

Cristina Wistari Formaggia, 62, died peacefully of cancer in her hometown of Milano, Italy on 19 July 2008. She will always be known in Bali as the woman behind the Gambuh Preservation Project in Batuan village. Her dedication to the classical performing arts of Bali knew no bounds.

A memorial will be held for Cristina on Wednesday, 30 July 2008 from 3 – 6 p.m. at Cristina's home behind the Ibah Hotel in Campuhan, Ubud. The Pura Desa Gambuh troupe will hold a short rehearsal in her honor. Please feel free to bring a flower or piece of fruit.

This month, we have lost two pillars in the world of Gambuh: I Ketut Kantor of Batuan, who died of a series of strokes on July 5, 2008 and Cristina Formaggia, 62 who spearheaded The Gambuh Preservation Project in 1992 and was taking the Pura Desa Batuan troupe to Europe to perform in a collaboration with Eugenio Barba's ISTA's THE MARRIAGE OF MEDEA a month before she suddenly passed away.

Cristina had been a serious student of Asian art for decades. Her interest in the ceremonial paintings of women led her to live in Mithila, a remote area of northern India. Subsequent journeys took her to the Hindukush in Northern Pakistan where an almost extinct tribe, the Kafir Kalash, dwells. Her fascination was with the songs and dances that formed an integral part of the ceremonial festivals of their animistic religion.

She studied Kathakali, a South Indian dance drama, for two years. In Kerala, India she worked with Guru Gopinath, one of the great master of this art.

On reading Antonin Artaud's essay on the Balinese Theatre in his book, "The Theatre and Its Double", she was drawn inevitably to Bali and its rich Hindu culture, complex rituals, and metaphysical dance theatre. The study of Topeng, the masked dance drama, was a catalyst for further development. And she began studying and performing Gambuh in earnest in the 1990s.

Since 1995 she has been a collaborator in the ongoing research of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology), directed by Eugenio Barba. From 1985 she has been teaching and performing in various festivals throughout Europe, Australia, Asia and South America.

Anyone who knew Cristina would understand that when she put her mind to something, she got it done. She was precise, thorough and intense. And one of the few Westerners who has been able to totally embody the essence of Balinese movement in her own body.

She lived a very simple life. Her home, set back behind the Ibah Hotel, was a simple one room affair with very little furniture—in fact only a desk and a chair and cushions nearly lined up in row. Short wooden steps led up to a tiny sleeping loft and her open air kitchen was big enough for one person and a two-burner stove. She disliked clutter and loved living among the greenery and the river that ran below her. Two months ago she moved into a new house just meters down from her old one; same layout, same energy but with a different view.

She was a strict vegetarian and did not smoke, always berating those around her who did. Her lifestyle was so healthy that it is hard to imagine that cancer of the brain, liver and lungs finally took her away from us.

When Cristina first came to Bali in 1983, it was to recover from a near fatal car accident she had in Australia, which injured her neck badly. She was planning on going back to India to study Kathakali again. But, the fates had something else in mind for her. She began studying Balinese dance, specifically the Baris warrior dance and then Topeng the mask dance-drama. She studied with none other than the great Topeng master, I Made Jimat of Batuan, who went on to co-teach workshops with Cristina all over the world. Her favorite masks were Topeng Tua, the old man and Topeng Dalem, the king. She became a part of Jimat's troupe and performed throughout Bali.

The village of Batuan is famous for Gambuh and there are four extant troupes there today. Cristina would see rehearsals of Gambuh at Jimat's and there she became fascinated by this ancient form. Gambuh at that point in time was only done for temple festivals, mainly local, in Batuan and for some of the larger ceremonies at Besakih and other temples. Yet as the form was not so popular with the Balinese, it was in danger of dying out.

Along with a number of scholars and performers, Cristina began the Gambuh Preservation Project funded by the Ford Foundation. Beginning in 1993, committees were formed to study and research the music, movements, literature and history of Gambuh. The Gambuh Project plays a fundamental role in keeping a precious tradition alive in contemporary Balinese society. The Gambuh of Batuan is one of the rare examples of a highly aesthetic art which was still being performed in its complete

form when the project began. The main aim of the project in Batuan was to prevent a possible decay and to ensure the continuity in the teaching of the dance with the old masters passing down their knowledge to the new generation.

All of the Batuan Gambuh troupes were involved in the beginning although over the years various alliances formed and many of the original performers dropped out of what became known as the Batuan Village Temple Troupe (sekeha Gambuh Pura Desa) as rehearsals and then performances were held at the Pura Desa or Village Temple (and they still are held every 1st and 15th of the month at 7 pm). A decision was made to limit the performance to two hours; some argued that tourists wouldn't be able to sit through even that much traditional dance.

But Cristina was adamant that authenticity should reign and two hours of spectacle held.

A two-volume book was written on the music and movements entitled GAMBUIH: Drama Tari Bali (Gambuh: a Balinese Dance-Drama), which was edited by Cristina and published by Lontar Press of Jakarta in 2000 and a DVD was created, which is sold at the performances and at local bookshops in Ubud. A series of tapes was also produced, containing interviews with the old masters as well as documentation of the movements, music and dialogue of each style; currently these are being digitalized in Switzerland.

