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Maria Tri Sulistyani & Iwan Effendi: Making puppets for all

JP/Ika Krismantari People only know two kinds of puppetry in Indonesia

Ika Krismantari (The Jakarta Post)

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People only know two kinds of puppetry in Indonesia. The first, which is usually seen on television, is purely dedicated to children's education while the second goes back to ancient traditions only older people seem to appreciate.

But the Papermoon Puppet Theater of Yogyakarta doesn't fall into either category. It's a new type of performance art blending fine arts and theater in one show. Using experimental media, Papermoon reaches out to wider audiences, by not only exploring deep and controversial themes but also portraying problems children and adults face in their everyday life.

Papermoon is the brainchild of Maria "Ria" Tri Sulistyani, a children book illustrator-cum-writer as well as a former theater actress. It was established in 2006 in Yogyakarta as an art space to nurture the younger generation's interest in the art world.

It was Ria's love for children and performance art that initially brought her to explore the world of puppetry.

After meeting and holding long discussions with her now husband and artist Iwan Effendi, she decided upon using the medium of puppetry to attract larger audiences.

The Jakarta Post met the couple while they were preparing for a show at the Goethe Institute Jakarta last weekend to find out more about Papermoon's passion for communicating with larger audiences using a blend of art forms.

Ria explained that the pair experienced an epiphany when attending the Jakarta International Puppetry Festival in 2006.

"One of the puppeteers in the festival performed Shakespeare. That's when it dawned on me: 'hey, puppet theater is not only for kids,'" Ria explained.

From then on, Iwan and Ria explored puppetry as an art medium to convey different kinds of messages to larger audiences, infusing it with experimental media and fine arts.

They shocked the public early 2008 with *Noda Lelaki di Dada Mona* (A Man's Stain in Mona's Chest), puppet performance aimed at adults only.

"The audience didn't foresee that watching a puppet performance would be thought provoking because we tackled serious topics, politic and sex," Iwan said.

But the show was a success. After that, the couple became addicted to putting together puppet performances for larger audiences.

The couple has enriched their knowledge of puppetry by exchanging notes with puppeteers from all around the world, either welcoming them into their small house-studio in Yogyakarta, or traveling overseas to meet them.

After securing a grant from the Asian Cultural Council, Ria and Iwan went to New York in 2009 to meet more than 70 puppet masters and familiarize themselves with puppetry in the US.

But growing people's appreciation for puppetry nowadays is not easy, with the art community still undermining the existence of puppet arts.

"It's really hard. People struggle to make a living. I think almost everywhere people undermine puppetry in arts. People never seem to take it seriously [as a form of art]. They persist in considering it a complementary form of art and always associate it with children," said Ria.

This hasn't deterred the couple from pursuing their dream, as both are convinced the art of puppetry is a rich medium with a bright future ahead.

Iwan and Ria have thus decided to continue their endeavor to make puppetry a universal art form that can be used to express any kind of messages. For them, Papermoon occupies a grey area in the world of art as it combines both performance art and fine arts.

Straddling two art forms, however, has given the artists the opportunity to explore arts without limits, Ria explained.

"We can do almost anything without fear of being judged," said Ria, who was awarded the Empowering Women Artist Award from Kelola, Hivos and Ford Foundation in 2010 and 2011.

Ria and Iwan — who have been married for more than three years — look like the perfect match, frequently completing each other's sentences during the interview.

In the end, both have gained valuable insights into each other's art by collaborating in Papermoon.

"When I make an artwork, I try to make stories out of it, while Ria, who is used to developing stories, now pays attention to composition and visual aspects," says Iwan, who always involves Papermoon in his art exhibitions.

Papermoon may end up being the comfortable house that allows both to grow into brilliant artists and create spectacular art performances.

“Having a performance is like having children. You nurture them in your concept, give birth to them and introduce them to others during performances,” Iwan said.

Iwan and Ria’s latest child is a heartbreaking story called Mwathirika, which delves into one of the darker chapters in Indonesian history where many people were kidnapped and killed in 1965 for allegedly embracing communism.

The good response the performance received from critics and audience has shown the couple has succeeded in introducing a new art concept in Indonesia, which is: Puppetry for all.