

Interpolating American Method Acting in 1950s Indonesia

Evan Darwin Winet

Reconsidering Asian Theatrical Realism

Modern theatre based on Western models has become a tradition throughout Asia. Japanese *shingeki*, Korean *shinguk*, and Chinese *huaju* all have existed for over a century, and they all rival older native forms in urban popularity. Asian playwrights (such as Gao Xingjian, recipient of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature) have achieved international celebrity status, and Asian directors (such as Singaporean, Kuo Pao Kun) have worked throughout the world. Aspiring Asian actors study in native institutes informed by Western methods or travel to New York, Los Angeles, Moscow, Paris, or London to attend Western conservatories. Whatever scorn may be heaped on these practices at home and abroad as derivative, inauthentic, Eurocentric, neo-colonial, self-effacing, elite, bourgeois, logo-centric, or amateurish, they are indisputably ceasing to be marginal. Many Asian modern theatres are older than seemingly more traditional theatres (for example, Balinese *kecak* only developed in the 1920s), and many younger Asians understand modern practices better than “their own” theatres. In Indonesia, luminaries of modern theatre, such as W. S. Rendra, Nano Riantiarno, Putu Wijaya, Ratna Sarumpaet, and Butet Kertaredjasa, are not simply darlings of the elite, but also popular celebrities.

Both Western and Asian scholarship have begun to reflect the growing importance of modern theatre in Asia with Asian practitioners (such as Suzuki Tadashi and Rustom Bharucha) publishing internationally distributed books and a younger generation of scholars in the West lecturing and publishing on the subject. However, the early phases of Asian “modern” theatres, which are typically most overtly derivative and realistic, are derided on all sides. Current practitioners reject earlier theatres as any avant-garde rejects its predecessors, and Western observers enamored of Asian theatricalism scoff Asian realism. Nevertheless, realism is a crucial link in most current genealogies of performance, and realistic foundations are still implicit in Asia’s current avant-garde.

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In Indonesia, Realism not only plays a fundamental role in the development of theories of acting and actor training, but the manner of its appropriation also raises fundamental issues relating to current discourses of interculturalism and postcolonialism in the theatre. We might see the adaptation of the American Method by Indonesian theatre artists in the 1950s in relation to Patrice Pavis's "hourglass," the most celebrated current model of intercultural reception. Indonesian critical concerns over the Method and other aspects of 1950s realism suggest the opposing perils Pavis describes as the "funnel" and "mill" functions of the hourglass.¹ As mill, the hourglass pulverizes culture and lets through meaningless debris. As funnel, it does not discriminate and produces material unsuited to any particular function. The appropriative practices discussed in this article will generally seem closer to the funnel than the mill (indeed, later Indonesian critics have judged them so), but the artists involved understood their intercultural performances as invested translations that functionalized their sources at a psycho-spiritual and phenomenological level.

The development of modern Indonesian acting also relates to vital issues for postcolonial theory. It calls to mind the notion of "interpolation" as a productive form of resistant appropriation of colonial culture in contrast to Louis Althusser's coercive notion of "interpellation." In Althusser's discussion of Ideological State Apparatuses, he regards the social subject as interpellated into ideology through identification with the ideology's subject categories.² Ideology, by this reckoning, is difficult to resist as every utterance in relation to it reifies the subjectivities that ideology itself scripts. The colonized subaltern, always already scripted by colonialism, cannot speak (i.e., Derridean difference as Spivakian stalemate). Asian appropriation of Western theatre in this view merely appropriates its Asian practitioners to Western ideologies. Interpolation, in contrast, insists that the act of appropriation implies agency. The colonized subject adopts a colonial discourse, but manipulates it to his own ends from within. Homi Bhabha imagines such agency as the resistant surrogacy of postcolonial mimicry. According to Bhabha, the colonized subject who mimics colonial forms resists ideology through his own irreducible difference (a racial difference in Bhabha's analysis between the colonizer and the colonized who is "almost the same but not *white*"). In other words, the irreducible presence of (racial) difference interpolates resistance into acts of *mimesis*.³ The Indonesian actor imitates the process of American Method acting, but interpolates difference into that process, transforming emotional identification into psycho-spiritual struggle and imitation into differentiation (a phenomenological rather than a semiotic resistance, as it were). It is a process with profound implications not only for the struggle against foreign colonial culture, but also for the more insidious processes of neo-colonialism, the internal colonialism of the authoritarian postcolonial state.

A National Theatre in Search of Performance

Sandiwara amatir (which became modern Indonesian theatre) was born in the 1920s and 30s in separation from *sandiwara profesional* (a popular musical hall genre) as a movement whose overt anti-colonial sympathies restricted it to literary journals and campus lecture halls. Three years of Japanese occupation (1942-45), the subsequent five year revolution against the returning Dutch (1945-49), and Sukarno's fifteen years as first president of the postcolonial Republic (1950-65) saw the emergence of the pre-war *sandiwara* from these "closet drama" roots into a sophisticated new performance genre. As practitioners of amateur *sandiwara* paid greater attention to the craft of acting, they began to articulate notions of psycho-spiritual authenticity in performance. They turned away from the representation of mythically idealized images of anti-colonial and revolutionary heroes, in favor of their own adaptations of Western realistic dramaturgy and acting. Meanwhile, the Indonesian government slipped from a tenuous parliamentary democracy to an authoritarian regime under President Sukarno. As the Indonesian state increasingly represented "the people" through monuments and "functional groups," *sandiwara* continued the revolution in the minds and souls of actors.

