

## INDONESIAN ADVENTURE

By Janis Brenner

Early in 2000, I was privileged to be invited, at the initiation of Javanese dancer/choreographer Miroto, to perform, teach and choreograph new work in Yogyakarta, Java at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI). Having had a long history with working in Asia and with particular people affiliated with Indonesia, I was thrilled at the prospect of working there in collaboration with these artists. The hope for *them* was that I would introduce my "contemporary" dance aesthetics in terms of modern technique, improvisation and composition as well as my interdisciplinary approach to movement, voice and theatre integration *and* create new work on the Saraswati Dance Company of ISI who were trained in traditional, or "classical" Indonesian dance.

ISI could offer no salary and no airfare for a seven-week visit! After much doubt that this project would come to fruition, I applied for and miraculously received an "American Artists Abroad" Grant from our very own U.S. State Department—a grant large enough to allow me to bring one of my main company dancers, Kun-Yang Lin (originally from Taiwan) to do duet concerts in Bali and Java (for two weeks) and my lighting designer, Mitchell Bogard—which turned out to be crucial in getting the concerts to happen at all.

I have been touring worldwide since 1977 when I was a member of the Murray Louis Dance Company. I have been honored to have worked in twenty-six countries and have had profound artistic experiences and interchanges with artists working in a great variety of circumstances and surroundings. That said, the experience of Indonesia was nearly incomparable to anything that had come before. The layers of complexity that permeate the society, the complicated intertwining of religion and culture, politics and the economy (their currency is so devalued, it was often painful for me to be bartering with a street merchant over whether to pay him 2,000 or 3,000 rupiah—the equivalent of 20 or 30 cents) and the on-going state of violence that seemed to exist from North, South, East and West of Yogyakarta and Bali, were issues that were quite prevalent in my mind, and in everyone else's, on a daily basis.

Ah, but being in the studio with those thirteen young, fresh, fun, beautiful dancers...or watching a class of 25—which usually included at least 6-8 faculty members!—do voice/movement improvisations together in made-up languages and resolve them in gales of laughter on the floor...was a treat beyond my wildest expectations.

The process of actually making what turned out to be two separate new pieces was a great challenge. The dancers' experience with partnering, weight-sharing,



learning complicated rhythmic patterns with the feet/ legs, or simply jumping off the floor was minimal, especially for the women who, particularly in Javanese dance, never leave the ground, rarely raise the eyes, have a spatial sphere of about 2 feet in diameter and do not lift their legs at all. We spent much time in explanation of the mechanics of working on these aspects, and since this was what they had brought me there to do, it was embraced wholeheartedly.

As I built the pieces, it became very clear to me that I needed and *wanted* to incorporate aspects of their lives, their place and their own dance styles deep into the fabric of the choreography. These works had to be about them, for them—to challenge them technically with new, creative directions and new information, but to embrace their situation as citizens of an ever-struggling country and their rich, stunningly beautiful traditions.

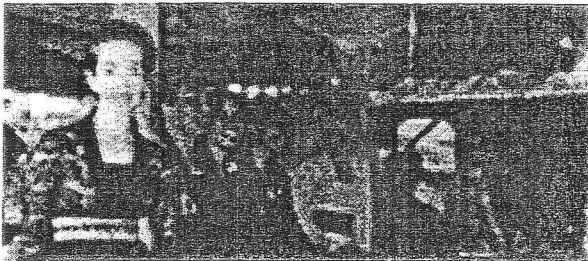
Daily events and interactions began to affect my perspective on everything having to do with being an artist and creating work: one of the dancers doesn't show up for rehearsal on a Monday morning because his father doesn't get paid until Monday afternoons, so he didn't have enough to get to the school (about 20 cents). He couldn't call to tell me this because his family doesn't own a phone. The next week, he comes to rehearsal looking deathly sick, covered in sweat pants, long-sleeved jacket and hood (it's nearly 90 degrees outside): he's had a relapse of malaria, which he contracted two years ago out in the rice paddies, and has to get injections, bedrest and keep the skin covered. He took the 1-hour bus-ride just to tell me this so I wouldn't think he was delinquent and he could at least try to watch rehearsal. We sent him home. I arrange to watch a video on a certain day before rehearsals: sorry, someone from the theatre department borrowed *the* chord to the VCR and perhaps they'll return it in a day or so.

Perhaps the only phone in the entire dance building will be fixed next week. We were planning to take you to the mountains this weekend, but Merapi (the volcano) is erupting and people are deciding whether to flee their homes or not. I go to see one of the most talented dancers in his nightly dance job in a production of the Ramayana for tourists. He is superb, mesmerizing. He is going to be a star. He tells me afterward that he makes approximately 70 cents a night. (I also keep all this in perspective: I think about the tragedy of our AIDS epidemic, our health insurance calamity, my own dancers and the two jobs they have to have on top of dancing for me and one or two other companies/choreographers and making just enough to pay their rent in NYC...the struggles are different, but relative.)

The theaters, in both Bali and Java, have so few lighting instruments and of the ones that *are* there, only half of them work. They can't get new ones because there is no money and they have to be sent from Jakarta or Japan. The priority seems to me to be the costumes; they can contend with a dance floor that could maim them, a sound system that chews tapes, a crew that doesn't know a leko from a fresnel and has no gel color for the lights, as long as they have the correct and most aesthetically-colored costumes.

Somehow—and one does not always know how—the pieces find their focus and purpose and the dancers discover new aspects of themselves. After 4 weeks of rehearsing, under less-than-ideal conditions, the performance is a resounding success. The US Embassy officials in Jakarta travel to Yogya to attend (as they had a month prior to see our duet concert) and are so genuinely touched that they immediately begin efforts to invite us to perform on the JakArt2001 Festival in June—to which we all greatly looking forward.

This is a much longer story in terms of collaboration, process, impact on faculty/dancers, on-going exchange and even US/Indonesian relations—in other words, of "meaning"... not to mention the importance of this on my own thinking and life. Although I continue to be reminded of the resonance of this experience through the dancers' e-mails, photos, reviews and *love*, I always reiterate to them that I have learned as much, if not more, from the endeavor as they did. In fact, of this I am sure.



*Ilona Copel, Patricia Carreras and Keyla Ermecheo in Costa Rica*

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FESTIVAL DANZA EN CAMARA 2002**

Dance Films Association (DFA) is proud to announce its sixth collaboration with the Film Society of Lincoln Center: Dance On Camera Festival 2002 and DFA's 30th annual festival. This year's festival includes a retrospective look at dance in animation (animation entries of any year welcomed). The festival will be held over two weekends January 11-12, 18-19, 2002, at the Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street, plaza level, New York City. A photo exhibit honoring DFA's charter member, Ted Shawn, founder of Jacob's Pillow, will be held at the Puffin Room in Soho, NY which will also host a variety of events and receptions.

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Direct all questions to Dance Films Association, 48 W. 21st St, #907, New York, NY 10010. Telephone/Fax: (212) 727-0764; e-mail: [dfa5@juno.com](mailto:dfa5@juno.com). Website: [www.dancefilmsassn.org](http://www.dancefilmsassn.org).