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

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## CHAPTER III

### **The short-script method: preservation or innovation?**

In this chapter I examine the different stages and dimensions of performances based on a short script. Important questions are: How do the participants in a performance make use of the short script? How is the short script transformed into a performance? The short script not only consists of a list of scenes (compare the ‘play schema’ of Chapter II), but also provides an actual synopsis of each scene. The performers have to improvise on the basis of the play schema, the short script and the *penuangan*.

I describe how a local radio station in Yogyakarta produces *kethoprak* and I compare this to the way a national TV station in Jakarta produces a *kethoprak* show. These mediated formats of drama became an important part of the Javanese theatre realm since electronic media started permeating daily life in the 1950s. In the second case study of this chapter I introduce the script-like ‘shaping agent’ phenomenon. All the participants in the production process shape the performance and can therefore be called ‘shaping agents’. Examples illustrate that participants like the guest star have a very specific shaping role.

#### *Kethoprak radio in Yogyakarta*

The local radio station in Yogyakarta MAVRO (Mataramsche Vereeniging Voor Radio Omroep) broadcast a *kethoprak* performance for the first time in 1935. From 1950 onwards the RRI Nusantara II (former MAVRO) has broadcast *kethoprak* on a weekly basis. Most of the *kethoprak* radio plays had a serial format. During the weekly programme, one episode of the serial was broadcast. During the period of my fieldwork (1999-2002) live broadcasting took place every Wednesday night from 21:30 to 24:00 hours, interrupted twice by the news bulletin that was relayed from RRI Jakarta. Playwright-directors Sardjana and Sugiarto supervised the live productions.

*The playwright-directors*

Sardjana joined the RRI Kethoprak Mataram group in 1981. Born in Yogyakarta's silver-industry suburb Kota Gede, Sardjana initially worked as a silversmith. As a young boy he used to participate on a yearly basis in kethoprak performances organised especially to celebrate Independence Day, on 17 August. Around his 20th birthday he was asked to join a professional kethoprak group. Since that time he joined many different travelling kethoprak companies. He learned to write scripts and direct plays in the field by observing his senior playwright-directors. Occasionally, he took part in a symposium on kethoprak (personal communication with Sardjana 2001).

Sardjana's younger colleague Sugiarto was born in 1955 in Yogyakarta. His parents were part of a professional kethoprak group that travelled around Java. His father worked as a décor painter for the group and taught Sugiarto the art of painting. Apart from helping his father to decorate sets, he watched as many performances as possible. In this way, he learned the basics of kethoprak and finally became a professional kethoprak player himself.

During the 1970s Sugiarto worked for several kethoprak groups. From 1979 onwards, he was a member of the Sapta Mandala group and received writing instructions from playwright Handung Kus Sudyarsana. When he started working for the RRI in the 1980s, playwright-director Widayat taught him how to write scripts for radio kethoprak. Sugiarto currently dedicates most of his time to creating scripts (personal communication with Sugiarto 2001).

*The production of the script*

The script of an entire serial was produced by one of the senior actors of the RRI Nusantara II group. During the period of my field research, either Sardjana or Sugiarto was in charge. The responsible 'playwright-director' had to prepare a script for each episode. This script consisted of two parts: a play schema (as described in Chapter II) and an overview of the scenes with a short abstract of the plot as well as

the content of the main dialogues. The play schema was presented on the front page of the script and on a blackboard.

The summary has a telegram style with short and incomplete sentences. Use of capital letters and punctuation is inconsistent. An example of this style of writing follows later on when I make a comparison between parts of the script and the corresponding performance on stage.

### *Rehearsals and penuangan*

Rehearsals in preparation of Wednesday evening's live broadcast took place two or three times a week. Director and actors gathered in a small classroom of the RRI building on every Monday and Tuesday morning and sometimes on Wednesday morning as well. On a blackboard, which was placed in front of the classroom, the director or one of his assistants wrote down the structure of the play. The text on the blackboard was divided in three columns (see Chapter II about the 'play schema'). The name of the *keprak* player was noted on the bottom of the blackboard: this person had the task of beating on a wooden slit drum (*keprak*). The knocking sound marked the beginning and end of a scene.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the name was noted of the person who had to take care of sound effects (for example bird sounds) using a cassette recorder.

The first *penuangan* takes place on Monday morning. The director has typed out the script using carbon paper (*kertas dorslah*) in order to make a few copies at once. In about an hour's time he tells the story to the actors. Sometimes questions or remarks from the players interrupt him. The atmosphere is relaxed: leaning back in their chairs, continuously smoking and joking, the actors become familiar with the story. Some walk in too late or suddenly leave. Every now and then one of the actors changes place from the back to the front in order to be sure to capture the director's

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<sup>1</sup> The knocking or trembling sound is an important feature of wayang as it announces cue changes and changes in mood of the characters. The dhalang produces the sound by rapping on the puppet box with a wooden mallet (Mrázek 2005:205). In kethoprak the slit drum player has taken over the cueing task of the dhalang.

words. The director does not seem to be disturbed by his quite noisy audience; whatever happens around him, he cheerfully goes on with his story.

Another *penuangan* takes place on Tuesday morning. The director gives a more detailed account of several parts of the story considered significant in relation to the rest of the plot. These scenes either contain a moralistic message or the main characters have to express specific feelings in them. The director always takes ideas or advice from the actors concerning the structure of the story into serious consideration. Humorous *intermezzi* (*adegan dhagelan*) are only discussed briefly during the *penuangan*, because the comedians are supposed to come up with their own jokes.

An extra rehearsal session is scheduled for Wednesday morning. The idea is that certain actors and the director have an opportunity to rehearse some of the scenes that are considered difficult. In practice, though, this hardly ever takes place, apparently because neither the directors nor the actors feel the need to study the performance in more detail.

During a *penuangan* session both Sugiarto and Sardjana tended to address their actors as a group. Occasionally, however, they gave individual instructions or explanations to individual players:

First in the presence of the actors I inform them about the story and I cast the actors according to the nature of their character. Then I tell them the storyline that the actors have to follow. For example in the time of the reign of Mataram, to the one who becomes the King Sunan Amangkurat Agung, to this actor I say: 'During the scene in the Palace of Mataram the gamelan orchestra plays a vigorous piece [*gendhing gagah*] and after this music is finished then sung-poetry starts and after that you have to deliver your main dialogue.' In *kethoprak* we call this *wos*.<sup>2</sup> (Personal communication with Sugiarto 2001.)

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<sup>2</sup> Pertama diberitahu dulu ceritanya di hadapan pemain dan *mengcasting* para pemain sesuai dengan watak dari karakter. Baru diterangkan alur ceritanya yang harus dibawakan si pemain tersebut. Seperti misalnya jaman pemerintahan Mataram yang jadi raja Sunan Amangkurat Agung, kemudian bagi si pemain tersebut diberitahukan: 'Pada adegan Kraton Mataram *gendhing gagah*, dan setelah *gendhing* selesai baru *nembang* dan setelah selesai baru dialog inti yang harus disampaikan.' Dalam *kethoprak* itu namanya '*wos*'.

Like his colleague playwright Nano Asmarandana (see Chapter II), Sugiarto referred to the ‘storyline’ or ‘main ingredients of the story’ as *wos*. In cases where an actor lacked experience, he would provide him or her with more details about the dialogue:

If you give a *penuangan* to young actors who are still learning you have to deliver the story in detail, but if the actors are professional that’s not necessary. [To deliver] the storyline is enough because the actor will be able to develop this him/herself.<sup>3</sup> (Personal communication with Sugiarto 2001.)

Here we learn that professionalism in *kethoprak* means being able to improvise. It was enough for Sugiarto to deliver a rough outline of the story because his actors developed text themselves. However, Sugiarto explained that not all playwright-directors award their professional actors this much freedom. For example Siswandha, the leader of *Siswa Budaya* from Tulungagung in East Java, had a very different approach towards his actors:

The late Mr Siswandha gave the *wos* to his actors with complete dialogues, even his movements had to be followed precisely by his actors. So until nowadays those who were educated by Siswandha resemble his style of acting.<sup>4</sup> (Personal communication with Sugiarto 2001.)

As I never witnessed a *penuangan* of Siswandha myself it is difficult to make any useful comparison between his style of briefing and that of Sugiarto. But what Sugiarto’s words do show at this point is his preference for an approach that leaves the actors free to create their own dialogue and movements. After the *penuangan* the actors had an opportunity to look at the short script. As a consequence, the outline of the story was visible for the participants in the staging process, rather than ‘hidden’ in the playwright’s head. They did not have to rely only on their ‘script in mind’ as I described in Chapter II.