Soon after the Japanese army took control of the Dutch East Indies in 1942, they set up a Censorship Board, which demanded that all theatrical productions submit a script for scrutiny. This greatly impeded professional *sandiwara*, a genre based more in skilled improvisation than libretto and, consequently, benefited scripted amateur *sandiwara*, which was appropriated to the government's most concerted efforts to shape Indonesian culture. On 8 October 1942, the Japanese *Sendenbu* established *Djawa Eiga Kosya*, an arts administration in Jakarta that included a Drama School to promote the writing of propaganda plays. These institutions were embellished in 1943 with the establishment of the Jakarta Arts Center (administered by *sandiwara* playwright, Sanusi Pane) and in January 1945 by the foundation of the Javanese Sandiwara Association, a body more explicitly devoted, in the few months of its existence, to developing a national drama.⁴ Together, these organizations promoted the writing of at least fifty-four original modern plays between 1942 and 1945, five times the total number of Indonesian plays written before the war.⁵ Many of these plays addressed Indonesian nationalism explicitly.

As the Japanese began to lose the war, the occupation government became increasingly sympathetic to the idea of training Indonesian troops and building organizational infrastructure for Indonesian resistance to the returning Dutch. In October 1943, the *Gunseikanbu* established *PETA* (*Pembela Tanah Air*, "protectors of the homeland"), a volunteer army composed entirely of Indonesian youth. It was through *PETA* and other youth organizations that the Japanese occupation government encouraged the notion of *semangat* (spirit, soul, zeal) as the sustaining

principle of the Pan-Asian struggle against Western colonialism and *pemuda* (adolescent youth) as the principal Indonesian agents of that *semangat*.

Many scholars have recognized the significance of such Japanese ideological influences in shaping the *semangat* of the Indonesian revolutionary struggle and that the *pemuda* enjoyed an ongoing moral status in the turbulent 1950s and 60s (and again in the upheavals of the mid-70s and the late 90s).⁶ Benedict Anderson has argued that this Japanese influence simply encouraged ideas already available in Javanese conceptions of adolescence. According to Anderson, young Javanese men had typically sought out masters, such as the *kyai* who administer *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), with whom they underwent physical and spiritual training in ascetic isolation from society and then returned to assume the responsibilities and pleasures of adults. However, in times of crisis, these *pemuda* might utilize the power gained from their discipline to heal social disorder.

As the meaning of the regular life-arc was undermined by war, oppression, or economic disaster, the asceticism and élan within *pesantren*-like communities took on a general significance unimaginable in times of peace. Traditional deviant aspects of *santri* existence—sexual abstinence, fraternal solidarity, selfless devotion, nomadic wandering, and dealings with the supernatural—were now seen as in harmony with the times.⁷

What's more, the personal discipline of the *santri* (the *pemuda* enrolled in the *pesantren*), his intense academic attention to the ordering of his own psyche, to the connections between his innermost self and the world, becomes reflected in the values of revolutionary society.

The sense that everything was in suspension while disorder raged in the cosmos seemed to be reflected in the suspended quality of the *pesantren*'s inner order. The society itself became a larger *pesantren*, in which the *pesantren* life-style assumed the mode of normality and necessity. For in periods of great crisis the whole society moved to free itself from the cycle of routine and regularity, and accepted the suspended soaring of the spirit which underlay the *pesantren*'s conception of itself.⁸

The notion of *semangat* as the “inner order” through which the *pemuda* radicalize all society into a *pesantren* will become apparent in descriptions of the role of the Indonesian actor as a revolutionary activist whose “inner truths” point the way to post-colonial subjectivity.

Following a bitter five-year struggle (1945-49), Indonesia won independence from the Netherlands and, following a brief interim government in Yogyakarta, established a new parliamentary republican government in Jakarta. In the first years of the new Indonesian Republic, revolutionary diplomats, intellectuals, and artists (referring to themselves as the Generation of '45) shared a commitment to using the central government to shape a new nation and national culture. However, as the decade progressed, the factious parliament lurched towards a bitter reckoning.

Although the parliament claimed to represent proportional Indonesian constituencies, no democratic election had yet verified this claim. When in April 1953 an election bill finally fixed parliamentary elections for September 1955 (to be followed by constituent assembly elections in December to draft a permanent national constitution), the nation's democratic hopes focused on this event. Parties and politicians, suddenly confronted with justifying their power through actual public support, campaigned furiously. For nearly two years, the streets of Jakarta were filled with incessant campaign rallies and demonstrations, replacing progressive policy initiatives with rhetoric and counter-rhetoric. Domestic crises from sectarian uprisings to rampant inflation, poverty and political corruption and foreign crises from the rise of the cold war to the ominous examples of military coups in other developing nations (e.g., Thailand, 1951; Egypt, 1952) all contributed to a common view that if the Election did not produce political and social stability, radical measures would be warranted.

On 29 September 1955, over 39 million Indonesians turned out to vote, representing 91.5 percent of eligible voters. Four parties (the Indonesian Nationalist Party; Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama, the two leading parties; and the Indonesian Communist Party) took close shares of 78% of the vote, while the rest was split amongst numerous minor parties. As Merle C. Ricklefs writes, the elections came as a great disappointment: "Rather than resolving political issues, the elections merely helped to draw the battle lines more precisely. The elections had produced no solutions and, thereby, represented a further step in discrediting the whole parliamentary system."⁹ In retrospect, the 1955 Election, Indonesia's only democratic election until 1998, may be seen as the beginning of a rapid slide towards President Sukarno's destruction of parliamentary democracy in 1957. The actual representation of political parties gave way to "functional groups," replacing real ideological differences with reductive identity categories: "the workers," "the farmers," "the students," etc.—all rendered by Sukarno as minor variations on the sole national protagonist: himself. Similarly, the Elections marked a turning point in the commitment of the revolutionary intelligentsia to public cultural policy. While President Sukarno increasingly superseded civic discourse on national identity with his own rhetoric, Asrul Sani and Usmar Ismail operated Indonesia's "national" theatre academy as a private institution.

