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CHAPTER 8

ACTING

RANDAI'S UNIQUE character is created by various specific acting conventions: the metered and melodious speeches, the positioning and movement of the actors, the fighting scenes, and the interplay between songs and acting. Generally speaking, acting is a more flexible element than the songs or the galombang movements; and it has changed more significantly than the other elements, possibly because it is the newest addition to the composite art form of randai. Performers seem to take more liberties with improvisation and innovation in the area of acting than in the songs or galombang dance, which are more strictly preserved in their traditional forms.

Acting takes place within the circle formed by the seated galombang members. In this empty open space, without scenery, and with a minimum of props, the actors rely on the singers to establish location, time, and general mood in the song preceding each individual scene. The scenes are enacted in a form of storytelling in dialogue form with elaborate vocal stylization. In contrast to the vocal style, most actors and actresses today simply stand in place while they deliver their lines. Except for choreographed fighting

scenes, their movement is limited to a few steps and gestures. The focus is clearly on the content of the words where there are words, and on silek where there is movement.

Role Types

As we have seen in chapter 5, there is a wider range and larger number of male role types in a randai play; female roles are often limited to just two per play. The major male role types include young heroes, older fathers or uncles, kings, religious leaders, silek teachers, traditional healers (pawang or dukun), villains, robbers, clowns, guards, and servants. Female role types are typically defined primarily by their relationship to men: young unmarried daughters, wives, mothers, and servants. The large amount and variety of male roles is clearly reminiscent of the fact that randai was initially an all-male theater form centered around male-male relationships and conflicts.¹ On the average, the male roles outnumber the females by four to one. Often plays have only one female character, although the standard is two females (often mother and daughter) and six to eight males. The play *Umbuik Mudo*, for instance, has seven principal male roles: the young hero, Umbuik; his teacher, who is also the uncle of the maiden Puti Galang Banyak; her father; a second silek teacher in the rantau; and three robbers. Secondary male roles are Umbuik's father, who dies in the first scene; several male villagers who find the dying man, and who later double as guests at the teacher's house; and a third teacher in the rantau. The two principal female roles are Puti Galang Banyak and Umbuik's mother. Secondary female roles are Umbuik's sister, and Puti's mother. In the much longer play *Anggun Nan Tongga*, the female-male ratio is similarly unequal. Although the entire epic has five main female characters, each segment that is typically performed as an individual randai play has only one or two principal female roles, typically a young unmarried girl and her mother. Male roles again are far more numerous and include, besides the

young hero, Anggun: his friend, guard, and advisor Bujang Sala-maik; his five uncles, whom he finds in different parts of the world; his countless adversaries; his teachers; and various healers and magicians, fishermen, peddlers, and peasants.

The same ratio can also be found in newer plays written after women began to act in randai. *Sutan Sari Alam* offers only one principal female role, the girl Rosani, who returned from the rantau in Jakarta with her father. The only secondary female role is an aunt. The principal male roles include the young hero, Sari Alam, his uncle, his grandfather, the would-be rapist Sutan Pamenan, and Pamenan's friend. Clearly, new plays have a cast distribution similar to that of older plays.² Male characters are the principal carriers of the plot, and consequently they have by far the greater share of lines and action.

The comparison of acting styles according to role types shows various stereotypical behavioral patterns. Male roles generally use a larger kinesphere than female roles;³ villains, clowns, and robbers in turn use a larger kinesphere than other more refined male characters. Unrefined roles also speak in harsher voices and show more uncontrolled emotions like anger, fear, or contempt. The more refined and educated a character is, the more he or she will control emotional outbreaks, speak a high-level language embellished with metaphors and proverbs, and move in a controlled and slow manner.