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<sup>3</sup> Kalau perlu diberitahu dialog yang harus dia sampaikan. Kalau yang diberi *penuangan* itu anak wayangnya masih belajar ya harus ditel menyampaikannya, tapi kalau pemainnya sudah profesi ya tidak perlu. Cuman garis besarnya saja, dan dia sudah bisa mengembangkan sendiri.

*The recording and live broadcasting session*

Finally, the performance takes place and is broadcast live on Wednesday night. The director, actors, singers and gamelan players are present in the studio during transmission. The programme director, who has the task of coordinating the technical aspects of the direct broadcast, is seated next door in the mixing room with the operator. When it is almost 10:30 pm, the operator switches on and off a red ‘communication lamp’ (*lampu komunikasi*) that is situated in the studio, in order to warn the actors and musicians to get ready and stand by. At the same moment, the presenter in charge introduces the programme.

When the introduction is finished, the operator switches on the communication lamp. The steady red light is a sign for the musicians to start the opening gamelan piece, followed by the announcement of the *dramatis personae*. Here follows a short impression, based on my field notes, from one of the performances broadcast live on Wednesday night (see Illustration 3.1).

Kethoprak Mataram RRI, Wednesday, 1 December 1999

Today, the 7th part of a series is performed. Last Monday and Tuesday morning Sardjana held a *penuangan* in which he explained the story of the week. Apparently, these two *penuangan* sessions were enough for the actors to gain insight into the story and fulfil their task fairly well. The blackboard with the play schema is placed in front of the classroom where the *penuangan* took place. While the musicians start playing, the actors joining the first scene walk in one by one. Many of the other players prefer waiting in the corridor while watching the show from outside through the window. In this way they can avoid the cold, non-smoking area of the air-conditioned studio as long as possible. Some of the actors walk directly up to director Sardjana in order to have a short glance at the more detailed script, which he has brought along, or to question him about their appearance. The operator warns the performers to get ready at 21:22 hours (the time is visible on a huge digital clock on the wall). At 21:30 hours the female singers of the gamelan orchestra (*pesindhen*), all wearing jackets because of the terribly cold air-conditioning, start singing. In the background, one can hear the announcement of the performance by the programme director.

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<sup>4</sup> Pak Siswanda almarhum memberi *wos* dengan anak wayangnya dengan dialog komplit, sampai dengan gerakannya semua pemainnya harus persis seperti itu. Makanya sampai sekarang yang

After 14 minutes of music the first actors take their places behind the microphones, facing their partners. To create the atmosphere of Mount Lawu, the location of the first scene, the person in charge of the sound effects switches on the tape recorder. For a short moment singing of birds fills the studio. While the actors utter their dialogue, the play director gives them specific directions from aside. By keeping in close contact with the players he is able to influence the development of the play. Sometimes Sardjana whispers his advice in the ear of the performer. When necessary he raises his hands, showing with his fingers the number of minutes left to finish the scene. At 22:00 hours there is a long break of about 20 minutes because of the news from Jakarta, followed by local obituary notices. The performers leave for a cigarette (it is forbidden to smoke in the studio) and to chat outside. When they are asked to get ready again, a performance of kethoprak is announced which will take place on Saturday in the auditorium of the RRI.

The actors seem to have fun while performing. Most of them tend to make lots of gestures and expressions with their faces and body, as if acting in front of an audience. It should be mentioned that they are actually performing in front of an audience: those musicians and actors who are patiently waiting for their turn, listen to the performers and even comment on their acting at times. Especially during the dhagelan scenes, they laugh out loud. Sounds of laughing and comments become part of the performance as a whole, as in the stage kethoprak performances described in Chapter II. The radio listener at home hears these comments and the laughing. Not all the actors listen carefully to their colleagues though: some continue smoking outside or lay down stretched out on the ground to take a short nap. At 23:00 hours the performance is briefly interrupted again with the latest news from the capital. Before the actual performance is finished, several actors whose tasks are finished have already left for home.

Sardjana considered his job of ‘controlling’ the plot a serious matter. He continuously walked up and down in the studio checking if everything was going according to plan. As his main focus was on a ‘correct’ and smooth development of the storyline he did not allow his actors to come up with pointless jokes:

I give my main attention to the story. If the actor makes jokes in a part that is meant to be serious the spectators are bound to like it but it damages the story. That is how humorous kethoprak works.<sup>5</sup> The people like it, but what about the story itself? How

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dulunya hasil didikannya pak Siswanda serupa pola mainnya dia.

<sup>5</sup> Sardjana refers to *kethoprak humor* which is the next case study of this chapter.



can you possibly represent a king in such a way! As a director I supervise continuously, and do not sit down and smoke. I do not leave the stage, I am always nervous. For Sugiarto it is possible to be relaxed [while directing].<sup>6</sup> (Personal communication with Sardjana 2001.)

Sardjana wanted his players to participate seriously during the live broadcasting session. He did not expect their continuous attention throughout the story. The actors were free to leave the studio for a chat if they had not been scheduled into a scene. Sardjana asked all of them to make an effort to create a good production and made it clear when he was not satisfied with the way they participated.

On Friday morning the players and director briefly evaluated the performance of Wednesday night. They discussed comments from outside on their play:

Kethoprak Mataram RRI, Friday, 3 December 1999

At around 10:00 am, all the players gather in a classroom. Sardjana gives a short evaluation of last Wednesday's live broadcast. According to Sardjana the performance can be described as reasonably good. Unfortunately, however, the timing was not precise during some of the dialogues. Also the timing of the slit drum (*keprak*) was sometimes wrong. Regarding some scenes in particular, he makes a few positive as well as negative remarks, both stating his own opinion as well as bringing up comments from outside. So-called 'official reactions' (*masukn resmi*) are remarks from audience members who have called the RRI by telephone after the show. This evening listeners had criticised the volume of particular voices and the use of vulgar words by the kethoprak actors.

#### *Live performance and broadcast at the RRI auditorium*

Apart from performing weekly in the studio at Kota Baru, the kethoprak group of RRI Nusantara II also performed four times a year in the RRI auditorium in Gejayan Street. The group used to perform once a month but for economic reasons they had to reduce the number of performances.

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<sup>6</sup> Kalau yang saya pentingkan cerita. Suatu misal mestinya serius tetapi dia melucu penonton akan senang meskipun itu keliru, tetapi itu dari segi cerita menyalahi cerita. Seperti kethoprak humor itu kan begitu. Orang senang tetapi ceritanya sendiri *kok piye iki? Ratu kok di-ngonokake!* Sebagai

Spectators had to buy a ticket at the entrance gate of 2000 or 3000 rupiah. During these performances a single story was performed which lasted about four hours and was broadcast live. The content of the play had no connection with the Wednesday night serial. As an example of an auditorium performance the following:

Kethoprak Mataram RRI, 3 and 4 December 1999

On Friday morning of 3 December, a *penuangan* is held for the special performance at the auditorium on the 4th. All the players gather in a classroom at around 10:00 am. After the evaluation of last Wednesday's live broadcast as mentioned above, Sugiarto changes places with Sardjana in front of the classroom, and starts telling the story of Saturday's performance: *Mayit hidup*. (*Living corpse*). It is a mixed story with elements from both Egypt (*lakon mesiran*) and Java (*lakon kejawen*). As a movie aficionado Sugiarto picked some elements of the *lakon* from movies that dwelled on mummies coming to life again. According to him the plot is simple (*wosipun gampang*). Here follows a summary of the script: (see Illustrations 3.2 and 3.3).

The first scenes of the *lakon* take place at the court of King Ptolemeus [Ptolemy] in Egypt. The King's main commanders Yudhas and Mahdi fight for the love of Princess Dewi Maya. Mahdi gets severely wounded during a fight with Yudhas. Just before dying he writes a letter with his own blood. This letter is not to be read because otherwise Mahdi's mummy will come to life again. The following scenes take place on Java at the court of Cirebon and its surroundings. Sultan Haji and Vizier Aburajak decide that the Sultan's son Prince Ahmad will marry the Vizier's daughter Siti Muryani.

In the meantime merchant Azis enters the museum with mummies from Egypt by night. He wants to prove to his friends that he is brave enough to encounter the mummies in the dark. When he opens a small box he finds a letter. The moment he reads it a mummy comes alive and kills Azis. After that the mummy escapes from the museum and starts chasing the Vizier's daughter. He kidnaps her and hides her in a cave. He explains to her that she is actually Dewi Maya from ancient Egypt who once rejected his love. Furthermore, the mummy tells that he came alive again because the letter he wrote ages ago with his own blood has been read. Now, he insists, Siti alias Maya has to accept his love. Prince Ahmad and his servants try to

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sutradara saya mengontrol terus, nggak pernah duduk-duduk, merokok. Saya tidak pernah menyingkalkan pentas, saya pasti *spanning*. Kalau Mas Giarto bisa santai.

rescue Siti Muryani. Finally, they succeed in killing the powerful mummy by burning the letter that was written once by supreme commander Mahdi.