During the Japanese occupation, a younger generation of *sandiwara* artists had chosen to work outside the ideological constraints of the official theatrical institutions. On 24 May 1944, a group of young nationalist professionals, including D. Djajakusuma, Surjo Sumanto, Rosihan Anwar, Abu Hanifah, and Usmar Ismail, joined together in Jakarta to form *Sandiwara Penggemar Maya* (Devotee of Illusion), the first organized theatre troupe in the history of *sandiwara amatir*. Although *Maya* disbanded in 1945, as the beginning of the revolution propelled many of the members into military and administrative roles, it began a movement to develop the performance elements of *sandiwara* with a commitment to theatre as “an instrument of culture, an expression of culture with national consciousness, humanity and divinity.”¹⁰ These emphases mark a crucial shift for *sandiwara amatir*, which had up to that point represented nationalist sentiment through heroic and mythic characters and narratives. *Sandiwara Penggemar Maya* set out to develop an Indonesian theatre representing the *humanity* of the Indonesian people, not simply the nobility of *ratu adil* (just prince) figures. Ismail went on to become a prominent filmmaker and one of the leaders in the development of *sandiwara* in the 1950s.

Turning Jakarta into a *Pesantren*

Ismail participated in a seminal 1948 Cultural Conference at Magelang, Java, where he joined in the historic first discussions of the post-colonial Indonesian cultural elite concerning the future of Indonesian national culture. To the assembled cultural nationalists, he urged that if amateur *sandiwara* was to thrive in the new republic, it must be professionalized. Scorning the imitative and improvisational style of the old *sandiwara profesional*, he called for a “systematic” approach to training and rehearsal in order to produce more carefully crafted characterizations. This would lead, in Ismail’s thinking, to a more profound artistic “consciousness”:

[E]xperience uninformed by consciousness, effort and the quest, both broad and deep, for the foundations of knowledge is like a farmer who works his field only out of inherited custom without making an effort to find out how he can achieve greater and more satisfying results. Repetition from night to night and from day to day provides the opportunity for directors and actors to become conscious in the moment of the need to study the performance and to execute the needed repairs.¹¹

Although Ismail did not directly address nationalism in this indictment, it is a perspective implicit in his critique. At this moment in Indonesian thought, nationalism was assumed as the vehicle of emancipation from colonialism. The “consciousness” lacking on the professional stage was first and foremost a consciousness of consistent and “rounded” characterization associated with realism.

However, it was also, implicitly, a national consciousness, the same kind of consciousness through which the farmer must throw off the shackles of the nineteenth-century Dutch plantation system and develop modern and personally beneficial ways of working his fields. In the immediate aftermath of colonialism, Ismail saw only two options for the patronage of modern theatre: some form of state-supported national theatre or the “commercial pit.”

In Ismail’s view, Indonesian intellectuals needed to be strong in these years in building a national theatre that would not compromise in moving beyond the craft of acting as practiced in *sandiwara profesional*. Again, the key term for Ismail is “consciousness.” The actor must achieve a more profound consciousness in relation to his role. Ismail concludes his article admonishing,

[I]t must be realized by the amateurs that amateurism is not a solid foundation for an art that may be hoped to grow strong. Our hope is that within a brief time a professional corps may be established, who with full conviction will dedicate themselves to this art, without any more need to fear the near-sighted.¹²

Essentially, Ismail hopes for a modern *pesantren* to train *pemuda* invested with the same nationalistic zeal as those currently fighting in the revolution to channel that zeal into the craft of acting. This new national theatre *pesantren* would train actors to represent a modern Indonesian identity beyond the surface play of idealized heroes, but expressive rather of individual Indonesian souls.

In 1950 and 1951, Ismail took inspiration from the Italian neo-realist filmmakers and began using untrained actors in his own films as a means to capture a performative authenticity obscured by the histrionic techniques of *sandiwara profesional*. Neo-realism appealed to Ismail as an approach stripped of essentializing conventions and, thus, seemingly well suited to the project of representing the true condition of the Indonesian people. As Salim Said puts it, “PERFINI [Ismail’s film company] . . . did its best to show the real face of Indonesia,”¹³ a face that Ismail found missing in the films of his rivals, which relied more exclusively on the box-office draw of old *sandiwara profesional* stars to turn a profit. He conducted general casting calls, attracting mainly students and other *pemuda*, and rehearsed them until he had selected his principals. In a 1963 article, Ismail laments his youthful purism:

One of my problems as a neophyte was that I wanted everything to be authentic, like the original and in the original locations. My official and unofficial advisers increasingly urged me not to deviate from the actual events. Only my opponents understood that the film was actually *make-believe* . . .¹⁴

