

Wayang Beber Metropolitan: a contemporary Javanese picture-scroll theater group

by Marina Pretković and Tea Škrinjarić

Wayang Beber is a traditional Javanese picture-scroll theatrical form, with a centuries-long narrative performance and ritual tradition, in which colorfully painted horizontal scrolls have a central role. The scrolls are traditionally made of beaten tree bark (*daluang*, or *dluwang*) rolled onto bamboo sticks (Teijgeler 1996; Utami 2016). In performance, the *dhalang* as storyteller unrolls the scrolls from one stick to the other while narrating the story, scene by scene.

In Java, there are only two sets of wayang beber scrolls that are considered original. These scrolls are distinct in their origin, kept in the homes of rural families, and passed down along the male line of descendants since, traditionally, the *dhalang* would be a man. These sets are referred to as “Wayang Beber Pacitan” and “Wayang Beber Wonosari,” the latter named after the city of Wonosari, the capital of Gunung Kidul Regency (Special Region of Yogyakarta). The “Pacitan” set is kept in the village of Gedompol (Karangtalun, Pacitan Regency, East Java), while the other is in the village of

Bejiharjo (Gelaran, Gunung Kidul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta). According to Teijgeler, (2016: 5) the Pacitan scrolls are dated between 1690 and 1739 and the Wonosari scrolls between 1700 and 1735. Neither of the sets is actively used for performances or rituals. There is another set of scrolls with similar characteristics in the Ethnological Museum in Leiden (Stutje 2022).

The stories are not from the Ramayana or Mahabharata, the usual repertoire of many other wayang forms on Java. Rather, wayang beber tells stories from the Javanese cycle of Panji legends that describe life events of Prince Panji from the Jenggala Kingdom and his search for the runaway princess of the Kediri Kingdom. More on Panji in Javanese culture can be found in the work of L. Kieven (2013, 2014). Our research (Pretković and Škrinjarić 2017) and that of others such as Anderson (1974), Soelarto (1983), and Kant-Achilles et al. (1990), showed wayang beber had a significant social and ritual role. Performances were



Figure 1. Scene from the Wonosari scrolls (2016). (All photos are by the authors.)



Figure 2. Traditional performance with Pacitan-style scrolls in Sragen, Central Java (2016).

an integrated part of the ritual *ruwatan*, a ceremony of purification of a village (Figure 2).

The scrolls are occasionally used for healing rituals where individuals ask the dhalang or scroll owner for help with various health or social issues. We were told that the scrolls have the power to guard against evil forces or even resolve specific problems when used in certain healing rituals. One of the rituals that has been passed down through multiple generations to the present day is the preparation of an offering (*sesajen*) and recitation of a prayer each time the original scrolls are taken out of the wooden box (*ampok*) in which they are kept (Figure 3). This is done regardless of whether they are being used for a performance, for healing purposes, or merely being shown to someone who requests to see them.

A typical performance is accompanied by a small ensemble of a few gamelan instruments. The traditional shows in Pacitan area include a *kendhang*, gong, *kenong*, as well as *rebab*, which has a dominant role. In Wonosari, where notation is sometimes used in rehearsals (Figure 4), female singers [*pesindhen*] are present; in Pacitan, *saron* and *slenthem* are added (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

To learn more about wayang beber, we conducted new fieldwork—looking for historical information, exploring the reasons for its decline, and assessing how the tools of cultural anthropology could contribute to preservation efforts. Even though the main performance props of wayang beber are of a material nature, the knowledge behind the storytelling is based on a long oral tradition, and therefore challenging to present and preserve. One of these challenges is variations in the information from different generations.

Wayang theater has been inscribed since 2008 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, n.d.), yet wayang kulit gets most public attention. Bernards Alens Zako, the Program Specialist at the UNESCO Office in Jakarta, told us that UNESCO had not included much detailed information about wayang beber in their reports on wayang, other than that it was fading out.



Figure 3. Storage of wayang beber Wonosari scrolls.

A report on the implementation of the status of elements inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity stated: "Among the many styles of wayang, some are active and developing (e.g. Surakarta and Yogyakarta Styles of Wayang Kulit, Wayang Bali, Wayang Golek Sunda). [Other] styles are fading out (Wayang Klitik, Wayang Beber)" (UNESCO 2014:12).

There has been some government support for wayang beber, such as the sponsoring of cultural events in the Pacitan and Yogyakarta areas, including a cultural event in Sragen that featured a wayang beber performance by Teha Tri Hartantno with the Wayang Beber Pacitan scrolls on 20 August 2016, the anniversary of the Wayang Beber Sakbendino group in Pacitan on 5 August 2017, and a performance by Selamat Haryadi in the Wonosari area. The cultural department of the Special Region of Yogyakarta commissioned a painter named Utomo to duplicate paintings of the Wonosari scrolls in 2017, intended for more frequent performing and in that way protecting the original set from further damage.

People we talked to had different priorities for the preservation of wayang beber; either the scrolls themselves took precedence, or performances and the meaning they have in the local community was more important. Opinions also differed on who should be in charge of



Figure 5. Rehearsal for a performance in Gelaran (2017).

preservation: the owner, the local community, conservation experts, the government, or if a collaborative effort should be undertaken.

