

Proceedings of the 4th Symposium
**THE ICTM STUDY GROUP
 ON PERFORMING ARTS
 OF SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Symposium Themes
 Performing Arts and the Religious Impulse in Southeast Asia
 Endangered Performing Arts—Maintenance and Sustainability Efforts
 New Research

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SAHITA DANCE THEATRE PERFORMANCE IN SATIRICAL MENTAL SPACE

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Introduction

Sahita, the subject of this research, is a performing arts group that refers to themselves as a dance theatre group. *Sahita* consists of four females between the ages of 44-55 years old: Thing Thong, born 1961; Atik, born 1963; Inong, born 1964; and Cempluk, born 1972. *Sahita* was established in 2001 in Surakarta, a municipality in the Central Java Province located at the centre of Java island, Indonesia. Before *Sahita* was started, each member of the group was highly influenced by Gapit Theater, a Surakarta-based theatre group well-known for play productions in Javanese led by Bambang Widoyo SP. The influence of Gapit Theater on *Sahita* is understandable considering that members of *Sahita* were once members of Gapit Theater. A group led by strong charismatic leader, more often than not, highly depends on his/her leadership. Therefore, in 1996 when the leader of Gapit Theater Bambang SP passed away, the theatre group deteriorated. Inong and friends were anxious because they missed the creative process with Gapit Theater. Five years following the passing of the leader of Gapita, *Sahita* was established. Hence, it can be said that Gapit was the mother of *Sahita* and that their work coloured *Sahita*'s works.

Background, Questions, Concepts and Methods

Female artists in the performing arts are often identified with having a youthful body and are beautiful, sexy, with light skin, because these criteria are considered "marketable". This idea is questioned by Inong, one of the members of *Sahita*. Inong asks the question: What about older woman on stage in the performing arts? Inong described that in the past, only beautiful and attractive young dancers were admired. However, Inong further questioned whether this description is a compliment or can be considered a kind of harassment. This anxiety is one of the triggers of creativity for *Sahita* in performances where the members choose to perform as funny and vivacious elderly women.

Through performance, *Sahita* promotes the image strong old women in their work on stage. As not so young in age, all members of *Sahita* confidently perform in costume and wear make-up that makes them look even older. The presence of *Sahita* on stage inspires the question of why *Sahita* chooses to dress older than their age and what it is they are trying to express with this choice. This research suggests that *Sahita* presents satire of the female body through the performing arts for the stage. Based on the background above, the following are the research questions that will be discussed further: (1) How does *Sahita* present satire of the female body in the performing arts for the stage; and (2) Why does *Sahita* present the female body in satirical manner.

Sahita utilises the performing arts for the stage as space to express their work. This study employs the concept of performing arts that refers to Schechner's (2004) idea that performance is an activity conducted by individuals or groups in front of other individuals or groups (pp. 22, 55). Performance is a series of exchanges between players and action, and the audience.

The female body becomes the focus of this study because *Sahita* consists of four women that employ their bodies as the primary media for their creative process. According to Fulfer (2008), becoming a woman means to occupy certain social positions where "woman" is juxtaposed with "man" along with other social categories established by society and culture where one lives (pp. 7, 18).

Satire as a concept is borrowed for this analysis as a form of artistic communication that contains criticism. The distinguishing characteristic of satire as the media of communication is that it can be widely accepted by the public although it may include criticism. The concept of satire is derived from the writing of Paul Simpson in his work *On the Discourse of Satire* (Simpson, 2003, pp. 1-2). Simpson assumes that humour is a good thing. From an academic point of view, scientific research on humour consistently identifies humour as important for common solidarity for people in their daily experiences. Hence, the skill in being able to deliver humour in any appropriate style or genre is valuable asset in communities and cultures.

According to Rancière, the concept of aesthetics as politics suggests that the two fields of "aesthetics" and "politics" are fields that are inherently inseparable (Berrebi, 2008; Robert, 2012). The politics of aesthetics is a space to rethink the relationship between art and politics by reducing the limits of aesthetics. For example, an artist may have a personal commitment that manifests through his/her works.

This commitment may not be an aesthetic one. Instead, it may well be a political one. This emphasises that aesthetics has its own political category (Rancière, 2004, p. 60).