Ismail recognized later to his chagrin that, however realistic, it was not enough for actors to “be themselves.”¹⁵ They needed to be themselves as characters. Furthermore, he found that untrained actors had no greater capacity than professionals to portray realistic characters in a simple and consistent manner, whereas they utterly lacked the skills necessary to portray characters that demanded histrionic embellishment: “After a great deal more experience in direction, I came to realize that acting less than is required, *under-acting*, is not always appropriate for all characters. Sometimes exactly what a role calls for is *over-acting*.”¹⁶ Ismail’s contemporary, Asrul Sani, reflecting on the same problem in “The Neglected Medium,” argues that neo-realism does not work in Indonesian film because the actors are not “theatrical” enough. If actors were sufficiently theatrical, they would not need to “act” (i.e., falsify) in front of the camera. Their “natural” behavior would be sufficiently compelling, sufficiently cinematic. However, he carefully resists a return to the histrionics of *sandiwara profesional*. Instead, he demands a disciplined theatricality animated by “genuine” impulses.¹⁷ In recognizing the failure of Ismail’s neo-realism, Sani admits that undisciplined behavior does not constitute theatrical authenticity. Instead, the actor must learn to create a more truthful *mimesis*, a theatrical artifice that will operate in harmony with his postcolonial identity.

Sani looked to Stanislavsky as the answer to Ismail’s failure to discover a productive middle ground between technique and spontaneity. He may have witnessed realistic actor training when he visited the Amsterdam Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1952, but he certainly encountered it in the United States—if not during a visit to Harvard in 1954, then on a more extended trip to Los Angeles in 1956 when he studied dramaturgy and cinematography at the University of Southern California.¹⁸ Indeed, the theoretical literature that formed ATNI’s canon through Sani’s translations (i.e., Boleslavsky’s *The First Six Lessons* and Stanislavsky’s American trilogy—*An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role*) indicates that he followed the American (rather than the Russian or even European) textual traditions.¹⁹ Sani was not content, however, simply to imitate. Beyond his enthusiasm for realism as an aesthetic, he was philosophically committed to individualism (in resistance to state communalism), existentialism (in resistance to state paternalism), and postcolonial cultural nationalism (in resistance to neo-colonial state nationalism). He developed a unique understanding of American Method acting as indispensable to the Indonesian national project. As head of Indonesia’s leading theatre academy, Sani built the entire training program around this understanding.

The Method allowed Sani to draw an active distinction between the old, professional star system that he and Ismail associated with *sandiwara profesional* and a new professionalism rooted in psycho-analytic acting. In the introduction to his translation of Boleslavsky, Sani writes:

An actor is the opposite of a “Star.” The forte of an actor is not his pretty face or his good build, but his *capacity* to animate and inspire a character before a spectator. We love him not for his persona, but exactly because he succeeds in taking leave of his persona to become another persona. In contrast to a “star,” an actor is capable of performing different characters. . . . While a “Star” becomes faded with age, an actor in contrast becomes more mature, and better. But he must purchase all this with concerted diligence, study, analysis and practice. They [actors] pay attention to all matters, not only everyday life, but the effects of other arts.²⁰

Sani imagines the new Indonesian *sandiwara* actor as free in a way that movie stars and old *sandiwara profesional* actors never were free. His sense of this creative freedom reflects a progressive enthusiasm characteristic of the Generation of ‘45, who believed that the new nation continued a revolutionary mandate for unprecedented, popular freedoms.

However, just as not every politician is equally capable of leading Indonesia into the future, not every acting student will produce the same results from his training. In Javanese thought, political power is often seen as *wahyu* (corporeal radiance). In acting, it is *bakat* (talent). As Ismail writes, “Talent (*Bakat*) is a gift that someone receives, possessed from birth as a gift from God that allows him to pick up an art (*prestasi*) more easily than other people.”²¹ Someone who possesses sufficient *bakat* may even outshine the trained actor, while those without *bakat* will progress very slowly. However, the actor who relies on *bakat* alone will be limited to the resources of his own personality and will not be able to create something new, such as a new national culture.²² The journey of the Indonesian actor requires not only talent, but the same *semangat* that animated the revolutionary *pemuda*. In describing the Stanislavsky system, Sani invokes a discipline that reaches deep into the actor’s soul:

Stanislavsky divides his system into two parts, first “inner technique” and second “physical technique.” Bodily movement is derived from a spiritual source. Every movement or outer expression that is performed is the result of a preparation of the soul that is long and penetrating. For a youth who wants to be an actor, it is no longer enough simply to have talent or will alone. These must be incorporated with hard work.²³

If Sani begins with an American version of Stanislavsky’s emphasis on the actor’s personal psychology, he transforms it through a psycho-physical metaphysics. Talent

is seen neither as the element that makes discipline superfluous (undermining the need for training) nor as something superfluous itself, but rather as a variety of *semangat*, a mystical potential to be channeled through discipline. Accordingly, the academy training interpolates state-of-the-art acting methods from abroad made different through patterns of self-epistemology and development consistent with the ongoing “revolution of the soul” (*revolusi jiwa*).

Sani’s active emphasis on the portrayal of Western dramatic characters has struck most critics as a submission to Western ideology (i.e., interpellation). As Sani and Ismail frequently replied, they did *not* encourage the rote imitation of Western actors. Sani insists that it is the mastery of a more authentic creative *process* that is desired. Goenawan Mohamad explains:

. . . [I]n his way of thinking, it is not a graceful gesture that makes someone into an actor, but the consistent inner aspect that makes the gesture genuine. He does not instruct us in the way that we smoke, sit and so forth on the stage. But he wants to point out that the inner aspect is how we generate a specific way of smoking, and how we go about discovering that inner aspect. What Boleslavsky presents are the first problems that must be tackled by an actor before he performs a gesture. And these first problems are valid for every actor, regardless of his nationality. Because of this, we can also make use of him for our purposes.²⁴

In Boleslavsky, as in most American Method acting theory, realistic action onstage derives from truthful psychological impulses on the part of the actor. Sani appropriates the psychology of this process as simply a “consistent inner aspect.” This subtle recasting abstracts the Method from the American fascination with individual feelings in order to interpolate it into Sani’s “revolution of the soul.” Psychological truth in service to mimetic realism becomes a personal, mystical truth in service to postcolonial subjectivity.

