

*The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Malaysia: A Study of Wayang Kulit with Performance Scripts and Puppet Designs* by Beth Osnes, Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland & Company, 2010, 204 pp.

*The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Malaysia: A Study of Wayang Kulit with Performance Scripts and Puppet Designs* is the culmination of over 20 years of work by writer and theatre Professor Beth Osnes. She first traveled to Malaysia as a graduate student in search of a topic for her doctoral dissertation at the University of Colorado during the summer of 1989. What she found was an art form that was inspirational and beautiful, grounded in a culture that was equally so. In contrast to the more well-known Javanese style of *wayang kulit*, the Malaysian form is a bit more rough and more vital. Osnes explains: "Prepare yourselves for a bumpier ride complete with dips into raucous humor and ascents to moments of sublime beauty" (p. 7).

During her travels in Malaysia, Osnes was introduced to Dalang Hamzah Awang Amat of Kelantan, one of the foremost puppeteers of the Malaysian form of *wayang kulit* until his death in 2001. The American researcher and the Malaysian puppeteer formed a friendship that would last a lifetime. After Dalang Hamzah agreed to take on Osnes as his student, she procured a Fulbright Fellowship that allowed her to spend a full year in Malaysia beginning in the summer of 1991. During her fellowship year, Osnes traveled every day from Kota Bharu to Dalang Hamzah's home in Tumpat to receive instruction as a performer of *wayang kulit*. This book is the result of this unlikely friendship, forged so many years ago.

The preface to the book details the circumstances under which Osnes came to write her book, including a description of how she chose the topic for her dissertation research, and how she went about creating relationships with the people that would inform her research. The introduction begins the book with a second-person narrative that invites the reader into the action as if they were in Malaysia experiencing a performance first-hand. Chapter one lays the foundation for understanding *wayang kulit*, including: a brief history of the form, a description of how the puppets are made and used in performance, an explanation of the role of the *dalang* (puppet master), a brief treatment of spiritual concerns, and an explanation of the differences between the Malaysian form and shadow puppetry in other parts of Asia. Chapter two gives the reader further insight into the form by introducing the stories upon which *wayang kulit* performances are based. These stories, including a brief synopsis of the *Cerita Mahraja Wana*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the Tales of *Panji*. Chapter three further explores the performance conventions, including: the physical setting, religious setting (which includes a layering effect of Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam), characters, use of ritual, humor, and music. This chapter also includes more details about the spiritual training and life of the *dalang*, a case study about

Dalang Hassan Daud of Kota Baru, and an overview of some of the attempts that are being made to preserve the *wayang kulit* in Malaysia. Chapter four provides the reader with five actual *wayang kulit* scripts. Each script includes a description of the setup, cast of characters (puppets), dialogue in English, and practical advice for performing the scripts. Chapter five provides the reader with ideas about how to teach Malaysian shadow puppet theatre, describing simple ways to create a shadow puppet theatre, including: how to create puppets from cardstock, how to create a puppet screen out of muslin and how to hang a light bulb as a light source.

There are several aspects that differentiate this book from other academic books that have been published about shadow puppets. First, Osnes' work emphasises the dual approach of scholar and practitioner. She maintains that *wayang kulit* is a form that "is best appreciated experientially" (p. 1). Several aspects of this book invite the reader to create their own opportunities to experience shadow puppets first hand. For example, the appendix to the book features designs for puppets that can be used to create actual puppets to be used to perform scripts included in the book. Thus, the book serves as a template for experiences that can be enjoyed by a variety of age ranges. Osnes encourages teachers of young children to use the book to create their own shadow puppet performances as a way to engage their students. Middle and high school students might use shadow puppet techniques to perform their school plays. Adults might explore the book for deeper insights into lessons about culture, philosophy, history and spirituality that are included in the book.

Another aspect of Osnes' approach that differs from many attempts to study Asian Art forms by Western scholars, is her attention to the ethical dilemmas associated with such a study. Many Western anthropologists of the past have been criticised for exoticizing and romanticising Asian cultures by drawing attention to differences between other cultures and their own. In contrast, Osnes' book never descends into the traps of orientalism. At the forefront of Osnes' scholarship is a constant awareness that the art form that she is writing about is rooted within a specific cultural context. In fact, Osnes uses the stories of her own experiences in Malaysia as a way to paint a vivid picture of the people that she encountered, and the *wayang kulit* form as a way to gain insight into the culture of Malaysia.

Perhaps the most touching moment in the book comes in the Afterword, when Osnes reflects on the fact that *wayang kulit* is an art form that is in a process of decline. Her teacher Dalang Hamzah Awang Amat passed away on 1 January 2001. With Dalang Hamzah, and with the passing of many of his highly respected contemporary Dalang's, vital knowledge about this art form is also passing away. One of the greatest ironies is that while interest in the practice of

*wayang kulit* has been decreasing in Malaysia, interest in the art form has been increasing abroad, particularly within American academic settings. Although this ironic twist is wrought with ethical problematics, the reality is that the future of this art form may depend on what Osnes calls "the friendship between academia and the performing arts" (p. 158). Osnes closes the book with a prophetic statement from her teacher's biography: "He often expressed his view that in future one would have to visit America, in particular, to study Malaysian *wayang kulit*, musing that while the *wayang kulit* would one day decline, and perhaps even disappear in the land of its origin, it would possibly still be active in academic institutions in the West" (p. 168).

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