The least refined characters are the robbers, obvious stock characters who always appear in groups of three or four. They have a large repertoire of standard sets of antics, jests, and pranks. A prominent example of their clowning is their frequent mistaking of members of their gang for enemies, upon which they start fighting with each other before they recognize each other as friends. A robber gang normally consists of an older leader and two or three younger, cowardly underlings. Once they face an opponent, they boast of their strength and meanness, but as soon as the fighting is about to start, the younger ones get frightened and push each other forward to take on the enemy. Clown-robbers are depicted as

malicious, ill-tempered, simple-minded, gullible, uneducated, clumsy, and boisterous. Nevertheless, they are typically not entirely evil, and upon encountering a superior hero they can be reformed to follow the right path.

Another type of unrefined character is the stereotypical villain. For example, Rajo Nan Panjang, the murderer of Sabai's father, is a thoroughly vicious despot. He struts around commandeering everybody and demanding everything at once. He is bad-tempered, either speaking in a loud voice and with unrefined expressions, or else using cunning and a falsely sweet language to manipulate others. Malicious, powerful, arrogant, and vengeful, he shows no respect for the rules of adat and religion, and laughs at people who do.

A refined male hero, on the contrary, behaves according to adat and religion, obeys his elders and teachers, and fulfills his familial obligations. Rambun Pamenan, the young male hero of a play by the same name, for instance, goes to rescue his mother, who has been imprisoned by an evil and lecherous king. A dutiful son, he is also courteous and respectful toward those he meets on the way. He is kind, even to the two watchmen who guard his mother. He convinces them to turn against their malicious boss, always speaking in a kind, refined, and eloquent voice. Rambun's speeches and body language indicate that he is in control of his emotions and therefore of the situation. When he finally has to face his mighty opponent, he is brave, skilled, and fair in his fighting.

The female impersonator, *bujang gadih* (boy girl), acts similarly to female actresses portraying female characters. Neither an exaggerated high voice, nor extremely softened movements are observed.⁴ The actor portrays the character primarily through the content of the lines and the female costume, and only secondarily through his voice and body language. Unfortunately, because there are so few female impersonators left in *randai* theater today, it is impossible to determine if and how female performers have been influenced by the performance style of their predecessors.⁵

Female characters are differentiated by age and social status. Older females appear in the function of mother or aunt, where

they normally enjoy the respect of the younger generation. Young females are unmarried girls, often portrayed as naive, uneducated, and foolish in their behavior, which justifies their patronage by elders. Exceptions like Sabai are rare. She is wise, although young, has good judgment, and acts with determination. The more standard young female is like Puti Galang Banyak: naive, a little spoiled, and without initiative; or like Siti Nurina, an obedient, dutiful daughter and trusting fiancée. There are no female equivalents to the male evil kings or robbers. Female characters can be mischievous or use trickery at times, like Dandomi, who lures Anggun into marriage, but they are neither overtly evil nor powerful. Accordingly, their body language and vocalization is that of a refined character, with small gestures, restrained flow of movements, and a moderate voice.

Animals and spirits are a special class of role types and are portrayed in various ways. Several plays have a speaking parrot (*nuri*) as a major character, while others feature tigers, monkeys, or buffaloes. The latter three are portrayed by actors in full body suits with face masks, and they don't speak. The *nuri*, however, can be portrayed in two distinct ways, either by an actress or actor wearing the standard female or male *randai* costume and speaking the bird's lines face-to-face with the other characters, or else by a fake bird in a cage with an actor offstage providing the voice of the bird. The first type of impersonation is closer to the storytelling tradition in which the narrator lends his voice to the character. Here the need to change the outward appearance does not arise. The second type attempts a more realistic enactment, using a bird in a cage and an offstage voice.

A similar distinction can be made for the portrayal of spirits and ghosts. One type of enactment of spirits has an actor with a veil or wig concealing his face speaking to other characters in the center of the circle. The second type uses only an offstage voice as the voice of the supernatural entity. In this case, the acting partner will wander around, staring into space, trying to locate the source of the voice (unsuccessfully, of course). The impression of the presence of

the spirit is created indirectly by a voice out of nowhere and the reaction of other characters to the voice.⁶ Here, it is actually hard to determine which of the two types of enactment is the more "realistic" depiction of a ghost; the invisible one, or the one with the wig or veil. According to Minangkabau beliefs, ghosts and spirits can appear in various human and animal shapes, and as disembodied voices. However, the concurrent existence of different approaches to the depiction of animals and spirits raises the possibility of the recent development of a more realistic acting style. If the recollections of older randai artists are correct, randai has indeed become more realistic over the past twenty-five years. The use of an actual bird, for instance, is not remembered as an element of randai in the past, nor are the use of wigs or veils for ghosts. The emergence of greater realism could be explained through the growing exposure to the realism of Western media such as television and film.