While Sugiarto is telling the story scene by scene the players often make funny comments about what he says and they talk to each other. Some arrive too late but nobody seems to be bothered. They relax while smoking their *kretek* cigarettes and sometimes fall asleep for a while. When the story has been told Sugiarto assigns some people the task of gathering several stage props needed. Any questions? Apparently not, everybody leaves at 10:45.

On Friday night the performance takes place between 8 pm and 12 pm at the auditorium of the RRI. I arrive at the RRI auditorium at about 7:20 pm. Backstage I meet the actors who are busy dressing up for the play. I join the women who are making jokes about each other's outfits. Director Sugiarto gives me the script so that I can read a little in advance. The female players get a bit stressed when they receive the message that it is almost 8 o'clock, because they have not finished dressing yet. I decide to take a seat in front. At about 8:15 pm the live broadcasting starts. The audience is welcomed in High Javanese by a radio presenter backstage. The auditorium hall is still quite empty when the play starts. The spectators listen to the announcement of tonight's cast via the speakers in front of the stage. During the second scene more and more people enter. Finally, the auditorium is fully packed.

On the basis of Sugiarto's five-page script entitled *Living corpse*, the actors created a performance that lasted four hours. To present an impression of the tersely worded Javanese of this script I quote two scenes. Subsequently, I show how the actors performed these particular scenes in the auditorium. This provides some insight into the improvisation skills of the performers.

Scene 6, museum

- [Setting: Museum, Azis enters a mummy museum]
- Dimmed light, green spot follows movements Azis. All dark/dimly lit. Azis enters carrying burning candle, finds little wooden box[,] opens [it] reads. Living mummy murders Azis. Mummy runs.

(Adegan 6, museum

Lampu redhup, lampu spot hijau ngikuti lampahanipun Azis. Sedaya petang/remeng-remeng. Azis mlebet mbeta lilin murup, manggih pethi alit dipun buka dipun waos. Mumi gesang mejahi Azis. Mumi laju [sic.]<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This is possibly a spelling mistake in the script. The correct word is *mlayu*, which means 'to run' or 'to escape'.

During the sixth scene we see how merchant Azis enters the dimly lit Museum of Antiquities. He walks in with a candle and curiously starts to have a look around. The audience gets louder and louder, continuously commenting on what is happening on stage. People sitting behind me apparently recognise the actor Sardjana repeatedly calling out his name. Azis finds a little box with a sign stating that it should not be opened (*ora dibukak*) and the audience cries out ‘Just open it!’ (*dibukak wae*). While continuously repeating these words Azis opens the box in which he finds a letter that is not to be read (*ora diwaca*). The audience shouts with even more volume: ‘Just read it!’ (*diwaca wae*). Azis reads it out aloud. And the mummy in the back of the museum suddenly comes to life again and strangles Azis. The audience cries out both for pleasure and horror. The mummy runs away, leaving the dead body of Azis behind.

#### Scene 7, beach

- Mban and Abdi [female and male servants] accompany Siti Muryani on an outing to the beach, they joke around and sing for a while. Siti Muryani does not want to return yet although it is already getting late.
- Pirates arrive who are after Siti Muryani. Prince Ahmad arrives to help, and the pirates run off. When they introduce themselves it becomes clear that Siti is the daughter of Vizier Aburajak, Prince Ahmad happily accompanies her back home to the Vizier’s residence.

#### (Adegan 7, pesisir

- Mban lan Abdi nderekaken Siti Muryani dolanan wonten pesisir, sami guyon tembangan, sawentawis. Siti Muryani dhateng dipun ajak wangsul mergi sampun sonten dereng kersa.
- Dhatengipun bajag, badhe remen/ngrujag Siti Muryani. Peng Ahmad dhateng nulungi bajag mlajar. Lajeng tepangan, sareng ngertos yen putranipun Pt Aburajak, Peng Ahmad remen lajeng ndugeken wangsul dhateng kepatihan.)

The seventh scene starts with a dhagelan skit. One female servant (*emban*) and two male servants (*abdi*) give a great show. They play, dance and sing on the beach with Siti Muryani, the daughter of the Vizier. Emban dances around in a funny way and invites the others ‘to sail away in a sailing boat’. The four actors take place behind each other moving their hips, while Emban holds a cloth as a sail above them. Then she starts quarrelling with one of the servants, apparently her own husband. The couple chase one another around trying to slap each other

with a cardboard tube. The audience laughs continuously while the servants run around. Lots of people even shout their comments out loud, hoping for an answer by one of the players in return. After a while two pirates appear on stage and they start chasing Siti Muryani. First Emban acts hysterically as though she is the pretty one being chased. But of course it is not her, but her mistress these men are after. The servants have a busy job trying to protect their mistress from the pirates. Each time the pirates are about to succeed in capturing Siti, the servants jump in between. Suddenly Prince Ahmad appears on stage, which makes the pirates run away. When he introduces himself to Siti they are both surprised and Ahmad happily returns her home.

During the performance of *Living corpse* playwright-director Sugiarto played along. Most of the time, he allows his actors to improvise, leaving them free to create their own dialogues. Occasionally, however, he would make suggestions to individual actors waiting in the wings to make an entrance. These suggestions generally related to timing problems or plot development. Since some of the male actors had the habit of passing their time outside drinking palm wine, eating snacks and smoking they were not always present in time for their next appearance. This lack of discipline seemed to be a natural part of the performance: Sugiarto did not show any sign of surprise or anger.

The play schema on the blackboard was present in the wings. Each time a scene had finished one of the actors wiped away the particular part concerned. In this way, the information on the blackboard vanished bit by bit. The actors tended to scan the board on a regular basis to make sure how far the story had developed. Especially for those who had been chatting outside it was a practical mnemonic tool to get back to work quickly.

When Sugiarto noticed the absence of an actor who was almost due to enter stage, he simply sent one of the other actors to look for him or her backstage. His relaxed attitude towards the developments on stage can be explained partly because he believed in the strength of his actors' improvisation skills. He admitted that only an inexperienced group required regular interference from the playwright-director:

Improvisation is the starting point of traditional kethoprak. This improvisation shows the power of the individual actor. It depends on the skills of the individual actor how he formulates his sentences, how he applies language etiquette (*unggah-ungguh*) and how he treats the sentences of his partner. Improvisation requires broad general

knowledge, knowledge of language, *unggah-ungguh* and about the possibilities of developing issues on stage. If your knowledge is limited, use of language and conventions will be wrong. That's what you see happening with groups from the village who do not know much about improvisation. They just imitate and it is not certain that what they imitate is right.<sup>8</sup> (Personal communication with Sugiarto 2001.)

Apparently the general knowledge of the Kethoprak Mataram RRI actors was sufficient to create a good performance without the extensive help of their director. However, this did not mean that Sugiarto never criticised his players. At times he commented on their language use as they failed to stick to the proper terminology and conventions of conventional kethoprak. He was convinced that proper Javanese was a quintessential part of a kethoprak performance and rejected the use of Indonesian or 'Javanised' Indonesian:

For me it is important that the correct Javanese is preserved. Not the mixed Javanese that we hear nowadays: Javanese consisting of a lot of Indonesian that has been 'Javanised' (*dijawakake*). Conventional kethoprak does not want that yet. With *kethoprak humor* the language is a disaster (*morak-marik*). What kind of Javanese is that? Mixed with Indonesian, English, mixed with ice (*campur es*) because of the skills of the players. Because I am in Yogya it is my task to try to maintain correct Javanese.<sup>9</sup> (Personal communication with Sugiarto in 2001.)

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<sup>8</sup> Kethoprak tradisional itu diangkat dan berangkat dari improvisasi. Improvisasi itu menunjukkan kekuatan individu pemainnya, baik itu tutur bahasanya, *unggah-ungguhnya*, entah bagaimana dia mencerna kalimat dialog lawan mainnya itu tergantung kemampuan individu pemain. Improvisasi menuntut pengetahuan umum yang luas, baik bahasa, *unggah-ungguh*, situasi sekarang bagaimana itu yang dikembangkan dalam panggung saat itu. Tetapi kalau tidak mempunyai pengetahuan yang luas, bahasapun akan keliru, *unggah-ungguh* akan keliru. Itu banyak terjadi di kumpulan grup-grup lain terutama yang di desa yang belum tahu banyak tentang berimprovisasi. Cuma tiru-tiru, belum tentu yang ditiru itu benar.

<sup>9</sup> Bagi saya yang harus dipertahankan bahasa Jawa yang benar, tidak bahasa Jawa campuran. Bukan bahasa Jawa yang sekarang. Bahasa Jawa kan sekarang banyak bahasa Indonesia yang *dijawakake*. Kethoprak konvensional belum mau itu. Dengan adanya kethoprak humor itu bahasa *morak-marik*. Bahasa Jawa apa itu? Campur Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Inggris, campuran es karena kemampuan pemainnya. Karena saya berada di Yogya sebisa-bisa mempertahankan itu Bahasa Jawa yang *bener*.

