Topeng: Balinese Dance Drama
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TOPENG:

BALINESE DANCE DRAMA

Ronald Jenkins

Introduction

In 1938, Antonin Artaud described the dancers of Bali as “animated hieroglyphs.” Today their otherworldly gyrations continue to conjure up images of ancient mystery. Balinese performance overwhelms the spectator with a whirlwind of color, sound, and dance. But even more intriguing than this immediate assault on the senses is the richly textured tapestry of meanings beneath the surface spectacle.

These layers of meaning are not easily unraveled. Balinese drama is not as pure or well documented as other classical oriental traditions like Noh and Kathakali. Most of the techniques and much of the mythology was transplanted from India and juxtaposed over the indigenous Balinese arts. From these mixed roots several different dance/theatre forms emerged. Each of these forms developed its individual character over centuries of gradual change in response to shifts in popular taste and societal needs, an evolutionary process.
which continues to this day.

Because of its dynamic and heterogeneous nature Balinese performances are difficult to categorize. The varying forms run the gamut from holy ritual to secular buffoonery, with no strict definitions delineating one from another. But there is an underlying unity. Running through them all is the implicit acknowledgement of a profound affinity between the spiritual and mundane worlds. Even the most outrageous popular melodramas contain elements of the divine temple dramas from which they were derived. And even the most sacred rituals possess elements of crowd-pleasing theatricality. This thread that links the ridiculous to the sublime is at the core of Balinese theatre.

The dance/drama which best reflects this special relationship between Balinese clowns and gods is the masked spectacle called Topeng. Performed regularly as part of village temple festivals, Topeng is a vortex of intersecting artistic energies. Music, dance, mime, and song are used to provide a dramatic forum for the mingling of history, religion, and topical events. Topeng achieves this complex synthesis by blending solemn ritual and carnival merriment into accessible popular entertainment.

**Performance**

Topeng performances usually take place on the first evening of the three to eleven day temple festivals held frequently in every Balinese village. Each Topeng is preceded by ritual offerings to the temple gods. The elaborately robed dancers sit cross-legged before a basket of masks. The painted eyes stare up at them as they dip frangapani petals into a flask of holy water. One by one they sprinkle the precious liquid first onto the wooden faces they will wear in performance, and then over themselves.

A few feet away a temple priest chants benedictions as the head of a baby chicken is snapped off from its neck. The blood is poured onto the dusty ground around the threshold of the performing space. This act of sanctification signals that the performance is about to begin.

The outdoor temple courtyard is packed with several hundred villagers sitting, squatting, or standing in a semicircle. The colors of their fine sarongs blend richly with the rainbow assortment of foods and cloths adorning the stone carved temple shrines. The audience has been waiting patiently for hours. They pass the time by praying, chewing beetle nut, nursing babies, or chatting with friends. A gamelan orchestra fills the night air with the rhythmic clanging of gongs and cymbals. Dozens of children peek behind batik curtains to catch glimpses of the dancers and their mysterious basket of masks.
Suddenly a dancer shakes the curtains from behind. Conversation stops. The gamelan shifts rhythms. Slowly the curtains part and the lamplight flashes on the mother-of-pearl teeth of a century old mask. The Topeng performance has begun.

Dancing and singing behind each of their masks in turn, the dancers use movement and voice to weave epic tales of adventure, comedy, and romance. Each time a dancer emerges from behind the curtain a new character is added to the drama. Quicksilver strength marks the angular choreography of the prime minister of war. A trembling old man makes weary limbed efforts to dance with dignity despite the fleas that infest his clothes. In a dance of eloquent stillness, the king powerfully expresses grace and command with only the slightest movements of his fingers and neck.

Each performer plays several roles. They shift effortlessly from mask to mask, their bodies automatically assuming the positions dictated by each set of carved features. Masters at giving the illusion of life to a countenance of wood, they make their masks breathe, sweat, and cry.

As always the performance is improvised. The performers respond to changes in the music (also improvised) and to the moods of the crowd. In turn, the musicians and audience respond to their dialogues as they shift from ancient Hindu texts to topical dirty jokes. History and religion are merged with buffoonery and love stories to create a hypnotic theatre of the ridiculous and the sublime. The entire village is linked to their ancestors and gods in a whirl of color, sound, and emotion.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE DANCE
When the last mask disappears behind the curtain, the spell of the drama is not broken by applause. The dancers are gone but the courtyard is still filled with vivid echoes of the characters they etched in imagination and space. Slowly families make their way home in the moonlight. A stray dog nibbles at a pile of rice cake offerings. No one chases him away. The gods have already taken the essence. The dancers unravel their sweat soaked costumes and walk off towards the river for a long cool bath.