To put it another way, the psychology of identification with the character becomes, for Sani, an internalization of anti-colonial struggle. He writes that “for actors, the basis for truth is the struggle between their own personalities and the personalities of the characters they wish to portray.”²⁵ It is a “struggle” that will not result in complete identification. “A one hundred percent identification surely cannot be achieved, because within ourselves we keep substances (*unsur-unsur*) that reveal our identities, and which it is not possible for us to escape, no matter how much we wish it.”²⁶ The struggle for identification trains the actor to recognize his own “substance” and to be able to construct personae to achieve specific actions beyond that basis. Sani views this process of struggle with a character that is insurmountably Other, that cannot be identified with “one hundred percent,” as a

path to a creativity consisting of identification coordinated with artificial construction. He believes that a true characterization can be achieved across the spectrum of identification and construction, from the rare cases of pure identification—"a correspondence between the actor and the character, such that the two make use of the same emotion"—to combinations of identification and construction (the vast majority of cases) to pure construction when "the situation portrayed by the actor is indeed foreign."²⁷ Indonesian actors, in their inalienable "substance," continue the inner revolution in confrontation (not merely identification) with foreign roles. They must learn to know themselves through this struggle before an Indonesian version of Italian neo-realism will be possible. The actor interpolates the colonial ideology inherent in Western characterization as a means to discover his own personal soul. Indeed, it is *crucial* that the characters are foreign.

Sani's profoundly individualistic understanding of Indonesian cultural nationalism increasingly parted ways with state policy. Mohamad cites Sani in 1955 describing Indonesian nationalism as "a nationalism still in search of its foundations,"²⁸ and he was certain that these foundations lay not with any easy national chauvinism, but with a difficult individualism. In this, Mohamad credits Asrul Sani with moving beyond the essentialist rhetoric of the day and anticipating Edward Said's criticism of Orientalist essentialism a quarter century later. He cites Sani on the failures of cultural policy towards the individual, stemming from this narrow essentialism: "This is something disavowed by those who want to turn us into a group of soldiers who get spurred on from right to left. This is something that people are protected from in this variety of democracy that wants to strangle all inner nationalisms."²⁹ Sani declares that Indonesia must turn now to the "inner revolution (*revolusi jiwa*)" that "will not end."³⁰ In this stage of the revolution, in the *revolusi jiwa*, the leadership of actors will outstrip that of soldiers or politicians, because only they will achieve the requisite inner discipline through methodical training. Actors will be the new *pemuda* at the gates of the neo-colonial palace, who will lead the people to a more authentic democracy.

The Indonesian capitol itself figures centrally in the thought of the Generation of '45, especially for Sani. ASDRAFI, the theatre academy founded by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1954, seemed ill-conceived to him not only in its subordination of theatre to film, but also in its location in Yogyakarta, a center of Javanese aristocratic culture.³¹ Both Sani and Ismail were West Sumatrans (Sani hailed from Rao, Ismail from Bukittinggi) who had re-"naturalized" themselves as sons of the nation by embracing Jakarta. As Sani put it in an "intimate interview" in 1968, "Jakarta is our mother,"³² the mother of a "second birth" into a post-colonial culture transcending all sub-national ethnic affiliations (especially affiliations to the *Javanese*, who tend through numbers and influence to dominate Indonesian politics and culture). In Sani's view, this frontier of the soul, this

pesantren city to which he invites the disciplined actor, offers rebirth into freedom from all the feudal and colonial hierarchies, all the “characters” of old. The national metropole is the stage for *revolusi jiwa*.

The Indonesian National Theatre Academy

When in 1948 Usmar Ismail called for the establishment of “a new communal house” in the service of Indonesian theatre, he expressed the aspirations of a generation expectant that the new Republican state would catalyze an authentic postcolonial culture. By 1953, the general disillusionment of the artistic intelligentsia towards state cultural policy was also reflected in thinking about *sandiwara*. Sani, in a series of magazine articles written between June and September 1953, progressed from a general dismay towards the insufficiency of Ministry funding for theatre groups to a conviction that a private League of Dramatic Arts would be the most dynamic catalyst for a modern Indonesian theatre culture.³³ In the early fifties, the Ministry had established numerous academies of traditional arts, music, and dance as ministerial sub-divisions. By the mid-fifties, Sani and Ismail both argued that a national theatre academy must be private, or at least claim a greater degree of sovereignty from the state bureaucracy.

Three weeks before the General Election, on 10 September 1955, Sani, Ismail, and D. Djajakusuma established the Akademi Teater Nasional Indonesia privately through a special arrangement with Jakarta’s mayor. For the preceding half decade, the many cultural initiatives of mayors and ministers alike had all but ignored theatre, and following the 1955 Election, cultural policy became increasingly centralized in the hands of President Sukarno and the communist cultural council (LEKRA). LEKRA imposed restrictions on the importation of foreign media, which exerted a short-term benefit on the production of local theatre (much as anti-Western censorship under the Japanese Occupation had done). However, in the long run LEKRA’s commitment to communist arts made non-aligned nationalist culture impossible. ATNI’s production activities dissipated after 1962, and their academic program closed soon after the 1963 “Cultural Manifesto” affair in which Generation of ’45 artists asserting their freedom from ideology were denounced and blacklisted by LEKRA. ATNI was created at the eye of a gathering storm at one of the last moments in which it was possible.