*Conclusion*

The description of both a kethoprak performance in the studio and a performance in the auditorium shows how members of the Kethoprak Mataram RRI group work with their script. As skilled stage players they improvise according to the time and prevailing conditions. A *penuangan* and a play schema help the professional players to perform well. At times the director steers their dialogue from aside.

Playwright-directors Sugiarto and Sardjana basically shared the same way of producing a play. They prepared a short script at home, which they used as the starting point of their *résumé* during the *penuangan*. The *penuangan* was an important moment for the exchange of ideas between all the members of the production process. The actors were given an opportunity to make suggestions or ask for changes in the story as proposed by their playwright-director. The playwright's assistant drew up the play schema on a blackboard. While broadcasting in the studio, the play schema was given a prominent place at the back. In the auditorium the blackboard was placed in the wings. When broadcasting started, both directors kept a close eye on the developments on stage. Their approach towards the actors during performance was different though. Whereas Sardjana tried to influence the development of the plot by actively steering his actors with suggestions and instructions from aside, Sugiarto played along himself and steered a little from this position.

In the following case study we see numerous similarities along with several essential differences compared with the case above. Moving from Yogyakarta to the capital Jakarta we look at *kethoprak humor* performed on stage and broadcast on television by RCTI. The actors of this group Kethoprak Humor Samiaji had more freedom than their colleagues at RRI to interpret their own role and express themselves accordingly. Individual utterances seem to be stronger than the 'collective' story plot. Guest stars show how important the 'script in mind' is. They make mistakes because they are not familiar with the conventions of kethoprak.

*Kethoprak humor in Jakarta*

What made kethoprak humor different from other kethoprak was its showy character. Decors, lamps and costumes were brighter than in average kethoprak performances and stories were more diverse. Famous guest stars added to a glamorous atmosphere on stage (Mohammad Bakir 2002). Guest stars often did not have a kethoprak background. They were for example comedians, artists, singers and television presenters. Their mistakes became the major attraction of the show.

Different furthermore from regular kethoprak performances was the use of the Indonesian language in a kethoprak humor show rather than Javanese. Even the script, unlike the script in all my other case studies, was written entirely in the Indonesian language. The reason why I decided nonetheless to make kethoprak humor into one of my case studies was the fact that it was an important part of the Javanese theatre realm at the time I carried out my fieldwork. Since many of the actors came from Central and East Java they frequently mixed their Indonesian with Javanese and tended to make many jokes in their mother tongue. And as playwright-director Timbul who hails from Magelang in Central Java put it:

Nowadays what is our national language? Indonesian! That's why kethoprak humor is in Indonesian because it needs to be understood by all of Indonesia. Is it wrong to use Indonesian? We are Indonesians and we cannot use Indonesian? To get closer [to each other] we should use Indonesian. For example the people from Irian and Medan sent letters here: 'I like kethoprak humor because the clothes are like this and this and I understand the language.' If [the actors speak] Javanese then for sure there is text [subtitles] on the bottom of the screen. [...] This is what I call development: traditional Javanese art for the whole of Indonesia.<sup>10</sup> (Personal communication with Timbul.)

Timbul strongly believed that kethoprak humor with its use of Indonesian and subtitling of Javanese had the advantage of reaching the entire country.

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<sup>10</sup> Sekarang bahasa nasional kita apa? Bahasa Indonesia! Makanya kethoprak humor pakai Bahasa Indonesia karena membutuhkan untuk dimengerti seluruh Indonesia. Apakah salah kalau pakai Bahasa Indonesia? Kita orang Indonesia kok tidak boleh pakai Bahasa Indonesia? Untuk pendekatan kita mesti pakai bahasa Indonesia. Contoh orang Irian & Medan kirim surat ke sini: 'Saya senang dengan kethoprak humor karena pakaiannya begini-begini dan saya tahu bahasanya.' Kalau Bahasa Jawa di bawah layar TV pasti ada teks. [...] Ini yang namanya pengembangan menurut saya: kesenian tradisional Jawa khususnya untuk seluruh Indonesia.



*The history of Kethoprak Humor Samiaji*

In 1998 the famous Javanese comedian Timbul brought together a group of kethoprak players with whom he formed the art foundation Samiaji in Jakarta. In an interview with the Javanese magazine *Jaya Baya* Timbul admitted that he was very happy about the new interest in traditional art, because he had been very worried lately about the disappearance of many traditional groups. His idea to start with kethoprak humor (humorous kethoprak) was the result of thoroughly thinking about a way to make traditional art more attractive to the audience (Yes Ismie Suryaatmadja 2000:11).

Because Timbul had experience with kethoprak groups all over Java he was proud to be able to 'combine the best of all styles'. He brought together people from West Java, East Java, Central Java and Banyumas. In this way, they could all learn from each other (personal communication with Timbul 2001). Apart from acting in kethoprak many of these kethoprak humor actors had been members of the dhagelan group Srimulat. Srimulat started in the 1950s as a music revue touring around in Solo and surroundings. In the 1960s it developed into a comedy group which became very popular all over Java in the 1970s and early 1980s (Herry Gendut Janarto 1990). Although the group was officially disbanded in 1988 it appeared again in 1995 as a 'reunion group'. Since 1995 the private television channel Indosiar broadcast their one-hour show weekly on Thursday night (Anwari 1999:74-5).

From November 1998 the private television station RCTI started broadcasting the *Kethoprak humor* programme, which became a major success at a national level. Soon after, similar programmes appeared on screen: *Kethoprak jampi stress* (Stress-medicine kethoprak) at Indosiar and *Ludruk luber stress* (Stress-overflow *ludrug*) at SCTV. Although these programmes based on Timbul's concept were not as popular as kethoprak humor, they reached a considerable audience too. In the beginning RCTI had to search actively for celebrities to join in the kethoprak humor show as guest stars. After a while, however, famous people asked themselves to become part of an episode (Muchus Budi Rahayu and Joko S. Gombloh 2000a:3; 2000b:4).

The art foundation Samiaji had a management team that took care of finance and marketing of kethoprak humor (Mohammad Bakir 2002). By way of market strategy, kethoprak humor was promoted as 'a mixture of traditional and modern art'

(Budi Sarjono et al. 1999). At the end of 2003 the RCTI finished its contract with Samiaji. From January 2004 onwards the channel TV7 took over the programme. Because of this switch to another channel both format and name of the kethoprak humor group had to be changed slightly (*Kompas* 28 December 2003).

### *The playwright and his script*

A special crew of artists from Kethoprak Humor Samiaji and RCTI, the ‘performance team’ (*tim pergelaran*), met once a week to discuss topics or stories suitable to make into a script. Furthermore, they took care of the setting, the costumes and the choice of guest stars. Timbul as head of the production did the actual writing of a synopsis (personal communication with Timbul 2001).

Timbul Suhardi (mostly called Timbul) was born in Magelang in 1942. Because he grew up in a family of professional kethoprak and wayang wong players, he learned to dance and act at a very young age. He travelled around Java with different theatre groups. Initially, he focused on his job as an actor, but through the years he became more and more involved in playwright-director tasks. At the end of the 1970s he became a member of the dhagelan group Srimulat and soon acted as their director too. From 1987 onwards he established several new theatre companies of which kethoprak humor became quite successful (personal communication with Timbul 2001).

The kethoprak humor script consisted of approximately four A4-sized pages written on the computer. Unlike the scripts mentioned in my previous case studies this script was written in Indonesian and not in Javanese. During the performances the actors mainly used Indonesian, but often switched to Javanese. The first page was an overview of the casting, the other pages provide a scene by scene synopsis in chronological order (see Illustration 3.4).

Inspiration for the script came from team members, stories of friends, legends and historical tales (personal communication with Timbul 2001). Timbul preferred stories without a clear historical background:

The problem with historical tales is that the humour in them is not enough. RCTI requires a story with 80% humour. I do not dare to change the history, because of the

books. If for example Dipanegara<sup>11</sup> acts as a clown that is not appropriate. What about the children who go to school at this moment? Was Dipanegara really like that? That Dipanegara had soldiers everywhere, that's something I pick out. A soldier of Dipanegara, who he is and where his struggle takes place, that's what I can make into humour.<sup>12</sup> (Personal communication with Timbul 2001.)

