

6 February 2006

Dear LUTSF

### **Dances of the Malang area, East Java**

I enclose my report on the project which the LUTSF enabled me to undertake in East Java, Indonesia. With the help of the LUTSF, I travelled to East Java, Indonesia, and spent 3 weeks at the Padepokan Seni Mangun Dharma (PSMD), near the city of Malang, from 12 November to 2 December 2006. The aim of the trip was to refresh and extend my knowledge of the traditional dance repertoire of the Malang area, to document dances which are nowadays less frequently performed and to incorporate my learning into my performance and teaching work.

The main achievements of the trip were:

- I met my objectives of developing my technique and widening my repertoire, and have deepened my feel for and understanding of East Javanese dance music.
- I learned two new dances: the mask solo Gunungsari and Grebeg, a martial style dance.
- I acquired new choreographic material and ideas that I can use in work with young people.
- I revisited and deepened my understanding of three dances: topeng Klana, topeng Bapang and Beskalan, and have a rich repertoire to draw on. In particular, I worked with one of the last of the older generation of dances on topeng Klana.
- I updated my notes on the dances Bapang, Klana and Beskalan and made notes on Gunungsari.
- I brought back film of some of the dances I worked on and made written notes, giving me resources from which I can continue to learn and which I can use in teaching others.
- I played Bapang and Klana in a full *wayang topeng* (mask dance drama) performance.

The mask dance drama performance was without doubt the highlight of the trip, and enabled me to put all I have learned into context. Personally, it was also a unique opportunity to connect up the dance and drama aspects of my experience as a performer, having initially come from a theatre background and moved into dance later. I worked with a dance company of young performers and a professional gamelan ensemble of musicians and had a special insight into the way such a performance is put together. By sponsoring this performance myself, I felt I was able to put something back into the local community; performing artists in Indonesia have gone through hard times in recent years (as have many others), and I was happy to be able to help make the performance happen.

As a UK-based dancer, I would like to encourage others to explore the rich diversity and vibrancy of East Javanese performing arts – in particular I would like to see more UK gamelan musicians studying East Javanese dance drumming! Javanese dance, like any other, works best with live music. Although I have worked extensively in this country with music groups performing the Central Javanese repertoire, opportunities to do the same with East Javanese dance are very limited.

I would recommend a visit to the PSMD to anyone interested in studying any aspect of Javanese performing arts. They draw on rich local traditions, play an important role in encouraging young performers and have a history of welcoming students from all parts of the world.

I plan to offer some of the film I took during my trip, once edited, to the collection at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and I have already shared music recordings with an ethnomusicology PhD student there. The PSMD are sending me a vcd of the *wayang topeng* performance I took part in and I hope to be able to forward on a copy to the LUTSF. I plan to write an article for *Seleh Notes*, the UK's gamelan newsletter, about my trip, and to write a more specialised article for a dance publication.

Finally, I would like to thank the LUTSF and everyone at the PSMD for making this project possible.

Yours sincerely

Gillian Roberts

### **Report for Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund**

My LUTSF scholarship enabled me to return to East Java, Indonesia, for the first time since 1997. I spent three weeks there, from 12 November to 2 December 2005, at the Padepokan Seni Mangun Dharma (PSMD, or Mangun Dharma Arts Centre) in Tumpang.

The aims of my visit were:

- to develop my knowledge and understanding of East Javanese mask dance
- to document dances and if possible record performances by older dancers (the remaining few of their generation) in the area around Malang, East Java
- to gain fresh choreographic ideas and inspiration for work with young people.

### **Background**

I specialise in Javanese and Balinese dance. In 1993-94 I spent five months at the PSMD, studying traditional dances of the Malang area, and returned for a shorter visit in 1997. I used what I learned on these visits to develop my own practice as a performer. East Javanese dance, and particularly mask dance, has become a key aspect of my repertoire, especially in my work for and with young people.

