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“Letter to an Actor”

Nashar

Translated by Elly Kent

Friend,

There is still a ringing in my ears from you shouting: “It’s impossible! An actor can never be freed! An actor must perform the image of the director! If not, the play will be chaos!” Then, with a quieter tone you ask me, what path led me to immerse myself in the theatre of Putu Wijaya. Even though, you said, his plays “LOH”¹ and “ENTAH”¹ had absolutely no parallels with my paintings, either in their resolution of form or in their subject matter or spirit. In response to your question, I reflect again on my experience of participating in Putu’s theatre.

One night a friend invited me to visit the rehearsal space; he was an actor in Putu Wijaya’s plays. The rehearsal began at 4 in the morning. At the time I wondered why they would hold a rehearsal so early in the morning, what did they want to achieve? When I asked my friend, he couldn’t really explain it. Then I asked about the story that was being played out, the answer I got was that there wasn’t a storyline. There wasn’t even a title yet.

After we arrived at the rehearsal space, I could see they had begun their rehearsals. My friend went straight in and joined his colleagues. Watching and following that rehearsal, I was really impressed, right until it ended at 6am. That night I tried to reflect on what I had seen in the rehearsal, then I made some notes in my diary, as follows:

It’s true what my friend said, what I saw had no storyline. It had only snippets from various lives, creating an atmosphere that was tragic and terrifying: I witnessed people fight with harsh and aggressive gestures, there was a movement like a pounce, which was truly

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terrifying. One or two people crawled down from the top of a bamboo ladder then dropped themselves in from behind and were greeted by many people, then picked up and paraded around. There were a few other scenes. Here I witnessed scenes of life that were born out of human emotions and instincts. Those scenes were sometimes accompanied by human voices, or the sound of a drum being struck, reminding me of the lives of primitive people. A theatre performance without dialogue and storyline, but which can carve out the “inner life” of the human experience. It is then extracted and elevated as a theatrical performance.

After that I tried to come and watch several more of the rehearsals. A few days later, when I was in an exhibition space at the Cultural Centre, I met with Putu Wijaya and one of his friends. He asked me about my availability, and whether I would like to help him in the rehearsals he was working on. Without thinking I immediately said that I would. From that moment my life became more directly involved in Putu Wijaya’s theatre.

When I wrote that note, I was involved in two of his performances, “LHO” and “ENTAH”. This theatrical life had its own rewards, especially during rehearsals. Every day there was a change in the activities and in the atmosphere that emerged from the actors’ work.

In general, there was a real difference between “LHO” and “ENTAH”. In “LHO” the atmosphere was tense, maybe even too tense, the movements of the actors were really coarse, sometimes frightening. The tempo was too fast, I mean the time between each scene was too short, especially when the issues in each scene were yet to be resolved before we could have the chance to consider and analyse it. One was often left holding one’s breath because it was so alarming. Meanwhile in “ENTAH” the tension was lower. If examined properly, there was indeed an actual storyline, although not literal: It begins with the movement of an *ondel-ondel*² and then followed the presentation of a variety of snippets from everyday life. Sometimes the *ondel-ondel* was involved in one of the scenes. At the end, the *ondel-ondel* dies and is hoisted up with a rope, almost like a spirit rising. But even in that performance the *ondel-ondel* is not foregrounded as the main character. Every scene, like I said before, is a presentation of snippets of everyday life. Unlike the theatre I was used to seeing at TIM, in these two performances there were no main roles and supporting roles. Neither were there parts that were given focus. I thought about this, how the departures from the norm in the performance must impress upon the audience or serious observers. In relation to this absence of main roles or foci, I was reminded of an experience some years earlier, when I opened my diary and read there:

If I'm in Bali my favourite thing to do is visit all the different temple festivals. The peak of the hustle and bustle is in the evening. Every resident of Banjar comes to worship at their own temple. The offerings brought by the women to be placed at the temple are so beautiful, because of their festive colours and shapes. In front of the temple there is dancing. Not far away there is a structure made with bamboo poles and a thatched roof, especially for gambling games. And nearby there are small gazebos where people sell things.

