

Book Review

Indonesian Cross-Gender Dancer Didik Nini Thowok

by Madoka Fukuoka. Osaka, Japan: Osaka University Press, 2018, 153 pp.

Made Mantle Hood

Tainan National University of the Arts, TAIWAN

E-mail: made.hood@gmail.com

Published online: 21 December 2018

To cite this article: Made Mantle Hood. 2018. Book review: Indonesian cross-gender dancer Didik Nini Thowok. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 17: 203–208. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2018.17.8>.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2018.17.8>

Performing across genders in Indonesian drama and theatre has an extended history. But that history has often been subject to restrictive communal, regional and national scrutiny. More traditional and conservative theatre productions often repeat age-old archetypes that depict male prowess over feminine refinement. But beyond the male/female gender binary lies terminology such as *waria* and *bebancihan* transvestite and effeminate males and that indicate much more dynamic, fluid and even tolerant multiple-gender constructs. An example of just such a construct is taken up in the book, *Indonesian Cross-Gender Dancer Didik Nini Thowok* by anthropologist Madoka Fukuoka who investigates Post-New Order attitudes to gender and performance through a biography of one of Central Java's most colourful practitioners. This volume is timely given Indonesia's increasing polarisation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights that exist on a precarious continuum from freedom and acceptance in more urban areas of the country to ultra-conservative and restrictive views in other regions. Somewhere in the middle, both geographically and philosophically, is Yogyakarta's most prolific cross-gender dancer Didik Nini Thowok. Although cross-gender theatre genres such as Balinese *arja cowok* and *ludruk* have made revivals, few performers have made life-time careers out of them like Didik.

Through colourful images and compelling biographical text, Madoka's book portrays her extensive affiliation with and sincere admiration for Didik Nini Thowok (Kwee Tjoen Lian), one of Indonesia's leading contemporary pioneers of cross-gender dance. The book is an English translation of the author's 2014 Japanese monograph put out by Mekong Publishing. Primarily biographical, it also includes analytical descriptions of select choreographies, costumes and performances. The book also offers a visual anthropological case study on issues of gender identity, ethnic relations and performativity. Madoka describes Didik as an individual artist highlighting his innovations and contributions over a long 40-year career. But she also provides a necessary broader cultural context for that career. The reflexive dialogic between the dancer and Yogyakarta, Didik's roots and revival efforts among ethnic Chinese communities and his reception in international arenas all give the reader a broader context for his individual stories and anecdotes.

The chapters of the book are organised around Didik's choreographies, his affiliations with Chinese Indonesian communities and candid accounts of local, regional and international acclaim. In her brief Introduction, Madoka rightly frames transgender performance as a deeply rooted historical component of Central Javanese theatrical traditions. Like a social pendulum that swings between acceptability and tolerance to regulation and rejection, cross-gender performativity can be risky business. The Introduction also highlights Didik's ethnicity as a Chinese Indonesian who produces cross-gender experimental artistic creations. This double "boundary crossing" (i.e. ethnicity and gender) that Didik has had to contend with all his life forms the basis of Madoka's subsequent chapters. Her goal is to present an engaged performing artist who has had a lifelong agenda to, "...deconstruct the stereotypes of both gender and ethnicity" (p. 19).

Chapter 1 "Crossing the Boundary of Gender: Female-Impersonation in Traditional Dance" introduces Javanese dance forms that employ female-impersonation, exemplary types of femininity and masculinity, body training as well as traditional Balinese and Javanese styles. East Javanese folk theatre called *ludruk* and Central Javanese court dances called *bedaya* in Yogyakarta traditionally employed female-impersonation as a quality of male refinement. In the case of *bedaya*, pre-adolescent boys' bodies were sculpted into movement choreographies featuring nine female dancers. Academy-trained dancers from the National Institute of the Arts still study across genders where students, whether female or male, learn each other's dance styles to gain sensibilities about refined or course characters. A nimble or

refined, course or stately, both male and female students learn these styles for personifying characters in dramatic narratives. In this chapter we learn that these dance styles are the fundamental. They are required in order to accurately depict such characters as Rama and Sita from the Ramayana and Arjuna and Subadra from the Mahabharata. It is not surprising to learn that Didik had foundational training in all of these in the early stages of his cross-gender dancing career. He even ventured to the neighbouring island of Bali to learn Legong from the renowned dancer I Gusti Gede Raka!