During our fieldwork we also met and interacted with people from different parts of Java who were not involved with wayang beber. When we talked about our interest in this form of wayang, their reactions gave us the impression that many people were unfamiliar with wayang beber or had never even heard of it, although many knew of the more widespread wayang kulit, sometimes having seen a performance. These reactions gave us even deeper appreciation of the significant efforts of individual artists and art groups to revitalize this unique theatrical form.

Contemporary Wayang Beber Groups in Java

There are many Javanese artists and scholars who have ambitious and creative ideas for the revival of wayang beber. Through communicating with other contemporary wayang beber groups and attempting to learn about their dedication to the tradition, we realized that, contrary to our perception of wayang beber being primarily an historical art form, these young Javanese artists had recognized its potential and transformed it into new creations that bridged a generational and sociocultural gap between the old and new. We became aware of the extensive work and efforts of art groups and individuals to create innovative performing styles in order to contribute to the continuity and preservation of wayang beber. All the groups shared a similar performing style adapted from the traditional Wayang Beber Wonosari in which a dhalang sits in front of a scroll rolled onto wooden rods (longer than the ones in Pacitan and Wonosari), using a long, thin, wooden pointer to indicate which character is speaking. The painted background of their scrolls, however, are less filled in. While not using Panji stories specifically in their performances, all of the groups are inspired by Panji's character as a symbol of important values in life, and as a hero who overcomes evil in many forms.

There are other changes as well. Some groups, like Wayang Beber Metropolitan and Wayang Beber Welingan, occasionally include female storytellers in



Figure 4. Wonosari dhalang showing gamelan notation (2016).

their performances. Modern groups often use the same scroll to tell different stories, and do not make offerings before a performance. Contemporary performances are accompanied by compositions that combine gamelan and modern instruments such as electric guitar and electronic keyboard. The music style and the instruments differ for each performance. Singing and clapping also play an important role.

Wayang Beber Kota is considered one of the first groups to pave the way to the world of contemporary wayang beber performances (Lis 2014). The Indonesian word "kota" means "city," so the group's name might be translated as Urban Wayang Beber. Formed in February 2005 by Dani Iswardana, a painter, Tri Ganjar Wicaksono, a young dhalang, and the group's manager Agung Priyo Wibowo (Dani Iswardana, p.c., August 24, 2016), the group performed for a few years, after which they switched their focus to educational artistic activities, led by Iswardana and based on wayang beber style. Iswardana also had an important role in the forming of Wayang Beber Metropolitan, since the founding members often met with him in Surakarta to exchange ideas and knowledge about wayang beber (Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo, p.c., September 18, 2016).

Another contemporary group is **Wayang Beber Sakbendino**, whose name can be translated from



Figure 6. Wayang beber performance in Gedongpol (2016).



Figure 7. Musicians at a performance in Yogyakarta (2017).

Javanese as “Everyday Wayang Beber.” This group was formed in August 2016 in Pacitan by the group’s storyteller, Tri Ganjar Wicaksono of Wayang Beber Kota. They started a year-long project of performing wayang beber every day with the aim of increasing awareness of this local tradition, especially focusing on the character of Panji. At first they used Dani Iswardana’s scrolls to tell different stories, and later started creating their own scrolls (Figure 16). Even after the one-year project had ended, the group continued calling attention to Panji culture and wayang beber through occasional performances, mainly in the Pacitan region, but also by collaborating closely with artists from Mojokerto.

Wayang Beber Welingan focuses on ecological topics such as environmental protection and recycling. Their name highlights this. “Welingan” is an abbreviation of *wayang edukasi lingkungan*, or environmental education wayang (Lis 2014, 516). In Javanese, “weling” means a “message,” so the name of the group can be interpreted as a wayang beber meant to convey messages, inform, and educate. Their scrolls are made with the batik fabric technique, using wax and natural dyes. The group was founded in 2012 in Surakarta in Central Java by Anthony Sastrowijoyo, the group’s painter and storyteller (Lis 2014).

While Wayang Beber Welingan only occasionally performs as a singular group (the last performance we saw was in 2016 in Surakarta), some of its members are more active as members of the puppet theatre community **WANGSA**, an acronym of wayang and *sampah* [trash]. Like Wayang Beber Welingan, WANGSA, or **Wayang Sampah**, focuses on themes of environmental preservation and sustainability, ecology, and recycling.

Wayang Beber Tani performs a cycle of new stories created by Faris Wibisono, a painter and dhalang (Figure 8). Tani is a root word in Indonesian connected to agriculture, used in *petani* [farmer]. Wibisono’s performances focus on the rural way of life and how it is slowly being replaced by contemporary, fast-paced, urban lifestyles. In his family house in Pracimantoro in Wonogiri, Central Java, where



Figure 8. Faris Wibisono holding a workshop on wayang beber style of drawings in Pracimantoro, Central Java (2016).



Figure 9. Detail of a scroll of Faris Wibisono (2016).

he creates the scrolls for Wayang Beber Tani (Figure 9), Wibisono regularly organizes workshops for local children to teach them the basics of wayang beber painting and narration. In addition to his dedication to creating new scrolls, he also makes reproductions of the historical wayang beber scrolls on daluang sheets that he often fashions himself.

Wayang beber collectives and performances also started to emerge in the area of Jombang, Mojokerto (East Java) in 2019, engaging school children in wayang beber performance. These were **Wayang Beber Mahesa Sura** and **Panji Waréngku**—later renamed **Panji Cêmêng** (Arief Budi Santono, online communication, February 2021). They use scrolls that they make themselves, and occasionally those made by Dani Iswardana (Figure 10).