Vocalization

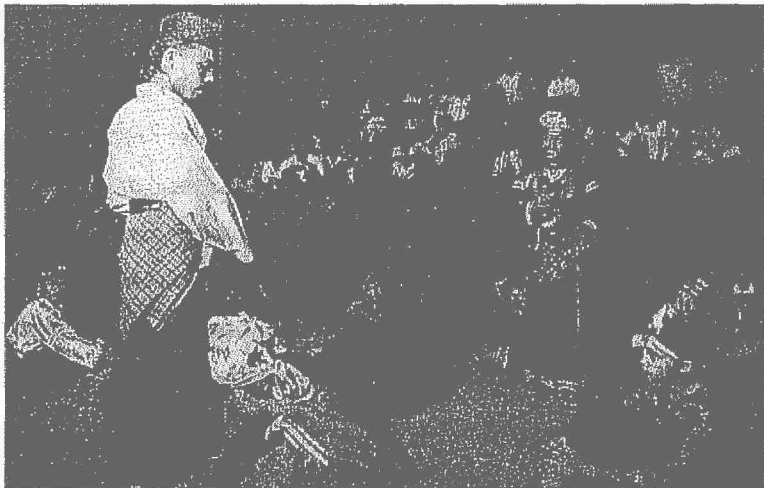
Most of the speeches in randai are delivered in a melodious, fairly regular meter, filled with rhymed proverbs and stock phrases. Depending on the skill and experience of the performers, contemporary comments and ad-libs are integrated to fit the meter, so that the melodious flow of a speech is sustained. Traditionally, this melodious and metered vocalization is sustained even when emotions like anger, sadness, surprise, or fear are expressed. Emotions are normally conveyed through the content of the words rather than through emotional outbursts and graphic enactment. Exceptions are the utterances of clowns and villains, who curse, laugh, use Indonesian and foreign languages (English and Dutch), and make nonsensical sounds for comic effect.

Increasingly, more and more groups add "realistic" enactment of emotions in high points of a scene. Crying and sobbing are added to scenes of grief. Puti Linduang Bulan (the mother of Rambun Pamenan) for instance, is kidnapped by the evil king Rajo

Angek after her husband dies. During her initial confrontation with the lusty despot, she retains her composure and speaks in eloquent phrases reminding him of adat rules and propriety. He reacts with derisive laughter and threatens her with his knife. She goes to her knees, requesting extra time to mourn properly for her husband, all still with customary metered and melodious speeches. However, as soon as she is alone with her maidservant, they both cry and lament over the forthcoming misery. Puti Linduang Bulan crouches on the floor, while her servant embraces and comforts her. Their sobbing lasts for several minutes until the end of the scene. A song then describes Puti's suffering in the lyrics.⁷

Movement Conventions

The circular formation of a randai performance and the fact that audiences are traditionally on all sides of the circle has led to unique acting conventions. Actors position themselves on opposite sides within the circle, and this artificially enlarged distance



Two male actors of the randai group Palito Nyalo. Notice the galombang dancers seated around them. (Photo by Edy Utama)

between characters gives the dialogue a larger-than-life quality. This distance is generally maintained even if characters have conversations with rather intimate content.

In addition to this positioning, the basic movement patterns within the circle are also remarkable. After the exchange of several lines, the actors interrupt the talking, walk a few steps clockwise or counterclockwise in the circle to a new position and resume the dialogue. This is intended to give all audience members equal opportunity to see and hear clearly. It also adds an almost Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, since the scenes are interrupted repeatedly and the spectators are constantly reminded that the actors change places to give all of them a better view. This convention is only altered when the performance is given on a raised stage with the audience on only one side. In that case the actors face front at all times and they also tend to stand closer together.