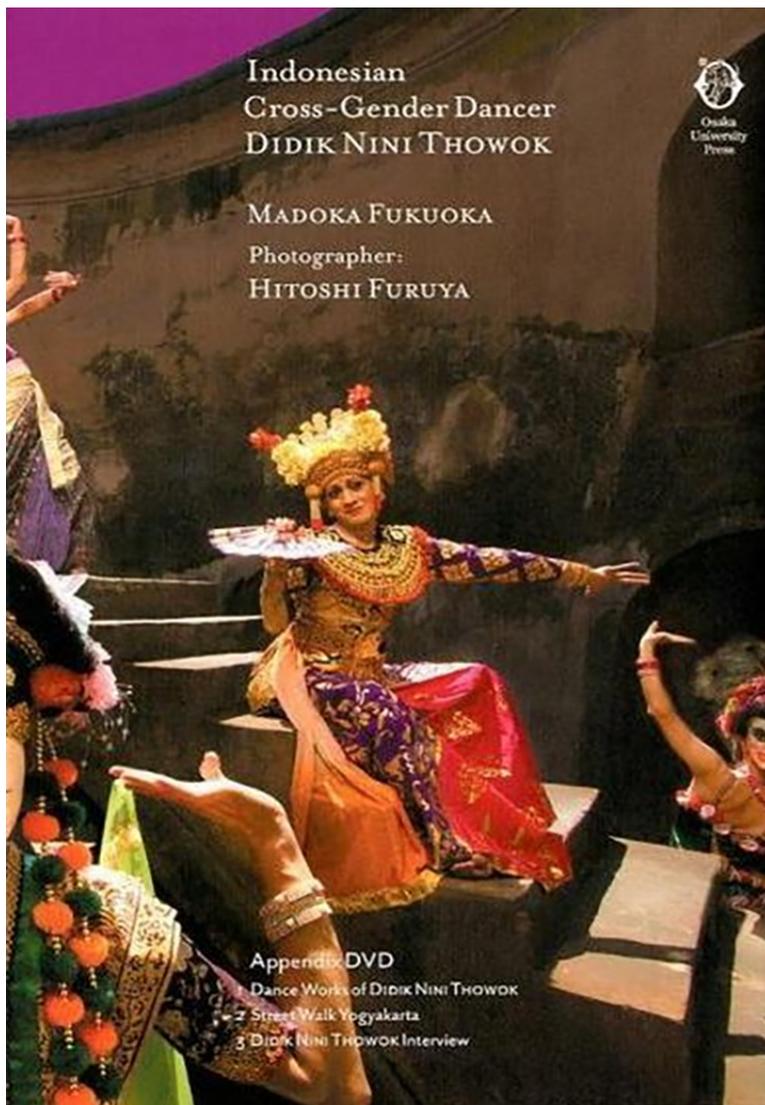
In Chapter 2 "In Search of Multiple Identities: Creative Work *Dwimuka*", Madoka pivots away from tradition to present the first of three creative works by Didik Nini Thowok. The first is probably his most iconic choreography that features two characters portrayed by a single dancer through a "split personality" approach to costume, make up and mask. Known as *Dwimuka* or "Two Faces", Didik portrays two characters simultaneously by wearing two different masks on the front and back of his head. His costume is split into front and back halves where for example, a West Javanese Ceribon mask on the front is combined with a Japanese Otafuku mask on the back. With these choreographies, remarkably, Didik has trained his body to convincingly portray his backside as if it was the front of the dancer. Madoka notes that audiences are always amazed during the "two faces" performance when Didik suddenly turns around and they realise he has been performing backwards. Even the president of Indonesia has requested Didik to perform the *Dwimuka*.

