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

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CHAPTER VI

Reconsidering the production process

My nine case studies were intended to provide insight into the way in which several theatre groups produced and used their scripts in Java at the turn of the 20th century. The cases describe a wide variety of different script formats ranging from succinctly worded play schemas and short scripts to fully-fledged play texts. In each case study, I focused on the approach of the people towards the script-like phenomena as well as their attitude towards the other participants in the staging process. By comparing the script formats and by examining the way the people apply them during the performance, I have illustrated a dynamic process of staging plays: a process characteristic of the Javanese theatre scene.

The contemporary format in historical perspective

By looking at the different stages and dimensions of Javanese theatre productions we encountered various manifestations of the script and script-like phenomena. All these phenomena play an important role in the production process as a whole. They are mnemonic and structuring devices employed by the participants of the production process. In my case studies I explained how the playwright-director creates these tools and how he and the actors apply them. Furthermore, I showed how shaping agents such as the playwright-director, his assistant, the guest star and the companion of the guest star are at work during the performance. These agents influence the way the actors apply the mnemonic and structuring devices that form part of the production process.

Generally speaking, the mnemonic and structuring devices have a rudimentary appearance. They consist of keywords and short phrases that inform the actors about the plot content and segmentation of scenes. They exist in written as well as oral form. The play schema, short script and *penuangan* are formats that are produced and used on a regular basis as opposed to fully-fledged scripts that seldom appear. Interviews with playwright-directors make clear that full scripts are only produced for a number of particular purposes.

All playwright-directors considered full scripts a useful tool for the younger generation of actors to learn proper Javanese language. In theory, actors could improve their knowledge of Javanese by memorising correct lines. In practice, however, I saw hardly any full scripts made for this purpose. Playwright-directors working for radio and television stations, had to provide full scripts as proof of their activities as well as for administrative reasons. But, in this case, the regulations were often ignored: the playwright-directors simply worked with a short script and a *penuangan*.

Two playwright-directors, Bondan Nusantara and Maria Kadarsih expressed a preference for working with a full script. Their aim was to upgrade and improve the quality of the performance by providing a full script. They deliberately rejected the common tendency of improvising a play on the basis of a short script. In their opinion the use of a full script was a prerequisite for a well-structured performance. They were convinced that introducing fully-fledged play texts could enhance the quality of Javanese theatre.

There are striking similarities between the ways script and script-like phenomena manifested themselves in the past and in my case studies. If we turn back to the first chapter in which I focus on the development of the Javanese script in the 20th century, it becomes clear that most of the theatre groups usually worked with short scripts and briefings. Full scripts were only made under specific circumstances. They were often the result of governmental or institutional regulations. For example, during the heyday of the communist party in the 1960s and towards the end of the Orde Baru regime, the authorities required playwright-directors to produce full scripts. These scripts had to pass a process of censoring before they could be performed on stage.

Government-sponsored script-writing competitions in the 1980s resulted in new Javanese play texts. The aim of these competitions was to improve the literary value of Javanese drama. Around the same time some individual playwrights started to create and promote full scripts as a means to improve Javanese theatre. Inspired by concepts of Western dramaturgy both sandiwara radio daerah playwright Soemardjono as well as kethoprak playwright Handung Kus Sudyarsana created and promoted full scripts. As these playwrights were the teachers of Bondan Nusantara

and Maria Kadarsih it is very likely that the former have influenced the work of the latter.

The format of script-like phenomena included in my case studies is partly influenced by institutional regulations. For example, the RRI radio programmes *Dhagelan Mataram*, *Kethoprak Mataram* and *Sandiwara radio daerah* as well as the sit-com *Obrolan Angkring* of TVRI had to provide a script for administrative reasons, which had to be kept in an archive. In other words, because government institutions required a script the playwright-directors had to produce a short or full script in addition to their regular play schema.

