

Evan Darwin Winet. *Indonesian Postcolonial Theatre: Spectral Genealogies and Absent Faces*. London and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 262 pp.

Tamara Aberle

The year is 1619. On an Easter Monday's midafternoon, the fortified *kasteel* (castle) of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Jayakarta (Jakarta/Batavia) became the arena for a performance of what Evan Darwin Winet identifies as the first staging of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Asia (p. 20). With this event, which was apparently the first European theatrical performance on the archipelago that later would become Indonesia, Winet begins his narrative of *Indonesian Postcolonial Theatre: Spectral Genealogies and Absent Faces*. His story is the history of modern theater in Indonesia, a history of colonial remnants and Western legacies that, according to the author, haunted modern theater practices on the archipelago through times of nation-building, guided democracy, *orde baru* (New Order), and *reformasi* until the recent post-Suharto era.

Winet's persuasive and well-written book is an important contribution to a genealogy of publications on postcolonialism available in the last two decades. The term "genealogy" here refers to a historical method of looking at the contemporary phenomenon of postcolonialism by analyzing its historical genesis. Decolonization as one of the dominant political and social phenomena of the twentieth century has generated a spate of critical works from academic researchers around the globe. In the field of drama and theater studies, the question of what postcolonialism means in recent years to contemporary theater practices and its practitioners has also become a major field of interest. For Indonesia, a country long dominated by European forces, the notion that colonial influences have had an impact on Indonesia's modern stage has surprisingly been little addressed. One reason for this might be the rather distant handling of colonial legacies by artists in Indonesia in general. This includes both the representation of the Dutch and dramatic criticism that "also concerns itself primarily with issues of humanism and nationalism" (p. 6). Winet cites Keith Foulcher, who finds in Indonesian post-war literature "an extraordinary disinterest in Dutch political, social, and cultural legacies, which he attributes to the multi-faceted translation of the colony into a new entity with its own new problems" (p. 6). In his genealogical narrative, Winet acknowledges some of Foulcher's arguments but contends that post-1949 Indonesia is still greatly influenced by colonialism. That influence is less visible in the persistence of colonial inequalities relative to that of maintaining "colonial mechanisms of control from an expressed logic of existential threat" (p. 7). He writes, "... the project of developing a national Indonesian theatre has always been limited by [...] the lingering trace of colonization in the form and content of *teater*" (p. xiii). There is much evidence for this, most prominently in the form of modern theater itself, which in its dramaturgy, acting style, architecture, and dramatic repertoire draws heavily from Western theater practices (p. 8). With *Indonesian Postcolonial Theatre*, Winet hopes to contribute to a framework for understanding "why modern Indonesian theatre until the present has never stepped beyond the shadow of coloniality" (p. xv).

The author's approach to the topic is both a historical and an analytical one. Circling around notions of colonialism and postcolonialism, Winet grounds his research in a profound methodological framework that draws from Pheng Chea's idea that specters of the past are haunting the present. Chea's organismic metaphor, as Winet calls it, is based on the notion that there is a "disjuncture between the existing state and the ideal image of the nation," and that the nation, in order to imagine a new future, has to forget its past, yet is "animated by resurrected spirits of the past" (p. 2). Goenawan Mohamad, following an idea of Ernest Renan, also thinks in this direction when stating that the idea of Indonesia, the first step of becoming a nation, was "forgetting," referring to primordial heritage.¹ What always remains in this process is the presence of specters of the past that haunt the nation's citizens and repeatedly are summoned by Indonesian theater practitioners on the national stage. This uncanny spectrality that Winet identifies as one marker of postcolonial times manifests itself in ghostly appearances of not only colonialism, but also specific political figures, such as Sukarno or Suharto. More broadly, there's the presidency itself, which, as a matter of fact, is still haunting modern Indonesian theater practice. An example for this is the repeated staging of Suharto's "smiling countenance" that "had presided for thirty-three years over a depoliticized, infantilized populace" (p. 203) and the herein lingering critique of his presidency by theater practitioners, especially in the *reformasi* era.

Framed by this methodology, the book's following six chapters illuminate various aspects of *teater* in Indonesia. The author's main focus is on colonial and postcolonial modern theater practices in Batavia/Jakarta, and he switches between using both names to refer trans-historically to the city (p. xv). For Winet, "the postcolonial metropole metonymizes the nation as that space," where Pheng Chea's organismic metaphor "is experienced at its greatest intensity and contradiction" (p. 73). Winet focuses not only on Chinese and *Indisch* theater legacies and the significance of Islam to modern national theater, but he also emphasizes the importance and change of performance space, the role of the actor, and amateurism versus professionalism, as well as modern theater practices in the post-Suharto era that deal with legacies of a presidency that still have not been laid to rest. This becomes evident, for instance, by theater practitioners staging "silenced histories" of New Order victims, such as "the missing reporter, whose fate could not be discovered, or the gravestone that could not be located" (p. 198). Whereas at the beginning of the book Winet mainly focuses on Jakarta as a center for his narrative, for the last three chapters he also takes the work of groups from Bandung and Yogyakarta, such as Teater Payung Hitam and Teater Garasi, into account. Both troupes recently have become known as leading avant-garde practitioners in Indonesia.

One main tool for Winet's historical genealogy—and one of the book's great strengths—is his analysis of plays and performances, the impact of which the author follows through the centuries. While Winet discusses the relevance of the material he uses in different time periods, he also traces continuities in practices of modern theater in colonial Batavia and postcolonial Jakarta, in national and post-national contexts. What did Rustam Effendi's nationalist play *Bebasari* mean to a contemporary group,

¹ Goenawan Mohamad, "What Indonesia Was, What Indonesia Is: On the Idea of Indonesia," in *Focus Indonesia*, ed. Anjum Katyal (Calcutta: The Seagull Foundation for the Arts, 2002), p. 18.

such as Teater Kami, that re-staged Effendi's work in 2001? How was Victor Ido's dramatic text *Karina Adinda*, which premiered in 1913 at the Schouwburg Weltevreden (today's Gedung Kesenian Jakarta), relevant to theater practitioners in 1993 under Suharto's government? The presence of both Hamlet and Caligula on the Indonesian national stage is, according to Winet, a recurrent motif at particular moments in Indonesian history, both characters in their complexity referring to specific characteristics of the nation itself.

Students and researchers of Indonesian theater will find *Indonesian Postcolonial Theatre* to be very relevant, especially in terms of its intriguing and crucial contribution to the field of historiographic genealogy, the historical work on the specialized topic of Indonesian postcolonialism on the contemporary stage. It is also pertinent for the play analyses that illuminate aspects of the theater that have not been addressed yet in academic writing about Indonesian performance.

Despite all of this book's excellent qualities, what feels strangely absent is the voice of the theater artist. Those voices, with few exceptions, such as in Winet's discussion of Emha Ainun Nadjib's or Ratna Sarumpaet's work, always seem to speak from a distance, appearing almost spectral themselves. Although Winet has a deep and profound knowledge and understanding of historical and contemporary theater practices and their social, cultural, and political implications, the narrative, unfortunately, often feels rather distant from its subject.