, singing, "playing with hand puppets, and creating performances using shadows when the electricity was off. Ria's family were the ones who gave her the greatest support in her love for the arts." After she moved to Yogyakarta to study, she also joined student theatre group which was directed by Joned Suryatmoko, the person she described as a "woman hater" but also a person for whom she has great admiration, for his work as an inspirational director and script writer.

"On 2 April 2006, Ria founded the Papermoon Puppet Theatre, a puppet theatre company that she began due to a concern for the lack of space in which children could experiment with various arts media". Earlier Ria wrote and

¹⁵⁾ Kelola database (Program Empowering Women Artists).

¹⁶⁾ Krismantari (2012).

¹⁷⁾ Kelola database (Papermoon Puppet Theatre).

¹⁸⁾ Kelola database (Papermoon Puppet Theatre).

illustrated books for children and was also an actress. Iwan, her husband and co-artistic director in the Papermoon, studied at the Institut Seni Indonesia in Yogyakarta, painted and created sculptures and installations. In the same year they had an opportunity to see and take part in a German Figurentheatre Wilde&Vogel workshop. This experience showed Ria that puppet theatre is not the same as theatre for children. *Teater boneka*, puppet theatre, became popular in Indonesia in 20th century. Its repertoire was inspired by different sources, popular TV programs such as Sesame Street among others. The theatre became so popular that people started to treat puppet theatre, other than wayang, as something that could be suitable for young children only. Wayang itself has never been regarded as puppet theatre, which can be easily seen in the language: the word wayang in old Javanese means ancestor or shadow. The derived word hyang is used to define gods, and the word eyang – ancestors.¹⁹⁾

The turning point for Papermoon and Ria's artistic activity came two years later, in 2008, when she directed *Noda Lelaki di Dada Mona*, "which stunned the audience with its innovations in the world of puppet theatre. This performance was the first attempt to present a puppet theatre performance in a style of realism which was designed for an adult audience".²⁰⁾

This performance was also the first one which raised the subject of the "September 1965 tragedy". 30 September 1965 is a date frequently omitted in modern world history and the history of Indonesia, although it altered the life of almost every village and every town on Java, Bali, Sumatra and other parts of the country. On l October 1965, Gerakan 30 September (30 September Movement), a self-proclaimed organisation composed of representatives of the Indonesian armed forces carried out an unsuccessful coup d'etat, killing six generals. At the end of the day, the Movement collapsed and responsibility for the incident was placed upon Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI). In the following weeks of that month the communists and their supporters or supposed adherents were ejected from public life and arrests and assassinations multiplied. It is estimated that from 78 thousand up to nearly 3 million people were murdered in 1965-1978. Other 1,5 to 2 million were arrested. Successive hundreds of thousands were separated from their families either by being imprisoned or, having been deprived of their citizenship, by being compelled to take refuge outside the country. After 22 years of wielding power Sukarno, the first president

¹⁹⁾ In animistic beliefs the ancestors and gods were often treated equally: Irvine (1996: 129).

²⁰⁾ Kelola database (Papermoon Puppet Theatre).

of independent Indonesia, was toppled in 1967 and succeeded by Suharto; this was the beginning of the Orde Baru (New Order) stage in the history of the country. The purges of 1965, which coincided with the pinnacle of the Cold War, were considered in the West as a victory over communism. These events were taboo in Indonesia for many years. It is only over the last few years that the first publications and films documenting the life of executioners and victims have come out, for example Joshua Oppenheimer's film *The Act of Killing*, which reconstructs the events of that time from the executioners' point of view – the gangsters (*preman*) who are still ruling and have never been held to account for their past crimes.

For Papermoon, the events of 1965 are the key to understanding the past, the present and the future of their homeland. Puppets, because of the association with children's theatre are the perfect medium for discussing difficult subjects. Members of the audience arriving at a Papermoon spectacle thus expect entertainment and fun rather than difficult, controversial or painful themes. Meanwhile, just as in the case of *wayang*, they are shown spectacles relating to values, moral choices and the sort of conflicts, which each of them may encounter in his life. Describing the most difficult moments in the history of contemporary Indonesia, the Papermoon artists do not mention dates, numbers or statistics. They tell the stories of individuals which might have been experienced by the spectators and their families or which actually affected those nearest and dearest to them.

Their last two performances, *Mwathirika* (Victims) and *Setjangkir Kopi dari Playa* (*A Cup of Coffee from Playa*) use the puppets designed by Iwan and built according to Japanese techniques: *bunraku* and *kuruma ningyo*. In the second one the puppeteers move on small, wooden boxes on wheels (*rokuro-kuruma*) animating the puppets (*ningyo*) at the same time. Using the right hand they move the right hand of the puppet, while the left hand moves the head and left hand of the puppet. The legs of the puppets have special hooks which the puppeteer can place between the toes. The close contact between the puppet and the puppeteer improves the realism of the movements and speed of the action. The performances are without words so the movement is the only and the most important way of transmitting emotions and meaning in the performance.

Ria describes Mwathirika:

this is a story about the history of loss (and the loss of history) in our lives. Shouldn't it be so, that if we know what has happened in the past, then

we can understand why we stand here now, and where we want to go in the years to come?²¹⁾

The performance was shown both in Indonesia and abroad, Singapore and the United States among others. The wordless history, in which the heroes are two neighbouring families, is "dedicated to the victims and the missing family members of September 1965 tragedy in Indonesia and of any other tragedy in the world caused by political turmoil". It evoked the same emotions everywhere. As Ria said there were people who survived the Holocaust, terror of the Khmer Rouge regime, Balkan conflict among the audience and they stayed after the performance to talk with her and the other members of the group about their experiences.

