

Embodied encounters: Identities in experiential, informal dance, and movement in Central Java

Lise Lavelle, Lund University, Sweden

Contact: liselavelle@mail.dk

Abstract

The performance presented in this paper, entitled “*Perempuan*,” or “Women” in English, is the result of an intercultural meeting between three dancers, two from Java, Indonesia, and one from Denmark (me). Our performance took place in the cultural city of Solo, Central Java, during the international festival, “Ritual Art and Cultural Environment” in 1995.

I first met the two Javanese dancers at the Indonesian National Arts Institute in Solo (ISI), where I was carrying out fieldwork for my PhD, centering on the *Amerta* Movement from Java. *Amerta* Movement, created by Javanese movement-instructor and performing artist Suprpto Suryodarmo (Prpto) in the 1980s, is a free, non-stylized motion based on everyday movements and on working with awareness and attitudes to life (not an ethnic dance). *Amerta* Movement has attracted thousands of people, especially Westerners, from all walks of life and of all ages. The practitioners study identity, self-expression, movement-vocabulary, communication, and improvised performance. The research method is practice-based/artistic research.

My aim of working with the Javanese dancers for *Perempuan* was to apply the *Amerta* improvisational movement to a dance performance with professional dancers, and to exchange our dance skills. It was also based on my wish to get to know Javanese women a little better. Thus, the *Perempuan* dance project and dance performance became an encounter between non-form *Amerta* Movement, represented by me, a Westerner; and form, Javanese dance, represented by the two Javanese dancers. It was an enriching experience, which made one think about oneself, of one’s identity and dance skills, as well as about the identity and dance skills of other dancers in new ways. Questions would arise and new solutions emerge. One was seeing life and dance in a broader perspective.

Keywords: interculture, improvisation, East-West, women, identities

Introduction



Procession of three dancers. A joint project entitled *Perempuan* [Women], presented September 11, 1995, at the Padepokan Lemah Putih art school. Photographer: F. Hari Mulyatno, Bonoroto, Java, Indonesia.¹

Perempuan, “Women” in English, is a movement and dance performance, which took place at the international festival, “Ritual Art and Cultural Environment,” held in Solo/(Surakarta), Central Java, Indonesia, September 10-20, 1995. The festival, arranged by Suprpto Suryodarmo, an internationally known Javanese, contemporary performance artist, and movement instructor, was held at his art school in Solo, the Padepokan Lemah Putih. The festival, moreover, was organized in collaboration with the “Art Center” in Solo, Taman Budaya Surakarta and Institut für Kulturökologie und Sprache [Institute for Cultural Ecology and Languages] (IKOS), Berlin. Suprpto Suryodarmo (also referred to by the shorter name, Prapto), is the founder of *Amerta* Movement,² a free, non-stylized motion (*not* an ethnic dance). *Amerta* Movement has mainly attracted Westerners from all walks of life (Bloom, 2006; Lavelle, 2006; Reeve, 2009; Bloom, Galanter, & Reeve, 2014).

¹ *Procession of three dancers*, a joint project entitled *Perempuan* [Women], presented September 11, 1995, at the Padepokan Lemah Putih art school during the international festival “Ritual Art & Cultural Environment,” Solo/(Surakarta), Central Java, Indonesia. From left: Titik Handayani, Java; Sri Setyoasih (Tingtong), Java, and Lise Lavelle, Denmark. Photographer: F. Hari Mulyatno, Bonoroto, Java, Indonesia.

² *Amerta* means “the nectar of life” in Javanese.

Perempuan was an informal, experiential movement and dance performance carried out by three women dancers and choreographers, two Javanese and me, a Dane. This performance-project took place over three months. It was an encounter between form: Javanese traditional, stylized dance, represented by the two Javanese women; and non-form: free, non-stylized movement in improvisation, inspired by *Amerta* Movement, as represented by me, a Westerner. It was also founded on other cultural and artistic projects I have engaged in with Javanese and Westerners artists living in Java since my first visit there in 1977.

On the basis of the *Perempuan* performance-project, I am convinced that an intercultural exchange between East and West through dancing and performing together can inspire young people in their search for their own identity, as well as for the identity of other people from different cultures in a globalized world.