The forced Indonesianisation of Chinese descendants that followed the 1965 G30S anti-communist policies serves as backdrop for Chapter 3 "Crossing the Boundary of Ethnic Identity: Creative Work *Panca Sari*". The author extracts the salient points about Didik's experiences as a marginalised Chinese Indonesian minority growing up within a dominant Javanese society. The reader gets a glimpse into how, politically, one ethnic group suppressed another through limited access to state education, deprivation of public services and even the prohibition of Chinese names for businesses, organisations and people. The chapter also describes the ridicule, bullying and public torment Didik endured during junior high school because he was the target of prejudice as the only Chinese Indonesian in his class. As a result his creative works have suppressed any expression of his *peranakan* (Chinese Indonesian) ethnicity until only recently when in 2010 he created *Panca Sari* or "Five Elements". For the first time in his career he openly displayed his ethnicity in choreographies that included Chinese, Western, Javanese, Balinese and Indian movement vocabulary and costume.

On p. 59, the reader can almost feel Didik's long-awaited sigh of relief, joy and elation seen Hitoshi Furuyas captivating full colour image of Didik performing his Chinese ribbon dance with a confident smile across his face.

Chapter 4 "From Comedy to Serious Performance: The Creative Work *Dewi Sarak Jodag*" details Didik's career as a cross-gender comedian and how he battled negative social stereotypes for much of his career. Male actors portraying female roles on stage frequently employed comedy as a way to ameliorate the tensions felt off stage. Comic roles did indeed receive laughter from the audience on stage, but were often ridiculed was the show was over. Like most comedians, Didik was keenly aware of his audiences and how best to deal with being the target of ridicule and constant teasing. As Madoka puts it, Didik would, "... purposely appeal to the folly of men playing roles for women. It was a strategic attempt of his deconstruction of gender stereotypes through comical acts" (p. 65). In his creation, *Dewi Sarak Jodag*, three contrasting characters are depicted including comedic, bombastic and dynamic. Lasting more than 20 minutes, Didik toggles between the three characters taking the audience through a range of expressive emotions.

After the three previous chapters that featured creative works, the following three chapters return to the biographic analysis. Chapter 5 "As an Indonesian Dancer" documents Didik's affiliations with Chinese community temple celebrations in Gudo, East Java. It traces the dancer's involvement with an extended network of Chinese descendant communities and culminates with an event in year 2013 when Chinese New Year in Yogyakarta is celebrated with the dedication of newly built entrance gate to Chinatown. In the event, Didik is a committee member and he dances a new choreography that is, for one of the first times in his career, exclusively Chinese without references to Javanese culture. This is of particular significance given increased tolerance in the current political climate of Indonesia today. The brevity of both Chapter 6 "The Body of a Female-Impersonating Dancer" and Chapter 7 "From the Local Community to the World" leaves the reader wondering if the biographical content contained in just eight pages of the former and seven pages of the later could have been subsumed in other chapters. Chapter 7 has more pictures than text and is less than 1,200 words in length. We do learn in Chapters 8 and 9 of Didik's experiences as a studio manager and teacher as well as his 60th birthday celebration entitled REBORN. But what these and other chapters lack in written text, they more than make up for in visuals.



It is worth mentioning in particular that Hitoshi Furuya's photos are nothing short of dazzling. The front, back cover and spine of the volume burst with colourful costumes. Almost every page reveals a new pose, posturing or position featuring Didik's signature dances. His choreographies and dramatic characters are painted in pictures from his signature "Two Faces" to the Balinese Legong and comical roles, to mask and facial expressions. All of the images communicate the pioneering persona of one of Indonesia's premier cross-gender dancers who has persevered, not only through gender intolerance, but also ethnic discrimination. Didik's resilience and artistic spirit shine upon the pages of this volume which is appropriate for theatre scholars, gender and ethnic relations scholars with a keen interest in Southeast Asian performing arts.