Besides these contemporary groups, numerous individual artists are inspired by wayang beber. The painting style of these individuals resembles the Pacitan style in both content and composition. Some of these artists create an entire set of scrolls similar to the Pacitan ones, while others copy individual scenes.

Wayang Beber Metropolitan

Wayang Beber Metropolitan is an art group founded in 2009 in Jakarta by Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo, a painter and the dhalang for the majority of their performances. The group members gathered spontaneously, and since all of them had different educational and professional backgrounds, members found different roles within the group as painters, storytellers, musicians, or educators; often one person played more than one role.

Wayang Beber Metropolitan stands out with their active engagement in performances, public discussions, and educational activities, reaching audiences in Jakarta as well as other places on Java. The challenge of attracting an urban audience to a rural tradition and adapting it for city-dwellers unfamiliar with the art form doesn’t prevent them from presenting interesting and engaging performances.

The group's knowledge about the history and painting style of the tradition is evident to those more familiar with wayang beber, while to others they present something new and different. Although the group members do not see their activities as primarily a revitalizing mission, we believe their work—raising awareness about the Javanese tradition and opening a dialogue with both the audience and the local government—is a valuable contribution to the preservation of wayang beber.

These collaborators wanted to present a tradition found in only two Javanese villages to a wider, urban audience unfamiliar with it. This urban element is apparent from the group's name, which Samuel explained also connects to the inspiration for their performances:

"It was rather difficult to choose the final name for Wayang Beber Metropolitan. Stories we deal with are not only stories from the urban city environment, but also stories about the impact that large modern cities have on other regions. The concerns of our stories are more to remind society about different systems. We also say that Indonesia is built on its maritime and agricultural strength, but the process of development sometimes makes you forget about these foundations. Every year in our country, rice fields are more and more often turned into residential areas. It is a real pity that our government always talks about self-sufficiency in food, such as rice (they say we can meet our need for food without having to import from abroad) but every year our rice fields disappear, so how will the country meet our food needs? That policy is really conflicting. We are aware that we are people whose path is art, and our task is limited to only reminding about such stories." (Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo, p.c., September 18, 2016)

Paintings on their scrolls depict fast-paced city (metropolitan) life, corruption, the effects of globalization, social alienation, and environmental issues. In parallel, they portray the significance of community organizations, farming, and a simpler lifestyle. These topics are reflected in their storytelling and in private discussions in their sanggar [studio] in Depok, a city within the Jakarta metropolitan area. The members often gather there to craft new stories and translate Javanese traditions into contemporary language understandable by younger generations.

"Wayang is a spectacle, but also carries a message of guidance—an entertainment embodying the meaning of good and setting good examples for how life should be lived. Even though we are contemporary, it doesn't necessarily mean we are "weird," but the oddity that arises from the characters we use has a moral message, has a purpose." (Ibid.)

Although on first viewing, their stories do not have much in common with the traditional Panji legends, they do incorporate, as Samuel suggests, the spirit of Panji. "The wayang character Panji is a wanderer who always adapts to his era. Merging with the existing dynamics of the time and, inspiring those in his environment. Whether we realize it or not, we are all Panji (Wayang Beber Metropolitan 2015).

"I tried to dissect the value of the spirit of Panji and *pewayangan* [puppetry], but I did not want wayang to be disconnected from temporal changes. What I took was the spirit, not the Panji story. The kind of spirit I try to create in Wayang Beber Metropolitan is not just a story that can be found on a scroll, but the spirit of Panji that is delivered through our shows to the communities." (Ibid.)

The group explains on their blog how something connected to old Javanese stories becomes relevant in presenting a moral story for today's audiences.



Figure 10. Wayang Beber Sakbendino performing in the Pacitan region with a scroll painted by Dani Iswardana (2016).



Figure 11. The scroll for “Kota Seribu Satu Mimpi”.

“The story presented in the performances no longer uses Panji as a narrative, but only the spirit of Panji which is inherent in the form of images and narration. Because the message about Panji is the loss of love, we try to revive it through an awareness of social criticism. The spirit of Panji can still be actualized and communicated in the present context through other media. It can be interpreted as lost love which we can present in the expression of wayang beber media.” (Wayang Beber Metropolitan 2012)

The concept of “extracting” the spirit of the traditional Javanese stories and characters, the spirit of their daily struggles, values, and morals, and giving it a new life among the challenges of urban existence, is reflected on a larger scale in the group’s work. The spirit of the wayang beber tradition, seen as a social tool to bring a community together and discuss different issues, is the spirit that the group tries to maintain—as a living organism that changes with the people, the local culture, and social circumstances.

While Wayang Beber Metropolitan’s canvas scrolls are painted in acrylic colors by several artists from the group, the characters maintain a style similar to the traditional wayang beber paintings: they are portrayed from multiple perspectives which is achieved by depicting the bodies of the characters frontally, their heads in a profile, but with both eyes and cheeks visible; their arms, legs and torsos are disproportional, with especially long arms.