In summary, there are various reasons why the script changed in appearance over time. In the first place, the spread of literacy and schooling contributed to the increased need and attention for written sources. As a result, the status of ephemera declined. Secondly, Western models of literature and theatre imposed the use of written texts. Thirdly, full scripts were required for the purpose of censorship. In contemporary theatre, the electronic media as well as local cultural politics influence the format of the script. Play texts that serve as the basis for a radio or television performance have to be adapted to the constraints of the specific medium. Furthermore, the patrons of the broadcasting service require written proof of productions. The local authorities emphasise the importance of theatre as local heritage, which needs to portray Javanese culture in a 'proper' way. Actors no longer have the opportunity to 'learn by doing' like they did in former times. By using full scripts their accurate use of the Javanese language can be guaranteed.

Characteristics of the production process

Unlike the theatrical frame as described by Goffman in which the participants share information states, the Javanese theatre frame is characterised by the operation of various information states. As Bauman demonstrated in his study about Mexican Nativity plays, one has to look at the production process as a whole in order to understand the value of the play text: 'Each stage of the reanimation ["re-performance"] process has a formative effect on those that follow, including of course the performance itself' (Bauman 1996:324). In my case studies, every stage of the

production process is based on a different mnemonic and structuring device. The actors tend to pay more attention to their playwright-director and his orally delivered instructions than to his written devices. In other words, there seems to be a preference for oral instructions, for the spoken over the written word.

In three of my nine case studies (Chapter II), the first stage of the production process is the creation of the play schema followed by the *penuangan* based on this play schema. In three other cases (Chapter III), the first step is the short script followed by either a play schema and *penuangan* or just a *penuangan*. Both play schema and short script remain within the hands of the playwright-director and are not multiplied for use by the other participants of the production. The final three cases out of nine (Chapter IV) start with a full script followed by either a reading or rehearsals. Only in the case of Sandiwara Jenaka KR, do the actors get their own copy to actually rehearse their dialogue.

In the case studies of my first two chapters, the moment of the *penuangan* is crucial within the production process. Because the actors never receive any written instructions beforehand, this is the first time the actors are informed about the play they will perform and about the character they have to play. The emphasis is on the development of the plot and segmentation of the scenes. While showing the play schema to his actors the playwright-director gives a summary of the play. Within this chronological overview there is hardly any attention to details related to textual and physical aspects of the performance. Sometimes, however, the playwright-director expands a bit more on a crucial part of the story. He illustrates for example a specific section by uttering lines of a dialogue or by telling an actor where to enter the stage. This is either part of the playwright-director's own plan or happens in answer to questions from his audience. The actors frequently interrupt their playwright-director, which makes the *penuangan* an interactive and lively event. It also happens, though, that the actors listen passively, that they start telling jokes to one another or that some of them even fall asleep.

The *penuangan* of *dhagelan Mataram* (Chapter II) has a slightly different format than the average *penuangan* of a *kethoprak* performance (Chapters II and III). In this case, the group members all come together like the *kethoprak* players do, but playwright Ngabdul does not deliver his story to the group as a whole. He gives individual instructions to his actors, informing them one by one about their role. It has

to be noted, however, that the Dhagelan Mataram group only consists of seven actors, whereas the average kethoprak group consists of at least thirty people. Thus, practically speaking, it would be extremely time consuming for the kethoprak playwright to inform his actors one by one.

The case studies of my fourth chapter do not involve a *penuangan*. The Obrolan Angkring group as well as Sandiwara Jenaka KR organise a reading session once the playwright-director has finished his full script. This session bears resemblance to the *penuangan* since it is the first time the actors are informed about the content of the play and about their specific role in it. Furthermore there is time for discussion about the performance plan. The playwright-director provides each actor with a copy of the play text. One by one the actors start to read out their own lines according to the order of the text. While listening to each other, the actors suggest possible changes to the text.

After two reading sessions the Obrolan Angkring members are prepared to go on stage whereas the Sandiwara Jenaka KR members have to study the text in depth during a series of rehearsals. The Sandiwara Radio Daerah actors read through their text before the recording starts. They have no official reading session or rehearsals and never learn their text by heart. While recording takes place in the studio, they simply read out their lines according to the play text.

