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A world of difference: the case of Java

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Review article: I La Galigo

Reviews
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This issue of RIMA has been edited by Campbell Macknight. The Review editor is Paul Tickell.

Cover: A British ship, just arrived from Batavia, in Makassar harbour, 28 July, 1815. This sketch, one among many in this Malay diary, represents a local view of the arrival of modernity. The present whereabouts of the original diary is not known, but there is a microfilm copy in the Australian National University Library, South Celebes Manuscripts, reel 13, item 1. Photograph: Campbell Macknight
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Review article

*I La Galigo*

State Theatre, Melbourne International Arts Festival
19–23 October 2006

*I La Galigo* is undoubtedly wonderful theatre; but how can one describe it more adequately? ‘Epic music theatre’ which appears on the program is unhelpful and I experienced some frustration in trying to get people who had seen earlier performances in other cities to explain to me what exactly happened on the stage. The best short description for English-speakers seems to be to call it an opera — or perhaps an opera with a lot of dance and orchestrated movement. That description gets the importance of the music and it covers the use of Bugis, a language effectively incomprehensible to the audience — but translated in subtitles. It also fits neatly with the essentially narrative character of the piece. The fact that the actors playing various roles do not, themselves, sing is of relatively little significance.

For the purposes of this discussion, it can be taken as given that the production and direction are of the highest order. The pace is stately, but insistent, and the Melbourne audience at the performance I attended sat through the solid three hours with rapt attention. The costumes and lighting, on a very sparse set, create scenes of great visual beauty, often using silhouette against the strongly lighted backdrop. The music is provided by an orchestra and vocalists seated to one side at the rear of the stage and the musicians, while clearly visible, are never visually intrusive. The choreography is highly effective in conveying much of the narrative content and consistently draws the eye without ever lapsing into mere spectacle. At the front of the stage throughout the performance, Saidi, the current leader of a group of *bissu*, or traditional shamans, sits quietly, ostensibly reading a book for much of the time and presumably to be taken as the teller and perhaps the protector of the tale; he also chants occasionally as a device for moving the narrative along.

The reviewer in The Age, Melbourne's leading newspaper, called the production 'inspiring' and thought it 'should prove ... a festival highlight.' This seems a fair judgement, even if much of his associated commentary is a little confused. This confusion is understandable, since some of the notes in the performance program are opaque, to put it mildly.3

One issue that needs to be more clearly explained is the relation of this production — and here again, it helps to use the thoroughly European term, opera — to its source. Shakespeare's history plays go back to Holinshed's Chronicles, and then Verdi, in Falstaff, recasts the Shakespearean material. What analogous process of source and derivation is at work here?

The fundamental source for I La Galigo is a long narrative widely known across Sulawesi and, especially, to Bugis speakers with an interest in their cultural heritage. Although the narrative has an overall shape and structure from the Creator initiating the peopling of the Middle World to the departure of their progeny after five generations, this is more helpfully seen as a series of linked episodes; there is great scope for compression and simplification, or expansion and elaboration within particular episodes and, to some extent, with the limits to the overall narrative.

This material has, or rather had, two main manifestations in Bugis culture. The primary manifestation, in my opinion, was as oral performance. Until quite recently — and even perhaps still in a very minor way — certain individuals could (or can) perform episodes or sections of narrative, finding the actual words spoken as they are performed, that is, the classic form of 'oral composition'. There was no fixed text and nothing committed to writing. Naturally, knowledge of the material and the ability to perform varied greatly from individual to individual depending upon interest, training and opportunity, and there is every reason to suppose that, in the past, there were performers of vast talent who were able to combine the narrative structure, which would have been well known to their audience, with very particular skills of composition to create tales of beauty in the telling and cultural power in the content. Such oral performances were both entertainment and 'tribal encyclopaedia'. I believe, but cannot prove in any robust
bourne’s leading newspaper, thought it ‘should prove ... a nastigament, even if much of his reviewed. This confusion is already in the performance program.

More clearly explained is the other again, it helps to use the Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida, and then Verdi, in its translation. What analogous process of development is a long narrative form, generally, to Bugis speakers with an oral tradition, has an overall fluidity that means the peopling of the world after five generations, with new episodes; there is great variation, or expansion and contraction, to some extent, with the added evolution of a story.

The two main manifestations in my opinion, was as oral performance (even perhaps still in a very extended form) cannot perform episodes or the words spoken as they are in the composition. There was no fixed wording. Naturally, knowledge of the text varied greatly from individual to individual, and there were performances of the various versions, which varied greatly in the telling and cultural settings. Some of these versions were both entertaining and informative, but cannot prove in any robust way, that some elements in the stories, such as the existence of Upper, Lower and Middle Worlds, the importance of ascriptive status, or the contact between communities by means of sea voyaging, go back to some form of common base in expanding Austronesian-speaking cultures from several thousand years ago. Even some of the particulars of the narrative, such as the peopling of the Middle World from the initiative and combination of characters in the Upper and Lower Worlds, or the problematic nature of twins, could have a very long history. There are comparisons to be drawn with many written and oral sources from across the archipelago and beyond. Since the material is ‘re-created’ for each performance, however, fresh material can always be incorporated. In fact, it is impossible to know exactly what exactly was in the mind of an oral performer, or precisely what words were uttered, at any stage in the past.