As Samuel explains: “Traditional paintings are already influenced by Islam, the form has changed, and we still use it in that way. It is not a problem, we still follow the form and *sungging* painting technique, but with a different expression.” (Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo, p.c., September 18, 2016)

The coloring technique *sungging*, the Javanese word for “painting” and “decoration,” is also adopted from the traditional wayang beber scroll paintings. Color gradation is achieved by using lighter and darker tones of

the same color. The decorative background (overfilling the traditional scrolls in the Pacitan set and to a lesser extent in the Wonosari set) is here reduced to a minimum—the characters stand out on a white background. Each of their scrolls consists mainly of three scenes and, unlike the traditional ones, transitions between scenes are not always accentuated, obvious, or marked consistently. Also, the style in which characters are painted and their position on the scroll give the dhalang freedom to choose which story he will tell and how. As Samuel said in 2016, they have been using the same eight scrolls for the past six years to tell many different, unrelated stories, making every performance unique.

Wayang Beber Metropolitan uses a few scrolls for their performances, including the scroll named “Kota Seribu Satu Mimpi” [City of a Thousand and One Dreams] by artists Surahman and Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo (Figure 11).

In addition to the fine and performing arts that traditional wayang beber already incorporates, Wayang Beber Metropolitan takes a step further by including dance and movement, props made of recycled material, and experiments with stage design, videos, lights, and shadows. Nevertheless, the scroll maintains its central position in their shows. It is placed in front of a dhalang who uses a long cane to point at the characters and parts of the scenes while narrating. We observed that all contemporary groups adopted the same performing style of wayang beber Wonosari, where the dhalang sits in front of the scroll and faces the scenes, unlike the Pacitan version where the dhalang sits behind the scroll and can barely be seen. The Wonosari performing style allows a closer interaction with the audience, such as giving and receiving comments during the show, which has proven to be an important performance aspect to all of the groups whose shows we have seen on our fieldwork. In contrast to traditional performances which

always present the same story with the same scrolls, Wayang Beber Metropolitan and other contemporary groups often use one scroll to present several different stories which reflect on current events and issues in Indonesia, as well as globally. While traditional wayang beber stories use the Javanese language, Wayang Beber Metropolitan uses Indonesian, since Indonesia's capital Jakarta is also home to non-Javanese speaking audiences.

Metropolitan's performances are full of diverse visual elements. Samuel and Sari Atika Sundari, another group member and the only female dhalang in the group who creates and performs contemporary wayang beber, together explained the main role of additional visual impacts in their performances. "The wayang beber performances are static but we make the performances very dynamic, to always keep the viewer interested." (p.c., September 16, 2016).

Lysloff (1992:150) has speculated that this dimension of classic performance, i.e., the lack of movement, that might be the very reason for the gradual decline of the popularity of wayang beber, as it is becomes largely replaced by the "more compelling and action-oriented" wayang kulit tradition. Storytellers do have a great responsibility to make a performance memorable and interesting, but this has become increasingly challenging in a time of vast circulation of information and dynamic stimulation of the senses. Wayang Beber Metropolitan's efforts bring wayang beber closer to contemporary urban audiences and their busy Jakarta lives.

The educational aspect is of great importance so there are discussions before or after their performances. In an environment that's entertaining for both children and adults, Wayang Beber Metropolitan shares their messages and knowledge and opens a space for critical thinking and questioning.

The group's performances are usually open to the public, whether performed in a studio, school, or museum. They often collaborate with other artists, both those familiar and unfamiliar with wayang beber, and create joint events for various cultural occasions in Jakarta and elsewhere in Java. Wayang Beber Metropolitan has also collaborated with the Wayang Museum in Jakarta and presented their work to the

audience through similar combinations of performances, talks, and workshops. This institutional support could be a significant factor in the popularity and acknowledgment of the group, and in reaching larger audiences than their Central Javanese colleagues.

While we had opportunities to see other performances of Wayang Beber Metropolitan, the following section focuses on sharing our observations of the group's style in more detail using the example of their performance entitled *Teror di Teror* [Terror in Terror] presented in the Wayang Museum in Jakarta on 18 September 2016 (Figure 12). Since this performance was the most comprehensive of the ones we saw live, we chose to make it a case study for analyzing the group's performing style. With these notes, we want to explore how their activities relate to traditional knowledge and art in a contemporary setting.

The performance of "Terror in Terror"

Terror in terror was a two-hour-long show telling a story that focused on interpreting different types of terror—external terror from everyday metropolitan society and the internal terror that we experience as individuals.

"It seems heavy, but the title is actually simple. Our story reminds us that in our country and even internationally, terror is understood to be just a bomb. But in our country, terror can be anything, such as traffic jams, education, the economy. ... We incorporate trivial things into the story, and even though the frame is global, we focus on ending the story with a return to introspection and incorporating self-reflection. I am only a speaker, so I also need to reflect on my work." (S. Prasetyo, p.c., September 18, 2016)

As Samuel explains, many social problems that surround and affect us—large or small, local or global—are mentioned in the show, but we should start from ourselves and reflect on how we can respond to these terrors.

No offerings were presented for this show as the original purpose and sacred values of traditional wayang beber performances are becoming less relevant and are even eliminated from most contemporary performances, so presenting offerings is also something that was excluded.