Despite these pressures, ATNI left a far greater legacy on Indonesian theatre than *Sandiwara Peggemar Maya* or ASDRAFI. Given that ATNI had no dedicated performance space of its own and that its formal mandate privileged training above production, it is astounding that out of a total of 123 stage productions accounted for by Jakob Sumardjo in Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta from 1958 to 1963, ATNI produced twenty-three, or 18.7 percent (although out of this total, fifty-eight productions [forty-six percent] were of foreign plays in translation, whereas all but five of ATNI’s productions [seventy-eight percent] were of foreign plays).³⁴ If

one were to include the independent productions of ATNI students, such as Steve Liem (Teguh Karya), Wahyu Sihombing, and Pramana Padmadarmaya, ATNI's production history would encompass the majority of modern theatrical performances in Jakarta during this period. ATNI's productions took place in a wide range of venues from the *aula* of the University of Indonesia (a modest improvement on the lecture halls utilized by the pre-war student *sandiwara* groups) to the Jakarta Arthouse, the most state-of-the-art Western stage in Southeast Asia during that time. ATNI also sent productions to all the national theatre festivals where they were seen by theatre artists from throughout the country.³⁵ It was undoubtedly the example of ATNI's productions at these festivals that inspired the spread of similar Method-based "acting courses" to Suyatna Anirun's Theatre Studyclub in Bandung and W. S. Rendra's Youth Theatre in Yogyakarta. Anirun, Rendra, and ATNI's own graduate, Teguh Karya, each had a great influence on the subsequent generation. Indeed, through these three artists, most of the current practitioners of modern theatre in Indonesia could trace a genealogy back to ATNI.³⁶

The 1958 Production of Sartre's *No Exit*

ATNI's numerous productions of the canonical works of Western realism (i.e., Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov) might seem the best examples of Sani's dramaturgy. However, the renowned 1958 production of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* provides a more telling example of how ATNI interpolated the Method in its productions. Whereas in most psychological realism, environment progressively reveals identity, in Sartre's play, identities struggle in an explicitly superfluous environment. Sartre's characters, much like Sani's revolutionary souls, are figures who must forge a new identity beyond history, in a room strewn with the ridiculous debris of cultural history (like the oversized chunks of culture passed indiscriminately through Pavis's "funnel"). Sartre depicts figures who must give birth to themselves to survive. The topography of his stage is psychological, but both psychology and ontology are subordinated to these subjective epistemologies. As Sani repeatedly affirmed in his own writings, the world created by European domination is the given stage for all contemporary inner revolutions, but it is up to us to perform those revolutions. The deceased characters, Garcin, Inez, and Estelle, all reject the hideous "Second Empire furnishings" of their shared prison cell as having nothing to do with themselves, but individually recognize that this will nevertheless be the background for their post-mortem performances. When Indonesian actors portray this rejection and *anagnorisis*, the situation takes on a clear postcolonial significance, i.e., the hideous colonial infrastructure is the stage on which the postcolonial revolution must take place.³⁷ The characters famously conclude that "Hell is other people," and the play concludes with mad laughter. I have seen this play performed by Indonesian actors who take great delight in that final moment. This exuberant terror, this tragicomic suffering/laughter, might be seen as the cathartic rejection

of that militaristic notion of postcolonial Indonesia as a corps of the like-minded. The Indonesian actors portraying these defiantly individualistic Western characters confront dangerous images of the self, measuring their own souls against cultural values that they have learned to see as foreign.

Sani's production of his own translation of the play at the Aula of the Jakarta campus of the University of Indonesia on 19 and 20 June 1958 elicited critical acclaim that confirmed the results of ATNI's approach to actor training in the eyes of the Jakarta theatre world. Critic A. Toekidjo exulted that the production "truly brought new understanding and new life," which could provide a model for an entirely new kind of stage production.³⁸ Toekidjo praised the complexity of the play itself and the completeness of its execution. Above all, he praised the performance of Soekarno M. Noor (one of ATNI's most celebrated graduates and one of Indonesia's leading film actors) as Garcin as achieving the express goals of ATNI's training: "He mastered the characterization thoroughly, with amazing speech and movements. As a result he precisely embodied the expressive energy of the narrative as presented on the stage." Toekidjo generally finds all the acting exemplary in its nuanced, realistic characterization in service to the narrative of the play.³⁹ As Sani might understand it, the success of the performance, its energy, comes from the exuberant *semangat* of Noor's struggle against the Hell of Other People, Westerners, and Indonesians.

Ever since this premiere, *No Exit* has served as a staple of Indonesian modern theatre and as great a proving ground for actors as Shakespeare or the Greeks. As Eka Sitorus, director of the theatre school at the Jakarta Arts Institute, told me in 1999, the character of Inez has always attracted Indonesian actresses. There are precious few opportunities for actresses to play assertive roles on the Indonesian stage, making exceptions such as *No Exit* particularly striking. Since many young Indonesian women are uncomfortable portraying the character's sexual aggression, they work with available local archetypes of Jakarta prostitutes and other women who flaunt dominant sexual moralities. In these cases, the process of identification leads Indonesian actresses into intra-cultural struggles with marginalized Indonesian identities.

