

# Ni Wayan Sudi

## Keeping an Ancient Tradition Alive

Interview by Julia Varley<sup>1</sup>

*How did you start to dance and what were the first things you learnt?*

I studied Gambuh, Balinese classical dance drama, from when I was a child. I started when I was ten years old, in the banjar, the village community meeting place, and I never went to the ASTI, the academy of dance of Bali. My teacher was I Nyoman Kakul, a very renowned dancer and guru in Batuan. He chose to teach me to dance because he liked me as a child. I also liked the idea of learning to dance. I started by memorising the Kakan-kakan role, one of the four ladies in waiting of the princess in the story, and later the princess Rajaputri's dance. The rehearsals were always done at night, after everybody had finished working in the fields. I was mainly rehearsing on Saturday night, when I didn't have to go to school the day after. A lot of my friends were learning with me. My teacher was very refined and gentle, and I really enjoyed studying with him. First he taught me how to put accent on the legs and how to use the hips while widening the knees. Then I had to learn the basic position, and the *agem kanan* and *agem kiri* (take the right and take the left). He taught me how to walk according to the style. We were learning by imitation: the teacher was in front of us and we imitated what he was doing.

*Why did you want to dance as a child?*

I cannot really answer: because I liked it. I loved the refined movement and the music, the same things that I appreciate today. When I was a child I would just enjoy the pleasure of dancing and only later, through the seriousness of apprenticeship and practice, did I understand the importance of

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1. This interview was done during the International Symposium, *Tacit Knowledge - Heritage and Waste*, 22-27 September 1999 in Holstebro, Denmark, on the occasion of Odin Teatret's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

**Theatre Women Generation - Ni Wayan Sudi**

continually learning in order to integrate the dance more and more.

*What do you think is the most valuable thing you have learnt?*

My teacher said it was important to study with seriousness and discipline so that Gambuh would not cease to exist. I enjoyed learning his highly refined way of doing the dance and also his particular way of portraying a character. He could really give life to the character. When he died, I continued to study with his son who had the same way of moving and teaching. There must have been thirty years difference between them, but the son reproduced exactly what his father was doing and there was no difference in their way of teaching.

*The Gambuh is essentially a collective feat. Have you ever felt that you would like to do something by yourself?*

I would like to teach dance to children, but the opportunity has not arisen. I can teach for the temple, in the temple, but the only way to coach privately would be at home and I cannot because I have not enough space. At the Banjar I tutor the young girls of the Pura Desa, our village's Gambuh dance troupe. To teach privately at the Banjar, I would need to ask for different permissions and many people would be implicated.

*Is there a difference between performing during a temple ceremony or for spectators?*

My feeling is the same when I dance for a ceremony and for a performance. I like to do them both. If I dance for the temple I feel more free, because I don't have to respond to a paying audience. In a public performance I have to concentrate until the end in a stronger way than during a ceremony.

Ni Wayan Sudi performing Gambuh. Photo: Tony D'Urso



But the beauty demanded of the dance is the same in both cases.

*Do you coach the young girls of the Pura Desa in the same way as your master taught you?*

Yes, I teach in the same way. But I could say that the new generation is somehow lazy in learning Gambuh. They are less available; they prefer doing some modern dance with contemporary rhythms and movements. For example, the young girls like the Legong style better, because it is more expressive and fun, and it does not have the repetitions and slowness characteristic of Gambuh. In Gambuh there are only a certain amount of movements that keep on repeating and repeating. The young girls do not understand why they have to repeat so much and what is the importance of the accents in the body. On the contrary I find it is important for my soul to dance Gambuh. I feel fulfilled, as if something substantial is happening inside me when I dance it. I hope this ancient form of dance-drama will continue to exist and be alive in the future. The differences between the generations do not come from a change in the relationship to spiritual life but rather they come from the external influence of tourism.

*Do you feel personally responsible in keeping Gambuh alive?*

Yes. I am completely dedicated to the Pura Desa ensemble. I teach regularly at the temple and that is the best way for me. Whether I Made Djimat, our present guru in the village, is present or not, I am there

tutoring. If I Made Djimat corrects, gives comments or suggestions on how to teach, I follow what he is saying and pass it on to the young girls. Often he will say that a movement should be done in this or that way, and he corrects the composition and the entrances and exits on stage.

*Do your two sons dance Gambuh?*

No. The first son wanted to dance, but it was too hard for him. He was crying and he gave up. Now the second one is starting and he wants to learn. He will not learn from me because I teach the female dance. He goes to the same teacher as I did and he is learning new creations and Baris, as he cannot jump into Gambuh immediately. I would like him to do Gambuh, but we will see later on what he decides to do.

Translated from Indonesian by Cristina Wistari

NI WAYAN SUDI (Bali) was born in 1966 and she started to study Gambuh in 1976. Since then she has dedicated herself exclusively to Gambuh, her style is particularly pure. Her teacher was a great master from Batuan, I Nyoman Kakul. From 1993 she started to collaborate with the Gambuh ensemble of Pura Desa of Batuan, and to teach the female dances.

Karolina Spaic

# Questioning the Invisible

I always make photos of my performances. Trying to fix the invisible. Where do these images come from? Who created them?