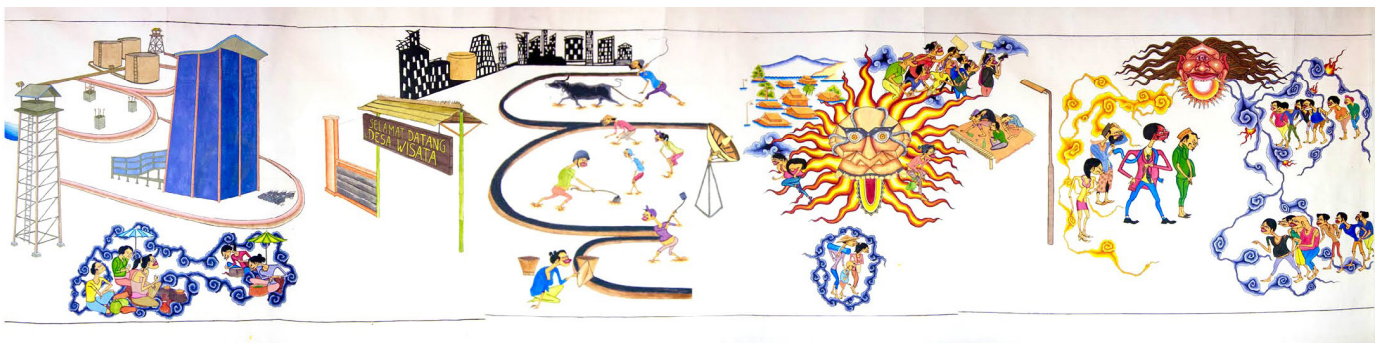


Figure 12. The scroll for "Teror di Teror."



Figure 13. Poster for “Teror di Teror.”



Figure 14. Including elements of wayang kulit in a performance, with a kayon held in front of the painted scroll.

The performance still follows the core principles of the traditional form and gives space for introducing new elements that are relevant to an urban community.

Even though the performance took place in Jakarta, where traditional clothing is not as present in everyday life as in other parts of Java, all performers were wearing some element of traditional dress. The dhalang and musicians all had *blangkon*, special hats with a batik pattern typically worn for various occasions in Java, including wayang performances. Additionally, all musicians wore batik shirts. Since those shirts may be worn for other special occasions, it is the *blangkon* that signifies a closer relation to tradition and to wayang performances in general.

The show incorporated some elements typically seen in wayang kulit performances. These elements were flat leather puppets presenting different characters of the story; the symmetrical pointed flat figure called *gunungan* or *kayon*, traditionally used for marking the beginning and end of a wayang kulit performance, as well as the transitions between scenes; and a banana tree log used as a base onto which the puppets are fixed in an upright position (Figure 14). We saw the use of puppets in conjunction with the picture-scroll performances only occasionally, on one occasion in Wayang Beber Welingan’s performance, while in Wayang Beber Metropolitan somewhat more often.

Samuel, as the dhalang, was sitting in front of the banana tree log onto which both the scrolls and puppets were fixed during the show. He was mostly facing the scrolls and puppets, while his back was turned to the audience. However, he would often turn towards the audience to make a comment directly to them and with this small gesture include them in the show. One of the musicians was assisting the dhalang with unrolling and changing the scrolls, sitting beside him or behind the opened scroll. Two scrolls were used throughout the performance. One depicted a traffic jam, which most Jakarta residents can relate to because besides the stress, it evokes other urban issues. The other scroll was used to depict the imaginary country of Poco-Poco and its citizens, who are under the threats of terrorism in the world. Poco-Poco refers to a very popular song and a line-dance in Indonesia, commonly played during social gatherings.

The story was enacted by the puppets and through the scrolls. The characters on the scrolls were stylized in a manner similar to the original scrolls from Pacitan and Wonosari but placed in a modern setting. The connection to metropolitan life was also achieved through the puppets, which were made of recycled materials, reflecting on the environmental and waste management issues in Jakarta. The dhalang was pointing to the characters on the scrolls with a stick (Figure 16), described previously as typical for the Wonosari style of performing, while changing his voice for each character, typical for both performing styles.

At the back of the stage, behind and above the scroll, was a large screen onto which the group occasionally projected photographs, simple animated illustrations, and

videos. The video created a more dynamic atmosphere and helped to place the story in the context of a metropolitan city, while the illustrations, drawn to resemble sketches, acted as additional commentary on the topics discussed. Something that was already a multimedia form of art was given an extra dimension corresponding to the rapid visual dynamics the younger generations are commonly surrounded with, either through their mobile phones or in the busy city streets.

The dhalang's act of turning towards the audience to give comical remarks and receiving the same from the audience is similar to the interplay we saw in many traditional wayang kulit performances in Central Java. Wayang performances are important and popular social events in Javanese culture. Socializing is an essential element; watching a performance is "not a one-way flow of information but a way of being together" (Mrazek 2007, 275). This event followed this format and engaged the audience to participate with comments to the performers and other spectators. Through interacting with the audience members during and after the shows, we noticed a sense of appreciation for the work of Wayang Beber Metropolitan.

The musicians have an important role in helping the storyteller bring the story to life, and they often communicate and interact with the dhalang during the show. The Wayang Beber Metropolitan team usually experiments with music in their shows to keep their finger on the pulse of the urban/modern life. To explore this, they often use everyday objects to create sound effects, such as metal plates and spoons to symbolically connect to food crisis issues (Pramesti Putri 2011, 84). In one performance we witnessed, there were sound effects related to the video projections. Some of the songs

were reminiscent of traditional songs familiar to most locals, done in the group's own style. The openings and closings of each sequence were accompanied by musical onomatopoeia, which contributed to creating the atmosphere of the show. While the dhalang was narrating, the music was usually very quiet and while the dhalang was finishing one scene the music would become louder and more dominant. This interplay of music and narration was present throughout the show. The music was also accompanied by singing in some songs, which is again closer to the Wonosari style of wayang beber performances.

