



"Bed Check" scene portrays the importance of love and companionship in the healing process.

# 'SHACKLED SPIRITS' A tour-de-force

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The stage turned pitch black and immediately flickers of light materialized on the dark background. The "fireflies" fluttered and danced across the stage.

It was a stunning opening scene created by a simple method — people in dark costumes manipulating electric torches — conceived by a collection of creative minds.

It was a scene that instantly captivated the audience and wooed them into silence, which was no easy feat since more than half of the 800-strong Ksirarnawa stage audience were Balinese — trained not to stay silent, or still, for that matter, while watching performing art. Chats, whispers and, often, loud comments directed at the actors are acceptable in Balinese traditional performance.

The captivating opening scene of *Shackled Spirits*, a collaborative project performed by students of Massachusetts College of the Holy Cross and the Singapadu Makaradh-waja Troupe, only lasted for a few minutes. Yet, it was enough to send a message to the audience that the oncoming scenes were not only about substance, but style.

Except for a few exceptions, such as the presentations of Teater Satu, Teater Gandrik, Teater Garasi, and Teater Koma, modern plays with contemporary topics in Indonesia, and Bali in particular, have rarely succeeded in gaining ground among the masses. It is still the luxurious intellectual exercise of the elites and one of the main reasons behind this phenomenon is the modern drama proponents' failure in presenting their messages in forms and esthetics that the masses could either understand or enjoy.

Despite its very modern subject-matter and non-linear narrative, *Shackled Spirits* did not end in that failure. The perfor-



The young writer character (Daniel Goodman) provides a narrative bridge that ties the seemingly isolated scenes and characters together.

mance, which was held on June 28 in conjunction with the 35<sup>th</sup> Bali Arts Festival, succeeded to be both provocative and entertaining, presenting elements that appealed to the elites and masses.

Scores of the island's art heavyweights populated the front row seats alongside students and curious onlookers, no one left until the actors and directors took their final bow. It was an obvious sign that the 90 minutes play was attractive enough to glue them to their seats.

"This is an excellent play that Balinese dramatists should pay a close attention to. *Shackled Spirits* managed to combine the

fascinating elements from the contemporary Balinese, Acehnese and western cultures into a coherent visual language to narrate its rather serious and grim topic. We could learn a lot from this play," Balinese dramatist Mas Ruscitadewi said.

Combining was probably not the most accurate word. The subtlety, sensitivity and intellect displayed by the play's three directors — Lynn Kremer, I Made Bandem and Swasthi Widjaja Bandem — resulted in a rich visual and dramatic tapestry, in which each and every borrowed element was beautifully woven into a single, unified fabric.

JP/Agung Parameswara

JP/Lukman SB



The masks are inspired by beasts and creatures from the fantasy world in Wianta's paintings.

Courtiers bring King George III strapped with a straitjacket to bed.

In this tapestry, the presence of Acehnese' *Saman* dance did not feel like unnecessary addition. Instead, the dynamic dance with its ever-increasing tempo played a critical role in defining the mood of the lunch time scene at a mental hospital. The performers had in their hands a metal lunch bowl and they passed the bowl to the person sitting next to them throughout the dance.

The extreme precision of timing demanded and the ability of the western actors to fulfill that demand in a perfect way and prompted the audience to give their loudest adoration.

*Shackled Spirits* was conceived by College of the Holy Cross' professor Kremer and Wianta, one of only a few Balinese painters who has earned global recognition. In the past, Wianta, who is also a prolific poet, had delved into themes deemed controversial, including violence and terrorism.

The play focused on people with mental illness, a theme that is quite relevant in Bali, a world-famous resort island where adequate treatment for that illness is either unavailable or too costly to be affordable. The Suryani Institute for Mental Health, the only NGO working in this field, estimated that there are around 9,000 people with severe mental illness in Bali. As many as 350 of them are shackled or confined by their own families. Most these people are living in impoverished villages in north and east Bali.

Mental illness is a topic rarely touched by local artists. *Shackled Spirits* was the first major theatre performance on that topic staged in Bali.

