

Michael H. Bodden. *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010. 391 pp.

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The years preceding the end of Suharto's *orde baru* (New Order) saw an intensified public dissatisfaction with the government. The confrontation between society and state in Indonesia climaxed in 1997–98 with riots in various parts of the country. In May 1998, the authoritarian regime finally ended. Michael Bodden's book *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* sets Indonesia's modern national theater at the center of this confrontation. The author's main aim is "to show how modern theater became a key arena for expressing political dissent under the authoritarian New Order regime" (p. 2) by examining "crucial performances and texts" created between 1985 and 1998, a time when the "growing critical intervention became more evident" (p. 6). During the 1990s, performances critical of the regime often had to face censorship imposed by the Indonesian government. Bodden argues that both "discussions of censorship and of the themes taken up in the banned plays and other theater works helped mobilize public opposition" (p. 2). According to the author, this almost antagonistic relationship between the modern theater and the state in Indonesia "was part of a process of social contestation that had been developing for some decades, reaching back even to the pre-independence period" (p. 22).

The key narrative thread of this study—the shift of "theatrical relations with the Indonesian state" towards a "more consistently critical mode" (p. 5)—is grounded in a methodological framework that centers on the term *resistance*. Following Susan Seymour's definition, Bodden uses "resistance" to refer to "intentional, and hence conscious, acts of defiance or opposition by a subordinate individual or group of individuals against a superior individual or set of individuals" (p. 8). The resistance on the national stage as discussed by Bodden is "formed from diverse and often conflicting constituencies, ideologies, and forms" (p. 9). The author argues persuasively that, from the mid-1980s on, theater workers' resistance to the state became more complicated, as "no longer was it simply a matter of a relatively homogenous cultural elite voicing its criticism [...] but theater workers from that elite were constructing socially critical works together with peasants, industrial workers, slum dwellers, and others" (p. 9). The author thus argues that resistance cannot be assumed to be homogenous, "nor can resisters be essentialized as a 'single, unitary subordinate'" (p. 9).

To support his arguments, which are underpinned by a body of theory that draws heavily from structuralist Marxism and neo-Marxism, comparative literature, and drama/theater studies, as well as postcolonial theory, Bodden uses exhaustive and highly informed analyses of plays and theater texts created during those years. His evaluations are mainly based on local news media reviews, interviews with and observations of practitioners and members of the audience, and the author's own field notes, which reach back as far as 1986. These analyses are the great strength of this study, as the author does not see the performances disconnected from their respective political and social contexts. Each performance or text discussed is situated in a detailed examination of its socio-political surroundings and gives valuable insights

into currents of thought that shaped modern national theater's work at the time. This context is used to "describe theater's wider connections with society" and "to see the many ways theater is connected to and interacts with social and political communities, aesthetic ideologies, and cultural forms" (p. 7).

Bodden's key research interests and some "trends in modern theater" (p. 19), are evident in a chapter on Workers' Theater, an area of scholarship the author has been interested in and published about for many years. Other examples include Indonesian Islamic theater in Yogyakarta, Grassroots Theatre, and *Teater Payung Hitam's* "theatre of pain" (p. 188). The analyses culminate in a chapter about censorship in the late New Order years of *keterbukaan* (openness), the dynamics of which, according to the author, illustrate "how theater could play a visible role in the process of democratization" (p. 309). The study also contains an important chapter on Teater SAE and Teater Kubur, two Jakarta-based modern theater companies, the latter of which is still actively performing in late 2011. These groups' work in the 1990s was very much spurred by "feelings of alienation from a modern urban space, including the increasing inundation of the social imagery with commercialized images" (p. 131), and traces of the "whole new trend [in theater]" they initiated through their work "can still be found in the productions of most of today's leading avant-garde groups" (pp. 132–33). However, this book is the first English-language scholarship concerning modern national Indonesian theater in which actual scripts and performances are discussed in detail. In 1997, Marianne König, a Swiss-German scholar, published her thesis on the work of Boedi S. Otong and his Teater SAE.¹ That study, however, has not been published in English or Indonesian as yet and therefore has a limited readership.

Apart from a meticulously compiled list of sources and a glossary, which explains many of the Indonesian terms and expressions used in the book, *Resistance on the National Stage* also contains a rather short but very valuable compilation of biographies of "the major theater writers, directors, actors, and organizers" (p. 327). These might be useful to all those readers who are interested in the book for its political rather than its theatrical approach and are not yet acquainted with the world of modern Indonesian theater. The role of cultural workers, a term Bodden uses to describe people who are active in the arts sector, in the Indonesian resistance movement has been discussed in earlier scholarly work on modern national theater, yet not in such a detailed, painstaking way, and those earlier works focused mainly on the very late New Order period of 1997–98. Therefore, this study is not only of relevance for students and scholars of Indonesian theater but also for a wider readership that is interested in and concerned with the political development and history of Indonesia, as Bodden sees the resistance of modern national theater workers to the New Order's power as "only a part of a larger social process then in motion" (p. 310).

What would have been an additional bonus to this already impressive and well-crafted work of scholarship is a discussion of performances outside the small realm of modern national theater on Java. Like most of the scholarly work on modern Indonesian performing arts, which has been published within the last decades, the central focus of this book is on productions in Java. In a study of "resistance on the national stage," it would have been interesting to read about a more diversified

¹ Marianne König, *Theater als Lebensweise – Theater als Ethnologie. Der indonesische Regisseur Boedi S. Otong* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1997).

national theater, including information about theater works created on other islands of the archipelago—for instance, performances by Teater Bumi in Padang, West Sumatra, or Sanggar Merah Putih, based in Makassar, South Sulawesi—that, according to the author, also resisted the New Order, but garner no further mention. As Bodden states in his introductory notes, in a study of this size he “could not possibly hope to cover all the groups that resisted the New Order and its social, political, and aesthetic ideologies on the stage” (p. 18). Thus, the book leaves room for more, future scholarship.