Shaping the Javanese Play : improvisation of the script in theatre performance

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Introduction

> The wooden slit drum announces a change of scenes. 'It's your turn,' whispers the senior actress. She pushes the female guest star to the front. The young actress, in her role as Princess starts talking rapidly: 'Tell my father that I'm scared. I'm not in love with this man. I love someone...' Unfortunately, the Princess gets interrupted here by the Prince who has just entered the stage with his servants. Now, she realises, it is too late to utter the text that was meant to describe her problems with marrying an unknown fellow. It is too late to explain that she does not approve of her father's choice. What should she do now? Clearly puzzled, she approaches the Prince: 'Excuse me, who are you?'

Never a dull moment during the Javanese stage performance: the participants are busy shaping their dialogues on the spot. For those familiar with carefully scripted theatre productions, the Princess' situation as described above might be considered odd. Did nobody give her proper instructions? Did she fail to remember her lines? Did she skip the rehearsals?

In fact the young guest star received instructions from the playwright during a briefing. The playwright appointed a senior actress to supervise and accompany her on stage. Moreover the playwright also kept an eye on her during the performance. What happened to her lines? The script simply consisted of a summary of the plot; there were no lines. What about the rehearsals? There simply were not any. The actress was supposed to improvise. Here we encounter just a few characteristics of a Javanese staging process. There are many to follow: let us enter the world of Javanese theatre.

The city of Yogyakarta situated in Central Java has a rich tradition of performing arts. It is the birthplace of many theatre and dance groups. These groups make up an important part of the local cultural life. This book focuses on several Javanese theatre companies and more specifically on the way these groups shape and use their play texts. Although many researchers have studied various aspects of *wayang kulit* (shadow theatre) performances, very little research has been done on other kinds of theatre in Java. The process of staging a play has hardly received any attention. My

aim is to provide information on the blue print or script of performances, as it is a crucial aspect of the production process.

I examine the drama script itself: how is it produced and what does it look like? I also look at the script within the context of the world of Javanese drama: how is it used and what is its status? What are the connections between play text and performance?

In nine case studies I show the different facets and dimensions of both script and performance. My case studies are based on the 1999-2002 period in which my fieldwork took place.

A comparison of 'play text' and 'performance text' reveals the way directors and actors treat the play text. Following the different stages of a theatre production provides us with insight into the way a scenario is brought to life on stage through the actor as a 'mediator'.

The scholarly framework

This study of Javanese play texts and script-like phenomena has its roots in Indonesian as well as Javanese theatre and literature studies. Furthermore, it is based on general research about the ethnology of performance. The historical background of the development of the script I provided mainly on the basis of socio-historical studies (James Brandon, Matthew Isaac Cohen, Keith Foulcher, George Quinn, Jakob Sumardjo, Soedarsono, Suripan Sadi Hutomo, etcetera).

I collected data for my case studies during fieldwork by actively observing the staging process of performances, and through informal and formal personal communication with the people involved in the process.

To analyse my observations and interviews, I made use of research on theatre and performance studies by Hélène Bouvier, John Emigh, Erving Goffman, Barbara Hatley and Budi Susanto.

The 'invisible' script

A common feature of 20th century research on play texts by Western theatre and literature critics has been its preoccupation with literary standards. As a result play texts were often condemned for their 'poor quality'. The 'multiple meanings' of a dramatic text have been overlooked because drama texts were treated as literature and the author was granted great status (Birch 1991:10-1). Birch, in his study entitled *The language of drama*, calls 'the privileging of particular forms of language/dialogues as "better" than other forms' an 'elitist, anti-popular culture position' (Birch 1991:14). It is this idea of evaluating a text based on its appearance rather than its content or practical use that brings us to the case of the 'invisible' script.

Although Birch based his ideas on Western, English-language drama texts the point he makes on the narrow approach of scholars towards scripts is relevant in the context of my research. Most Javanese scripts have the format of a summary and do not consist of any dialogue at all. Because of this format, it does not reach the attention of those interested in literature. Considering Birch's call for a broader approach towards drama texts, questions can be raised about the relationship between text, playwright and literary authority.

I consider script and scenario as part of a spectrum of linked mnemonic and structuring devices: major elements in the process of creating a performance. So far, little attention has been paid to scripts within the study of Javanese theatre. Some socio-cultural studies are partly devoted to the script: a study of *tarling* theatre by Cohen (1999a), research by Feinstein (1995) and Weix (1995) about play texts of the Central-Javanese group Gapit and a book by Henri Supriyanto (1992) on *ludrug* theatre. The Javanese script also received some attention in studies conducted by Brandon (1967) on Southeast Asian theatre, in studies by Handung Kus Sudyarsana (1989) and Hatley (1985a,b and 2005) on the genre *kethoprak* and in Suripan Sadi Hutomo's overview of modern Javanese literature (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1975). Generally speaking, however, scholars of Javanese theatre and Javanese literature tended to neglect the script. Why did scholars neglect studying the script? I have found four main reasons.