The main storyline featured various available therapies for mental illness — from occupational therapy, black magic and trance, social, art, medication, meditation, music to physical therapy — punctuated by fashion runway scenes depicting historical characters with mental illness, such as Charles VI of France, Ludwig II of Bavaria and George III of England. A narrator, in the form of a young writer sitting before his old typewriter in the corner of the stage, provided a bridge for the non-linear narrative.

The presence of those royalties and the narrator's proclamation that "Mohammed, Moses, Abraham, Joan of Arc [...] heard the voice of God. Socrates, William Blake, John Milton [...] Carl Jung heard voices," forced us to examine the definition and nature of mental illness.

Two separate narratives, one provided by a veteran of World War II and another by a veteran of the war in Iraq, established a sense of continuity as helping the audience comprehend the other, unacknowledged mental illness: the insanity that prompted civilized nations to tear each



Bamboo ladders, the principal visual element and prop in the play, are transformed into many things during the performance, from a cage and a door, into a machine that presses concrete bricks in this scene on occupational therapy.



*Shackled Spirits* is rich in pleasing, aesthetically-staged scenes that pamper the audience.

other apart and its devastating toll it inflicted on the soldiers who fought the wars.

A substructure on "Robbing the Dollhouse", in which two girls of different ages gradually emptied a dollhouse while reciting poems, lent the whole play a poetic and cryptic beauty.

*Shackled Spirits* was a play with a grim theme and a complicated structure. It was also a pleasing performance with aesthetically-staged choreography, inspiring dialogue, powerful music — the *kotekan* Balinese interlocking melodies in music

therapy scene — and superb actors.

Most importantly, it was also a compelling argument on the futility of any uniformed, rigidly enforced therapy that fails to identify and acknowledge the patient as a unique human being.

"We want to show examples of people who need help but can't express their needs. We have to reach them and help," Kremer said.

She had succeeded in doing so as well as in staging the best performance in this year's Bali Arts Festival.

## Performance as a collaborative practice

*Shackled Spirits* is a collaborative art nurtured years in the minds of its creators.

In 2009, I Made Bandem, one of the brightest and most influential maestros in contemporary Bali, introduced Made Wianta and his wife, Swasthi Widjaja to Lynn Kremer from the theater department of the College of the Holy Cross.

Kremer admired Wianta's work particularly his large-scale installations and they began to explore a new project. The first idea was a theatrical production about Tenganan, the ancient Bali Aga (mountainous Bali) village in Karangasem, and its unique Gringsing cloth.

Wianta had mocked up concepts for the stage and props when Kremer decided that "there was simply no drama in Tenganan" and aborted the topic.

Mental illness then popped up and the two travelled to the island's sole state-funded mental hospital in Bangli. They taped the daily life of the patients and interact with them.

"I saw their hands jutting out between the iron bars and the scene transported me back to Wianta's painting I saw years before. The painting of a bamboo ladder," she said of what would become the principal visual element and stage props in *Shackled Spirits*.

For Wianta, mental illness was a far more interesting subject than a unique cloth.

"Insanity is universal and the number of mental hospitals across the world keeps increasing," said the painter cum poet, often praised as well as derided for his treatment over controversial subjects.

Wianta was responsible for the visual elements of the play. His works were translated into masks and puppets by College of the Holy Cross' Bobbie-Jean Powell and into costume by Kurt S. Hultgren. Sound and video were crafted by Cooper Gardner and lights by Barbara Craig.

Made Bandem and Swasthi Widjaja brought the traditional theater and musical elements to the play. Kremer herself embraced Balinese performing arts enthusiastically.

"I really love Indonesian dance and music. It changed how I went about making a theatrical piece," she explained.

*Shackled Spirits* is a collaborative piece, in which everybody, even the participating theater students, contributed. It is expected to trigger another production, this time in the field of mental illness' treatment.

"For some people medication works, for some it disturbs. For some, meditation and yoga helps. What we need to do know is find a solution unique to each person, not a solution based on one size fits all approach," she stressed.

— I WAYAN JUNIARTA