Mask dance theatre (*wayang topeng*) can be found in every region of Java, in other parts of Indonesia and elsewhere in South East Asia. Some people say that *wayang topeng* originated in Malang. Javanese *wayang topeng* is based on the Panji cycle of stories, versions of which occur throughout South East Asia. These stories tell episodes from the life of the prince Panji Asmarabangun. As in *wayang kulit* (shadow play), the *wayang topeng* is narrated by a *dhalang*, who also cues the musicians and leads the performance; in East Java the *dhalang* speaks for all the characters, except for a couple of comics (who wear half masks). As in the rest of Java, stories are passed on orally from one generation to another and the *dhalang* improvises each show within a specific set of structural conventions.

M Soleh Adi Pramono is the artistic director of the PSMD (website: [www.mangun-dharma.com](http://www.mangun-dharma.com)) and has been my principal teacher there. Descended from a family of *dhalangs*, Pak Soleh trained in Malang and Yogyakarta and founded the PSMD in 1989; he runs it in partnership with his wife Karen Elizabeth Sekararum, who, as an American, has made a unique and very successful career as a dancer and singer in Java. The PSMD is based in the village of Tulus Ayu, just outside Tumpang (a small town about fifteen miles from the city of Malang), in the foothills of the Bromo-Tengger mountains. Drawing on the rich cultural traditions of the area, the centre aims to maintain and develop the traditional arts of East Java; it puts on performances and events, runs a programme of dance and gamelan for young people and offers facilities to international research students.

I had discussed the aims of my visit with Soleh and Karen and we agreed during my three-week stay at PSMD I would:

- refresh and develop my knowledge of two mask dances, topeng Klana and topeng Bapang, and of the Malang dance Beskalan
- learn topeng Gunungsari, another mask dance
- learn Grebeg Sabrang ('sending out of the troops'), to give me some new material for work young people
- attend and take part in performances at the PSMD and elsewhere.

My main teachers would be Pak Soleh (for Klana, Bapang and Beskalan) and his son Supriono (for Gunungsari), supported by Buari, one of the PSMD's teachers, and by Pak Soleh's wife Karen. On previous visits I had also had the privilege of working with senior dancers from the village of Glagahdowo – Pak Rasimun, Pak Gimun and Mak Riati – all of whom were then in their 70s, and still performing. Mak Riati passed away in 1996. I had wanted very much to return and learn topeng Gunungsari from Pak Rasimun while he was still able to teach, but after I made my LUTSF application, I heard that he had passed away. However, he had passed his version of the dance on to Supriono and I would be able to learn it from him.

I had arranged to sponsor a performance of a *wayang topeng* (mask dance drama). *Wayang topeng* used to be a very popular artform; the Malang area has its own rich tradition, with individual groups (usually based in particular villages) having their own variations. However, a full mask dance drama is now very expensive to put on; you need 12-15 musicians and up to 20 dancers, not to mention the *dhalang*, who runs the whole show. Performances nowadays usually last only two or three hours (traditionally they might have lasted till dawn), but even this is increasingly rare, and there are far fewer *topeng* companies working than there were even 20 years ago. The PSMD is one of a small number of centres dedicated to perpetuating *wayang topeng* traditions and passing them on to the next generation.

The last time I visited PSMD I co-sponsored a performance by Sri Margo Utomo, a mask dance troupe based in Pak Rasimun's village, which was supported by the PSMD, and I assumed I would be able to do something similar this time. With the passing of Pak Rasimun, the troupe is no longer together in the same way. The PSMD activity's now focus strongly on providing a training for young people, so Pak Soleh told me I should sponsor a performance by the PSMD's young people's dance groups. I would also be taking part in it, playing the role of Klana, a bold and lecherous king. On previous visits I had already performed Klana's solo dance, using the version from the village of Jabung that Pak Soleh had made his own, and I had also studied the version

from the village of Glagahdowo with Pak Gimun. This time, I was going to play all of Klana's scenes; in the version we performed, this meant dancing the solo, two dances with Klana's soldiers, and a fight duet, plus acting in dialogue scenes.