The first reason seems to be the 'invisibility' of the play text. Scripts are difficult to trace because they consist, at least partly, of the spoken word, which vanishes into thin air immediately after delivery. What is written down has an ephemeral character: the script on a piece of paper or on a blackboard is used as a mnemonic device and ends up discarded after use or rubbed off after reading. Since the theatre performance itself is transitory too, there seems to be an urge for written proof, read 'literature' to legitimise its very existence. Ras on Javanese theatre:

> Because of the customary technique of extemporizing on the basis of memorized synopses of stories, no written texts of performance – until quite recently a condition for being accepted as 'literature' – could be provided (Ras 1979:2-3).

Ras' words imply that there are 'no written texts' available for the scholar; no written texts in the 'literary' sense. There *are* however written texts that circulate during the production process and the participants do make use of them. In other words, Javanese play texts are simply not available for the scholar who does not look for them in the field. Only by observing the production process can the scholar encounter texts like a scene overview on the blackboard and a briefing by the playwright-director, which I believe can be considered script-like phenomena too. These phenomena might be short-lived and ephemeral, but this does not reduce their significance. As long as the scholar is not acquainted with this material he will not search for it. As long as he dismisses it because of its ephemeral nature he will not consider it a subject of study.

The scripts that *were* written down remained 'invisible' for a larger audience because they seldom reached the printing press. In his preamble on *Telaah kesusastraan Jawa modern* (Study of modern Javanese literature) the author Suripan Sadi Hutomo explains that he does not write about drama because it is hardly ever published in magazines, newspapers or books and is thus too difficult to describe (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1975). Once scripts did get published however, scholars tended to reject them on esthetical grounds. This brings us to the second motive why scripts did not receive much attention from researchers.

The second and third reasons for neglect are closely related. I suggest that we look for the second reason why play texts have not been studied extensively in a mainstream prejudice among scholars: the 'non-existence' of modern Javanese literature. The third reason we find in another prejudice linked to the second: the 'poor

quality' of modern Javanese Literature in general. The study of Quinn (1992) about the Javanese novel seems relevant here as it convincingly opposes these two prejudices. Quinn maintains that 'three main ideological complexes' have influenced scholars in their attitude towards contemporary Javanese literature (Quinn 1992:253).

The first complex is the ideology of European imperialism: an ideology that (in the Javanese context) has its origin in critical commentary by Dutch scholars in the 1920s and 1930s. The scholars criticised Javanese literature for its 'poor quality' in comparison with European literature of the time. This judgement set the tone for the rest of the century as a clear example of the unquestioned supremacy of European literary norms (Quinn 1992:254-9).

Literature in Indonesian received more respect from the Dutch scholars than Javanese literature did.

> Possibly many saw Indonesian as a more 'modern' language, strongly influenced by and closer to the linguistic and intellectual norms embodied in European languages and therefore more capable of being the vehicle of 'properly' modern […] literature (Quinn 1992:259).

Dutch scholars and their followers either failed to see the existence of literature in the Javanese language or spoke about it in dismissive terms by applying external criteria (Quinn 1992:259).

Secondly, the ideology of conservative *priyayi* (high officials) has influenced scholars. As the Dutch gained more and more power in Java during the 19th century, awareness started growing amongst *priyayi* that their authority, and therefore their cultural hegemony was in danger. Many *priyayi* feared a gradual loss of their literary tradition as in the first decades of the 20th century. Dutch and Malay were granted leading positions in education and bureaucracy. The conservative *priyayi* tried to get attention for their endangered vernacular by romanticising its outstanding character in former days and stressing its deplorable condition in the present. As a result, contemporary developments did not receive attention (Quinn 1992:264-72).

Thirdly, Quinn mentions the ideology of Indonesian nationalism. In the 1920s nationalist movements called for Indonesian as a unifying language. The role of the Indonesian language in relation to regional languages remained highly disputed amongst the different movements for independence. Advocates of a monolingual

national culture no longer considered literary activities in Javanese (or any other regional language) appropriate. In 1935 Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana described the Javanese language as feudal and useless in the struggle for progress. From his point of view, the regional cultures and languages should be forgotten in favour of the national culture and language (Quinn 1992:273-5).

As becomes clear from Quinn's study, the ideological complexes of imperialism, conservatism and nationalism determined the way literature scholars approached modern Javanese literature. Disdain for the subject led to misinterpretation and disinterest caused denial.

Like his Dutch predecessors, Anderson has been dismissive of modern Javanese literature. According to Anderson a profound literary tradition ceased to exist on Java after the fall of the kingdom of Majapahit in the 15th century (Anderson 1990:203). He qualified the modern literary tradition on Java as 'not noteworthy', comparing it with the Indonesian literary tradition. He stressed that contemporary writers with a Javanese background neglect their vernacular and write in the national language Indonesian instead (Anderson 1990:195).

