Tossing the Tiger: Performance in the Malay Wayang

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Some performances of the Malay *wayang Siam*, the shadow theatre, contain a striking little drama. The forest clown, Peran Hutan, out hunting in the forest, is attacked by a tiger. After a fierce struggle he subdues the beast but is unable to quit the carcass of lingering evil influences and must seek the help of his master Betara Guru, who literally flings the tiger out of the performance area (Sweeney 1971).

This simple drama defines the intersection of ritual and theatre, the space of the *wayang*'s performance. The playlet is most often performed as part of the opening of an evening's performance; it can also be given at the end, when the *dalang* takes down the screen and feeds his puppets (Sweeney 1971: 79–80; 1970: 74–75). In some areas it is offered purely as entertainment but most instances point to its ritual nature. The *Peran Hutan* states symbolically what the *wayang* as a whole is about.

The *wayang* resonates with the intricate whole of Malay culture. The *Peran Hutan*, small in compass, displays this relationship most clearly. Following the resonances of the *Peran Hutan*'s imagery freely through Malay folk culture builds feeling for shadow theatre performance within its culture context. Though it would be pretentious to claim that someone raised in Malay culture actually experiences the *wayang* this way, a study of *Peran Hutan*'s associations can reconstruct *wayang* performance for those outside the Malay world.

The puppeteer, or *dalang*, offers this piece to honor his own master in the form of Betara Guru and to abase himself, as Peran Hutan, before the master's greater skill and purity. The playlet is a dramatic extension of the purification rituals which have preceded the entertainment; it is

Asian Tolklore Studies, Vol. 42, 1983: 209–215.

designed to exorcise evil from the place of performance. Tigers are very unlikely to interrupt the proceedings. There are, however, other tumults which the *dalang* would like to prevent.

The master-disciple relationship is at the center of the *Peran Hutan.* The performing *dalang* has won his craft by long study with his master, first as an enthusiast drawn from the audience by great personal attraction to the *wayang* characters, then as a member of the small orchestra which accompanies the *dalang* and at last as a recognized follower awaiting the *dalang*'s instruction and attentively observing the performances to glean what the dalang does not actively teach (Sweeney, 1971: 70–71). He may pass from one teacher to another.

Yet even the best follower will not be favored with the master's full knowledge, just as the master has not received his own master's secrets. The history of the *wayang* parallels the entire history of the world: there runs from the mythic times of the *wayang*'s plots to the present decadence a continuing loss of grace and knowledge. The long succession of remote masters and yearning disciples leads down to the present *dalang*, a forest clown possessing the physical strength to kill the tiger but not the spiritual power to toss the tiger clear.

Betara Guru's spiritual mastery epitomizes the ascendency of the father and the teacher in Malay culture. This mastery is often put down to a concrete fund of formulas and magic charms, just as the father's authority, ostensibly derived from the sons' natural respect for their elder, is actually due to his control over land which he may bestow on his heirs as he chooses. The reverence payed the master *dalang*'s sanctity conceals the disciple's coveting the very useful fund of magic which the master must possess. Disciples do not believe that spiritual attainments alone account for the *dalang*'s success; he must jealously guard arcana which he is loath to reveal lest a follower compete too well. The *dalang* is aware that his apprentices are all potential rivals, and he is not about to give them an edge. He binds them to him with hope, feeds them tantalizing pieces to secure their loyalty and perhaps plays them off against each other with hints of what is in store. This yields the figure of the master seen in Betara Guru, a potent father whose patrimony demands unquestioning service from the foolish follower.

The concealed practices which the disciple craves include the extremely valuable means of fascinating an audience, and more particularly of luring the women in the audience. Like many another variety of strolling player the *dalang* has always had the reputation of a roué ready to carry off local women taken by his charms (Rentse 1936). This complements rather than contradicts his reputation for spiritual strength. It is another side of the *dalang*'s public personality. Peran

Hutan and Betara Guru are opposing sides of the same person.

The audience members are not in the position of the disciple. They do not stand to gain important knowledge from the *dalang*, though they do consider his performance a source of edification and of positive influences. He is invited to perform in celebration of major local events such as weddings and house dedications. When his performance is arranged by a local entrepreneur, who has provided the *panggang* or raised hut in which the performers sit, the *dalang* splits his profits with the entrepreneur, the police (for a license) and guards hired to keep order (Sweeney, 1970: 57). Sellers of food and other goods take the crowd's business. A visit from a *dalang* benefits a number of people, and not just spiritually.

