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dance

Bang! Purr Fusion puppetry at MIT

BY MARCIA B. SIEGEL

ShadowBang, the fusion puppet show by Evan Ziporyn and I Wayan Wija that premiered last weekend at MIT's Kresge Little Theater, offered us the chance to laugh without irony or guilt for the first time in many weeks. The Balinese shadow play (wayang kulit) sets



opposites alongside each other: good and evil, humans and supernaturals, heroes and villains, lower-class sages and confused nobles. You can't always tell the good guys from the bad guys, and in battle neither side wins conclusively. Wayang kulit depicts the world not as it should be but as it is — in highly fictionalized form.

DEPARTING FROM TRADITION: Evan Ziporyn and I Wayan Wija have reconceived the Balinese shadow play.

ShadowBang's main character is Dumdumbwi, a power-mad monster who roars and snuffles and has to have everything translated into broken English by a squat little retainer, a clown with a hysterical laugh. This vassal keeps charging ahead and inciting his master to "Show yourself! Show your strength!" They arrive, with an army of grotesques, at a blue space they figure out must be the ocean. But they're intimidated by a Sea God who begs them not to drink all the water because they'll kill the sea animals, so could they please go find some other enemies.

Trekking into the mountains, the demons encounter dinosaurs, predatory lions, and a hocketing chorus of frogs. They hold a party complete with raunchy dancing girls. Next day they meet up with Subali, the monkey king, who quickly dispatches them with the help of his army of primates.

Using traditional puppet personalities like the family of peasant clowns and the imposing demons, *ShadowBang* tries to configure familiar Balinese themes and role playing for a modern audience. Wija, a master dalang (puppeteer) from Bali, and Ziporyn, the director of MIT's Balinese Gamelan Galak Tika, have reconceived two of the basic components of wayang kulit, the music and the flat screen behind which the dalang animates his two-dimensional, filigreed leather puppets.

Instead of gamelan music, Ziporyn has written a score for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, of which he's also a member. This modern ensemble based in New York has a sound as distinctive as the gamelan but very different in quality. Strings, percussion, keyboards, and winds together don't produce the sonorous clamor that usually supports the extended battles and philosophical debates of wayang. Ziporyn has retained some of the gamelan's propulsiveness, with a regular beat that speeds up and slows down, stops abruptly and starts again, and provides an anchor for rhythmic changes. But his music is more easygoing, less of a shock.

The score sometimes sounded a little like early jazz couched in dissonant harmonics. It seemed at first alien to the traditional puppets, but they gamely boogied to the rhythms and soon the mix felt comfortable. With lighting instruments in place of the traditional oil lamp, the puppets were projected onto not one but two screens



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on ramp, the puppets were projected onto not one but two screens, stretched along converging diagonals of the stage. This allowed the possibility for some multimedia tricks, like the ghostly apparitions that stood for deities, and for scenic effects like tree branches. It also allowed the audience to see the band, who were set up behind one screen.

Working in an environmentalist modern variant called wayang tantri, Wija has created new stories and designed new puppets to supplement the traditional ones — slithery fishes, brontosauruses, topless hula dancers with swively hips. Another big departure from tradition was the appearance of a live dancer, Made Moja, in the role of Subali. I thought this was really jarring, but I reminded myself how cultures we think of as old and unchanging are always siphoning up modern innovations and putting the formulas together in new ways. Moja-Subali subdued the puppet armies and Dumdumbwi with martial moves derived from the basic Balinese warrior's dance, Baris.

The introduction of a real actor into the shadow world led to a gradual withdrawal from fantasy. The screen concealing the dalang was moved away and we saw him, as we had at the beginning of the show, seated on the floor with his cast of characters fanned out around him. He blessed the puppets and the musicians with holy water, and then, assisted by Moja, he began storing them away in a wooden footlocker. He held up each one and fluffed it a bit, letting the audience glimpse how beautifully these expressive objects are made and painted. With this small ceremony he conveyed the idea that the magic wasn't really finished, only being put to sleep.

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