My timetable varied each day, depending on what else was happening at the centre. I would generally have a private lesson in the morning; in the afternoons, I either had another lesson or practiced alone or with others. Sometimes I worked in the evenings as well. Most weekday afternoons and every Sunday morning there was class for the young people's groups, so I sometimes joined in with them to work. On Wednesday and Sunday afternoons we rehearsed with the PSMD gamelan musicians.

### **Working on the dances**

As with all Javanese dances, a *sampur* (dance scarf sash) is used in the following dances to amplify and draw attention to certain aspects of the movement. The way it is worn depends on the character. A set of bells is also worn around the right ankle and used to emphasise the rhythms of the dance.

When I first came to the PSMD in 1994, I was often faced with different versions of a particular dance, depending on who was teaching. Initially I found it quite confusing (even more so when older dancers tended to vary what they did each time, anyway); with Klana, for instance, I worked on versions from Pak Soleh and Pak Gimun – in the end I decided to opt in the main for Pak Soleh's version. I felt a little guilty about this, as Pak Gimun was very supportive and generous with his time, and I didn't feel I was doing him justice. With further experience, however, I am now able to take something from both versions and synthesise them into my own; this is how dance is passed on in Java – you start by following your teacher, but eventually you develop your own variations and personal flavour.

### **Topeng Klana**

On my second full day at PSMD, to my delight, Pak Gimun arrived first thing in the morning. Now 81 and looking considerably frailer than when I last saw him in 1997, he was nevertheless very keen to take me through *topeng Klana*. We spent a fantastic morning working on it together, with Pak Soleh and Pak Gimun comparing and discussing alternatives as we went along. Pak Gimun became more and more sprightly as we worked and was clearly enjoying dancing again.

Most of my first week was taken up with working on Klana. I got lots of detail from Pak Soleh that I had not been ready for on previous visits; I also worked on improving my stance and on being able to hear the drum patterns accurately (which in Javanese dance always correspond to the dancer's movements). An important test of whether you really know a dance is whether you can practise it with the drum accompaniment alone.

In the story we would be performing, Klana is up against the hero Gunungsari, who was to be played by Christina Sunardi, a Fullbright scholar who had been studying gamelan and dance at the PSMD for a couple of months. With the exception of a couple of comic characters, dancers in *wayang topeng* do not speak; the dialogue and narration is improvised by the *dhalang* in Javanese, the regional language, and the dancers must act and gesture appropriately in dialogue scenes. For Christina and me this presented a challenge; we both spoke Indonesian (the national language), but little Javanese, so we would have to rely very much on non-verbal cues, such as changes in the *dhalang's* tone of voice, to know when our characters were speaking. At the end of my first week, we had a first run-through of our battle duet in masks and marked through the final section of the story with the rest of the performers.

### **Topeng Bapang**

Bapang is a popular mask dance character and is unique to the Malang tradition. Jaunty, full of life and sporting a distinctively long nose, he provides a comic interlude in the action of the drama, with aspects of his movements recalling a variety of animals and birds. Since my first study trip Bapang has become a favourite of mine, and a key element in the work I do with children; he provides a very accessible and engaging way in to Javanese dance. However, eight years is a long time away; as with Klana, there were details which I needed to work on with more precision and I also needed to improve my ear for the drum patterns. I did some initial practice session with Karen and her daughter, Condro, and then spent a couple of days working on details before going through the dance with Pak Kusnadi playing the drum for it.