Our diverse cultural backgrounds

The *Perempuan* performance-project took place at the art school of Suprpto Suryodarmo, the Padepokan Lemah Putih, a landscape studio in nature in a hilly environment on the outskirts of the city of Solo. The performance took place in the school's main practice hall, (*pendopo*), a roofed, open-sided pavilion used for dance, ceremonies, and meetings. In the following, I will present our *Perempuan* group consisting of three women: dancers, performers, and choreographers.

Sri Setyoasih, among friends called Tingtong, was 35 years old and married with children. She was, and still is, a lecturer, M.A. [*S. Kar.*, in Indonesian], at the National Performing Arts Institute in Solo, ISI [Institut Seni Indonesia], (hereafter referred to as ISI),³ herself a skilled performer, specialized in Javanese ritual dance. Before her marriage, she danced annually at the court of the king of Solo as one of the maidens performing the *Bedoyo Ketawang* dance, the most famous and most secret among ritual dances in Java.

Titik Handayani, then a 25-year-old dancer and a graduate from ISI then known as STSI, was creating her own modern dance-theater choreographies based on tradition at the Javanese Art Center in Solo, Taman Budaya Surakarta. She also danced in the dance-theater of Waluyo Sardono, one of Indonesia's famous choreographers and dance-theater directors of the time.

³ "ISI" (formerly *STSI Surakarta*), has the largest faculty in Indonesia for traditional and classical Javanese dance (Lavelle, 2006, p. 40), and also attracts a good number of foreign students.

As for myself, after an initial stay in 1977, I returned to the city of Solo in Central Java for periods from a few months to several years during the 1980s to 2013. The purpose was to study movement and dance, specifically *Amerta* Movement, the work of Suprpto Suryodarmo, as mentioned above, as part of my doctoral dissertation in Indonesian, at Lund University, Sweden. *Amerta* Movement is based on everyday movements and on attitudes of life. It is performed with awareness and in a state of an enhanced sensitivity. My intention, in 1995, as part of my fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation was to develop a dance project with female Javanese colleagues in order to get to know them better from a cultural and an artistic perspective. At ISI, the National Performing Arts Institute in Solo, I got in contact with Tingtong and Titik. Although we had difficulties in communicating, knowing too little of each other's languages, we agreed that the goal of our performance-project was: Women who move and dance together to support each other as dancers and choreographers from different cultures and contexts, so as to create a dance-theater performance together. Getting to know each other and being together was just as important as our performance. In Java, taking the time to get to know each other whatever one's purpose is crucial.

The method leading to our performance was practice-based/artistic research founded on our daily practice, a well-known technique in Java where, according to tradition, one only learns through experience felt by one's own body.⁴ The project took the form of an exchange between our respective movement and dance skills: Javanese ritual dance with its strict form and highly stylized movements of which Tingtong was a specialist, and the free, non-stylized movement and dance improvisation inspired by the *Amerta* Movement, in which I was trained. To this I added exercises from classical Danish relaxation and movement of which I am a trained teacher from the Ingrid Prahm School in Denmark.⁵ Based on these practices of dance and movement, as well as based on our being together and our daily life activities in the practice space, we constructed a scenario which was to be carried out as an improvisation.

Approaches and challenges

Both Tingtong and Titik, as Javanese women, shared an attitude to life based on the collective, contrary to my attitude as a Westerner, based on my individuality. They were

⁴ My fieldnotes, Java, 1995.

⁵ Ingrid Prahm, a former Danish ballet/character dancer (d. 1995), was one of the pioneers of relaxation pedagogy, as this arose in Denmark from the 1930s onward. The school has since closed down, but the techniques are still practiced by Danish psycho-motor therapists.

challenged by the individuality of Westerners, deeming it egoistic, but at the same time being attracted to it as a liberty from tradition. However, their general approach to life was based on being a “part of”: part of society, part of their family, and in terms of dance, their identity was closely tied to the Javanese society, specifically to Java’s traditional, collective, ritual dances. According to the latter, the dancer should maintain an attitude so as to avoid showing her/his individual self. Thereby the spectators would not look at the dance in terms of the dancer, but, rather, look at the dance itself. Hence, Javanese ritual dances do not enhance the dancer in a personal way. There is not even a term for the dancer of ritual dance in the Javanese language, there is only a term for the dance itself: *taya* (Suharto et al, 1990, pp. 17-20, 25).