To an uninitiated spectator Topeng appears simply as a satisfying form of popular entertainment. The costumes, music, songs, and jokes provide a sumptuous feast for the spirit and senses. The performance formula is similar to that of the commedia dell'arte. A group of actors begin with well known scenarios and improvise freely within certain limits of stylization. The masked characters are stock types that can be easily transported from one story to another. The outdoor performance setting lends itself to good natured audience-performer interaction.

But the deeper beauty of Topeng is the way it harnesses the energy of popular entertainment into a multi-leveled event that simultaneously fulfills many needs in a complex community. History is brought to life. Religious concepts are presented in the context of modern situations. Children are exposed to tales of Balinese heroes and religious proverbs from the mouths of clowns. Family and village problems are brought out into the open where they can be healthily acknowledged, laughed at, and examined from fresh perspectives. All this helps to foster a sense of solidarity, not only between the individuals and their community, but also between the community and its ancestors and gods who appear in the dramas alongside the common characters and clowns.

The many faceted functions of Topeng can be best understood by examining the dual nature of its primary elements. These elements are the masks, the attitude and skills of the performers, and the fluidly evolving quality of the subject matter. Each in its own fashion reflects the intimate merger of the comic and the divine which is at the heart of Topeng's unique appeal.

Masks

One of the major keys to Topeng's significance is its use of masks. The epic tales and classic dance styles of Topeng can be traced back to the fifteenth century migration of Hindu kings from neighboring Java. The tradition of masked ritual drama, however, goes back even further in Balinese history. Masks represented ancestors and gods in
primitive rituals as far back as the eighth century and probably earlier. When the Hindu kings of Majapahit arrived in Bali the forms of the masks were changed to conform with those of the new rulers, but the Balinese belief in the magic power associated with masks remained unchanged.

For the Balinese masks are a medium through which village society can link itself to the sacred strength of its ancestors and gods. In many villages certain masks must be danced at least once a year as a source of spiritual renewal for the community. Sacred masks like these are often brought to the homes of sick people to hasten their recovery.

By virtue of its masks Topeng assumes a significance close to that of these healing rituals. Its position is artfully balanced between sacred ritual and profane entertainment. Some Topengs may be performed specifically to exorcise a village of sickness or to bless a particular ricefield with fertility. These special Topengs may be performed as if only the gods were watching with few mortal spectators in attendance. Other Topengs are obviously geared more directly towards pleasing a crowd of responsive villagers. They may even be performed outside the temple for such mundane reasons as a birthday or graduation party.

The line distinguishing these forms of Topeng is never clear. Neither is the line between Topeng and other dramas. On one side there is the Chalon Arong performance which uses some of the same masks as Topeng, but is considered more sacred because of its story line of black magic. On the other side there are newer forms like Drama Gong which have performance formulas very similar to those of Topeng, but which are performed without masks. These entertainments are very popular, but cannot be held inside the temples like Topeng, and are rarely laced with serious morals. Clearly the use of magically potent masks in entertainment oriented Topeng gives its words and actions an added dimension of seriousness in the public's eye.

The use of masks also links Topeng to two of the most profound symbols in Balinese religion. Rangda and Barong, complex manifestations of the struggle between good and evil, are represented by masks which are preserved in special temple sanctuaries. These demon-like masks are notably different from the more human caricatures of Topeng, but the reverence commanded by Rangda and Barong influences the Balinese attitude towards Topeng masks. Topeng dancers, for instance, also keep their masks in special sanctuaries of their family temples, and honor the masks with offerings similar to those presented to Rangda and Barong.

The link between the comic and the divine is accentuated in Topeng by the style and inter-relationships of the masks. The characters of kings and gods wear full masks. The clowns wear half
SIDHA KARYA: MOST SACRED OF ALL TOPENG MASKS—BLEND OF MADMAN, GOD, AND KING

MASK CARICATURENING A DUTCH SOLDIER

CLOWN SERVANT

OLD HAG MASK—OFTEN WORN BY MEN IN PARODIES OF WOMEN DANCERS
masks that leave their mouths free to translate the gestures of the
higher characters and inject verbal comedy of their own. These
clowns are the focal points of Topeng performances. They provide
the liaison between the mundane world of the audience and the
spiritual world of the drama's protagonists.