The audience is in the *dalang*'s thrall economically and socially. He appears before them (or does not appear because he is concealed by the screen) as the paragon of skill and polish. He manipulates the leather puppets to cast deft shadows upon the screen; he intones the voices of gods, demons and clowns; he cues in the orchestra to set the mood. The world which he portrays is an impossible one where the good and the noble triumph and the foul are defeated utterly. The etiquette which among Malays is supposed to dominate society does control the *dalang*'s world. Those who do not observe the correct decorum are punished. The *dalang* himself has traffic with the most powerful beings. He makes it clear in his opening and closing rituals that these beings themselves guide the motions of the puppets behind the screen.

Small wonder members of the audience worship him and resent him. Some are so affected by his performance that they become aficionnados and may even aspire to discipleship; others may become enamored of the *dalang*. Most suspect the magic by which he creates these impressions. A few may find it sinister and want to make a reply in kind, hence they work their own magic to cause disorder in the *panggang*, to make the lamp which hangs at the *dalang*'s head fall over and start a fire, to make the puppets stick to the screen, an ugly effect.

The secrets sought by the *dalang*'s followers are no bundle of mystifications; they are rather practical techniques to render the *dalang* charming and immune to any magical attack directed against him. Meditations prepare the *dalang* for his strenuous task. Charms and rituals make certain that the *dalang* will deliver a fascinating performance. Before even the preliminaries begin the *dalang* will privately address eminent puppets, Rama or the clowns, with prayers and offerings. He may appeal to them to hold the audience, or ask them to help with the delivery. Possibly he will ask that a woman in the audience fall in

love with him. A successful *dalang* obviously has an ample complement of these concealed techniques, making him the envy of his aspiring apprentices and the ambivalent object of the audience's attentions.

From the *dalang*'s position the audience is wild and unruly, devoid of restrain and politeness. The screen is his wall against their world. He teaches them but does not attend particularly to their response because he is able to control all that happens on his screen, itself an expression of a higher world which influences him. All that happens in the plays, from the *Peran Hutan* trunk and out the branches of the *Ramayana*, signals the inalterable preponderance of order over disorder, of the courtly and the divine over the base and the demonic. *Peran Hutan* shows how well the *dalang* can reject the disruptive elments in nature, how learning to control that disruption is the most important part of the *dalang*'s education. The playlet's imagery suggests that the *dalang* has won mastery over the most immediate disruption, the audience. This at least was the *dalang*'s attitude before paying audiences required him to pay closer attention to their whims (Sweeney 1971: 68). The status of the *dalang* asserted by the *Peran Hutan* is more and more a thing of the past.

The wayang audience is disruptive. The occasional resort to spiteful magic is minimal amid the normal unruliness of the group. People attending a *wayang* go there for an outing. No one sits still for the performance. Some sleep, some eat, visit with each other. Children play; adults quarrel. The whole community is recreated in small and goes about its life and lives with heightened intensity. The audience creates its own drama out of the interplay of politeness and insult, offence given and revenge achieved, kindness done and rewarded which fills Malay village life. This drama strongly resembles the shadow play on the screen, at times so closely that to someone watching both the focus seems to move back and forth between the two. The audience members are for the most part comfortable with this tandem course of *wayang* and life. They do not need to be aware of it. But the *dalang* can only see that other drama beyond the screen as competition. A fight in the audience will take attention away from the most perfectly crafted puppet fight cast upon the screen. To the *dalang* the audience's drama is a wildness to be held in check. His performance can accomplish this; it can bring the audience into the controlled world of the *wayang*. From his vantage point the *dalang* cannot comprehend that his audience is always in that world.

The audience is the forest around the performing *dalang* and it is the tiger, the most concentrated expression of the forest's savagery.

The *dalang* stands opposed to the tiger in every way. He is stationary, housed under the *pangang*'s civil roof; he is polished and educated, in touch with divinities. The tiger wanders the unsettled terrain and invades human dwellings only to kill; he has no language; he consorts with demons and witches.

The clearest sign that the dissociation of *dalang* from tiger is fundamental to the wayang comes in the *pelimau* ritual, the lime-bath initiation of the *dalang*. The Malay word for "lime," "limau," is very similar to the word for "tiger," "rimau." The *dalang* asserts his choice of the civilized fruit over the wild predator's fare. The lime is cool and restraining while the tiger is hot and impetuous in the Malay division of the natural world into "cold" and "hot" entities. The mere difference of a consonant demonstrates how decisive is the *dalang*'s choice.