The methodology employed for this research is “life history” (Pack, 2011, pp. 58-65). The method of “life history” refers to the description of lived experiences of a person told by that person to a researcher, orally or in writing, upon request of the researcher. In this research, the life history method helps record the life and personal anxiety of the members of *Sahita* by exploring the creative process, the artistic experience, and the personal lives of individual members, as well as *Sahita* as a group. Therefore, the method of data collecting uses field observation, in-depth interviews and literary studies. The location of the research is Surakarta, central Java in Indonesia, where members of *Sahita* intensively meet. In addition, observation in the field was also conducted in several areas where *Sahita* had performances.

The Satiric Mental Space in the Works of *Sahita*

The works of *Sahita* combine elements of movement (dance), verses (dialogue, song, a cappella), sound (music), and playing of space. Until today, *Sahita* has produced 11 compositions entitled Srimpi Srimpet (2001), Srimpi Ketawang Lima Ganep (2001), Iber-iber Tledhek Barangan (2002), Pangkur Brujul (2003), Gambyong Gleyongan (2003), Gathik Glindhing (2004), Seba Sewaka (2005), Rewangan (2007), Mbok Mase (2008), Alas Banon (2008), and Rebirth (2010). These works have been performed repeatedly for many occasions, spaces, and events. Unfortunately, *Sahita* does not have well-organised notes in order to know the exact number of performances they have organised or participated in.

Sahita’s inspiration comes from various sources including personal experiences and social issues. Their experience working with Bambang Widoyo SP in Gapit Theater inspired them to work on the themes of marginalised communities and Javanese traditions. It is evident in all of their works that clearly depart from and re-interpret Javanese traditions. The idea of “playing” with tradition is used as strategy and means to enhance their capacity in dancing, singing, and building dialogue on stage. Finally, all members of *Sahita* agree to seriously work on the idea of “playing” with tradition as strength of their art within the performance art scene.

In creating their works, *Sahita* does not deliberately determine their target audience. *Sahita* hopes that their works will be acceptable to the public regardless of their social class, gender, ethnicity, age, and so on. The empty or “playing space” prepared for *Sahita* actors to improvise, allows their works to be adapted to any context and any audience. Therefore, despite many of their recent works, *Sahita* may still perform their old works at different occasions by considering the event and the audience.

A combination of personal experience and social issues gives soul to the works of *Sahita*, making them contextual. Their facial expression and body language are a part of *Sahita*’s signature in performances. The ability of *Sahita* to build communication with the audience is also one of their strengths. Oftentimes, the physical distance between *Sahita* and their audience is diminished once *Sahita* members mingle with the audience.

The biggest hit among most of *Sahita*’s audience is when *Sahita* invites them to laugh. Is this really the case? At least, that is one of the reasons why *Sahita* always provides time in their performances to showcase and lightly “discuss” funny and meaningful topics. This invites the audience to laugh and reflect on what they are laughing at.

Based on data gathered in the field and analysis, the following are the findings of this study. The first question posed in this essay: How does *Sahita* present satire of female body on the performing arts stage? Firstly, the research findings are that *Sahita* blends traditional based dance theatre with a contemporary flavour. Observing the performance of *Sahita*, it can be seen that *Sahita* strongly upholds tradition in their performance by adopting the pattern of traditional dance as the foundation of their work. On the other hand, *Sahita* intentionally presents a contemporary flavour in their work and this reflects the culture and society underlying the creation of the artwork. The presentation of *Sahita* emphasises flexibility, freedom of expression and improvisation that is loosely structured and is able to be combined with many musical styles. Since *Sahita* employs classical dance and other traditions as the foundation of their work, their work cannot be immediately considered as contemporary art. Schechner (2004) placed performance in active relation with social life, ritual, games, sport, and other popular entertainments (p. xi). This idea of Schechner answers the issue of why *Sahita* cannot be categorised as either traditional art or contemporary art. The dynamics of social life that is not only characterised by traditional art and contemporary art, colour the creative process *Sahita*. Secondly, *Sahita* focuses on laughing at themselves and making themselves the butt of jokes. *Sahita* presents their identity using their body on stage. Sometimes *Sahita* performs classical dance steps like a regular

dancer, however they also perform “unusual” movements and these movements invite laughter from the audience. Making themselves the butt of jokes is part of the process of establishing an identity of *Sahita* as a group. According to Butler (1999) identity is established performatively, repeated until the expected “true identity” is achieved, although no one knows for sure what is “true identity” (p. xv). Identity is established performatively through various expressions. Performativity is not a single act. It is a repetition and ritual through continuous process of naturalisation that finally becomes culture. *Sahita* establishes identity in performative manner through various expressions presented on the performing arts stage. It is through the performativity of *Sahita* that the group establishes their identity that is manifested through sounds, movements, and facial expression.

