Balinese Wayang Listrik is Electric

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An undergraduate in theatre and music, Amy Johnson enjoys creating art of any kind. Her life’s goal is to eventually have had every possible hair color.

The University of Hawaii at Manoa is well-known for its productions of non-Western theatre. The latest, under the direction of Kirstin Pauka, Subali-Sugriwa: Battle of the Monkey Kings, a Balinese Wayang Listrik, is an impressive production. It combines music, dance, and shadow puppetry in a visually and aurally stunning masterpiece. I attended one of the last dress rehearsals with several other writers and photographers, and so I was able to obtain some information about the process and what was involved in staging the work.

According to Pauka, Subali-Sugriwa was several years in the making. The script was translated from Balinese to English by Annie Reynolds, who also served as assistant and musical directors. For the actors’ training, several guest artists were brought in. I Ketut Wirtawan and I Made Widana trained the actors in choreography (along with Reynolds) and shadow puppetry. The two, with Hannah Schauer Galli, also designed the makeup. The third
guest artist, I Made Moja, designed the scenery projections, properties, and the intricate shadow masks. Majo’s masks and puppets are beautiful and complex, and according to Pauka, he was still making small changes to some of them during the rehearsal. With light and sound designer Brian Shevelenko’s lighting showing each small detail of Majo’s stunning work, there is always something new to notice in each character.

The show begins with an overture of sorts, showing off the abilities of the gamelan ensemble. One of the more interesting aspects of the ensemble is that there is no conductor. There are several musicians playing the same line, and they were attuned to each other that allowed them to stay together. The ensemble is a class offered at the university, but the music for the show was composed by one of the guest artists, I Made Widana, who shared the role of musical director with Reynolds. The music continues, unbroken, through the entire show.

There is a fairly large cast of characters in the show. Some characters appear only as shadow puppets, either played by actors with masks, or solo puppets, others as both live dancers and shadow puppets, and a small number only as dancers and not as puppets. The dancers, Froilan Fabro, Michelle Huynh, Misty Maliena, Amanda Stone, Chantelle Saneda, Mahany Lindquist, Kisaru Sherreitt and Meghan Rose Donnelly, bring the action of the shadow screen onto the stage; while some of the dancers portray acrobatic monkeys, and others graceful ladies-in-waiting, all move with admirable lightness and agility.

The actors behind the screen, however, also deserve commendation. Pauka commented that they had to be aware, at all times, of the positions of their bodies relative to the light and the shadow screen. Therefore, movement that felt natural might not create a shadow that conveys the character and story. The training paid off, and the shadow puppetry was dynamic and communicative. However, because of the logistics of the shadow screen and the actors behind it, all voice actors were given body microphones. There were a handful of issues with the microphones and balance in the house, but as I was attending a dress rehearsal, some technical issues were still being ironed out.

Joanna G. Mills and Hunter Kaye as the title characters, Subali and Sugriwa, respectively, have impressive presence and command attention. They appear both in front of and behind the screen, yet their presence is not diminished behind the screen. In contrast to their strength, Qiaoer Zheng commands attention with her sweetness and charm as the goddess Tara. Their contrasting dynamics create captivating relationships. They are among the more serious characters, who are offset by other comedic puppets.

The comedic characters are puppeteered and voiced by several different actors, but the standout voice actor was Maseeh Ganjali as the brother/sister duo Delem and Tualen. Based on the gamelan ensemble’s reactions, I believe some of his lines may have been improvised, and they were wonderful. Regardless, Ganjali’s characters have a joie de vivre that endears them to the audience. Bronte Amoy’s innocent Merdah is also among the more memorable characters.

Overall, Subali-Sugriwa: Battle of the Monkey Kings is a treat, and a form that is not often seen outside of Bali. In the hands of capable teachers and actors, the show is engaging to the eyes and ears.

Tags: Kennedy Theatre, Staff Reviews, Subali-Sugriwa: Battle of the Monkey Kings, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

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