The show was preceded by a workshop on drawing wayang beber characters, during which Sari described the technique and style of the traditional wayang beber paintings to children and their parents (Figures 17, 18, and 19). Children afterwards presented their work to the audience together with another member of Wayang Beber Metropolitan. Even though the children participating in the workshop were quite young and might not have recognized that this was a presentation of an old Javanese tradition, the workshop presented a unique opportunity to be introduced to wayang beber. The images, the shapes of the characters and their names—these are elements that the children could easily hold on to and later recognize as specific imagery related to wayang beber. A discussion with the audience followed the performance, reflecting on the themes that were covered in the show and on wayang beber in general.

For many young people, Wayang Beber Metropolitan's performances are their first encounter with wayang beber. Because of this, the group makes an effort to introduce the tradition and discuss it with the



Figure 15. Musicians playing during a Wayang Metropolitan performance at the Wayang Museum, 18 September 2016.

audience, especially younger attendees who might become the main agents in safeguarding the cultural heritage. As Samuel said, “when I understand my culture, I will appreciate it” (p.c., September 18, 2016). Taking the time to open a dialogue with the youth about their surroundings and engaging them in artistic activities contributes to an understanding of and appreciation of the local history and culture. Thus, the educational aspect, based on inclusion and discussion in an entertaining environment, is one of the key characteristics of performances and events conducted by members of Wayang Beber Metropolitan and one of the crucial approaches in preserving and passing on the knowledge about wayang beber.

Conclusion: understanding, appreciating, safeguarding

Seeing the importance of wayang beber as an aspect of national identity, Wayang Beber Metropolitan tries to be a solution to reintroduce wayang beber to the public as a performing art. Even they don’t present a classic story, they still try to present the noble values contained in classic stories in a contemporary and innovative form. (Wayang Beber Metropolitan, n.d.)

We were both drawn to wayang beber with great curiosity and eagerness to learn more about it and to share our experiences with all who are interested. We envisioned our fieldwork consisting of opportunities to talk



Figure 17. Sari in a workshop at the Wayang Museum, 2016.

to different people about wayang beber, see performances, the scrolls and rituals, and to collect as much information as possible. While exploring different aspects of wayang beber— historical, contemporary, artistic, cultural and social— through literature, observation, and participation, as well as talking to different groups of people, we realized how complex this topic truly is. What wayang beber meant, and means, to different people or groups is something we continue to explore. In its complicated history and its evolving present we found even more beauty, soon realizing that we would be connected to this part of Javanese culture for many years to come.

The main effort in keeping wayang beber alive is usually taken by individual enthusiasts or smaller art groups. Wayang Beber Metropolitan is such a group, whose members gathered because of their shared love towards art and tradition as well as the sense of community that arises in preparing each story and performance. The quality of their work is recognized, and the group nurtures a continuing and successful collaboration with different cultural institutions. For example, besides being frequent guests of the Wayang Museum, they were also invited to speak at “*Diskusi kelompok terpumpun pengelolaan wayang beber*,” [focus group on wayang beber management] at the Jakarta National Museum on 24 August 2018, in an event co-organized by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Figure 20).

The group also presented a short play and conducted a workshop for children. Other speakers were storytellers who presented the traditional styles of Pacitan (Rudhi Prasetyo) and Wonosari (Slamet Haryadi), Prapto Yuwono on behalf of the Museum, while Samuel spoke on behalf of Wayang Beber Metropolitan, representing their contemporary performing style

The fact that they were the ones who provided additional activities in this seminar—a performance and workshop—shows their respected position as mediators bringing this tradition closer to young people and confirms their holistic approach in public performances, which including discussions, sharing knowledge about wayang beber, and making new artistic creations with the audience, especially children.



Figure 16. Sari in a workshop at the Wayang Museum, 2016.



Figure 18. Sari leading a workshop at the Wayang Museum, 2016.

Even though the group is aware of the rarity of wayang beber in the public nowadays, they did not perceive their work as something focused only on reviving an old forgotten tradition. Wayang Beber is a part of their culture and is a logical form of artistic expression; a medium that can bring together artists of different backgrounds and styles to create a like-minded community with a story to tell. For them, it is a living tradition and a way to express themselves artistically.

In that sense, the purpose of wayang beber has not changed much. The purifying transformation happens within us, through an introspective journey presented by Wayang Beber Metropolitan's stories of (dis)harmony and reaching peace with ourselves, with each other, with nature. The way the audience detects right from wrong, how the audience laughs and sympathizes with the hero and other characters, is painted throughout the old Panji stories, and in similar ways reaches the audience in Wayang Beber Metropolitan's stories. Their stories are placed in modern times but serve as reminders of the local history, their ancestors, and their cultural roots, in order to understand the present better.

