

**Matthew Isaac Cohen. *Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theater in Colonial Indonesia, 1891–1903*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2006. 496 pages.**

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*Komedie Stamboel* traces the life of the Eurasian theater actor/director/manager Auguste Mahieu and the history of the original Komedie Stamboel theater (capitalized to distinguish the particular theater company from the *komedie stamboel* genre) and a number of other *komedie stamboel* companies with which Mahieu was involved. The book focuses on a short period from the genesis of Komedie Stamboel in 1891 to Mahieu's death in 1903, with most attention given to the earliest years (1891–1893). However, the book is about much more than theater: it gives a glimpse of new ways of living and seeing, about new desires, obsessions, and pleasures, in the fin-de-siècle towns and cities in the East Indies, and beyond that, about the formation of Indies and Indonesian modernity in the realm of popular urban entertainment. As such, the book is relevant to later developments in the field of theater, cinema, and television (even though exploring these implications is not the main aim of the book). Further, the book situates fin-de-siècle Indies urban culture in a larger picture of popular entertainments beyond the Dutch East Indies.

Cohen describes the initial stimulus for writing the book:

I still recall my excitement on encountering a series of eight articles in the Dutch newspaper *Tjerimai* describing a run of performances of the Komedie Stamboel “under the direction of the Heer Mahieu” in 1893. [...] I had no inkling that primary sources, in the form of newspaper sources, existed—and in such substantial numbers. Curiosity got the better of me. (p. xi)

Newspaper reports, announcements, and critical articles are not only the author's main source—and the research behind the book is impressive—but throughout the book the reader, too, can enjoy some of the excitement of newspaper discoveries. Reading certain parts of the book feels almost like going through old newspapers. Much of the book consists of quotations and summaries of materials from newspapers, giving the reader a sense of the voices that talked about *komedie stamboel*, and of contemporary perspectives—how journalists and letter writers argued about *komedie stamboel*, what assumptions they brought to the theater, what pleasures and annoyances they found in it, what was important to them, how *komedie stamboel* troupes framed their announcements and what they felt was important to emphasize to their audiences, and so on. In other words, the book allows the reader to see *komedie stamboel* through the eyes of its audiences and contemporary observers, to eavesdrop on their conversations, and to share their excitement.

Theatrical performances are among the most evanescent forms of art, and—especially in this case, where no recordings exist and no scripts, stage directions, or manuals have been preserved—it would seem that writing a history that would give a feel of the actual performances is a hopeless project. Yet Cohen succeeds in doing exactly that—the book gives one the feeling of what it was like to attend *komedie stamboel* shows. He conveys the pleasures and annoyances of being in the theater, and

explains who was in the audience and who the actors were, and describes what their lives were like. One gets a sense of how the spectacular costumes and special effects were seen by the people who attended the shows. The book gives evidence that an open-mindedness and thoughtfulness of research may be more important than the availability of plentiful evidence; that even with limited sources, one can reconstruct a historical world and give a sense of being in that world. There is much more to theater than scripts and stage directions, and some of the available information—the emphasis on spectacle and theatrical effects, the audience's enjoyment of costumes and scenery, or the pleasures afforded by the "free range of the gaze on the company's white-skinned actresses" (p. 78) arranged in tableaux-vivants—may be more vital to bringing life to our picture of *komedie stamboel*.

Cohen shows how *komedie stamboel* emerged from and figured in its world. Little snippets of available information about *komedie stamboel* are presented against carefully painted backdrops and thus they are made meaningful and interesting. Cohen creates for the reader a picture of Surabaya around the time that *komedie stamboel* emerged there, with the different parts of the city and its people, its weather, its streets, its tastes, its smells—showing both the drama on stage and the social comedies around it. Later, when he discusses the travels of Komedie Stamboel and other troupes, he describes the individual places where the company traveled and the people who lived there, the means of travel, and so on. The reader can thus travel in his imagination with the theater company, learning not only about the theater, but feeling what it was like to travel with a *komedie stamboel* troupe through fin-de-siècle Java, getting a sense of each town, encountering the people, reading the newspapers (to learn about little and big scandals), and seeing the performances through the eyes of the audiences. The reader gets a sense of how shows were advertised, what headaches the actors and managers endured, what the performing spaces were like, who the spectators were, where the actors stayed, and so on. The organization of the book—the reader follows the company as it changes, as it travels through Java and beyond, as it goes through good and bad times—reveals the temporal nature of the theater: the uncertainty of a life on the go; the changing popularity of a theater company; the formation, dissolution, and re-formation of theatrical troupes; and the feeling that every place at which "we" perform is excitingly different and depressingly like all other places on this trip.

*Komedie stamboel* is at the center of the book, but it is situated among other entertainments of the times—such as theatrical performances, circuses, and magic shows. Cohen describes the other shows that were "on" in the particular town where *komedie stamboel* was performing. The book thus gives a picture of the larger entertainment "landscape" in which *komedie stamboel* figured, and how *komedie stamboel* was shaped by interaction and competition with different kinds of entertainments, such as the famous magician, Professor Anderson, who *poenya tenda besar matjem baroe* ("has a big tent of a new kind") and performed his *Pemboenoehan Pada Satoe Njonja* ("The Murder of a Lady"; p. 97); or Stanley's Comic Opera, with its "double bill of The Sleeping Beauty and Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay" (p. 131). The book also describes how people would imitate *komedie stamboel*, how new local groups emerged, and how *stamboel* songs became popular.

To write such a rich study of any theater would be valuable, but Cohen also shows what is special about *komedie stamboel*. It was the first locally produced theater

embodying early Indies and Indonesian modernity, a theatrical lingua franca free from strong associations to a particular local culture and local language. Performed in Malay, it connected performers and audiences into a trans-local “metropolitan superculture” (p. 3), drawing on inspiration from Western theater and opera as well as Indian and Parsi theater. It was shaped by Eurasians and (especially in the early stages) local Chinese, and it appealed to a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic audience. In more technical terms, *komedi stamboel* for the first time popularized many aspects of modern Western theater that would gradually penetrate local practices, from proscenium stage to ideas about acting and repertoire, and indeed the Western idea of theater.

The final chapter discusses Mahieu’s legacy in the Eurasian community in the Netherlands, and then turns briefly to the legacy of *komedi stamboel* in Indonesia, suggesting that it can be seen not only in influences on specific kinds of performing arts—from what are now considered “traditional” genres such as kethoprak and ludruk, to modern theater, to Indonesian cinema and television—but also in general attitudes toward acting and public behavior. These final few pages of the book, as well as parts of the excellent introduction, provide tantalizing hints at what could be fascinating future research into *komedi stamboel*’s legacy in Indonesia, and really into the history of theater and related spectacles in modern Indonesia, the beginning of which—or one of the beginnings—is traced in Cohen’s *Komedi Stamboel*. This is an important, pioneering book that is also a pleasure to read—let’s just hope that the second and the third volumes of this history will be coming to town soon!