Another movement convention is the *langkah duo*, a two-step pattern derived from *silek*. First, an actor takes one step forward, placing the rear foot close to the front foot; he pauses and then



A male and female actor of the group Sago Sejati perform a scene from the play Umbuik Mudo.

takes one step backward, placing the front foot close to the rear foot. The knees are slightly bent at all times. This movement convention echoes a basic silek practice wherein participants try to blend their movements and achieve a harmonious flow. Both combatants continuously adjust their movements and body positions to each other, typically keeping an equal distance while exchanging strikes and blocks.

Traditionally, this stepping technique in randai was also accompanied by arm movements and hand gestures derived from silek blocks and strikes, but today these are only infrequently used. One step is typically taken per spoken line, timed to the tempo of the speech. There are many variations of this technique. Although traditionally used only by male actors, it is nowadays also used for female roles. Some groups use it only for the character that is speaking while the other characters remain still. Other groups coordinate this stepping pattern so that all actors step in unison on all lines spoken. While facing each other, actor A moves backward and actor B moves forward and vice versa, so that the distance between them remains the same. The *langkah duo* is employed to different degrees by various groups or various actors within a group. Some actors move exclusively in this fashion, while others use it only occasionally to emphasize important lines.

Another characteristic movement convention is a silek-derived stepping sequence mainly used for the first entrance of servant characters and prior to fighting scenes. Called *langkah tiga* (three steps) or *langkah ampek* (four steps), depending on the silek style, it is a formal greeting consisting of three or four steps and a final pose. If the actor plays a servant role, he enters with the silek steps and assumes a crouching position, folding his hands above his head in what is called a *sambah* (greeting). A servant character addresses a higher-standing character in this fashion to show respect and deference. This pose is typically used by the first character who enters the circle at the beginning of the play, in order to show respect toward the audience and to honor the ancestors of both community and performers.

A more elaborate variation of this entrance is used by male characters who are not servants. As an indication that they will be involved in a fighting scene at some point in the play, their first entrance opens with a sequence that also includes the three or four silek steps. The pose, however, is different. The actor crouches and extends both arms diagonally down toward the floor, palms facing up, fingertips touching the ground. From here, he raises both hands to his head, touching his temples lightly with the fingers. He momentarily holds both poses. He might then turn his body to face a different direction and repeat the greeting up to four times.⁸

During scenes the amount and quality of movement of a character is determined by the role type and circumstances. A refined character like an older mother, a young maiden, or a respected village chief generally uses small gestures and a restrained movement flow, while unrefined characters like clowns or villains use larger gestures and a less restrained flow of movement. The basic gestures are the same: pointing with the index finger, making a fist, holding the right hand to the heart, covering the eyes, putting one hand on the hip, pushing out the palm to stop someone, and other standard randai gestures. Intensity, duration, and range of these movements, however, vary according to the type of character.

There are no strict rules, and different groups use different movement types. A few groups incorporate silek steps for each movement in space as well as hand gestures with each step, both timed to the spoken lines. Other groups incorporate virtually no movement, and the actors merely stand in place and deliver their lines as storytellers.⁹

Interaction between Characters

Generally, scenes in randai have a single focus. In most cases only one action or exchange of speeches happens between two or three characters at a time. Occasionally, multifocus scenes are created when additional characters act outside the circle, indicating a different location than the main one inside. A prime example can

be found in the performance of the play *Umbuik Mudo*. While Umbuik is engaged in the competitive Qur'an recitation in his teacher's house, the teacher's niece, Puti Galang Banyak, walks back and forth outside the circle, indicating that she is in the anjuang,¹⁰ the room from which she listens intently to Umbuik's beautiful and captivating voice. Another example in which the space outside the circle is incorporated into the scene is when robbers sneak up on lone travelers or other unsuspecting victims. In this spatial constellation speeches can occur simultaneously in the two different locations and overlap considerably, something that is strictly avoided in regular single-focus scenes. Eventually, parallel scenes will merge into one; Puti descends from the anjuang to request that Umbuik repeat his recitation, or robbers catch up with the victim and attack, thereby converging the two imaginary locations into one.

