

## A Lyrical Poem of Passion and Humanity

*Sardono W. Kusumo's masterpiece at an international festival in Mexico, the best performance of the last 20 years, unfortunately can't be seen yet in Indonesia.*

A deep voice, like a moan of the earth, stretches through the darkness. Slowly, the stage brightens. A figure walks slowly, into a pool of wet mud. He squats down. Little by little, he rubs the mud on his body. Then he lies down.

From there, the man, like a somber Bima, radiates sound from the cavity of his body. It is as if his voice, which is almost uninterrupted throughout the performance, has come from a cave in the earth, or from the distant past.

This is the beginning – also the background, and at the same time the basic image – of *Maha Buta*, a lyrical stage work by Sardono W. Kusumo.

On the stage of Cervantes Theater in the old town of Guanajuato, Mexico, last week, (among a number of international works at the XX Cervantino Festival), *Maha Buta* was performed with six dancers and a background voice. Some in the audience were confused. But mostly, everyone was shocked. Before them: an incredibly intense poem of motion and sound.

Like most of Sardono's works, there was no story on the stage. In *Maha Buta* there was also no dance in the usual sense. And there was no gamelan. Here and there the occasional sound of Japanese bells was heard and the sound of a struck Javanese *kemanak* softly tinkled. The dominant sound was the voice of the human in the pool of mud, performed by Ed Herbst, a musical artist from New York, who had learned vocal techniques from Balinese puppeteers (*dalang*) and Tibetan monks and then adapted them to his own style.

*Maha Buta* is ultimately a collage of images which are infinite in meaning. The performers move, not following a choreography: their bodies and voices are pure sparks of their inner expression. Bodies and voices are also manifestations of their union with a wealth of human memories and myths, in this case about passion and tenderness, destruction and love.

Three pairs appear on the stage: a series of allusions to the natural elements colliding and coalescing with each other. But they could also be an allusion to the conflict between the body and the mind. *Maha Buta*, which literally means\* “demonic spirits,” is the animalistic element present in every human being. In Sardono's play, this element is part of the life process to create balance with nature.

The first pair – female dancer Restu Kusumaningrum and male dancer I Ketut Rina – move smoothly and quietly at first. Not long after, the atmosphere is trampled by Ketut Rina's rough movements and roars. This tall and sturdy dancer is wearing the mask of an old man. He slashes a whip with a cracking sound.

Then there is a transformation, performed by Restu, from smooth to rough, as Rina begins to howl and rumble, suggesting an expression of lust and loneliness. The two dancers – Rina with his roars, Restu with her shrills – seem to be wrestling, while also joined

together. At the climax, Rina lifts Restu's body and continues to dance, and the atmosphere becomes quiet again.

The next sequence is the most poetic part of *Maha Buta*. Two male dancers, Pamardi and Sulistyo Tirtokusumo, pair up. Here, the background voice presented by Ed Herbst, from the pool, is no longer heard. The stage is quiet. There is only motion, soundless. The scene is then interrupted by Pamardi, who, with an electrifying voice, performs the song Asmaradana about love, desire, friendship, and death. After that, lyrical utterances alternate with low, soulful tones.

This part is full of homoerotic suggestions: the two figures, only clothed up to the waists, form a tense intimacy. Towards the climax, they run their hands over each other, and then pull something from between their partner's thighs: a keris, perhaps an image of strength, identity, or manhood. With that object, they cut each other's neck and chest. Soon the symmetry and tender intimacy between the two men changes. Pamardi stabs the kris into his chest, accompanied by a scream. Sulistyo follows suit. The two walk, slowly, toward the pool. And they both fall down, into the mud, to be one with the earth.

The third part presents a large, tall bare-chested figure wearing black cloth. Wayan Sukandia sits cross-legged in front of a green shrub, looking like a giant in the forest. Around him are plates, some with lit candles on them, and a jug.

Here, Ed Herbst's voice growls again. Wayan Sukandia begins to roar. One by one, he breaks the shrub twigs in front of him. Then he stands up, tosses the remnants of the plant, and shouts, as if casting a curse, perhaps a voice of lust and anger. Then he scoops and swallows some rice and noodles from a plate, and then gulps down water from a jug, and vomits it all back up. Over and over again. Meanwhile, in slow motion, Maria Darmaningsih appears from behind the stage carrying a plate with a candle on it. With a gentle motion, but also with the dreamy face of a sleepwalker, she steps up, from among the scattered plates, towards Wayan Sukandia.