What is it I understand from the atmosphere of these temple festivals? The groups I mentioned before are all in the one place, at the temple and in its vicinity, each radiating their radically different lives. But there are similarities, a kind of singularity, between the gambling table and the temple, among the dancers and where people are selling things. There is no sense that one place is more prominent. Each group has its own harmonious bond to life. Everything is done with solemnity under the auspices of the temple festival. From this reality, which I so enjoyed, my heart was opened to the understanding that in everyday life, there are those parts in which there is a focus, while there are other parts in which there is no focus, but which still have a singular harmony with life.

If we look at the world of painting, there are also two forms of life like this. The kind of painting which has a focus, for instance Affandi or Rusli etc. And the kind without a focus, like the classical Balinese paintings, reliefs on temples and, in general, primitive art. The emergence of these things is the result of the worldview that has shaped that artist. I think, from my observations here, that it has influenced my painting. If in the past I was used to having a focus, more recently I haven't really cared as much about that. I just want to follow an internal rhythm.

Because as I see it, what I call the internal rhythm is shaped by the environment in which some forms of life have focus, and others do not.



Friend, that is what I observe in "LHO" and "ENTAH". The problems that are revealed in the snippets of life that the plays present always contain cruelty, violence or something of that tone. This can also be translated into one word: "injustice". The presentation of injustice is a voiceless protest, without using the word protest. To whom? To whomever wants to regard it as a protest.

The problem is expressed through the physical movements of the actor. So with “movement” in “ENTAH”, there some scenes in which there are readings of African poetry, translated by Taufik Ismail. As well as those verses, there was poetry that related to the scenes being played out.

The voices and the words from those verses functioned as “movement” in the same way as the actors’ physical “movements” functioned. And so, the properties—the light and so on, are “movements”. From these movements we grasp the problem presented through each performance.

Because this play only used one element of theatre, there were those who thought that it wasn’t, or wasn’t yet, theatre. In Putu Wijaya’s one-page letter, he wrote that this performance was a kind of spectacle; the word “spectacle” was then exploited by one of these critics, who said to me: “Of course this performance is a kind of spectacle, that should properly be performed in an open arena at a night market or somewhere like that. But it’s not appropriate for a theatre like TIM, because this spectacle is not theatre; it doesn’t meet the requirements of theatre.” We can guess from this perspective that many people are tied to these rigid definitions, even though “movement”, as it is used in the Putu Wijaya play, is a recognised element of theatre, so long as that “movement” can express content or an idea. It is also possible that those who have that opinion have yet to understand this. And perhaps their understanding is that “technique” determines content or ideas, and that this is what is contained in the “technique” that they embrace.

At a performance of “ENTAH” I found another friend, a serious theatre-goer. His comments went like this: “ENTAH” is performed in an arena-style theatre, which means that the audience sits around the performance area. The actors’ movements should be aligned with the form of the arena but surprisingly, the actors’ gestures are always directed to the front. Doesn’t that neglect the audience to the left and right? Isn’t that a misuse of the rules of the stage?” So commented my friend. Aside from this he also gave me his thoughts on how an arena should be used differently to a stage. On the stage, he said, the audience can only be in one place, at the front, so of course the actors only direct their gestures in one direction.

I don’t think my friend’s logic can be faulted, so long as the performance is able to reveal the content or ideas that it wants to share. But is this the only way? In “ENTAH”, with the performers always gesturing to the front, even though it violates the rules of the stage as he describes them, is there an issue with this violation if the play can still communicate its (non-technical) content and ideas?



Friend, this issue is a technicality. But what is the function of technique in creativity?

Would the performance of "ENTAH" have been more successful if it had used the technique described by my friend? In my opinion, that's not at all certain. Because technique doesn't determine the emergence or otherwise of the content or ideas. On the contrary, technique can result from what the content and ideas demand. This means that the concepts are what determines the technique required. That's the reason that in my world of painting, I don't care about technique. Consequently, I don't give any thought or consideration to it, meaning nothing I do is technically based (or is non-technical).