The word Topeng is derived from the Balinese root “tup” which
means “to cover.” Topeng refers to masks in general as well as to
specific masked performances. When covering his face with a mask
the Balinese performer feels that he is giving himself over to the
spirit of the mask. Conventional divisions between kings and com-
moners, gods and clowns, no longer hold in the fantastical realm
inhabited by masks. Even the holy masks of Rangda and Barong
often find themselves engaging in slapstick frolics. To the Balinese
mind the laughter evoked by this style of improvisation renders a
drama more sacred. Laughter brings happiness. Happiness is a form
of beauty. And beauty is pleasing to the gods. Submerging the
human ego behind a mask frees the performer from the restrictions
of logic and facilitates uninhibited interplay between the ridiculous
and the sublime.

Performers

A revealing perspective into Topeng's many facets can be gained
by examining the attitudes of the dancers towards their perfor-
mance. Despite their high level of artistic excellence, most Topeng
performers are not professionals. They earn their living as rice far-
mers, shopkeepers, or artisans. To them dancing in the temple
dramas is an honor and provides an opportunity to contribute to the
well being of their community.

Balinese village life is profoundly social. Privacy is almost non-
existent. Rice fields are owned and farmed collectively. The chief
source of pleasure is gossiping with friends in small neighborhood
gatherings. At the heart of this community oriented structure is a
strong religious faith that emphasizes the necessity of cooperation
and sharing.

In this context the temple dancer is imbued with a deep sense of
responsibility both to the gods and to his community. The perfor-
mance is viewed both as an offering to the gods from the community
and as a gift to the community made possible by the gods. Thus the
dancer becomes a medium of exchange. His talents as an individual
are de-emphasized and his receptiveness to impulses from his masks
and his public are considered the key to his success. This is why
Topeng performances are never rehearsed. Each drama is impro-
vised and open to spontaneous influence from several sources. “I
don't think about what I will do until I come out from behind the
curtain,” explained one dancer. “Then it is easier to feel what the
people want and what the mask wants to give them."

This attitude towards performance is in harmony with the Balinese emphasis on communal rather than individual creation. It is manifested in its extremes in certain forms of trance dramas in which young girls who have never studied dancing perform complicated movement patterns after having been hypnotized into a state of unity with the gods.

Topeng dancers have been known to fall into trances like these during their performances, but mostly they depend on rigorous training to prepare them properly for the execution of their roles in the temple dramas. Rehearsals of particular stories are unusual, but practice in general techniques is extensive and begins at an early age.
Topeng dancers are expected to study voice, dance, acting, song, and mime. Because Topeng involves sensitive interplay between performers and musicians, most dancers learn how to play all the instruments in the gamelan orchestra which accompanies Topeng. These skills are usually handed down from generation to generation on a one-to-one basis. Older performers select pupils as young as six years old as apprentices.

Once a high level of technical proficiency has been achieved in these various art forms, the Topeng dancer turns his attention to his other responsibilities as a temple performer. He is expected to study ancient religious and historic texts inscribed on palm leaf manuscripts called “lontars.” Familiarity with these writings allows him to weave relevant quotes and moral teachings into his improvised dialogues. Combining his knowledge of religious and historical tradition with a consciously cultivated awareness of topical village problems, a good Topeng performer improvises dramatic situations that speak directly to the audience in terms of their historic and spiritual past.

This mélange of past and present is employed most effectively by the clowns. Usually they are the ones who have studied the religious teachings most deeply. Many of them are as well versed as the priests. Dancers who play the comic masks make a point of listening to local gossip whenever performing in a village other than their own. During the drama their special position as intermediary between the worlds of gods, men, and kings allows them the liberty to satirize whomever they wish. And like Shakespeare’s court fools, they are immune to retribution for their lampooning ways.

For instance, in a village once known for its industrious artisans, a Topeng clown discovered that the workers were becoming lazy. Playing the part of a servant to a prince, he was nowhere to be found when his master called. After a few minutes of confusion the audience heard a raspy voice singing merrily behind their backs. In full costume, the clown was drinking wine at a roadside stand fifty feet away from the performing space where he was supposed to be dancing. Frequenting these roadside “warungs” is a popular lazy man’s pastime in Bali, and the audience laughed to hear themselves echoed in the clown’s defiant cry to his master: “I’ll have plenty of time to work tomorrow. But now you must leave me some peace to drink my wine.” He then began singing a series of bawdy couplets that were drunken parodies of easily recognizable radio jingles. Topeng clowns have virtually unlimited license to liven up the temple dramas with comic antics. Often they steal the show so effectively that the major characters that open the play never reappear on stage.