Sukandia catches her, knocks her down, plants kisses over her body. Then he, laughing with lustfulness, scatters rice and noodles on the body of the woman who remains speechless. He then licks it. He turns into a *raksasa* 'monstrous giant' from the *wayang* stories: "the embodiment of wrath". But suddenly, in one smooth motion, Maria puts her hand on Sukandia's face. The *raksasa* stumbles. And Maria stands up, as if alive again, dancing over the hefty body that lays on the ground. At the climax, she pulls a large rope from the crotch of the giant – perhaps a subtle imagery of phallus or intestines, lust *and* voracious appetite, or brute force and magical power. Then Maria goes down on her knees and reached out for the water jug. She splashes the water on her head, as if washing her hair to clean herself. And on the chaotic but silent stage, all that can be heard is the sound of water flowing down from her loose bun. Then Maria picks up the candle and blows it out. The performance ends.

For me, this is the most impressive Indonesian stage performance in the last 20 years, which unfortunately has not been performed in Indonesia. This may also be Sardono's masterpiece, the culmination of his explorations. He has sharpened his concept of motion over the years: that drama no longer relies upon formations of body movement, but rather on the substance of the dancer's inner experience. This work also confirms him as a lyricist. He

does not start off from the framework of a story, but from expression on an open theme, filled with a number of images that are full of meaning.

The strength of *Maha Buta* is that in liberating themselves from the form of motion, the dancers root themselves in Javanese and Balinese traditions. So, the idioms that they choose freely still show the beauty of design that has been a treasure of traditional dance to date.

The opening scene, for example, made use of the solemnity of the *bedaya* dance, complemented by the song *Mijil* sung in a slow, subdued, magical rhythm. In the first sequence, Rina would not have been so expressive had he not known Balinese mask dance so well. Restu's movement transformation was effective because she departed from Javanese gracefulness to Balinese staccato rhythms that she mastered well. Also, her shrill voice was reminiscent of the strident voice of Balinese dancers in dialogue. In the second sequence, Pamardi's movement beautifully mirrored the idioms of the Javanese dance *Wireng*. In the third sequence, Wayan Sukandia, a Balinese puppeteer, turned to be so powerful precisely because he was alive with the imaginative world of the Balinese *wayang* of Si Tamak and Si Loba.

So, every dancer in *Maha Buta* is a creator. Sardono admitted that in this performance at the Cervantino Festival he was helped by "the best dancers of the tradition". Here is where Sardono's distinctiveness lies: he does not configure the dancers; he demands that they find their own form, after he prepares them within a beautiful collective creation. Dancers are not merely expected to play a role, but also transform themselves into images that they know from their own experiences in life.

It's not easy. The performers of *Maha Buta* in Guanajuato the other week also felt that they were dealing with the toughest work in their experience. Sulistyو Tirtokusumo, a well-known Javanese *alusan* (graceful) dancer, even described it as a *malati* dance, a dance that requires a total mental and physical effort.

But if *Maha Buta* in Guanajuato reached a rare level of beauty, it was also because Sardono, who is sometimes overabundant in his creative movements, succeeded in condensing his work. He cut down on a lot of things. He removed the gamelan element and purified the stage into a wholly intimate blend of motion and voices of the actors. The outcome was a point of balance between expressive force and maturity. The mystery in the beauty of a dance does in fact revolve around trying to find that point, while still being stunning.

And *Maha Buta* was stunning. Scene after scene, the audience felt that behind every tenderness, violence was lurking, and in every sensuality, there was always refinement in wait. The metaphor conceived as an idea here helped to create suspenseful contrasts on stage: a dialectical representation between *suradira*, wrathful and lustful passions, and *pangastuti*, virtue and compassion – which makes life (and art) precious and exciting.

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**(2021 English translation by Ni Luh Windiari)**

\*While *buta* are demons, or destructive elementals, the Balinese *panca maha buta* are the five elements – earth, fire, water, air, and ether (space).