Sani vs. Sukarno

Astonishingly, this first "Golden Age" of Indonesian modern theatre coincided with the apotheosis of Sukarnoism. While ATNI students sought identification with characters informed by post-War French existentialism, Sukarno built heroic monuments after the model of Soviet socialist realism. While Sani defended the individual against the inner Orientalism of post-colonial nationalistic essentialism, Sukarno invented *Marhaen*-ism (his distinctive brand of populism based on an archetypic peasant figure), *gotong royong* (the spirit of "mutual cooperation" that Sukarno identified at the heart of Indonesian national character), and the political

system of “functional groups” (glossing the complexity of Indonesian civil society through a reduced spectrum of recognized interest groups). While ATNI looked to the West in conducting a *revolusi jiwa*, Sukarno stoked the fires of the ongoing revolution against *nekolim* (neo-colonial imperialism, a bugbear Sukarno recognized in everyone but himself). Such diverse nationalisms, which had contributed to a lively, if politically chaotic, debate in the early fifties, had become irreconcilable in the climate of Guided Democracy. And so in 1963, ATNI disbanded, re-opening briefly after the 1965-66 massacres until replaced by the Jakarta Arts Institute (IKJ), a division of the publically funded Jakarta Arts Center (PKJ) finally built in 1968 at the initiative of Jakarta’s Governor, Ali Sadikin.

Placing such emphasis on foreign plays, ATNI certainly failed to catalyze the development of original Indonesian drama. None of the prominent dramatists of the time (with the possible exception of Motinggo Boesje) learned their craft there. Likewise, New Order theatre critics have complained that ATNI was too enslaved to Western *mise-en-scène* and left it to such innovators as Anirun and Rendra to “Indonesianize” *sandiwara* by incorporating elements of various ethnic, traditional, performance practices (with which they were usually not previously familiar). Writing in 1990 on the development of modern theatre after ATNI, Sani warned contemporary practitioners against transferring the process of self-discovery from the actor to the director:

. . . [I]n a director’s theatre the actor is no more than a part of a design built from movements, sound, light and schematics. The result is that in the new theatre, the demands for technical proficiency for professional actors has become less significant. . . . It is increasingly apparent that these theatres are not addressing the issues that need to be addressed, issues that might be dealt with by a realistic theatre.⁴⁰

Sani does not simply accuse the new directors of making bad theatre, but of retreating from democracy, indulging in character epistemologies reminiscent of Sukarnoism and *sandiwara profesional*. A theatre of directors, a theatre which instrumentalizes the actors in the name of spectacle, cannot, in Sani’s estimation, address “the issues that need to be addressed, issues that might be dealt with by a realistic theatre”: the most intimate representation of Indonesian identity through the struggle of the actor.

Continuing the Revolution of the Soul

Although Sani’s Method invokes both Western and Javanese paradigms of mind and body, his insistence on struggle emphatically rejects dialectical synthesis, leaving the confrontation between irreconcilable elements unreconciled. The “inner

self” described by Sani navigates between the Western psychological self and the interiority (*kebatinan*) that Javanese mysticism is primarily concerned with bringing into alignment with the cosmos. Sani’s language for talking about the actor’s discipline is immediately legible within a Javanese context, and yet it moves beyond that context just as it moves beyond American Method psychology. Sani’s Method insists on the irreducibility of struggle, whereas both American Method identification and Javanese mysticism imply synthesis. An “authentic” performance in this new idiom, that is a performance in which the actor expresses his own personality in relation to a well-crafted and consistent character image, will always have an aspect of unresolved complexity that indicates the complexity of postcolonial life.

This actorly discipline, sometimes explicitly, often implicitly, leads Indonesian modern theatre towards a re-conceptualization of the national project away from the representation of essentialized images of national identity. Rather, the development of actor training in the 1950s rested on the assumption that the *revolusi jiwa* brings national identity into productive conflict with individual souls. Whereas Sukarno’s government monumentalized Indonesian identity, modern theatre used American dramaturgy to urge individual Indonesians to struggle for the nation within themselves.

Notes

1. Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992) 4-20. I would like to express my thanks to the Henry Luce Foundation, which supported me through a Southeast Asian Studies Dissertation Fellowship, as I conducted the research for this article in Indonesia and Australia in 1999.

2. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1998) 153-64.

3. Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 85-92.

4. Jakob Sumardjo, *Perkembangan Teater Modern dan Sastra Indonesia* (Bandung: Citra Aditya Bakti, 1992) 132, 136-37.

5. Sumardjo, *Perkembangan* 370-74; A. E. Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967) 110-14; Aiko Kurasawa, “Propaganda Media on Java Under the Japanese,” *Indonesia* 44 (1987): 109-111.

6. See, for example, David Wehl, *The Birth of Indonesia* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1948); Hubertus J. van Mook, *The Stakes of Democracy in Southeast Asia*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1950); George McTurnan Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1952).

7. Benedict R. O’G Anderson and Cornell University, Modern Indonesia Project, *Java in a Time of Revolution; Occupation and Resistance, 1944-1946* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1972) 10.

