

ABSTRACT

Looking to the Future: Training a New Generation for Balinese *Arja*

Bethany J. Collier

The integrated nature of music, dance, and drama in Balinese performance has long attracted the interest of scholars and arts aficionados. While characteristic of many genres of traditional performance in Bali, this complex intertwining of sound, movement, and narrative is nowhere more present than in the operatic dance-drama *arja*. Once a favorite source of entertainment for local audiences, popular interest in the traditional genre has always fluctuated in response to historical and cultural developments: for example, increasing fervor for *drama gong* in the 1960s led to a general decline in audience attention to *arja* (Dibia 1992), while innovations in the 1990s, including frequent performances by all-male casts (*arja muani*), brought renewed interest to the genre (Dibia and Ballinger 2004).

It is well known that steady changes in Bali's social, cultural, and political landscapes continue to impact the status of the traditional performing arts: today, artists and cultural critics consider how the persistently rapid pace of development and the abiding, powerful influence of globalization may affect the future of the Balinese arts. Questions abound: as one generation of accomplished performers ages, how will traditional performance survive unless a new generation commits to its preservation? How do competing pressures in society come to bear on the vitality of the arts? Will today's technologically-savvy, media-minded youth continue to value traditional culture as a vital aspect of their identity? One common response to these concerns has been the development of new children's performing groups, including youth *gamelan* ensembles, dance organizations, *drama* groups, and *arja* troupes. While this strategy capitalizes on the important role that young people play in ensuring continuity of tradition, it also presents a complex set of circumstances for group leaders and their students.

This paper integrates perspectives from new fieldwork (2012) with ideas from my previous research to examine some of the challenges that today's teachers face when training young artists for *arja* performance. It focuses particular attention on the ways that older, respected artists modify traditional pedagogical models in order to better suit today's developing performers, and it considers some of the benefits and implications of making such adaptations. Keeping the genre's challenges in mind, and focusing on the teachers' ideologies and expectations, this study explores the possibility that training children and teenagers to perform *arja* is an effective tactic for strengthening the young generation's sense of Balinese identity.