Whatever technique Putu Wijaya utilises, consciously or not, he steps outside of what he has had in the past. At a minimum he frees himself from some of what he has previously had. As we have encountered in the creative process, an artist deals with many intricate problems. Because of that it's impossible for them to simultaneously free themselves from everything, depending on the limitations of each artist. This problem of change through freedom can appear visually, but sometimes it can only be felt.

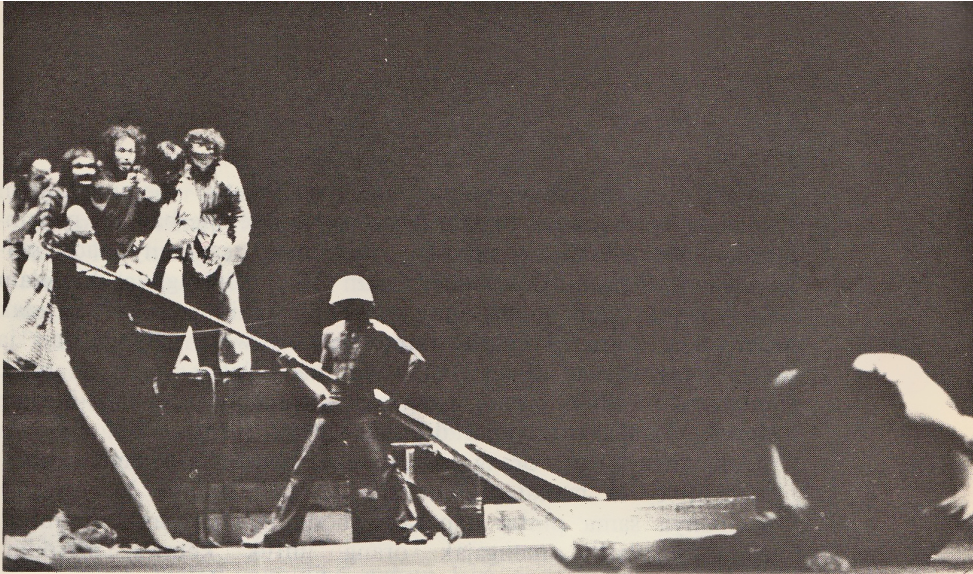
In problematising this word "freedom", I am reminded of how some of my friends, when we are chatting, are quick to express their reactions. Idle chatter is a freedom in this life because we're no longer tied to what is implied in this new freedom. From the tone of their reaction, I can see it is born out of fear; fear of what, who knows.

* * *

Many of the problems in the performances of "LHO" and "ENTAH" can be analysed in connection with the issue of freedom. So, I will take a few examples to fill in the details of my idea of freedom, as I know everybody's idea of freedom is different. Your understanding of it might be different than mine.

Take two of the scenes from "ENTAH". A woman sits down on a coffin. A few people move slowly and suggestively towards her, then they pick her up and swing her around. When they've had enough, they lay her down on the coffin with her hands and feet hanging down, and slowly back away. From another direction a man bursts out of a group of his friends and approaches the woman. He toys with her body violently. When he is about to kill the young woman, he is restrained and carried off by his friends. Another woman who is standing beside the young woman pursues the violent man, intending to kill him. Before she achieves her goal, she hesitates and throws away her weapon, wailing.

Here the scene changes. Suddenly the lights go out. Darkness falls. On a white cloth spread across a wall a shadow puppet is speaking English. Below



Entah Putu Wijaya, Teater Mandiri



Lho Putu Wijaya, Teater Mandiri

From the personal archive of Michael Boddén.

this in the darkness, there are only the echoes of the woman wailing. She never stops.

So, what is interesting about this? There is the cry of the wailing woman, which crosses from one scene to another.