That mere difference also suggests that the mannerly exterior of the lime (which after all is quite sharp inside) conceals a raging beast. Malay tiger legends confirm that this observation is not just a psychoanalytic fantasy, that the master *dalang*'s bathing his disciple with lime juice is not to keep the tiger away so much as it is to keep it from emerging. Tigers are thought to have culture of their own in the deep forest. They live in villages, are conversant with the civilized arts. They are even observed to practice divination. Tigers are humans who have taken this murderous form to feed upon others or to cause harm to enemies: cannibals and sorcerers become tigers. In a seeming contradiction, however, very austere individuals may also turn into tigers. Unyielding committment to ascetic self-isolation brings up the beast which the Malays picture within every human skin. Ascetics, cannibals and sorcerers are the same in their rejection of society, so they lose the outside appearance of humanity to live in the form of tigers unchecked by the rules of etiquette. The behavior known as *amok*, once more common than it is now, was an actual eruption of the tiger inside. A man would go *amok* upon being placed at an irresolvable social disadvantage. Rejecting social order entirely he roamed and killed indiscriminately until laid to rest by death. Anyone residing amid the tensions of Malay society might give way to the inner tiger, whose rudeness was equal to his former calm.

The *dalang*, the most polite of all, was also the nearest to the fearful emergence: just one consonant away. Peran Hutan encounters more than a deadly adversary in the forest; he is faced with his own lack of the refinement necessary to overcome his inward violence. The tiger which he drags back to Betara Guru is the yet undefeated tendency toward vile action. The tiger's expulsion proves that this tendency

can be defeated, but that requires the intervention of the teacher's superior craft.

Peran Hutan is threatened by the tiger's influences, which are left vague in most performances but clearly comprise the danger of succumbing to the base whims which pass through any person's mind in his daily life. Being in the forest and near to the tiger the clown risks being drawn into that low realm on the other side of the screen. He may be drawn away from the *dalang* and into the audience, where people, unaware of how close they are to savagery, are always near to becoming tigers. Peran Hutan is the *dalang*-in-the-making trapped between the audience and the *panggang*. He cannot escape the audience and the tiger which lurks there will manfest itself in him without his master's aid.

Some few *dalang* have gained their skill " by inspiration," that is, they have received a miraculous revelation. They are not much respected by other *dalang*. All apprentices begin with inspiration: the *wayang* touches their *angin*, the sensitive and responsive aspect of the soul. They find in themselves a vocation for the *wayang*. This initial contact provides the energy to go forward into the arduous training which must precede the most elementary handling of the puppets. Inspiration alone is suspect; there is no assurance that it is sufficiently pure to permit contact with the beings who animate the performance. A beginner has to be integrated into the ranks of *dalang* and made to pay respects to his masters. Then his inspiration is formalized into a skill he has been taught. The aspirant is legitimated by the established *dalang*, who has every reason to want few competitors and a high value placed on his tangible and intangible abilities. The tiger's threat is a persuasive symbol of the inability of anyone from the other side of the wall of the world to achieve a *dalang*'s skill " by inspiration."

The audience is denied direct access to the *dalang* even when the screen is down and the *dalang* is in trance feeding his puppets or performing the *Peran Hutan* at the end of the night's play. The *dalang* is elevated above the common crowd both by his performance and in his performance. *Peran Hutan* is a ritual drama of the *dalang*'s mastery and the audience's helplessness. It asserts the distance between the *dalang* and the audience even when the physical barriers are down. Some members of the audience may indeed sit behind the *panggang* to watch the *dalang* at work, but they still are separated from him by the cultural space described in the *Peran Hutan*. The playlet does not create this space; it simply sets forward the terms of its existence. Drawing upon feelings and values shared by most Malays, the *Peran Hutan* affirms who the *dalang* is and who the audience members are,

and outlines the conditions under which the audience may approach the *dalang*. It is a ritual of exorcism because, using powerful symbols, it asserts the predominance of a social order; it is drama because that assertion has the form of a familiar confrontation between recognizable characters. As drama and as ritual *Peran Hutan* sets forth the world that is the performance of the *wayang*, and allows for ambiguities and conflicts which it alone does not express. The tiger tossed clear of the *pangang* includes in its arc the whole space of the *wayang* performance. It is tossed very far.

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