The most recent Papermoon spectacle, premiered in 2011, is entitled *Setjangkir Kopi dari Playa* (A Cup of Coffee from Playa). The titular cup of coffee is the leitmotif of a story about a couple separated by the events of 1965, discovered by Ria while searching for material for the previous production. She wavered for a long time whether to base the scenario on this account, fearing the reaction of the protagonists whose story she wished to describe (Fig. 4, 5).

Just after the premiere she had the opportunity to meet them, pass the performance photo albums, recordings and first of all confront her view on their life with their recollections. Pak Widodo was born in 1940 on Eastern Java. As a student, he moved to Yogyakarta, where he met the daughter of the head of a local factory; they fell in love and hoped to marry. In 1960, however, he was sent by the Indonesian government to study in Moscow. On the eve of the departure the young couple became engaged and Widodo promised his beloved that they would marry immediately upon his return. Sharing the fate of thousands of other young Indonesians trained in assorted countries of the communist bloc he had been selected to create the future elite of his country. After 1965, however, all were deprived of Indonesian citizenship. Without a passport, an opportunity to come back home or contact their families, they had lost their homeland and stayed on in the USSR and Cuba. Keeping the promise given to his fiancée, for more than 40 years Widodo tried to reach her. He never married and never returned to Indonesia, having regained his citizenship at the beginning of the twenty first century. Only recently did he find out that his betrothed had married and today has four grandchildren.

²¹⁾ Mwathirika Blog (2012).

²²⁾ Citation from the *Mwathirika* performance.

Ria, as a director, is also responsible for research preceding each performance. But the final effect is always a collaboration between Ria and Iwan. As Ria says, they can work anytime and anywhere together, 24 hours per day. They inspire each other. Papermoon is a theatre company involved in continual development, improvement and instruction. Its technical level is the outcome of hours of rehearsals and discussions. Their openness and comprehension *vis-a-vis* other cultures stem from their experiences from trips abroad as well as those gained while working with artists from all over the world invited to Yogyakarta for the "Pesta Boneka" theatre festival held every two years.

Ria is now the only woman in the Papermoon Puppet Theatre, she was also one of the first woman that was granted by The Empowering Women Artists program. Ria was an EWA grantee in years 2010–2011 which she described as an advantage "to widen opportunities and challenged myself as a woman artist to create beyond something that I could not imagine before. EWA also has been a precious and a battle process for the artists to become more settled".²³⁾

The experiences of Citra and Ria show how the situation in contemporary Indonesian theatre is changing rapidly. Five years ago Barbara Hatley wrote: "Women performers seemed especially marginalised, virtually never directing and rarely participating in discussions about productions". Although theatre is rarely considered as a "serious profession" for women and being an artist is often not accepted by the family and society, the example of these two women indicates that it is possible not only to be an actress but also a director, producer and founder of a theatre along with being wife and mother. This proves the difference between traditional and contemporary theatre in which women get power to show their new role and growing importance in the Indonesian society.

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Fig. 1. Pesindhèn, Surakarta, 19.07.2012, photo by Marianna Lis



Fig. 2. Citra Pratiwi, *Mainan Dari Gelas*, The Migrating Troop Taman Budaya Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, 15.11.2012, photo by Amin Mohamad

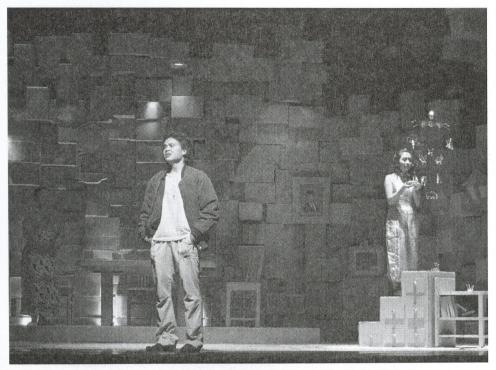


Fig. 3. *Mainan Dari Gelas*, directed by Citra Pratiwi, The Migrating Troop Taman Budaya Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, 17.11.2012, photo by Marianna Lis



Fig. 4. *Setjangkir Kopi dari Playa*, directed by Maria Tri Sulistyani and Iwan Effendi, Papermoon Puppet Theatre Yogyakarta, 14.12.2011, photo by Indra Wicaksono

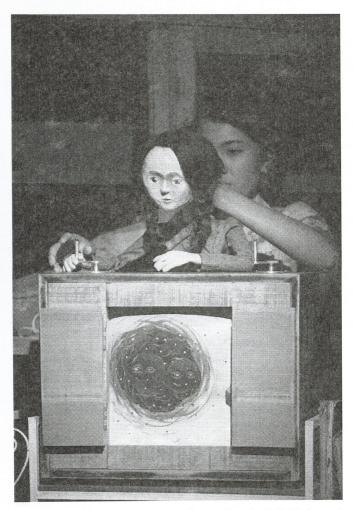


Fig. 5. *Setjangkir Kopi dari Playa*, directed by Maria Tri Sulistyani and Iwan Effendi, Papermoon Puppet Theatre Yogyakarta, 14.12.2011, photo by Indra Wicaksono