Sahita is identified as a performing art group in the following ways: (a) Presenting themselves as older women with all of their limitations in order to gain acceptance on performing art stage; (b) By using dance theatre as medium; (c) Combining traditional art and contemporary art; and (d) Presenting satire of female body by treating themselves as the butt of jokes for the audience. Through the process of establishing an identity, the importance of performativity lies not in what is performed or what the meaning is of the performance, but on how *Sahita* presents the self and their social relationships within society. The demonstration of the self and social relationship of *Sahita* is explored juxtaposing the idea of performativity and the concept of satire and aesthetics as politics.

The second question posed in this essay is: Why does *Sahita* present the female body in a satirical manner? Satire is selected because it is able to answer the sexual, defensive, aggressive, social, and intellectual through humour. Sex is generally considered taboo that is not to be discussed publicly, but on stage *Sahita* can presents the topic of sex in a funny manner without worrying about taboo. Satire provides the sexual function, through humour as a way to gain social acceptance of the topic of sex.

Satire also answers the defensive function of humour. The sexual function can also be categorised as sub-category of the defensive function which means, “employed or intended to survive,” because it accommodates the use of humour to deal with difficult topics including sex. Satirical humour has the ability to prevent repercussions as humour delivers critiques implicitly. Although with *Sahita* their performances are laden with social criticism, no one is offended by their critiques. Through humour, *Sahita* escapes accusations of presenting an immoral performance, defamation, and pornography.

Satire also answers the aggressive function of humour. The aggressive function in humour is presented through acts of mockery, allowing superiority to be presented. The aggressive function is seen when the members of *Sahita* mock each other. There are times when one member becomes the butt of jokes of the other three members. The audience is often engaged in these acts of mocking. This act is performed easily and loosely and the person who is the butt of the joke is also not offended. Such scenes collaboratively appear on stage and with the audience.

Satire answers the social functions of humour. The social function is achieved when *Sahita* members position themselves as women in the family, community, and state. Their experiences in witnessing or even experiencing injustice in the family, society, and state are presented playfully on stage displaying the solidity of the group in performing their idea. In this case, the social function is useful for in-group and out-group cohesion, and strengthens the interpersonal connection.

Satire answers the intellectual function of humour. *Sahita* often uses the higher education as material for their satire. They blatantly and playfully express critiques of highly educated people that often do not “walk the talk.” The materials discussed allows *Sahita* to achieve intellectual function of humour based on absurdity, word play, and non-sense which gives temporary release from rigidity of rationality.

In the context of discussion of aesthetics as politics, the works of *Sahita* contributes in presenting the anxieties of our lives, including the voice of marginalised women. The anxieties of *Sahita* presented on stage includes the issue of acceptance (or rejection) against older women of the performing arts, the issue of limitation of space and time for housewives to express themselves, and the unjust treatment received by wives from their husbands. *Sahita* also discusses environmental destruction and exploitation as part of their personal anxiety. Aesthetics as politics merges very strongly in the works of *Sahita* because of their commitment to voice the anxiety of women as a political category constantly appearing in the performances of *Sahita*.

Conclusion

Sahita makes performance art not only to present a show or scenery, but also to provide a space to meet and for dialogue between actors/players and audience. *Sahita* is able to present the work that: (a) Blends traditionally and contemporary art; (b) Presents act by laughing at themselves as the butt of jokes; (c) Uses

satire to answer the sexual, defensive, aggressive, social, and intellectual functions of humour that they present.

Sahita uses laughter as a shield because through employing satirical space *Sahita* can discuss difficult topics of daily life. *Sahita* realises that humour is not just about laughing, but also about crying. Humour helps people to identify, face/confront, and finally release, escape or resolve their own fears. *Sahita* is committed to voicing the anxiety of women, that is also a political category, a subject that appears in many performances. Hence, aesthetic as politics is embedded in the works of *Sahita*.

Finally, the contributions of this research include demonstrating the breakthrough of the work of *Sahita* in the performing arts. This research also shows the success of *Sahita* in penetrating an over commercialised performing arts scene although their way of presenting humour is considered “different”. Furthermore, *Sahita* through comedy has brought and will continue to bring an improvement in the performing arts. This research shows that the strength of satire in the performing arts is that it can uplift the dignity of the “victims” in a society by helping them perform and express themselves on stage. Lastly, the findings from this research shows that the power of comedy performed by “victims” as a medium of social critiquing as satire carries several enabling functions that has been explained in this research.

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