The performance and the shaping agents

After the *penuangan*, reading and rehearsals the next and final stage of the production process is the performance. This is when the actors apply their knowledge of the information they have gathered during the preparations preceding the final performance. They mainly improvise their lines. Informal communication and interviews with the actors reveal that they consider improvisation a quintessential part of the performance. To them, acting involves endless creativity: their task is to contribute to the development of the plot in an appropriate and professional way.

While improvising, the actors make use of their personal script in mind. This knowledge of genre conventions enables them to respond quickly to developments on stage. Because of their insight into scene sequences and stock-character behaviour they are aware of events and actions that could possibly develop during the

performance. However, this does not mean that they can simply play as a routine. The improvisation process requires a flexible attitude because it always leaves room for surprises. When joking around, the actors might consult their ‘personal stock of jokes’ (see Chapter IV), which is a concrete written device with humorous anecdotes. However, the more professional they are, the more easily they tend to create jokes on the spot. Since they know the theatre conventions so well, they can use them as a source of humour: parody and word play that mock conventions have become an intrinsic part of their own script in mind.

The playwright-director is the authority when it comes to the design of the performance. He keeps an eye on the developments on stage and gives advice to his actors when necessary. The play schema remains on display backstage to inform the actors about the order of the scenes. But rather than reading or studying this written device, the actors follow the personal instructions of their playwright-director. Less experienced actors as well as guest stars who are not acquainted with the genre receive some extra attention. In some cases, the playwright-director has an assistant who helps to steer the performance in the right direction. For example during an *Obrolan Angkring* performance, one of the actors, Heri Dwirudi, had the task of cutting a dialogue in case his colleagues dwelled too long on a subject.

Guest stars, commonly VIPs, keep a certain privileged position during the staging process. For example they do not have to take part in rehearsals or briefings and are free to arrive when the performance starts. Since the guest stars do not join preparations their knowledge of the play is less accurate than that of the other actors. Because of this difference in knowledge, the guest stars are likely to influence the story line. It happens, for example, that they do not understand the words or intentions of their fellow actors and that they come up with strange remarks. Because of miscommunication between the regular group members and the guest stars the play may develop far from the plot. Two types of guest stars can be distinguished. The first type unintentionally influences the plot; the second type does this partly by accident and partly in a deliberate way.

In the case study of kethoprak humor we encountered the first type of guest star. Because they did not have a kethoprak background their knowledge of the conventions of kethoprak was limited. Their lack of a ‘script in mind’ made it difficult for them to follow the other actors. In order to prevent them from getting lost on

stage, the kethoprak humor director appointed a senior actor who had to accompany the guest stars. The companion supported their dialogues and actions on stage. During the performances of Obrolan Angkring and Sandiwara Jenaka KR the second type of guest star appeared on stage. Famous diva Anik Sunyahni starring in the *Obrolan Angkring* episode entitled *The karaoke divas* put herself continuously in the spotlight by making funny remarks. Comedian Marwoto Kawer likewise grabbed all the attention in the Sandiwara Jenaka KR performance *The honourable councillor*. Both Anik Sunyahni and Marwoto Kawer seemed to take advantage of their fortunate position as well-known artists. They neither studied the script nor attended any rehearsals but managed to steal the show. No other actor could stop their jokes or entertain the audience quite as much.

During performances that are accompanied by live music it is very common that the musicians comment aloud on what happens on the stage. The actors tend to pay attention to such comments and respond to them. In this way, the musicians influence the dialogue between actors. When performances are broadcast via radio or television the remarks are never cut or faded out.

Comparable to the comments of the musicians are the comments of the spectators. These comments also have an important share in shaping the performance, as they become an integral part of the performance. The actors react flexibly to contributions from their audience. Apart from making loud remarks about the developments on stage, many spectators also try to communicate with the actors in another way. They throw packets of cigarettes on stage with personal notes attached to them and sometimes even, bank notes. If an actor is aware of a flying packet, he might try to catch it, but more likely runs up to grab it from the floor once it has landed. He reads out aloud the message that usually contains fan mail or a song request. In this way, the notes of the spectators are integrated into the performance text, but they do not directly influence the plot structure.

