

There are no translations available.

Ganug Nugroho Adi, Contributor, Surakarta, Central Java | Sat, 05/29/2010 9:58 AM | People

In 1987, former minister of information Boedihardjo called Ki Manteb Soedharsono a “satanic puppeteer” after watching the puppeteer from Karanganyar, Surakarta, perform wayang, a shadow play.

Manteb didn't inherit his nickname because of any devilish traits, but was so anointed in recognition of Boedihardjo's admiration for sabetan (the artistic movements in the puppet performances), carried out by the puppeteer.

Manteb said Boedihardjo used the phrase “satanic puppeteer” to praise the puppeteer's skilful movements, which could not be equalled. Since then, he has accepted the sobriquet “Satanic Puppeteer”.



JP/Ganug Nugroho

It's now been more than 20 years since Manteb was given the nickname. But the expertise with which the 62-year-old manipulates the leather puppets has not faded.

In Manteb's hands, the small puppets are imbued with such strong spirit that they look as though they have come alive. Manteb is extremely skilful in manipulating his puppets, moving them rapidly from here to there.

"Sabetan isn't simply a matter of skill, but rather a way to give the puppets spirit. People can learn how to manipulate puppets in just one month. But without the right skill, the puppets might still appear dead, or without spirit," Manteb said at his joglo (traditional Javanese mansion), in the Perum Permata Buana complex, Tohudan, Colomadu, Karanganyar, Surakarta.

When discussing the movements, Manteb admitted he had developed his skills by watching kung fu films starring Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Long before that, Manteb had learned his techniques from Ki Warseno Kethek, a famous puppeteer from Wonogiri. At the time, Warseno was known to have great sabetan skills.

"I developed my artistic movement techniques from Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan films. Their kung fu movements inspired my sabetan," the father of six children said.

Manteb was born into a puppet master family: His grandfather and father, Ki Hardjo Hardjowijoyo Brahim, were both famous and well-respected puppeteers in their day.

His father and mother, Nyi Darti, a gamelan singer and an eminent gamelan musician, groomed him to be a puppeteer from early on. From second grade at elementary school, Manteb would tag along with Ki Hardjo to take part in shadow play performances. At the age of 12, Manteb performed a shadow play in public for the first time.

After being mentored by Ki Warseno Kethek, Manteb perfected the art of puppeteering with Ki Nartosabdo and Ki Sudarman Gondodharsono, in Semarang.

In 1972, Manteb won the Pakeliran Padat (a shadow puppet theater) contest in Surakarta. From then on, his name shot to fame. But he still had to fight hard, because during the 1970s and 1980s, Ki Narto Sabdo and Ki Anom Suroto still dominated the world of shadow puppets.

“Ki Narto was skilful in dramatization, whereas Ki Anom was the vocal expert. I had to be different from them. In the end, I chose to concentrate on the movements of the puppets,” Manteb said.

Since 1983 he has been putting on regular performances. A puppet stage is set up in his house every Tuesday or Legi (the first day of the five-day week in the Javanese calendar), coinciding with his weton (birthday in the Javanese calendar). This event is known as Legen (natural) Tuesday night and presents puppeteers from various regions.

Manteb’s popularity as a national-level puppeteer rose further after he performed a puppet show called *Banjaran Bima*. (Bima is a hero in the Mahabharata epic), once a month for a full year (in 12 episodes) in Jakarta, in 1987.

In 2004, Manteb created a record by performing a shadow play for 24 hours and 28 minutes without a break for the Indonesian Record Museum (MURI).

Even though Manteb tends to perform *pakeliran*, classical shadow puppets, his shows are nevertheless infused with innovation.

As a puppeteer, he has been a pioneer in innovative visualization, adapting the various elements of modern performances to enrich the nuances of *pakeliran* without removing the content and subtleties of Javanese culture. With such creativity, the artistic space of the *kelir* (the screen for a shadow play) is seen as more beautiful. This is particularly enhanced by the lighting design.

For the musical accompaniment, Manteb often uses modern musical instruments such as drums, violins, trumpets, and cymbals, so the shadow puppet show becomes more attractive and dynamic. In the beginning, this breakthrough attracted criticism from senior puppeteers. However, many of them eventually supported his innovative spirit.

Although he emphasizes the aesthetic side of pakeliran performances, his shows also provide space for the audience to reflect on life.

In his shows, which are full of moral messages, social criticisms and solutions to problems, Manteb has always tried to include meaning and reinterpret the play he is presenting.

"Actually, puppets aren't just for entertainment, but they also act as a medium for guidance. Wayang creates an opportunity to learn about life. It exposes different characters so [people's] behaviors can be understood from the puppets," Manteb said.

Fifty years on, the puppeteer's popularity is still going strong. His fans are spread across various regions in Indonesia, not only in Java but also overseas.

He has already presented thousands of shows, performed at Ruwatan events (to banish misfortune), celebrations and political campaigns.

Of the many plays he has staged, a few have become famous including, among others, Banjaran Bima, Ciptoning (about the name of Arjuna) and Wiratha Parwa (a story about Pandawa, one of the five acknowledged sons of Pandu, in exile after he lost at dice).

One notable play is Celeng Degleng, a fragment of Manteb's life, where he interprets the paintings of Djoko Pekik, particularly his work Berburu Celeng (hunting the wild boar), which describes the fall of the Soeharto regime.

Manteb has taken shadow puppet performances abroad to places like the United States, Japan, and Suriname, countries that have frequently invited him.

When UNESCO recognized the puppet arts as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, Manteb was chosen to represent the community of Indonesian puppeteers and received an award.

In May this year, Manteb is heading to Japan to receive the Nikkei Asia Prize Award 2010 in the field of culture, a tribute to Asians of outstanding achievement, who have made a significant contribution in the field of regional growth, science, technology, innovation and culture.

At almost 72, Manteb is aware his time is running out. So he has been grooming future Manteb's. At the moment, for example, he is teaching approximately 60 children and teenagers.

"Shadow puppets do not die. We, as parents, should know when it is time for regeneration. Do not forget to pass one's skills onto others," he said.