The second manifestation of the La Galigo material is in the manuscripts that, typically, contain a version of one or more episodes. I have argued elsewhere that these manuscripts were created by a number of ‘writing composers’. We do not know why it was worth writing the material down, but Sirriko Koolhof’s research suggests the benefits of a slightly more ‘literary’ level of language and one can imagine other advantages such as the possibility of enjoying access to the stories by private reading. Manuscripts of the size in which we have them — they often run to hundreds of pages — imply the availability of paper and that fact alone makes me doubt that any manuscript text was written down much before, say, AD 1700, and most are probably later. New versions of episodes could have been created until recent years. The existence of manuscripts also allows the creation of more or less accurate copies, and these can be shown to exist, but the process of copying needs to be distinguished from that of re-creation by a ‘writing composer’.

What is noteworthy about both these manifestations of the La Galigo material is the absence of a fixed text or, of course, of any single author. It is misleading to claim, for example, that ‘[at] more than 6,000 pages long, Sunaryo Galigo [the La Galigo text] is among the most voluminous works in world literature.’ It is both more, and less, and in neither manifestation does the material form a single ‘work’ in any useful sense.
The very fluidity of the material in its source form invites yet further re-creation in other genres as, in this case, an opera-like work. This is no different, in essence, from making a Hollywood film of the Trojan war or the Argonauts' quest for the golden fleece. The Mahabharata has also been presented recently in theatrical form. Every re-creation, though, bears the inescapable marks of its particular context and creator. It is worth asking, therefore, what signs there are in this La Galigo production of its circumstances. The person most responsible for this version of the narrative has been Rhoda Grauer, a highly experienced American producer, director and writer with considerable experience of Indonesia, and she has consulted widely and wisely.

The most obvious point to make is that the narrative has been constrained to fit within three hours of running time. This has involved some sensible simplifications. For example, a whole generation is skipped, and Sawérigading, the main character (to oversimplify), is made the son, rather than the grandson, of Batara Guru who was the first ruler of the Middle World. The not-inconsiderable cast of nearly forty is still a long way from matching the hundreds of named individuals in the source material. While it is certainly defensible to make the relationship between the twins, Sawérigading and Wé Tenriabéng, and Sawérigading's eventual wife, Wé Cudaïq, the centre of the narrative, this has some costs. The mutual physical attractiveness of the parties is indeed there in the source materials, but one may wonder if the stress on it owes something to modern sensibilities. There is no mention of the fact that Sawérigading and Wé Cudaïq are cousins — and therefore very suitable marriage partners in the context of Bugis nobility, or that there are many other examples of cousins marrying in the total sweep of the narrative. The extent of the voyaging of Sawérigading and his son, La Galigo, can only be hinted at on stage, though the devices used to suggest sea travel are clear and most effective. The evocation of cock-fighting, a central enthusiasm of Bugis society over the centuries, is a truly wonderful passage of dance and music, but there is little attention given to many other aspects of the traditional world.
Another aspect of the re-creation has been more controversial. Elements have been introduced into the production from beyond the limits of ‘traditional Bugis culture’ as represented in the source materials. Given that there is a very great deal that even the experts don’t know about the practicalities of ‘traditional Bugis society’, some of these ‘borrowings’ are surely allowable, especially when from close at hand. It is difficult to argue, for example, with the use of the *pakarena* which is strictly speaking a Makasar dance. In fact, a great deal of the dance and music is taken from across South and Southeast Sulawesi generally and could serve as an introduction to the vitality and interest of these traditions in the area. As the notes to the double CD of the music make clear, the score put together by Rahayu Supanggah is a remarkable and very well-informed re-working of material from many sources.

Borrowing material from neighbouring parts of Sulawesi is one thing, but even the non-expert can also pick up some influences of *gamelan* from Java and Bali and many of the cast are drawn from across Indonesia. How far can an expression of Bugis culture and identity be Indonesianised? And does it matter? There certainly have been those in South Sulawesi who believe that the production takes unjustified and perhaps unauthorised liberties with material of local significance and sensitivity. There are arguments on both sides, but since the main elements of the material are freely available in published form, and since there has been no actual performance in Sulawesi itself (if that would offend any local sensibilities), it seems difficult to oppose the result on principle.