It is important to note that RCTI required comedy rather than kethoprak. This had a direct impact on the format and content of the script. Lakon that could not be made into grotesque humour for ethical or historical reasons were not suitable for the programme. The flexible artists of kethoprak humor were able to keep a sense of kethoprak and sell it as such. Timbul claimed to write real kethoprak plays. He created humorous plays with 'educational aspects'. He did not agree with a story that was over the top or a story that was just created for the sake of humour:

We want it humorous, but humorous in what way? [We want] humour that makes sense. Not humour that is haphazard [*ngawur*]. That is what we take into account. Then what is the story, because we do not only need one or two episodes but hundreds of episodes. Each episode has to be different. I really like humour but it should not be made at random [*ngawur*]. For example a kethoprak play where Gathotkaca<sup>13</sup> comes on stage or Superman... that is *ngawur*.<sup>14</sup> (Personal communication with Timbul.)

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<sup>11</sup> The Javanese Prince Dipanegara (1785-1855) from the court of Yogyakarta was leader of the rebellion against the Dutch during the Java War (1825-1830). He is an official national hero.

<sup>12</sup> Kalau babad, sejarah itu humournya kurang. Tuntutan daripada RCTI 80% minimal harus ada humournya. Kalau cerita sejarah saya tidak berani mengubah, ya takut karena ada bukunya. Seperti Dipanegara terus *mbanyol*, itu tidak boleh. Nanti terus bagaimana dengan anak-anak sekolah sekarang? Apa Dipanegara dulu begitu? Kalau Diponegara itu punya laskar-laskar di mana-mana, nah ini yang saya ambil. Laskar Dipanegara itu siapa saja, perjuangannya di mana saja, ini yang bisa saya bikin humor.

<sup>13</sup> Gathotkaca is a son of Pendhawa brother Bima and ogress Arimbi from the well-known Hindu epic Mahabharata; character that regularly appears in *wayang* and *wayang wong* performances.

<sup>14</sup> Kita maunya lucu, tapi lucu yang bagaimana? Lucu yang mendasar, bukan lucu yang *ngawur*. Ini yang kita perhitungkan. Lalu ceritanya apa, karena kita tidak hanya satu atau dua episode, sampai ratusan episode. Kita harus membedakan di antara episode per episode. Saya senang sekali humour, tapi jangan sampai *ngawur*. Seperti kethoprak dikeluarin Gatotkaca, dikeluarin Superman. Itu kan sudah *ngawur*.

Timbul considered the *pakem* (kethoprak scenario)<sup>15</sup> as principle for each performance that cannot be changed: 'I enjoy making jokes and I make a living joking. But if we talk about a pakem that is subject of change it's me who feels sad and can cry.'<sup>16</sup> According to several art critics, however, kethoprak humor plays did not adhere to any *pakem* whatsoever. They described the performances as one grand parody of original kethoprak plays:

Kethoprak humor parodies almost all aspects of the traditional kethoprak. The theme of the play, the moral of the story, the roles, the setting on stage, everything is subject to elimination. Each character degrades into a clown and that exactly is the revolution.<sup>17</sup>

Whether the performances were according to the traditional pakem or whether they violated it, remains a point of discussion. What is clear though is that the guest stars tended to have a different approach towards the developments on stage than the other actors. They were not hindered by knowledge of the principles of kethoprak.

#### *The guest star and the companion as shaping agents*

For each performance one or more guest stars (*bintang tamu*) were invited to brighten up the show. Curiously, many of these celebrities had no kethoprak background. Because of their ignorance in the field of traditional theatre they tended to make many 'mistakes' while performing kethoprak. They influenced the plot in an unexpected way, shaping the outcome of the performance.

However, not only guest stars made mistakes. Many comedians deliberately mocked the conventions of kethoprak. According to the actor Tarzan, a well-known

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<sup>15</sup> The word *pakem*, in this context, can be described as 'a scenario based on the conventions of the kethoprak genre'.

<sup>16</sup> Aku ki seneng guyon, lan uripku pancen saka asil guyon. Nanging yen ngomong perkara pakem kang diowah-owah aku salah siji saka paraga kang rumangsa sedhik lan bisa nangis (Yes Ismie Suryaatmadja 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Kethoprak humor hampir semua pakem tradisi diplesetkan. Inti tematik lakon, moralitas cerita, perwatakan, bahkan *setting* panggungnya dibabat. Degradasi penokohan dengan mengubah setiap tokoh menjadi pembanyol, ialah wujud revolusi itu (Muchus Budi Rahayu and Joko S. Gombloh 2000a:3).

member of Srimulat, people watched kethoprak humor because they wanted to see the Srimulat players. Spectators enjoyed watching the failures that were made on stage (Muchus Budi Rahayu and Joko S. Gombloh 2000:3).

The Javanese art critic and soap opera playwright Arswendo Atmowiloto also believed that mistakes were a major attraction of the show. When he acted as a guest star in the performance *Bajak laut* (The pirates) at Taman Ismael Marzuki in Jakarta on 28 December 1999, he hardly received any instructions about his role as General. He attended the penugangan but still had just a vague idea what would happen on stage. As a result he became the object of laughter as he frequently violated the plot in one-way or the other (personal communication with Arswendo Atmowiloto 2001).

Miscommunication between a guest star and the others caused hilarious scenes. As a rule, the actors tended to forget each other's names and improvised far from the plot. Sometimes it turned out to be difficult for the non-Javanese players to understand the utterances in the Javanese language. The audience reacted enthusiastically when one of their pretty celebrities was mocked by their Srimulat favourites.

Although they enjoyed teasing the guest stars the kethoprak humor actors felt responsible for helping them too. Especially the senior players took care of those who were less experienced on stage. If they observed that their fellow actors did not have enough inspiration, they provided them with a new topic of conversation (personal communication with Timbul 2001).

Actress and model Dian Nitami who often played along as a guest star in kethoprak humor admitted that especially the Srimulat players were experts in providing her with fresh material when needed. The moment she was about to get stuck on stage they immediately helped her out. In this way, the dialogue never came to an abrupt end (Ami 2000).

Apart from spontaneous help, the guest stars received planned instructions too. Before each performance took place, the director appointed a senior actor who had to accompany the guest star. This special companion (*pendamping*) had the task of keeping the guest star on the right track. By physically staying close to the guest star the companion tried to 'control' the guest star's actions. He whispered suggestions to the guest star and sometimes even pushed him to the right spot on the stage. In this

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way the companion worked as an important shaping agent: his instructions were of direct influence on the guest star's actions and thus on the development of the entire plot.

The personal companion always tried to prevent or at least reduce the chaos on stage. This made it easier for the group members to concentrate on their own task. As for the guest stars themselves, they did not have to be afraid of becoming totally lost. In the case of the play *Ulah sang Pangeran* (Behaviour of the Prince) the companions and the guest stars worked together well. Playwright-director Timbul accompanied singer and television-drama actor Rizal Gibran alias Prince Aria Lintang. One of the senior actresses had to take care of female guest star Della Puspita alias Princess Ratnasari who is a singer, actress and model. Although they did not have a kethoprak background Rizal Gibran and Della Puspita turned out to be very flexible on stage.

To learn more about the interaction between the participants in the production process let us turn to the briefing session and the performance of *Behaviour of the Prince*.

Here, first, a summary of the script:

The play *Behaviour of the Prince* is about the adventures of Aria Lintang, the son of Chancellor Aria Wisesa. Aria Lintang will be given in marriage to the daughter of one of his father's friends. Because Aria Lintang has already set eyes on the girl Ratnasari, he is not very happy about his parents' plan. They allow him the time however to get to know his fiancée first. Aria Lintang decides to approach her with the help of his servants. One of the servants, Marwoto, changes places with his master. In this way, it is possible for Aria Lintang to observe his future wife without revealing his identity. As master and servant in disguise enter the palace of the unknown fiancée she turns out to be the beloved one Ratnasari herself. This leads to all kinds of humorous complications.

### *The penugangan*

The actors never seriously rehearsed before performing. According to Timbul it was no problem for the actors to work without a detailed script because as professional players they were used to acting spontaneously (Yes Ismie Suryaatmadja 2000). The

actors got together for the *penuangan* a few hours before the show started. The director and the playwright-director instructed them about their role and the story to be enacted.

*Penuangan* for *Ulah Sang Pangeran* (Behaviour of the Prince) at Taman Ismael Marzuki on 28 September 2001

At 6 pm the wooden slit drum (*keprak*) sounds. All the actors of Kethoprak Humor Samiaji gather in the dressing room behind the stage. They sit in a circle with director Aries and playwright-director Timbul in the middle. Aries reads from the script. The *penuangan* lasts half an hour.

Aries starts by announcing the list of *dramatis personae* and follows with a detailed account of the story. He does not stick to the text on paper but tells the story in his own words, adding details and instructions. The actors focus on their director and do not move from their chairs. Although Aries is interrupted occasionally by remarks from his players or the sound of their mobile phones, the actors seem to pay much more attention to their playwright-director than the actors I witnessed during other *penuangan* (as described in Chapter II and above in this chapter).