Balinese clowns are conscious of their special roles as comic caretakers of the public good. “Our intention is deeper than just
making people laugh. We try to dance stories that show a little about the difference between right and wrong. Sometimes we draw a character who is an example of a good way to be. But it is better to dance a character who is an example of a bad way to be. The other characters react to him in a way that makes people laugh. And after they laugh at something bad, maybe they will not be so quick to do that thing themselves. "It is especially the older clowns who recognize the effectiveness of the ridiculous as a means of achieving the sublime. "If there is too much seriousness, the people will grow weary and forget the lessons we teach. But if we make them laugh, the happiness locks the lessons strong in their memories."

The intangible quality which makes a Topeng dancer effective as both an entertainer and a communicator of higher truths is known to the Balinese as "Taksu" (literally "the place that receives the light"). A dancer descended from generations of Topeng masters explains, "Taksu is the power that enables a dancer to give life to his masks. If a dancer has no Taksu, we say that he is just moving the wood, like a carpenter. Taksu is difficult to achieve. You cannot buy it at the marketplace. You must meditate on your masks, treat them with respect, and make proper offerings to the spirits they represent. The offerings can be very simple. A flower and a stick would be enough if the intention behind the gesture was pure.

"My father used to spend many days in meditation with his masks. He kept them in a special place in the house and sometimes slept with them next to his pillow. Today it is sad that young dancers have little time for this. They put their masks in a box and use the box to sit on. This is not the way to find Taksu."

**Responsiveness of Topeng to Continuing Evolution**

As hinted in the above quote, modern western ideas are beginning to influence young Balinese dancers and their art. Dancers are beginning to perform for money which tourists gladly pay to see the dramas at a convenient time and place. Surprisingly, this influence is not as destructive as it might be. The nature of Balinese genius is the ability to assimilate new ideas without destroying the integrity of the original. This has been going on since the fifteenth century when the Majapahit Hindu empire migrated from Java to Bali. The Balinese did not resist the new religious ideas. They simply extracted what they considered to be the most beautiful of the Hindu symbols and myths, and incorporated them into the old Balinese religion. The resulting synthesis of beliefs created a complex theological system which remains unique in all the world.

In the arts a similar transmutation occurred. The classic styles of Hindu dance were adopted into the temple ceremonies, but they were remolded to suit Balinese tastes. Musical tempos were quick-
ened. Specific codified finger mudras were eliminated. Their communicative function was usurped by the clowns who translated the meanings of the noble dancers' gestures in their own raucous style. Gradually the clowns became the dominant figures in the Topeng dance/dramas (other Hindu forms remained more static), significantly altering the original classic style.

This eclectic revolution of Balinese arts continues to this day. The invasion of Western ideas is more overwhelming than was the invasion of the Majapahit kings, but so far the Balinese have responded with remarkable resilience. Lightbulbs adorn the stone carvings in many village temples. There is no electricity in most of these temples, but the villagers have decided that the shape of the bulb is beautiful and therefore renders the temple more holy. The western symbol is thus twisted to suit Balinese needs, losing its original function and assuming a character that is peculiarly Balinese. To the western eye the lightbulb in the temple seems degenerate, but to the Balinese it represents an honest and ingenious attempt to cope with forces of cultural transition.

Of all Balinese temple dances, Topeng demonstrates most clearly this ability to shift in response to external change. Its semi-improvised form lends itself to a continuing and fluid evolution. The
key to this dynamism is the flexibility of the Topeng clowns. Making good use of their improvisational skills and intimacy with the public, they mold each Topeng performance into a topical socio-political event.

An example is the Topeng clowns’ frequent satirization of events that reflect village family structure. In the family temple of a well known adulterer, a Topeng clown improvised a scene about a buffoon who beat his wife and murdered his lover. The audience roared in recognition of these bawdy scenes which eventually eclipsed the main story line of the drama. Interest was heightened even further by the fact that some of the dancers behind the masks were the individuals involved in the real-life adulterous trio.

A more serious use of Topeng satire took place during the Japanese occupation of World War II and the subsequent war for independence from the Dutch. Topeng clowns ridiculed the enemy forces and helped instill their audiences with the spirit of independence. Their performances were so effective that many well known Topeng dancers were forbidden to perform or imprisoned by the Dutch and Japanese authorities.