The specifically Bugis content of the production, however, led, or so it seemed to me, to an outcome which was the converse of the assertion of local interest. For the vast majority of the Melbourne audience — and surely the same would apply for those in Europe and the United States — the name *I La Galigo* and still more the content of the story, the language and associated aspects of culture would have come as a complete novelty. There is no previous hook on which to hang an understanding. At the most basic level, I doubt that many people were aware that the screen which greets the audience as they take their seats and which descends to close the performance showed
a manuscript page of a highly specific script, language and verse form. The link with ‘Indonesia’ served some purposes for newspaper commentators and publicity, but without the usual references of *batik*, *gamelan* and *wayang*, or even the Indonesian language and Islam, things tended to go astray.

The consequence of this sense of novelty, which I observed among friends in the audience, was a freedom of reaction; there were no preconceptions or comparisons. Their enthusiasm was founded entirely on the total ‘package’ of the production and reflected the excellence of its many parts. It could be argued, of course, that this is a welcome illustration of the diversity of Indonesian cultural resources, though that argument is weakened by the realisation, as we have seen above, that this is very far from an authentic presentation of a traditional cultural form.

I prefer a slightly different approach. Rhoda Grauer in her program note on the text observes that ‘this is not the definitive *Sureq Galigo*. It is a version of the legend shaped specifically for this production.’ That is, this version involves a degree of cultural translation or re-creation. It is not the only such translation of the material that has been attempted in recent years. In 2002, at the splendid *La Galigo* festival and seminar held at Barru in South Sulawesi which brought together a host of Indonesian and foreign scholars, as well as a great variety of performers, there was a balletic interpretation of a central episode; in 2005 Sapardi Djoko Darno and John McGlynn published an Indonesian and English poem which outlines the essential story; and the editions of the manuscripts which the philologists are beginning to produce are yet another form of the tradition. Yet for the moment it is this operatic version, which has now been seen in Europe, America, Southeast Asia and Australia and which has involved the creative talents of many non-Bugis Indonesians as well as many non-Indonesians, through which the *La Galigo* material has been brought so triumphantly to a wide, non-specialist audience. Let us be grateful for the artistic imagination — and funding — which has made this possible and hope that the future may provide more versions of this rich heritage for the general conversation of humanity.
script, language and verse form. Some purposes for newspaper and the usual references of batik, Indonesian language and Islam, things of novelty, which I observed freedom of reaction; there were their enthusiasm was founded on production and reflected the it; argued, of course, that this is Indonesian cultural resources, the realisation, as we have seen, an authentic presentation of a approach. Rhoda Grauer in her 'this is not the definitive Suroq shaped specifically for this involves a degree of cultural only such translation of the recent years. In 2002, at the mar held at Barru in South East of Indonesian and foreign performers, there was a balletic 2005 Sapardi Djoko Damono Indonesian and English poem which the manuscripts which are yet another form of the operatic version, which has now East Asia and Australia and elements of many non-Bugisians, through which the La triumphantly to a wide, non or the artistic imagination — possible and hope that the future such heritage for the general

I La Galigo

Notes

1. The most important credits for the production, other than performers, are Robert Wilson, direction, set design and lighting concept; Rhoda Grauer, text adaptation and dramaturgy; Rahayu Supanggah, music; Restu I Kusumaningrum, artistic coordination; and Joachim Herzog, costume designer.

2. Gilbert Hamonic in his expert and perceptive commentary on the production ("Une épopee bugis dans la lumière d'un regard international: à propos de la mise en spectacle de 1 La Galigo par Robert Wilson et Rhoda Grauer", *Archipel* 68, 2004, pp. 13–20) describes it as an 'opéra-ballet'. As he also explains, the proper name of one of the main characters, La Galigo, seems to have become attached to the narrative as a whole by a later tradition that makes him responsible for the narrative in some way. The prefix 'La' is a common element in Bugis names for males. The further prefix 'i', which has been used in the title of production, is no more than a filler syllable used to make up the correct number of syllables in the metre.

On the wider question of bringing Bugis culture to a wider audience, Hamonic has wittily explored some of the issues and conundrums in 'Un corps oublié? À propos d'un cérémonial bissu présenté à Paris (2006)', *Archipel* 72, 2006, pp. 9–14.


3. In addition to a free performance program which was very informative (despite my criticism), it is worth mentioning the availability of a more substantial volume of essays associated with the production, *I La Galigo*, Change Performing Arts in partnership with Purnati Foundation for the Arts, Milan, 2004. This has superb illustrations of the production.


6. From 'A Note on Sureq Galigo' in the performance program. This note is said to be excerpted from articles by Koolhof and Hamonic, though both scholars have a rather more nuanced view in their many other publications. The figure of 'more than 6,000 pages' goes back eventually to Kern. See my paper in the Barru seminar volume mentioned above for more estimates.

7. The Melbourne production ran to this very precisely, without intermission. The program for the Singapore production says that it took 'approx. 260mins with intermission'; the synopses for both productions are identical.

8. 'Creating the text for I La Galigo' in the performance program.


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