Physical contact between characters is rare. Handshakes between male characters or comforting embraces between female characters occur, but they are brief. In scenes where someone is sick, injured, or dying, he or she typically lies on the ground, while other actors kneel close by. In moments of intimacy or sadness, actors also tend to kneel close to each other. Ultimate intimacy is expressed in scenes where two lovers vow to either marry each other or die, and even this highly emotional exchange is typically sealed with a mere handshake and a longing glance. No other contact occurs.¹¹ Again, closeness is expressed through lyrical proverbs and metaphors rather than through body language. The most unrestrained physical contact is displayed in fighting scenes and during interactions among characters like robbers who teasingly push, drag, and carry each other around, stumble over each other, and engage in mock battles.

Scenes of Conflict

In almost every randai performance, a conflict escalates and then culminates in a physical fighting scene. Often, the actual

physical fighting is preceded by a lengthy verbal exchange. This verbal fight or *silek lida* (silek of the tongue) can be a kind of competition of verbal fighting skills during which both opponents ad-lib insults and threats intended to proclaim their strength and to intimidate each other. This strategy is often used among robbers. In other scenarios, the *silek lida* can be used by a virtuous character to verbally defeat the aggressor and preempt a physical attack. This strategy, however, is rarely successful in *randai*, and typically the hero will have to engage in a physical fight to defeat his opponent. Once it is apparent that a physical confrontation can no longer be prevented verbally, a standard phrase will be exclaimed by one of the fighters: "Open your step!" or "Let's compare our steps!" (both referring to *silek* steps). Both performers then circle each other in low crouching steps, and exchange the first attacks and defenses. Often a second or third attacker will join and the excitement builds further when one of them draws a weapon.¹²

During a fighting scene the actors stay in character. A boisterous robber for instance will strut around showing off his muscles between attacks, while a refined character will simply stand composed and look at his opponent with contempt. A cowardly fighter will try to hide behind his companions and fight only when they push him toward their opponent. Fights are frequently interrupted by the participants to shout more insults at the opponents and comment on the other fighters' lack of good *silek* techniques. When several robbers are engaged in combat, they frequently ad-lib advice or encouragement to their companions and insults at their common enemy.

The outcome of fights varies according to the plot and the characters involved. Fights in which robbers attack an innocent hero tend to end in a standard manner. After the robbers are defeated, they give up and beg for mercy in an exaggerated and comic fashion. They tremble and stutter, shriek and cry. The hero will then normally spare their lives after he makes them promise to give up their criminal ways and follow the true and righteous path of Islam. Rarely are robbers killed for their crimes.

In more serious combat between two equally strong opponents, either one can be defeated. If the evil character wins, it is frequently through the use of trickery or black magic. The antagonist might shoot his opponent in the back like Rajo Nan Panjang, who shoots Sabai Nan Aluih's father, or he might call several underlings, who then overwhelm the good character. The villain will triumph without remorse. On the contrary, if a good character kills an evil one, he or she will typically express compassion and sorrow for the adversary. Sabai Nan Aluih, for instance, grieves for both her murdered father and his murderer after she has taken revenge and killed him.

Other confrontations are solved through the interference of a higher entity, often a village chief, uncle, or teacher. A prominent example is the combat between Anggun Nan Tongga and Katik Alam Tansudin. Katik loses in a gambling tournament that is intended to determine who can claim Gondoriah as his fiancée. Katik maintains that Anggun has been cheating and attacks him. Since they are of equal strength, the winner cannot be determined and they fight for a long time. Finally, the spirit of their old teacher descends from the heavens, stops the fighting, and decrees that Gondoriah belongs to Anggun.