I quote from the second scene of the script followed by the *penuangan* of this scene as delivered by Aries:

Scene 2. The palace garden

Cast: Servants, Prince Aria Lintang

The servants are having fun. Aria Lintang arrives in a sad mood because he is forced to marry someone he does not know. Aria Lintang asks one of his servants to act as if he is the Prince while the Prince Aria Lintang himself will be disguised as his servant. Then they will go to have a look at the girl that will be given in marriage to Prince Aria Lintang. When all the servants agree they leave.

(Babak 2 Taman Kasatriyan

Cast: Abdi, Pangeran Aria Lintang

Para abdi sedang bersuka ria. Datang Aria Lintang bersedih hati karena dipaksa menikah dengan orang yang tidak dikenal. Aria Lintang lalu meminta bantuan salah satu abadinya untuk berpura-pura menjadi dirinya sementara Pangeran Aria Lintang sendiri akan manyamar sebagai abadinya. Kemudian mereka pergi untuk melihat putri

yang akan dijodohkan dengan Pangeran Aria Lintang. Setelah para abadinya setuju, mereka berangkat.)

Director Aries:

When the intermezzo is finished we enter the second scene in the Palace. This is the Palace of Salokapura. The servants are having fun. Then Prince Aria Lintang arrives. The Prince is nervous because he has to obey the order of his parents to get married to a woman he has never met. So he tells his servants that his parents gave him permission to get to know the character of his future wife. It is said that his future wife comes from the Chancellor's residence of Sanggabumi. [pauses, speaks more slowly and in a lower voice] 'That's why I'd like to have an ambassador representing me to get to know my future wife. One of my servants has to dress like me as well as behave and act the way I do, while I will behave and act like my servant. All together we will go to Sanggabumi to get to know her well.' [speaks faster, frequently changing from Indonesian into Javanese:] Who is the servant that will be chosen? Finally the most enticing one of the servants will be chosen and that is Marwoto.

[The actor Marwoto interrupts the director and a short dialogue develops between them]

Marwoto: Hey, hey.... [The actors start laughing].

Director Aries: Marwoto is prepared.

Marwoto: The handsome one is chosen, right?

Director Aries: Yes, the most handsome one!

Marwoto: Isn't there someone else? [laughing increases]

Director Aries: No, there isn't!

[Director Aries goes on] Then they agree to find a way to Sanggabumi. When they are finished making decisions they leave. So the dressing, leave it to later. [In other words: the exchange of clothes has to take place backstage. The director points at the Prince and at servant Marwoto:] This one follows this one. This one follows this one. Change clothes at your turn. After you leave the second scene is finished. Here we first rest without an intermezzo and then we'll start the third scene.

(Selesai selingan masuk ke babak kedua di Kasatriyan. Kasatriyan ini di Kadipaten Salokapura. Para abdi sedang bersuka ria. Kemudian datangnya Pangeran Aria Lintang. Gelisah si Pangeran tersebut karena harus menuruti perintah orang tua akan dikawinkan dengan wanita yang belum pernah diketahuinya. Sehingga disampaikan



kepada para abdi sudah mendapat izin dari orang tuanya untuk mengetahui lahir dan batin calon istrinya. Calon istrinya seorang wanita, katanya putri dari Kadipaten Sanggabumi. ‘Untuk itu saya ingin mengadakan utusan menjadi wakil saya, untuk mengetahui hati nuraninya calon istriku yang di Kadipaten Sanggabumi. Caranya salah satu abdi saya ini harus berpakaian dan mengaku, bertingkah seperti aku, sedang aku akan bertingkah dan perilaku seperti abdiku. Kita bersama-sama menuju ke Sanggabumi perlunya bisa mengetahui dengan jelas.’ *Sapa sing terpilih? Akhire sing terpilih yang tertampan para Abdi adalah Marwoto. [Marwoto: ‘Eéé, Eéé’] Marwoto saguh. [Marwoto: Terpilih sing bagus, ta?] Maksude sing bagus dhewe! [Marwoto: Ora ana kancane?] Ora ana kancane.* Sanggup, kemudian mereka bersama-sama bersepakat untuk mencari jalan menuju Sanggabumi. Setelah kesepakatan berakhir dengan keberangkatan mereka bersama. *Dadi dandanane mengko wae. Sing kene arep jujul, sing kene arep jujul, ijol pakaian giliranne.* Berangkat. Babak dua selesai. Di sini istirahat dulu tanpa selingan, kemudian masuk babak tiga.)

Director Aries’ account of the story was very lively. He started off as a narrator presenting the main developments of the story. From time to time, however, he switched into the perspective of one of the characters. He raised or lowered his voice and uttered fragments of a dialogue. Apart from presenting the main elements of the play and demonstrating text fragments that were likely to be used on stage, the director also gave some practical comments concerning the position of the camera and the changing of clothes. Furthermore, he did not hesitate to react to remarks from the actors as became clear from the humorous conversation with the actor Marwoto.

When director Aries finished the penugan the actors had about an hour to dress up for the play. They put on make-up, styled their hair and helped each other to put on headdresses and traditional clothes that were made out of shiny and colourful fabrics.

### *The performance*

Each performance took place in front of a large audience in one of Jakarta’s renowned theatres: TIM (Taman Ismael Marzuki) or GKJ (Gedung Kesenian Jakarta). The spectators had to pay an entrance fee of 20,000 rupiah. Live performance was an essential aspect of the kethoprak humor formula. By performing in front of an audience the group had an opportunity to interact with the spectators as is common in

traditional theatre. The aim of the producers was to bring the spontaneous atmosphere of the stage and its audience into the living rooms of the TV watchers at home (Chris Pudjiastuti 2000).

Since most of the actors had a Javanese background they tended to use their mother tongue frequently. In order to serve the non-Javanese spectator, most of the dialogue uttered in Javanese during the performance appeared with Indonesian subtitles on screen.

Performance *Ulah sang Pangeran* (Behaviour of the Prince) at Taman Ismael Marzuki on 28 September 2001

By 8 pm the theatre hall of Taman Ismael Marzuki is full of spectators. The gamelan orchestra, situated in the orchestra pit, starts with the sounds of the programme's opening tune. Several cameramen of the RCTI are recording the play with mobile video cameras. The backdrops and props as well as the actors' clothes are very shiny and colourful.

The actors have a busy job anticipating their counterparts. The format of 'humorous kethoprak' calls for a continuous flow of humorous anecdotes, puns, slapstick and practical jokes. This does not mean, however, that there is no room for the story itself. The story is built up in stages. What to expect from guest star Rizal Gibran alias Prince Aria Lintang who according to the script and the penugangan of Scene Two has the task of asking his servants for help?

Aria Lintang: [walks back and forth on stage with a thoughtful expression on his face] My father said she is like this, this and this. She is pretty, but I don't know her heart. I don't know her character...

Marwoto: Obviously pretty is a relative notion.

Timbul: Relative?

Aria Lintang: There is no guarantee.

Marwoto: That's why.

Aries: Pretty is relative?

Marwoto: I might say pretty according to my taste, but *Kang* Timbul might not say pretty.

Timbul: No.

Marwoto: Because it's not according to Timbul's taste.

Aria Lintang: [facing Marwoto] What is your taste?

Marwoto: For me whatever there is, instead of having nothing to do. [audience laughs]

- (Aria Lintang: Bapak saya mengatakan bahwa dia itu begini, begini, begini. Cantik, tapi saya belum tahu hatinya. Saya belum tahu karakteristik...)
- Marwoto: Dan yang jelas cantik itu kan relatif.
- Timbul: Relatif?
- Aria Lintang: Tidak menjamin
- Marwoto: Nah justru itu
- Aries: Cantik kok relatif toh?
- Marwoto: Saya mungkin bisa mengatakan cantik karena sesuai dengan selera saya, tapi mungkin Kang Timbul tidak mengatakan cantik.
- Timbul: Tidak.
- Marwoto: Karena tidak sesuai selera Kang Timbul.
- Aria Lintang: Selera kamu seperti apa?
- Marwoto: Saya seadanya, daripada nggak ada kegiatan kalau saya.)

As Prince Aria Lintang comes up with the problem of not knowing his future wife: ‘She is pretty, but I don’t know her heart, her character...’ servant Marwoto tackles the word ‘pretty’ (*cantik*), finding himself the focus of attention as the Prince confronts him: ‘What is your taste?’

When laughing has faded away it is servant Timbul who receives attention in turn as he is having problems pronouncing the word *menyelidiki*, ‘to investigate’.

- Aria Lintang: So how about our tactic? I would like to investigate (*menyelidiki*) further.
- Timbul: Concerning the problem of *menyelidiki*. [audience laughs]
- Aria Lintang: *Menyelidiki* (investigate).
- Timbul: Yes, *menyelidiki*. [laughing increases]
- Aries: *Menyelidiki*.