### **Topeng Gunungsari**

On previous visits I had enjoyed watching Pak Rasimun, a very fine dancer, performing this dance. I particularly wanted to learn it because Gunungsari is an *alus* (refined) character and a contrast to the coarser characters of Klana and Bapang. I was very happy that Supriono was able to pass on Pak Rasimun's version to me. Because of his other commitments we only had 3 days to work on it, but this was enough time for me to learn the dance and enable me to continue working on it back home. The dance contains some distinctive moves particular to the character; this includes, for example, a section where the dancer imitates a peacock taking a dust bath or pecking on the ground; kneeling down with one knee raised, the arms are raised and stretched out to the rear, the torso is extended forward and the dancer swoops up and down, leading with the head. At the same time, the dancer turns in a circle on the spot, shifting the lower knee and the foot folded underneath the body to do so.

### **Beskalan**

Beskalan is said to mean 'beginning dance'; some people say that all other female style dances in East Java originated from it, but it is also performed as the opening dance of an event. The dance depicts Proboretna, a female warrior considered the flower of all Malang women warriors, whose beauty and skill cause men to fight over her.

I started learning Beskalan in 1994 with Mak Riati, who was then in her seventies. Pak Soleh had worked with her to recover the dance, which she had not performed for over 30 years. Mak Riati's version was 30 minutes long, and included two sung interludes. It was very complex, and like most seasoned dancers, Mak Riati rarely did it the same way twice. I was very new to East Javanese dance then, so I found it quite a challenge. I ended up learning a shorter version, from Pak Rasimun, which was more suitable for performing in the UK. I did quite a lot of work on Beskalan on my previous trip; this time I spent a few sessions working on details of technique with Pak Soleh and learning an expanded version which includes a *kiprahan* section, very similar to that found in Central Javanese *gandrung* male dances such as Gambiranom and Klana.

### **Grebeg Sabrang**

One of my aims was to learn a non-mask dance that I could use in workshops for young people. I began learning the *grebeg sabrang* the day after I arrived, starting with a version danced by the younger children's group. This dance (which means 'the sending out of the troops') was used for the first appearance of soldiers in the performance we did. Buari, another of the PSMD teachers, taught me, along with Pak Soleh. I also

learned another similar dance for the *wayang topeng*, the *prajuritan sabrang*, which is used when Klana dances with his own soldiers. Buari's and Soleh's versions differed slightly but it was useful to see variations and how they could fit - as with any other, the dance can be made shorter or longer as necessary.

### **Performing**

Two days after I arrived, I danced Bapang for a *ludrug* performance (a sort of variety show, with singers, dancers, comic acts and a soap opera style play). The plan was that I would dance it to the prerecorded music with which I was familiar; I hadn't danced it with live music since 1994 (few UK gamelan drummers know the East Javanese repertoire) and there had been no time to rehearse with the gamelan to tune my ear back in (each gamelan is unique and there are many possible variations in the musical fabric). In the event, there was a problem with the sound system shortly before I went on, so I had to dance with the live gamelan after all! With Pak Soleh on the drum, I got through it somehow. Pak Soleh reflected afterwards that probably the odds had been stacked against me; given that the village where the show took place was called Gunungsari, he thought that Gunungsari's spirit may have hindered Bapang's from entering. I thought that was a very graceful way of explaining it...

Our *wayang topeng* performance took place at the end of my second week and was a highlight of my trip. We had rehearsals with the musicians (the PSMD's professional adult ensemble) on Wednesday and Sunday afternoons, but had never done a full run-through at any one time - whether because time didn't allow or, more likely, because it wasn't felt necessary. A central improvised comic scene, played by Buari, for instance, was never done in rehearsal at all. The show was therefore a bit of a voyage of discovery, as I realised I had no idea how long certain sections would last. I danced Bapang early on in the show; Pak Kusnadi, the drummer and leader of the musicians, had lots of fun driving the pace, and I felt that we were really playing (in both senses of the word) together and responding to each other's energy. Bapang is accompanied by a servant, who tries to imitate him heightening the comedy already in the piece. This is also an example of how, traditionally, an apprentice dancer would learn, by playing the servant of the role he is studying. I had a dangerously quick change of masks and headdresses from Bapang to Klana.