8. Anderson and Cornell University, Modern Indonesia Project 10.

9. M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) 251.
10. Sumardjo, *Perkembangan* 134. All citations of Sumardjo, Sani, Ismail, Mohamad, and Toekidji appearing in this article have been translated from Bahasa Indonesia.
11. Usmar Ismail, "Meletakkan Dasar-Dasar Baru," *Mimbar Indonesia* 2:7 (1948), *Usmar Ismail Mengupas Film* (Jakarta: Penerbit Sinar Harapan, 1983) 41.
12. Ismail, "Meletakkan" 43.
13. Salim Said, *Shadows on the Silver Screen: A Social History of Indonesian Film* (Jakarta: Lontar Foundation, 1991) 54.
14. Usmar Ismail, "Film Saya Yang Pertama," *Intisari* 1:1 (1963) *Usmar Ismail Mengupas Film* (Jakarta: Penerbit Sinar Harapan, 1983) 168.
15. 168.
16. 168.
17. Asrul Sani, "Medium yang disia-siakan," *Surat-surat Kepercayaan* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1997) 211-16.
18. Ajip Rosidi, "Riwayat Hidup Singkat Asrul Sani," *Asrul Sani 70 Tahun* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1997) xi-xxi.
19. Richard Boleslavsky (1889-1937) was one of the first of Stanislavsky's actors to introduce the Method to the United States in the 1920s. His *Acting, the First Six Lessons* (1933) is a canonical text of American (not Russian or European) psychological realism. The trilogy, which has provided the only writings by Stanislavsky available in the United States until quite recently, were not published in that form in the Soviet Union. These books have been criticized recently as placing undue emphasis on Stanislavsky's psychological experiments without acknowledging the equal importance he placed on physical training. See Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus, Russian Theatre Archive*, vol. 17 (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998). A curriculum based primarily on Boleslavsky and the trilogy almost certainly derived from exposure to American training.
20. Asrul Sani, Introduction to *Enam Peladjaran bagi Tjalon Aktor*, by Richard Boleslavsky (Jakarta: Penerbit Jaya Sakti, 1960) 8.
21. Usmar Ismail, "Beberapa Segi Dalam Memenuhi Hasrat Pada Peminat Seni Peran," *Buku Pekan Seni Drama D. C. I. Jaya, Th. 1968* (Djakarta: Panitia Pekan Senidrama DCI Djaja, 1968) 8-11.
22. 8-11.
23. Sani, Introduction 6.
24. 5-6.
25. 9.
26. 13-14.
27. 13-14.
28. Goenawan Mohamad, "Lirik, Laut, Lupa: Asrul Sani dan Lain-Lain, Circa 1950," *Asrul Sani 70 Tahun* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1997) 71.
29. 56.
30. 44.
31. Sani, "Medium yang Disia-siakan" 211-16.

32. Asrul Sani, "Ibu Kami Adalah Djakarta: Sebuah Wawantjara Akrab," *Budaya Jaya* 1:1-3 (1968): 19-21, 107-111, 229-32. Goenawan Mohamad traces Asrul Sani's passion for Jakarta as a place of great cultural possibility back to the first years of Independence: "Jakarta, writes Asrul Sani in an editorial for the magazine *Zenith* in June 1951, is a place 'where all values are as the breaking of waves,' in which one might discover 'an arena for a new Indonesian culture and life'" (Mohamad, "Lirik, Laut, Lupa" 41).

33. Asrul Sani, "Badan Dana Yang Dibutuhkan," *Siasat* (1953), *Surat-surat Kepercayaan* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1997) 207-10.

34. ATNI's five Indonesian plays were: *Malam Jahanam* by Motinggo Boesje, *Titik-titik Hitam* by Nasjah Djamin, *Domba-domba Revolusi* by B. Sularto, *Mutiara Dari Nusa Laut* by Usmar Ismail, and *Pagar Kawat Berduri* by Trisnoyuwono. The foreign plays included works by Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Sartre, Lorca, Gogol, and Molière (Sumardjo, *Perkembangan* 151-52).

35. Major theatre festivals included Dramatic Arts Festivals at Menado and Medan in 1956, the series of "Student Arts Weeks" (*Pekan Kesenian Mahasiswa*) held in Yogya in 1958, Jakarta in 1960, Denpasar (Bali) in 1962, and Bandung in 1964, and the massive Meeting for the Formation of a National Theatre Federation (*Musyawarah Pembentukan Federasi Teater SeIndonesia*) in Yogya in 1962. This last event was attended by thirty-one theatre groups from throughout Indonesia, including appearance by forty-five famous theatre luminaries, and resulted in the short-lived, but groundbreaking, Council for the Development of Indonesian National Theatre (*Badan Pembina Teater Nasional Indonesia*, BPTNI).

36. My dissertation, "Facing Indonesia: Nation, Character and Actor in Jakarta's Modern Theatre" (Stanford U, 2001), and the book I am currently writing from this research treat these genealogies in greater detail. Anirun and Rendra both incorporated native performance vocabularies and techniques into *sandiwara* to a far greater extent than ATNI, heralding the development of the genre under Suharto in the following decades.

37. Jean-Paul Sartre himself recognized the postcolonial condition as the greatest problem for social philosophy after the Holocaust. Although he may not have begun to recognize this as early as 1944 when *Huis Clos* was first staged (at the time, the occupation of France was more pressing), he actively supported the development of postcolonial theory in the 1950s, particularly through his promotion of Frantz Fanon and the publication of North African literature.

38. A. Toekidjo, "Drama Pintu Tertutup Di Djakarta," *Budaya* 7:7 (1958): 291-92.

39. 291-92.

40. Sani, "45 Tahun Menyertai Turun-naik Kehidupan Kebudayaan Indonesia di Jakarta," *Surat-surat Kepercayaan* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1997) 555-84. Sani originally delivered this meditation as a lecture in 1990, but it did not appear in print until 1997.