"Every culture has its values, so we made this work based on the social reality that we experienced. It not only tells about the romanticism of Panji's journey but how our nation is like a Panji figure that is looking for its love, his Dewi Sekartaji. By opening up the topic and reminding people who might have forgotten that Indonesia was built from an agrarian and maritime space, they will be reminded again." (Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo, p.c., September 18, 2016)

Observing all these important elements, we wanted to contribute to the understanding of picture-scroll theatre performances through sharing the insights about contemporary wayang beber with a wider audience outside of Indonesia. Our insights developed after numerous discussions with the members of Wayang Beber Metropolitan. This very vibrant and layered art group uses tradition as an inspiration for raising awareness, not only about wayang beber, but also about different issues which are present in contemporary Jakarta and Indonesia; they are proving to be key agents for bringing wayang beber into the 21st century.



Figure 19. Sari leading a workshop at the Wayang Museum, 2016.

Suggestions for further research

Future research in wayang beber might examine audience reception and audience inclusion, interaction and collaboration between governmental actors and civil society groups in their efforts to preserve an intangible cultural heritage, and the mutual interests that bring together different generations in creating or watching performances. Paying further attention to new trends, possibilities, and potential limitations of an ancient tradition on digital platforms could also give further insight into the art form and a deeper understanding of its social and cultural values.

During the pandemic of 2020, Wayang Beber Metropolitan, as well as other groups mentioned here, organized online wayang beber performances themselves or participated in larger online cultural events on sites such as Instagram, FaceBook, or YouTube. These young artists quickly adapted to performing wayang beber in changing circumstances. Analyzing how people consume and accept these types of performances, which have a significant social and interactive aspects, would reveal more about the social functions of contemporary wayang beber. Did this shift to the digital world contribute to the availability of wayang beber related content and result in a wider, international recognition of this art form?

Our initial perception of a vanishing tradition that we got from reading available literature—which guided our first preparations for the fieldwork—was quickly refuted. Wayang Beber proved to be both complex and fluid, reflecting the fast-paced changes, as well as the persistence of its core elements—conveying messages about important values in the society, creating a sense of community as well as a space for catharsis, entertainment, and gathering. ■

About the Authors

Tea Škrinjarić (Croatia, b. 1990). A graduate in Social and Cultural Anthropology, during her formal and non-formal education Tea gained a theoretical and practical knowledge of ethnographic research and visual anthropology. She spent six months studying traditional dance and music at the Institute for Indonesian Art in



Figure 20. The event at the National Museum in Jakarta that included a discussion on preserving wayang beber.

Surakarta (ISI), which gave her insight into Indonesian art and culture and opened the door to the topic of wayang beber. She describes an encounter in 2013 with Wayang Beber Welingan, “[This group] inspired my curiosity to peek deeper into wayang beber, to look at its history, and to wander around Java in a search for stories, people, and meanings. From this our Wayang Beber Project was born.”

Marina Pretković (Croatia, b. 1988). Along with her formal education—an M.A. in Art History, Ethnology, and Cultural Anthropology—Marina participated in workshops and projects focusing on cultural heritage protection and revitalization, one of her main interests. Her first visit to Indonesia was in 2015 on an Arts and Culture Scholarship in Surakarta, where she started learning about Indonesian culture. Besides doing ethnographic research, Marina enjoys illustration and travelling. She recounts, “My first visit to Indonesia was an exciting journey that inspired me on a personal and professional level. The town of Surakarta in Central Java is the place of my dearest memories, and one of them stands out the most. A small event in 2015 brought together two contemporary wayang beber groups—the local Wayang Beber Welingan and the Jakarta-based Wayang Beber Metropolitan—who performed in an intimate atmosphere and created a playful celebration of this old storytelling tradition. This sparked my desire to research all the fascinating layers of wayang beber.”

Methodology

Inspired by our first interaction with contemporary wayang beber groups, we conducted field research on Java during 2016, 2017 and 2018, each of the visits lasting around three months. Besides engaging in participant-observation, we conducted interviews with people having a wide range of experiences related to wayang beber: families who keep the scrolls, storytellers, painters and musicians, paper-makers, UNESCO officials, local government and museum representatives, as well as scholars researching wayang beber and other forms of Javanese heritage. Learning about so many groups gave us a better understanding of what wayang beber represents to different generations. Although

everything we learned was valuable, we focused on one of the most active groups: Wayang Beber Metropolitan.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all our interlocutors and the groups mentioned in this article for the knowledge they shared with us, for interesting late-night discussions over coffee, and for their patience with our numerous questions.

We also thank the *Balungan* anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments which helped greatly in the final shaping of the article, as well as the editors of *Balungan*, especially Jody Diamond, who was very supportive and enthusiastic about presenting our research.

We are grateful to the supporters and sponsors who helped make our project possible: the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Beasiswa Unggulan Scholarship), Peter Lienhardt and Philip Bagby Small Research Travel Grants of Oxford University, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Zagreb, the Croatian Ethnological Society, the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, the Croatian Ministry of Culture, and other sponsors and donors.