Quinn opposed Anderson's view giving examples of Javanese authors writing stories in their vernacular: 'in their populist, satirical, thoroughly anti-elitist character they [the stories] bear eloquent testimony to the capacity of modern Javanese to be a vehicle for critical discussion of Javanese society' (Quinn 1992:277).

Play texts seem to be disregarded for similar reasons as novels. Because they are written in the regional language, they do not reach the attention of scholars of modern literature. These scholars do not notice modern theatre in Javanese since modern theatre is regarded as part of an area that has come to be reserved for the national language (Feinstein 1995:632). As a result Javanese scripts, like novels, have been neglected.

To uncover the fourth reason for neglect we move from contemporary literature studies back to the field of modern theatre studies.

Amongst scholars there is a tendency for a dichotomous approach towards theatre in Indonesia. I believe that because of this approach scripts fall between two stools. On the one hand I see with Quinn (1992), the dichotomy between the national

language Indonesian and the regional language Javanese. On the other hand, I see the dichotomy between modern and traditional drama.

Generally speaking, theatre is categorised as follows: drama in the Indonesian language is regarded as modern, whereas drama in Javanese language is regarded as traditional. Within modern theatre people use a script as opposed to traditional drama in which people improvise (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1993:60; Gillitt Asmara 1995:165).

In the following chapters I show that it is useful to look at Javanese drama in a less dichotomous way. One cannot simply categorise Javanese drama as 'traditional' and 'regional'. My case studies describe a variety of scripts in which both Javanese and Indonesian are used at a local and national level. The fact that actors speak Javanese and improvise their performance does not necessarily mean that the theatre form they represent is 'traditional'.

As described above, Javanese play texts have been largely neglected. Summarising the reasons for neglect brings us to the following statements. Most scripts are neglected due to their ephemeral character. Furthermore, play texts have been overlooked because the scholars studying them have a narrow conception of 'literature'. Literary critics either deny the very existence of Javanese-language scripts or deliberately choose to dismiss them as insignificant. Moreover, scholars tend to consider Javanese theatre as a merely traditional art form in which the written word is a rare thing. This means that they fail to see what is actually written down during the process of staging a play.

I use several terms in this book to refer to the key word 'script'. The script, as I define it, is both a proposed arrangement for a theatrical performance as well as a tool that can be used to create this performance. It bears resemblance to the concept 'play' that can be described as a composition intended for performance on stage. The word 'play' however can also refer to the dramatic performance itself.

I distinguish between the various formats in which the script appears. I distinguish three main formats. The first and most basic format is what I call the 'play schema' that consists of a list of scenes. The second format is the 'short script' that provides a summary of the plot development. Occasionally I refer to this sketch of the play with the term 'scenario'. Thirdly I recognise the 'full script', at times referred to

as 'play text' or 'drama script'. This is the most complete script format. Comparable to regular Western scripts, it includes dialogue as well as side-text providing details on aspects such as the setting and the emotions of the characters.

The three script formats are part of a broader spectrum of 'mnemonic and structuring devices'. These devices all play a part in the production process of a performance. Apart from the scripts I recognise 'script-like devices' or 'script-like phenomena'. These include briefing sessions and reading sessions during which the playwright-director informs his actors about the content of the script.

Chapter overview

Chapter I provides a historical background of the development of the Javanese script. I show the occurrence of both continuity and change in development, comparing Javanese and Indonesian-language theatre. I describe the various reasons why scripts either remained the same or changed in appearance and status.

In Chapters II, III and IV, I describe a range of case studies, focusing on the following questions: How does the author treat his text? And how do theatre practitioners treat the play text? How did the playwright-directors and actors I met in the field speak about their approach and their treatment of the subject? I divide my case studies into three types on the basis of the physical appearance of the script. I distinguish the (ephemeral) play schema, the short-script and the full-fledged script.

Chapter II is devoted to the 'play schema' that appears on a blackboard or on scratch paper. I present case studies of drama performances that took place outside during ritual celebrations, followed by the description of a comedy in the studio of a radio station. I show how the theatre group members produce and make use of a play schema and how the playwright-directors instruct the actors during a briefing (*penuangan*).

The 'short script' that provides a summary of the play is the subject of Chapter III. I focus on a theatre group that performs for radio and a group that appears on television. Whereas the radio performers stick to a performance format that has been used for several decades, the television actors tend to innovate this format greatly.

Chapter IV is about three groups that make use of a full script: the comedy group of a television station, a theatre company that performs live on stage and a group that produces radio plays. In the first case, the playwright-director leaves a lot of room for improvisation. In the other cases the actors have to stick to their lines.

In Chapter V, I compare the different types of mnemonic and structuring devices that I encountered in the field. I analyse the attitude of the participants of the production process towards these devices and towards the development of the plot. How does interaction take place on stage and how does this interaction influence the final appearance of the performance?

In Chapter VI, I reconsider my own observations of the script and script-like phenomena, placing them in historical perspective. I analyse the different phases of the course of the theatre production, drawing conclusions on the characteristics of the Javanese staging process. By observing these conclusions at a more general level, new insights are gained into the various dimensions of staging a play.