Two to three times a week, Cristina would set off in her little blue pickup truck and go the 10 kilometers from Ubud to Batuan to rehearse. She often played the role of Panji, the refined prince, which was a speaking role that demanded the use of Kawi or Old Javanese. She made sure that the younger generation were at the rehearsals, learning their lines, notes and moves alongside their older siblings. Continuity and sustainability were all important to her.

The project performers not only perform the Gambuh regularly to this day in Bali but also went to Europe to perform in 1999 and 2006; the latter was a trip to perform a version of Hamlet in a collaborative work with Eugenio Barba, the noted Italian theater director, in Denmark where they performed at the actual castle of Hamlet. Just this month, they performed MEDEA with Barba's organization ISTA (International School of Theatre and Anthropology). Even in this form, the elements of gambuh (music, costumes, movements) are all there in their complete form so it would be recognized (and advertised) as gambuh. In this way, they are heightening world awareness of the form.

Cristina has collaborated with ISTA and ODIN TEATRET since 1995 and was a permanent member of the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble. ISTA is a multicultural network of performers and scholars giving life to an itinerant university whose main field of study is Theatre Anthropology. ISTA is a multicultural network of performers and scholars who, within the framework of the University of Eurasian Theatre present the results of ISTA's research. During its 16 years of existence ISTA has been a laboratory for research into the technical basis of the performer in a transcultural dimension.

Cristina often wondered what would happen if she would no longer be involved with the Gambuh Project—would the villagers take it on and continue to perform? Who would be the liaison with ISTA in Europe? Now, with her passing away, these are questions that must be answered sooner than later.

While she was working with the Gambuh Project, she felt she wanted to work on creating an all-women's Topeng Troupe. She met with Desak Nyoman Suarti, the director of the all women's gamelan troupe LUH LUWIH in 1999 to talk about her idea. Suarti, who has been empowering Balinese women through the performing arts for years through gamelan, thought it was a terrific idea. Cristina came up with the name TOPENG SHAKTI; shakti means female power so it was the perfect name. Months were spent looking for the perfect story—most Topeng tell the stories of Balinese Kings and their exploits. In the end, a Panji story from the Gambuh cycle was chosen that focused on the female protagonist Candra Kirana. Then female performers who were excellent storytellers and felt comfortable with masks had to be found. In the end, the main performers were Ni Nyoman Candri and Cokorda Isteri Agung from Singapadu village, both accomplished Arja singers and dancers. And of course, Cristina. In 2000 and 2001, the three of them went to Paris to perform and give workshops.

More recently, Cristina began exploring her own movement, calling it the Spirals of Sand. Even though the Balinese sense of movement flows through it, this is definitely a new side of Cristina blossoming forth. She performed it at festivals in Europe and felt this was the new direction her life was taking her.

The Balinese say that she is now dancing for the Gods. I can imagine her, with her long hennaed hair with streaks of white running through it, her huge grin lighting up the heavens, moving with a precision and intensity that would please all beings.

Background to Gambuh

Originating in the royal courts of 17th century Bali, gambuh combines dialogue, music and dance to enact romantic tales of courtly life, love and political intrigue based on the adventures of Panji, a historic Javanese prince. Gambuh requires a large cast of dancer-actors and musicians and is distinctive and difficult to perform for various reasons, including its Kawi (an ancient form of the Javanese language) text, which few people understand today, and the unusual meter-long, end-blown bamboo flutes of its orchestra, which take years to master.

In Gambuh the dance-drama is accompanied by a small gamelan group consisting of about 17 musicians. The dancers can number anywhere from 15 to 25 depending on the lakon (story) and the availability of performers, whereas formerly, gambuh casts could number 60 to 70 performers and crew, made up of all strata of society. Performances typically last two to three or more hours; in the past they could last a few days.

The heart of the dramatic spectacle of a gambuh performance is not so much the plot unfolding as the continuous presentation of its illustrious dramatis personae, always preceded and accompanied by their attendants, who translate the ancient Javanese court language, Kawi, into Balinese for the audience.

While the plays vary, the dramatis personae consist of a series of stock characters—both male and female, strong (keras) and refined (alus), royalty and servants—as well as stock scenes. Given the political and ceremonial functions of gambuh in upholding courtly ideals, the movement and speech of each character, even servants, must be dignified. Characterization is all very regimented. The female roles are set, with very little room for improvisation. Parts of the male roles are set dances; other parts are improvised within certain parameters. This may be because traditionally, all of the women's roles were choreographed and performed by men, reflecting ideals of 'femininity' from a male perspective, although today, in some places, there are also women in the cast. Perhaps because the women's roles were done by men, they had to be more choreographed, whereas the male roles, played by males, could be more improvised.

Gambuh is performed in only a pocketful of villages today, including: Batuan, Pedungan (Denpasar), Pujung (Gianyar), Anturan (Buleleng), Budakeling (Karangasem) and Tumbak Bayu (Badung). Thanks to Cristina's revitalization project, Gambuh will live on a bit longer.

Thank you, Cristina!

Rucina Ballinger

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