When performances are combined with a campursari or dangdut concert the spectators, especially those standing in front of the stage, tend to make a lot of loud and vulgar remarks. In this case, the actors do not react to all the remarks, as they are too numerous or too boorish.

The case studies in a general perspective

The Javanese staging process as described above has a lively, spontaneous and creative character. Rudimentary scripts, script-like phenomena and improvisation are at the core of the performance instead of detailed scripts and rehearsals. This provides us with insight into a theatre realm where scheduled and non-scheduled elements interact; a world where various different information states intermingle. On one hand mnemonic and structuring devices as well as conventions help the participants of the production process to compose the performance in a structured way. Furthermore, the playwright-director with his personal advice is on stand-by to steer the developments in the right direction. On the other hand, however, shaping agents like guest stars either unintentionally or deliberately tend to disorganise the whole structured process. The result is a show in which a complex interaction of shaping agents determines the development of the plot.

The interaction between shaping agents is characterised by multiple (humorous) misunderstandings. These misunderstandings eventually lead to collisions and call for multiple creative solutions in response. The main reasons for misunderstanding are a difference in information states between the actors and a difference in their attitude towards the playwright and the script. Furthermore, confusion occurs when tension rises between genre conventions and information states. In this case the actor's personal script in mind comes into conflict with the imposed information state. The actor, so to speak, follows his script in mind as a routine and forgets the specific task he is given by the playwright-director for this specific occasion. Or in case of a lack of script in mind, the actor (usually a guest star) simply gets stuck because he fails to master his temporary information state and also cannot perform as a routine. That is where the creative solutions come into play: either the playwright-director himself or one of the fellow actors has to steer and guide the 'confused' actor back on track.

It is this dynamic way of interaction between the different participants of a theatre production that needs to be emphasised. Distinct from the theatre realm described by Goffman in which the playwright imposes a single information state on the actors, Javanese theatre leaves ample room for each actor to shape the play according to his or her information state. The people involved in my case studies strongly believe that their performance needs to be the result of a communal process.

For this reason, they clearly question the tenets of a ‘Western’ full-script method. They reject a situation in which they have to stick to a full script because it reduces room for creativity and fruitful interaction. In other words, the theatre-makers are convinced that their performance becomes impoverished if the developments on stage are precisely planned in advance: the information state of a single playwright-director should never prevail.

I suggest that difference in information states is not only a feature of the Javanese theatre I described, but also of other types of Indonesian theatre. Examples are genres in which people base their improvised plays on short scripts, like *ludrug* from East Java, *loddrok* from Madura, *lenong*, *longser* and *sandiwara masres* from West Java, *randai*, *makyong* and *dulmuluk* from Sumatra. Likewise, theatre comedies of the 1990s called *Selononkboy* and *Srimulat* that were broadcast by television had very lively shows that were improvised on the spot. Here we see shaping agents on stage like famous guest stars and playwright-directors who act as narrators. Further investigation is needed to trace the characteristics of the different information states that are at work in the genres mentioned.

Let us turn back once more to Princess Ratnasari alias actress Della Puspita asking:

‘Excuse me, who are you?’ Is this ugly man in front of her with buckteeth really her future husband? ‘Are you Prince Aria Lintang who will be given in marriage to me?’ A cacophony of voices surrounds her. All the servants have their own unique explanation of the situation. Each comedian tries to be funnier than the other. She looks around to her companion for support. The senior actress nods: ‘Don’t worry, everything will be alright.’ The Princess sighs. It is not easy to grab the attention in this competition of jokes. She starts to laugh: it’s a comedy after all.

It is the pleasure of shaping the action on stage that keeps the actors on their toes. Given the fact that their information states differ, their knowledge of the developments on stage is limited. This calls for a flexible and creative attitude towards the available mnemonic and structuring devices and towards the other participants of the staging process. The outcome of each performance remains a surprise.