References

- Anderson, B.R.O.G. 1974. “The last picture show: Wayang Beber.” Conference on Modern Indonesian Literature, Madison, Wisconsin, 28–29 June 1974:33–81.
- De Pourcq, Maarten, and Staf Vos. 2015. “Safeguarding Theatrical Heritage: a Strategy for the Empowerment of Artistic Communities.” In *Theatrical Heritage. Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Bruno Forment and Christel Stalpaert, 221–243. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Kant-Achilles, Mally, Friedrich Selmann, and Rüdiger Schumacher. 1990. *Wayang beber: das wiederentdeckte Bildrollen-Drama Zentral-Javas* (Wayang beber: the rediscovered dramatic picture rolls of Central Java). Stuttgart: F. Steiner.
- Khor, Khengkia. 2014. “Wayang Kulit Kelantan in Digital Media.” In *Puppetry for all Times. Papers Presented at the Bali Puppetry Seminar 2013*, edited by Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 271–311. Singapore: Patridge.
- Kieven, Lydia. 2013. *Following the cap-figure in Majapahit temple reliefs: a new look at the religious function of East Javanese temples, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- . 2014. “Panjian icon of cultural heritage in East Java.” Accessed 12 June, 2022 <http://www.lydia-kieven.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Artikel-BudayaPanji140714-s1.pdf>
- Lis, Marianna. 2014. “Contemporary Wayang Beber in Central Java.” *Asian Theatre Journal*, 31(2): 505–523. <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2014.0029>.
- Lysloff, René T. A. 1992/1993. “Book review: Kant-Achilles, Mally; Selmann, Friedrich; and Schumacher, Rüdiger. Wayang Beber.” *Asian Music* 24/1: 146–151. <https://doi.org/10.2307/834457>.

- Mrazek, Jan. 2007. "Ways of Experiencing Art: Art History, Television, and Javanese Wayang." In *What's the Use of Art?: Asian visual and material culture in context*. Edited by Jan Mrázek and Morgan Pitelka, pp. 271-305. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Pramesti Putri, Dinda Intan. 2011. "Etnografi Seni Pertunjukan Wayang Beber Tradisi Lama Yang Kembali Hidup Di Tengah Ibukota Jakarta. Studi Kasus: Komunitas Wayang Beber Metropolitan." MA diss., Universitas Indonesia.
- Pretković, Marina, and Tea Škrinjarčić. 2017. "Reviving Javanese Picture Scroll Theatre." *Etnološka Tribina*, 47(40): 198–325. doi: 10.15378/1848-9540.2017.40.08.
- Soelarto, B. 1983/1984. *Album Wayang Beber Pacitan*, Yogyakarta. Translated by A M Hidayati. Jakarta: Ministry of Education and Culture, Directorate General of Culture, Project of Cultural Media.
- Stutje, Klaas. 2022. Provenance Report Regarding *Wayang Bèbèr Plaat* [Wayan Beber Scrolls]. PPROCE Provenance Reports, 3. Amsterdam: NIOD, Rijksmuseum, Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Accessed 12 June, 2022 https://pure.knaw.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/481403850/RAP_PPROCEprovenanceReport_03_WayangBeberPlaten_RV_360_5255_5256_5257_v10_202203.pdf
- Teygeler, Rene. 2000. "Dluwang, a near-paper from Indonesia." In *IPH Congress book 1996*, vol.11: 134–145. Marburg: International Association of Paper Historians.
- Teijgeler, Rene. 2002. *De mythe van het Javaans papier* / The myth of Javanese paper [bi-lingual]. In *Tijdloos papier* / Timeless paper, edited by Seitzinger, R., Westerhof, A, 132 – 151. (English 1-9). Rijswijk:Gentenaar & Torley Publishers.
- UNESCO, 2014. "Report on the implementation of the Convention on the status of elements inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.Periodic report No. 00924/Indonesia". Accessed 6 June, 2022. <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/download.php?versionID=33153>, <https://ich.unesco.org/en-state/indonesia-ID?info=periodic-reporting>
- UNESCO, n.d. "Wayang puppet theatre". Accessed 6 June, 2022. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/wayang-puppet-theatre-00063>.
- Utami, Esti, and Judi Achjadi. 2016. *Beaten Bark – Hidden Treasure: Fuya, Tapa, Daluang*. Jakarta: Museum Tekstil Jakarta.
- Wayang Beber Metropolitan. 2012. "Wayang Beber Kontemporer." Accessed 26 October, 2019. <https://waybemetro.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/wayang-beber-kontemporer/>.
- Wayang Beber Metropolitan. 2015. "5 Tahun Wayang Beber Metropolitan Mempersembahkan Metamorfosa Panji." Accessed June 11, 2022. <https://waybemetro.wordpress.com/2015/06/09/5-tahun-wayang-beber-metropolitan-mempersembahkan-metamorfosa-panji/>.
- Wayang Beber Metropolitan. 2016. "Photos." Accessed 26 February, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/wayangbebermetropolitan/photos/1762365840705867>
- Wayang Beber Metropolitan, n.d. "About." Accessed 11 February, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/wayangbebermetropolitan/about/?ref=page_internal

Groups mentioned in the article

See "Selected Groups and Museums" for more information. [LINK](#)

Wayang Beber Kota (Surakarta)

Wayang Beber Mahesa Sura, Wayang Beber Panji Cemeng (Mojokerto)

Wayang Beber Metropolitan (Depok)

Wayang Beber Sakbendino (Pacitan)

Wayang Beber Tani (Pracimantoro)

Wayang Beber Welingan (Surakarta)

Wayang Sampah / WANGSA (Surakarta)

Wayang Beber Project

The Wayang Beber Project is managed by the NGO AngArt, an open platform for engaged cultural and art practices in Zagreb, Croatia.

angart.platforma@gmail.com

wayangbeberproject@gmail.com

wayangbeberproject.wordpress.com/

www.facebook.com/wayangbeberproject