Another powerful but rarely performed Topeng drama tells the story of the 1906 massacre of a Balinese royal procession by Dutch soldiers. Knowing they could not resist the rifles of the invaders the Balinese King and court refused to surrender. Instead they dressed themselves in their most beautiful ceremonial robes, armed themselves only with sacred knives, and marched knowingly to their death at the hands of the Dutch rifle corps. None of them survived, but their legend is honored in Topeng drama. The serene dignity of the noblemen’s masks as they advance towards death contrasts strongly with the grotesque smiles and giant noses of the masks that caricature the Dutch. Bumbling over each other like tropical Keystone kops, the Dutch soldiers conquer the flesh, but are no match for the grace of the Balinese souls that dance beyond the bullets to a paradise after death. It is a haunting drama in which the double-edged mystery of the Balinese clown is put to powerful use.

In a more current vein, Topeng clowns use their comedy to comment on the alienation between the villages and national government policies formulated by the Javanese in the capital city of Jakarta. Family planning, election politics, and transmigration programs are among the topics regularly satirized. On the ever-increasing construction of asphalt roads a Topeng clown quips, “I am smarter than all the big bosses in Jakarta. They need big machines and fancy stones to make a road. All I need is dirt from the earth.”

Often Topeng’s historical plots are modernized by the inclusion of topical themes. In a scene lampooning the growing trend towards capitalism in community-oriented village life, a Topeng troupe once portrayed King Gaja Mada bargaining with a boatsman for cheap passage across the Bali straits. This would be somewhat analogous to
having George Washington haggle over rowboat rentals on the shores of the Delaware. "We made it up as we went along," said one of the clowns. "We were showing the people how foolish they can be sometimes. Seeing a respected hero like Gaja Mada put into a situation like that makes them think of their own lives and how things have changed since Gaja Mada's time."

One of the most popular characters in Topeng is also a result of changing times. Mixed in with the basket full of masks depicting kings and warriors of Balinese history is an oddly shaped mask painted the color of a white man's skin. It consists entirely of a long pointy nose. This is the Balinese characterization of a tourist, often

.injected into the Topeng dramas for comic relief. It speaks in incomprehensible gibberish, asks stupid questions, and tries to take pictures of everything it sees. "The people in the villages love to see this new kind of clown," laughs one dancer. "It is a character they all know very well."

Conclusion

The presence of clowns, light bulbs, and long-nosed tourists in the temple dramas does not diminish the seriousness of the overall event. To the contrary, the Balinese believe that laughter, like beauty, makes a temple event more pleasing to the gods. This attitude is woven into the fabric of everyday village life where much energy is devoted to the creation of beauty and laughter. Every
morning women fashion elaborate configurations of flowers and rice cakes which serve as both gifts to the gods and ornamentation for the family temples. In daily interactions, like buying food at the market, it is considered impolite not to make an effort to joke and smile. A visitor to a Balinese home can be sure of receiving beautifully made cakes and hours of cheerful conversation.

So it is natural for the Balinese to unite beauty and laughter in their temple dramas. Every Topeng dancer places fresh flowers behind the ears of his masks when he dances. Even the ugliest buffoon characters are adorned with this simple symbol of spiritual beauty. These flowers are used in all forms of Balinese prayer and temple offerings. In Topeng, the dancer is offering himself and his art. The frangapani petals and the sounds of laughter are the gifts he gives to his gods and his public.

A bamboo Topeng basket is filled with masks that represent the spectrum of human nature from simple-minded slapstick to divine perfection. This diversity reflects Topeng’s acceptance of all aspects of the human condition as valid for dramatic celebration. Past and present, gods and clowns, love and war, common men and kings, topical gossip and ancient mysteries are masterfully merged into a captivating theatre that is at once ridiculous and sublime. A high level of artistic technique is combined with the broad appeal of popular comedy to create theatre that both envelops and transcends the everyday world of its public.

Naturally a drama form like Balinese Topeng could never be transported to the West as anything more than a cultural curiosity. Western directors like Artaud who visit Bali to search for inspiration have the difficult task of accounting for the cultural differences between their own audiences and those of the Balinese. Still, in terms of creating popular theatre capable of serving as a constructive societal force, the West has much to learn from the ragpatch magic theatre of Balinese gods and clowns.

All photographs by Ronald Jenkins.