- (Aria Lintang: Bagaimana ini nanti taktiknya bagaimana? Saya ingin menyelidiki lebih lanjut.
- Timbul: Lho kalau soal menyelidiki.
- Aria Lintang: Menyelidiki.
- Timbul: Lha iya menyelidiki.
- Aries: Menyelidiki.)

Taking Timbul's pronunciation problems into serious account, Prince Aria Lintang points at the other three servants one after the other making them say the word *menyelidiki*. As this does not occur to be a problem for them Aria Lintang faces Timbul and starts spelling out the word syllable by syllable. Timbul, however, keeps mixing up the syllables. Marwoto suggests Timbul uses an alternative verb: *meneliti*, 'to examine'.

Marwoto: The easy way is just to [use] *meneliti* (to examine).

Timbul: [With relieved expression on his face] *Meneliti!*

Aries: *Meneliti* is that what you use for clothes.

Timbul: That is a *peniti* (pin).

Marwoto: *Peniti* is the person who tunes the gamelan.

(Marwoto: Sing gampang meneliti ngono wae.

Timbul: Meneliti!

Aries: Meneliti iki sing dienggo klambi kae lho.

Timbul: Kae peniti ya!

Marwoto: Peniti iki sing sok nyetel gamelan kae.<sup>18)</sup>

The word 'meneliti' calls for several different associations. Aries comes up with another synonym of *menyelidiki*: the verb *menjajaki* ('to gauge'). Once again the servants start associating on the new term. Finally, however, the dialogue gets back to the initial question of Prince Aria how to approach the Princess.

Marwoto: [facing Timbul] Come on, speak, if the others say *diselidiki*, you just say *teliti*, OK?

Timbul: *Teliti*, not *di si li ki di*.

Aria Lintang: *Diselidiki*.

Marwoto: How do we investigate?

Aria Lintang: I have a tactic.

Marwoto: With 'boom' or not? [Marwoto refers to a TV Quiz]. With 'boom' it is the Quiz 'Tak-Tik-Boom'.

Timbul: [to Aria Lintang] You have Tak Tik and I have Tik Tak. A sweet.

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<sup>18</sup> The following Indonesian subtitles appeared on screen: Meneliti itu yang biasanya dipakai untuk baju/ Itu peniti/ Peniti itu yang sering mengontrol gamelan.

- Marwoto: [laughs and tries to kick Timbul with his right foot] You have got a sponsor?
- Aria Lintang: I have a tactic. From these four cover boys...
- Timbul: [interrupts shouting] What??
- Aria Lintang [pauses as audience laughs loudly] Cover boys from the class 'Nyonya Meneer' [famous Indonesian brand of so called *jamu*, herbal medicine and cosmetics].
- Nurbuat: [points at Marwoto beside him] This is not a cover boy, this is a bed cover.
- Aria Lintang: [walks towards Timbul] And this is a *koper* (suitcase) boy.
- Timbul: [moves his arms as if lifting suitcases from the ground] The boy who carries the suitcases?
- Aria Lintang: Indeed.
- Marwoto: [points at Timbul] This is the suitcase boy, but this... [points at Aries] a damaged suitcase it is.
- Aria Lintang: [raises his voice] You want to listen to my tactic or not?
- Servants: Yes, yes!
- Aria lintang: From my four servants who look like movie stars, like cover boys, I would like to choose one. I'm going to choose one!
- (Marwoto: Ayo ngomong, nek kana muni 'diselidiki' kowe muni 'teliti' wae ya?<sup>19</sup>
- Timbul: Teliti, jadi tidak di si li ki di.
- Aria Lintang: Diselidiki.
- Marwoto: Terus, caranya?
- Aria Lintang: Saya punya tak tik.
- Marwoto: Pakai 'bum' nggak? Kalau pakai 'bum', kuis 'Tak-Tik-Bum'.
- Timbul: Panjenengan punya Tak Tik, saya punya Tik Tak. Permen.
- Marwoto: Entuk sponsor apa kowe?<sup>20</sup>
- Aria Lintang: Saya punya tak tik, dari keempat *cover* boy ini.
- Timbul: Apa??
- Aria Lintang: *Cover* boy angkatan Nyonya Meneer.

<sup>19</sup> The following Indonesian subtitle appeared on screen: Lainnya boleh bilang diselidiki, kaubilang teliti saja, ya?

<sup>20</sup> Subtitle: Apa kau dapat sponsor?

- Nurbuat: Kalau ini bukan cover boy, ini *bed cover*.
- Aria Lintang: Kalau yang ini koper *boy*.
- Timbul: Tukang ngangkati koper?
- Aria Lintang: Betul.
- Marwoto: Iki koper boy, nek iki koper bobrok, ki ya iki.
- Aria Lintang: Mau dengar taktik saya nggak?
- Abdi: Mau, mau!
- Aria Lintang: Dari keempat abdi-abdi saya yang tampangnya seperti bintang film, cover boy, saya akan memilih satu. Saya akan memilih satu.)

The servants are surprised about their master's plan. Who would be chosen and what would happen? The Prince goes on:

- Aria Lintang: My tactic is like this: I will change places with the servant I will choose later on.
- Marwoto: [whispers to Timbul while pointing at Aria Lintang] I'm not daring enough to exchange with this one.  
[facing his master] Changing?
- Aria Lintang: One of you changes into a prince and I become the servant.
- Marwoto: Changing, you mean quarrelling?<sup>21</sup>
- Aria Lintang: Changing. What do you mean quarrelling? Changing. Changing!  
[starts pushing Marwoto from the back]
- Marwoto: Aha, that's it. [irritated voice since his master keeps pushing him forwards] Your big hands are pushing me over from behind. Playing kethoprak one night will leave my back broken.
- Aria Lintang: Mind you, we receive the same salary.
- Marwoto: [laughing] You get more!
- (Aria Lintang: Ya jadi tak tiknya itu begini: Saya akan tukaran dengan abdi siapa yang akan saya pilih nanti.
- Marwoto: Ora wani nek kon tukaran karo kene. Tukaran?
- Aria Lintang: Tukaran jadi pangeran, saya jadi abdi.
- Marwoto: Tukaran itu kerengan.
- Aria Lintang: Ijol-ijolan. Kowe iki piye sih? Ijol ijol.

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<sup>21</sup> This is a pun. The Indonesian word *tukaran*, 'change', means 'quarrel' in Javanese.

Marwoto: O ngono ta. Tanganmu gedhe kene dijongkongake. Ngethoprak sewengi kene boyokku putung.

Aria Lintang: Mangka bayarane padha.

Marwoto: Okeh kowe!<sup>22)</sup>

The servants keep joking around with their master. Aries, in his double role as director and servant, tries to make order of the chaos on stage. He suddenly reminds the others of their plan: one of them has to disguise himself as Prince Aria Lintang. This fake prince will go to the palace of Princess Ratnasari accompanied by his master in disguise and the other servants.

Aria Lintang has to make up his mind: which servant is most suitable to approach the Princess? In order to make a good decision the Prince gives his servants the floor one by one. They have to walk back and forth on stage like a prince. However, since the servants are not very eager to become princes, they all walk up and down in a ridiculous way. While the audience laughs non-stop, Aria Lintang picks Marwoto as his stand in. Marwoto does not seem to be very pleased, but has to obey his master anyway. The second scene finishes with the Prince telling Marwoto that they have to change clothes.

The actors tend to take turns in the creation of jokes. The greater part of the text uttered on stage consists of an exchange of humorous remarks. Many of their jokes are based on punning and on phonological parallelism like rhyme.

Furthermore, humorous remarks have their roots in literal translations from Javanese into Indonesian and vice versa. This way of joking is very common within performances of the dhagelan group Srimulat. As Goenawan Mohamad calls it in an article about Srimulat and translating: ‘there is always a submerged joy at a Babel-like linguistic breakdown’ (Goenawan Mohamad 2006:82). Since many kethoprak humor actors have been Srimulat members it is not surprising that they come up with these ‘Babel’ jokes.

Other funny expressions have the character of ‘meta-commentary’, a term used in John Emigh’s study about Balinese mask theatre (*topeng pajegan*). He describes this as ‘throwing the emphasis onto the act of performing by recognising the

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<sup>22</sup> The following Indonesian subtitles appeared on screen: Tukaran itu berkelahi?/ Ditukar, masa berkelahi, maksudmu itu apa?/ Ditukar/ Tangannya besar mendorong./ Main ketoprak semalam pinggangku putus/ Bayarannya sama/ Banyak kau.

presence of the audience and [...] fellow performers' (Emigh 1996:183). Emigh illustrates 'meta commentary' on the basis of the following example in which the mask-theatre actor speaks to the gamelan orchestra:

[A]s Penasar Kelihan, the senior storyteller, he [the mask-theatre actor] chides the *Satria* gamelan leader for setting the wrong tempo: 'What a chase those noblemen in the orchestra gave me! Now I'm worn out! Already too tired to give you a show! Mind you, I don't mean to criticize.' (Emigh 1996:183.)