In the first scene it is as if she wails in regret for her urge to kill, but perhaps she regrets her inability to go through with it. The continuation of these cries from one scene to the next has a different function and value. In the dark, the wailing triggers a variety of emotions: tragic, cutting, a wrenching loneliness etc. The problem for me is that the crying could change function and value again in different conditions and situations. Even though the director never directed or instructed the actress as to how she should wail in the first and second scenes. On the other hand, the actress made no effort to adjust the wailing in response to the change in scene. What actually happened was that the actress, consciously or otherwise, consistently existed within the condition and situation that she faced. So, in this position, the function and value of whatever she does is for that condition and situation. This is a form of freedom because it is natural and proper.

In order to better imagine what I mean by this freedom, it is worth presenting a counter-example. An actor is playing the role of a grandfather. Many think that when delivering his lines, his voice should be raspy in order to perform the role properly. So, we hear this raspy voice when he is delivering his dialogue. Because many directors also have this understanding, they too train actors to develop this raspy voice. But when I hear it, this rasping sounds false. In real life, the voice of an old man doesn't differ much from his voice in his youth. If there's a difference, perhaps it's because of an illness or of failing lungs. So, if we took a naturalist approach, if an actor is able to embody the condition and situation of an old man, then whatever his voice naturally sounds like will emit the qualities of an old man's voice, without having to force himself to sound old. To achieve this an actor needs to have freedom of spirit, meaning each actor needs to be in touch with their natural self. If not, as with the previous actor who put on the raspy voice, there's a possibility that he will damage his throat or his voice box, because there is pressure to do unnatural things, whether that is from other people (or the director) or from the actor himself, and the voice will sound fake.

But what is the connection between this and freedom? If we continue this critique, we will find that actually, not all actors have the same ability to express their roles. But it must also be said that no matter how unskilled an actor is, they will certainly have an image of the role that they are playing, and it is just their capacity to express it that is lacking. Perhaps it is even the director who is struggling to deal with the actor. But this weakness, I think, is not a

reason for a director to train the actor in such a way as to impose their own vision of the role. In facing such challenges, it is hard enough for the actor to express their own perception of the role, let alone trying to express someone else's vision.

I'm conscious that there are directors who, when dealing with actors like this, train them to express the director's vision of the role with the excuse that they aren't yet mature or capable enough to fulfil the role themselves. But they have a very different attitude to an actor who has those skills, and will give them true freedom to carry out their own image of the role.

Based on this fact, sometimes I think that it is about the rehearsals that take place in preparation for a performance. Of course, these rehearsals, as well as developing a holistic performance, are also a good opportunity for actors to enhance their ability to express their own image.



Friend,

This is wanted I wanted to discuss with you, because I think that no matter how poor an actor's ability to express their own vision of a role, it is more meaningful and useful for their future, and for attaining a higher level of freedom (because that is their natural self) than can be achieved by developing their ability to express someone else's vision.

LATE AT NIGHT

1976

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BIOGRAPHY

Translator of *Surat kepada Seorang Aktor*, **Elly Kent** is the editor of *New Mandala*, Deputy Director of the ANU Indonesia Institute and a member of the Asia: Innovation and Transformation Research Hub in the School of Art and Design at the Australian National University. She has worked as a researcher, writer, translator, artist, teacher and intercultural professional for over 20 years in academia and the arts in Indonesia and Australia. Elly is the author of *Artists and the People: Ideologies of Indonesian Art* (NUS Press, 2022) and co-editor (with Virginia Hooker and Caroline Turner) of *Living Art: Indonesian Artists Engage Politics, Society and History* (ANU Press, 2022).

NOTES

- ¹ Translator’s note: *Loh* (sometimes *lho*) and *entah* are colloquial terms expressing, respectively, emphasis or surprise, and disbelief/confusion. Correlating terms for *loh* could include “what?”, “my!”, “right!”, while *entah* is often translated as “who knows”, as in “who knows why it happened”.
- ² Translator’s note: a larger-than-life Betawi folk costume puppet.