Klana demands lots of energy and performing with live music really feeds that energy. I gave the audience a good laugh in one of the dialogue scenes when I tried to 'speak' out of turn - it was obvious to them that it wasn't my character speaking, but not to me as a non-Javanese speaker, and this was a bit that had never cropped up in rehearsal. The fight scenes with the opposing army and my battle duet with Christina as Gunungsari went off well, and I got a good laugh on my final exit (Klana beats a hasty retreat, beaten by the hero), thanks to a great visual gag which Pak Soleh helped me work on in secret.

### **Seeing other performances**

I had originally hoped to make my trip in August 2005, around the time of Independence Day celebrations, when there are always lots of performances, but had to change my plans due to work commitments. Fortunately by going out in mid-November, I caught the last week of performances put on to celebrate Idul Fitri, the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. I was thus able to see: two *ludrug* performances (which included male *remo* dances, female style *remo* danced by a transvestite group and some comic mask dances); a *remo* performance by leading women dancers; dancing horses (*jaran joged*)

and a hobby horse trance dance (*jaran kepong*) as part of a village festival (not related to Idul Fitri) up in the mountains.

### Outcomes

- I achieved my objectives of developing my technique and widening my repertoire and have deepened my feel for and understanding of the music.
- Working with Supriono on Gunungsari not only gave me the dance I wanted, but means that I can now look with better informed understanding at a film I already have of Pak Rasimun performing the same dance and continue to study it.
- I learned *Grebeg*, a martial dance which has given me new material and ideas I can adapt for work with young people.
- I took part in a full-length *wayang topeng* performance in Javanese and got a special insight into the organic way in which such shows develop.
- I feel I have now made topeng Klana and topeng Bapang my own. I was able to revise and extend what I know of Beskalan and now have a rich repertoire to draw on.
- I brought back film of some of the dances I worked on, so have resources from which I can continue to learn and which I can use in teaching others.
- I updated my notes on the dances Bapang, Klana and Beskalan and made notes on Gunungsari.

Not everything went according to plan, of course, but I know from previous experience that you have to be prepared to go with what happens; sometimes the best things emerge as a result of that. My first two weeks were very much focused on preparation for the performance; at the beginning I did not realise quite how much this would involve (I had originally imagined I would just do one solo...), and there always seemed to be some new thing to learn (right up to the day of the show). I would have liked to have spent more time working on Gunungsari, but the work I did on Bapang and Klana was just as valuable in developing me as a dancer, and performing in the show was a very special experience.

It was not possible to do as much filming as I would have liked, but I got enough footage for my own purposes and also bought some *remo* vcds. I plan to offer some of the film I shot to the collection at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and have shared music recordings with an ethnomusicology PhD student there, who I am trying to encourage to study East Javanese drumming. The PSMD have said they will send me a dvd of the *wayang topeng* performance I took part in. In return I am sending them a copy of film shot of Pak Rasimun rehearsing Gunungsari some years ago, which they do not have already and would like for their archive. I plan to write an article for *Seleh Notes*, the UK's gamelan newsletter, about my trip and to write a more specialised article for a dance publication.

The Padepokan Seni Mangun Dharma is one of a few centres that play a crucial role in sustaining Malang-style performing arts, and in developing the dancers of the future. I feel privileged to have been able to take part in the life of the centre and hope they continue to flourish and get the recognition they deserve. My particular thanks are due to Pak Soleh, Pak Gimun, Pak Kusnadi, Karen Elizabeth Sekararum, Supriono, Buari, Winarto Ekram, Condro Lukitosari, Kyan Andaru, Christina Sunardi and everyone else who made my stay so enjoyable and rewarding.

[photos](#)



Padepokan Seni Mangun Dharma - PSMD



GR dancing topeng Klana - PSMD

Mak Riati dancing Baskalan - PSMD

GR with Pak Soleh - Gill Roberts



GR dancing topeng Bapang - Gill Roberts