Apparently the actor had to dance really fast because the gamelan played too quickly. Here we see that the actor 'abandoning character [...] addresses himself directly to the act of performing'. In my case study the actors also (suddenly) refer to the world outside their character and outside the theatre realm. As a result they create hilarious jokes.

While all the joking is going on, playwright-director Timbul and the director Aries make sure that the essential points of the script and *penuangan* reach the stage. They do this by instructing the actors both backstage and on stage. Backstage they give individual suggestions to those actors who are still in the wings and are about to enter the stage. On stage, when the directors are performing themselves, they give either short hints or they deliberately steer the dialogue back to the plot. In this way, they make clear to their fellow actors that it is time to move on to the next topic.

In the meantime, the companions are at work too, trying to guide their guest stars. As subtly as possible they have to influence the actions of the guest star. Sometimes a little push in the back is enough, but sometimes they also have to open the floor for their guest star. In the following fragment of the third scene in the Palace garden of Sanggabumi the companion of Princess Ratnasari, Emban is drawing attention to her mistress. Because the slit drum has already sounded as to signal an upcoming change of scene, she knows that time is running out. In other words, companion Emban has to give a clear sign to guest star Ratnasari that it is her turn to speak:

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Ratnasari and her seven servants are singing the song ‘The farmer’s hat’ (*Caping nggunung*) accompanied by the gamelan. Towards the end of the song the situation on stage becomes very chaotic because the servants start chasing each other. Emban tries to calm them down:

Emban: Enough, the Princess wants to speak, don’t be loud. [speaks to a servant who has taken a seat next to the Princess:] You move, don’t sit there, [she points at the ground] get down!

Ratnasari: Tell father that I’m afraid. I don’t love [him]. I love someone else.

(Emban: Uwis gusti arep ngendika aja rame wae. Kowe kuwi ngaliha aja lingguh neng kono, ayo medhun. [Indonesian subtitle: Sudah, Gusti Putri mau bicara, jangan ribut terus.]

Ratnasari: Bilang sama rama aku takut. Aku nggak cinta. Aku cinta sama orang lain.)

Unfortunately Princess Ratnasari is interrupted immediately, because the fake Prince Aria Lintang arrives and the focus switches from her to the guest. According to the *penuangan* however, she has to express her feelings about the arranged marriage in a more elaborate way. I quote from the third scene of the *penuangan* as delivered by director Aries. It shows that Ratnasari is sad about her father’s decision and her servants have to try to cheer her up:

[raises voice as if impersonating the princess:] ‘I did not tell my father yet who is the man of my choice and suddenly he orders me to marry or to be given in marriage to the man of my parents’ choice. This makes me sad.’ [lowers voice:] Then the servants cheer her up, but some of them agree with her and some disagree with her. Some take sides with the father and some with the daughter.

(‘Saya belum menyampaikan kepada *Rama* seorang pria yang menjadi pilihanku, tiba-tiba *Rama* memerintah saya untuk menikah atau dikawinkan dengan pria pilihan orang tuaku. Ini yang menyedihkan.’ Kemudian para abdi menghibur, tapi ada yang pro kontra: ada yang memihak bapaknya, ada yang memihak anaknya.)

This dialogue between Ratnasari and her servants as mentioned in the *penuangan* does not take place during the performance. Just at the moment Ratnasari starts to talk about her future husband, the fake Prince enters the stage and takes over the conversation. A dialogue follows between the Prince and the Princess. Some ten minutes later Emban has to steer the Princess back on track after she made a joke. According to playwright-director Timbul this was part of the game:

It does not matter what jokes you [guest star] make, for sure you return to the plot. The companion reminds you that you have lost the story. [...] Like last night when the girl [Ratnasari] met Marwoto [the fake Prince Aria Lintang]: ‘Oh is that really him? I imagined that the son of a Chancellor would be handsome!’ That’s where the humour lies. Then [we lead her] back to the main track.<sup>23</sup> (Personal communication with Timbul 2001.)

Here we see that a good understanding between companion and guest star is very important for the smooth development of the story.

#### *The editing process and broadcasting at prime time*

RCTI made a ‘one-take’ shoot that was broadcast on Saturday night. Although the show on stage lasted about two hours, broadcasting of the programme was limited to approximately 80 or 90 minutes. As a result, parts of the stage performance did not reach spectators at home.

According to playwright-director Timbul it took time for RCTI to understand *kethoprak* and to understand the best way to shoot the performance: ‘shooting our live performance is really something different from shooting a television drama series’ (personal communication with Timbul 2001). Here Timbul refers to the difference between shooting a basically non-scripted show and a scripted one. In the case of a live *kethoprak* humor performance, spontaneous acting has to be shot in one take. The

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<sup>23</sup> Kamu mau *mbanyol* apa sajarah nanti pasti kembali pada benang merah lagi. Pendamping mengingatkan kalau ceritanya lepas. [...] Seperti tadi malam putrinya itu ketemu dengan Marwoto: ‘Lho kok kaya begini, bayangannya itu kalau anak bupati itu mesti cakep!’ Itu lho humournya di situ itu. Nanti kembali ke jalur lagi.

cameramen have to work non-stop without a detailed prior plan. In the case of television drama, however, shooting takes place on the basis of a scenario and storyboard, which gives the cameraman much more opportunity to anticipate on the actions on stage. If necessary he can repeat parts of the shooting.

The editing process involved cutting parts of the footage that were considered less important or less appropriate. Furthermore some censoring, although on a limited scale, took place: remarks with an explicitly sexual or political connotation were cut. For example parts of the performance entitled *Bajak laut* (The pirates) I witnessed in Taman Ismael Marzuki in Jakarta on 28 December 1999 (broadcast in January 2000 by RCTI) did not make it through the self-censor. During this performance, one of the audience members threw a very delicate and sexy present on stage: the male actor 'Tessy' (Kabul Basuki), famous from Srimulat, who always impersonates a female, received a package with underwear. The audience reacted wildly when Tessy started showing around 'her' fancy bra. This part of the show was not visible on screen.

Apart from cutting and censoring, editing of a kethoprak humor show also meant the adding of subtitles and special effects like lightning and moving targets. Subtitles were added in Indonesian for the parts in which the artists communicated in Javanese. Special effects were added to fighting scenes or magical moments. Commercials were added in between the scenes.

The production of a kethoprak humor performance involved several script-like phenomena. Playwright-director Timbul provided a short script for each episode. This short script formed the basis of the *penuangan* that was delivered by director Aries. Aries told the story in a lively way, at times raising and lowering his voice making it sound like one of the characters. During the performance both playwright-director and director gave instructions backstage. The guest star and companion were important shaping agents. Most guest stars had no knowledge of kethoprak conventions and performed in their own way. It was the task of the companion to guide the actions of the guest star. The interaction between companion and guest star influenced the plot.

*The short-script method in Yogyakarta and Jakarta: a comparison*

The performances I described in this chapter by the Kethoprak Mataram RRI group and the Kethoprak Humor Samiaji group are all based on similar mnemonic and structuring devices. However, the way in which these devices are created and applied differs for each case. If we compare the short script of both groups we see a difference in language and in writing style. The RRI script that is composed in Javanese can be characterised as succinctly worded. The Indonesian language kethoprak humor script consists of sentences that are worked out in more detail.

The playwright-directors use the short script and the play schema as the starting point of their *penuangan*. The kethoprak actors of RRI Nusantara II tend to be either somewhat sleepy or they are busy with their own conversations during the *penuangan*. The kethoprak humor actors seem to be more focused on their director while he delivers the *penuangan* than their colleagues in Yogyakarta. This probably relates to the fact that they are not familiar with the plot of the new play they have to perform, whereas the RRI actors perform an already existing *lakon*.

During the performance, the director takes care of the developments on stage, if necessary informing the actors in the wings. Whereas kethoprak Mataram actors carefully follow the initial plot of the play, many kethoprak humor actors tend to add more (humorous) sidetracks. This can be explained by the fact that the RRI performance aims at representing the traditional *lakon*, as opposed to a kethoprak humor performance of which the main goal is to entertain the audience with an endless flow of jokes. In other words, the jokes sometimes become more important than the story. However, another even more significant reason for the emergence of sidetracks can be found in the phenomenon of guest stars. Since guest stars often do not have a kethoprak background they are not familiar with kethoprak conventions and do not have experience with improvisation. Although companions try to keep them close to the initial performance plan, the guest stars tend to improvise far from the plot.