## A Persistent Spirit

Russian poet, Marina Cvetaeva

*He is the one that mixes up the cards  
And confuses arithmetic and weight.  
He is the questioner from the desk...*

Marina Cvetaeva, *The Poet*

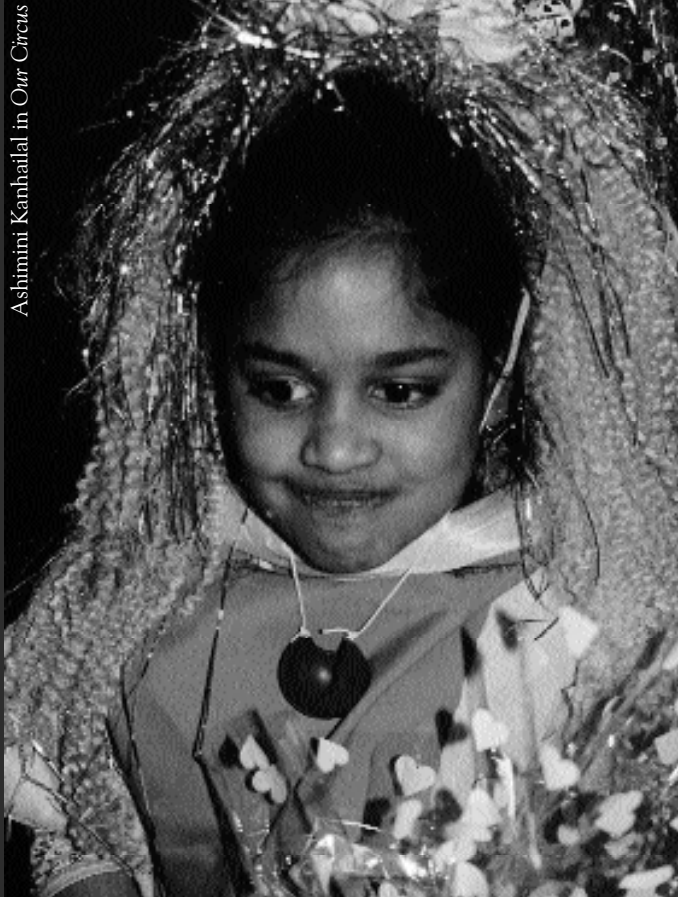
In the ecstasy of movements, the actress becomes one with the sugar lumps spread all around her. She plays Cvetaeva, a passionate Russian poet from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I "discovered" Cvetaeva as a teenager. The power of a female spirit and the incredible capacity to love life, were her main

messages to me. Years later, imperceptibly she started to appear in my performances, again and again... First she was present only with a few lines (*My Country in the East*, 1989, *Sisters*, 1990, *What about War*, 1993), until she demanded to become the main subject of the solo by Marjo Dames called *Marina* in 1996. Finally in *Voyage* in 1997 she could express herself fully as one of the characters in the group performance. At the moment, I am preparing a new performance. I don't think of Cvetaeva this time, actually I don't want her for a moment to be there. I am searching for some new voices. But at the same time I am curious who will be more persistent this time, her or me.

## In the Beginning





Drama pedagogue,  
Ljubica Beljanski Ristic

It has always been extremely important for me to continue to work with children within theatre. The enthusiasm, power and creativity that shows up each time is my motor behind the work, and also my own experience as a child. I was thirteen years old, when I

became a member of Skozoriste, a drama studio for children. The founder was Ljubica Beljanski Ristic, a young enthusiastic woman who called herself a "drama pedagogue". With her incredible talent she guided us to write, act, direct and perform in her country and abroad. We children between ten and fourteen years old created our own world within the theatre. As always with a teacher and a pupil our roads separated in order to meet again. I left the studio to make crazy performances in unconventional spaces, I went to study theatre abroad, I came back with performances, workshops... She is always there, watching, helping, advising, encouraging and praising. In Amsterdam, on my bookshelves there is a special place for a book she gave me when I was thirteen - *Towards a Poor Theatre* by Jerzy Grotowski - when everything started...

## A Recognition

Performance visual artist, Marina Abramovic



I came to study in Holland in 1984. I had heard about Marina Abramovic already in Belgrade. There was a lot of mystery around the performance artist who moved to Amsterdam. Not everybody was happy with her radical art in Holland and some people advised me not to go to the crazy Western world. When I saw her work for the first time in 1985, I was deeply moved; conceptual, fragmented, biographical, a strong female energy. Everything that was barrelling inside wanted to break out: a strong recognition. Through the years her work changed, as life itself does. I changed, too. But the invisible connection stayed. There are moments when I had to decide to jump forward with my work, to let the work lead me over the borders that I or the world around me creates. In these moments I am consulting Marina: "What should I do?" Recently she made a movie about herself and I realised that she is almost from my mother's generation. My mother always asks me: "What is the most important thing for you in your life?" Marina always asks me: "What is the most important thing for you in your art?"

KAROLINA SPAIC (Yugoslavia/The Netherlands) was born in Belgrade in 1963. In 1988 she graduated in theatre from the High School of Arts in Utrecht, Holland. In 1991 she founded ZID Theatre in Amsterdam, where she works permanently as artistic leader and director. ZID Theatre produces physical/visual performances in unconventional locations, visual art projects and community projects for children.

Ruth Hollstegge in *Glass Effect 2*

Photos: Karolina Spaic