As a Westerner, I was challenged by Tingtong’s and Titik’s collective sense, by how they always seemed to do things according to the Javanese tradition (*adat*) and only *because* it was the tradition. Moreover, I was somewhat fascinated by how they managed relations in group dances in a fluent way and how they would never be bumping into each other (*Koentjaraningrat*, 1985, p. 308).

Teachings

When I was teaching, I started with physical warm-up exercises of the feet, spine, and neck, as is current in the West, and with walking freely in many ways. After each exercise, I invited Tingtong and Titik to sense from the inside how a particular exercise was felt by them personally. They were not used to training their physical bodies and their body awareness in such a personal manner. Javanese traditional dancers and especially dancers like Tingtong, a specialist of the slow ritual dances, do not warm up physically. Rather, they prepare themselves spiritually through meditation. Thus, whenever I asked Javanese dancers about their dance, they would put their hand to their heart, saying, “I dance with feeling” (*rasa*).⁶ Thereby they meant that they danced based on the feeling of their heart, somewhat like when one listens to music. When we practiced free, non-stylized movement and dance, inspired by *Amerta* Movement, Tingtong and Titik rather quickly tried to change into the structured movement patterns and stylizations of Javanese dance instead of dancing their own personal steps based on daily life movements characteristic of *Amerta* Movement and of free improvisation. In contrast, when Tingtong was teaching the highly stylized Javanese ritual dance, with its specific sitting, standing, and walking positions, and its specific *mudra*, hand- and finger-positions, it was I who had difficulties. I found it hard to adjust to the strict form of

⁶ My fieldnotes, Java, 1985-2013.

the dance and to cope with the bodily suppleness. The movements of Tingtong and Titik were reminiscent of flowing water, not least the way in which their arms and hands were undulating and the manner in which their hands and fingers were bending further backward in the joints; this was more than I had ever seen in the West, it seemed. I could not help but constantly make comparisons between them and me, not least between their body and mine.



Two dancers on the floor. A joint project titled *Perempuan* [Women], presented September 11, 1995, at the Padepokan Lemah Putih art school. Photographer: F. Hari Mulyatno, Bonoroto, Java. Indonesia.⁷

Elements from Javanese ritual dance

While teaching Javanese ritual dance, Tingtong focused on the gait of the Javanese dancer, called *lumaksono*, a basic walking technique. *Lumaksono* is as a meditation in movement. The dancers, moreover, appear to be floating when they walk in this manner. But actually the technique is simple: the dancer puts one foot in front of the other, slightly rotated toward the outside, setting the heel first to the ground, before shifting the weight to the rest of

⁷ *Two dancers on the floor.* A joint project titled *Perempuan* [Women], presented September 11, 1995, at the Padepokan Lemah Putih art school, during the international festival, “Ritual Art & Cultural Environment,” Solo/(Surakarta), Central Java, Indonesia. Left: Sri Setyoasih (Tingtong), Java, making *sembah* with her hands, the respectful greeting of ritual dance. Right: Titik Handayani, Java, shifting position of hands and sitting posture. Photographer: F. Hari Mulyatno, Bonoroto, Java, Indonesia.

the foot. Arms are hanging down naturally. This basic way of walking can be made more complicated by the dancer alternating between going high up on her toes and deep down in her knees for each step and by a Javanese *mudra*, a codified hand- and finger-position, whereby the middle finger of each hand bends, so as to join the thumb, thereby forming a circle.⁸ What makes *lumahsono* special is the attitude of the dancer, who is in a state of an enhanced sensitivity of body, mind, and spirit, a “dilated awareness,” in Western terms. The Javanese performer of ritual dance, furthermore, dances based on a spiritual attitude pervading her whole body and being. One might even see the dance as a prayer to life, nature, and the Almighty, pronounced with the whole body.⁹

Movement process

As we spent much time together in the main practice hall (*pendopo*), we alternated between individual and group activities. Each one of us had chosen a specific private space inside the *pendopo*'s overall space for our own quarters. Here we would occupy ourselves with ordinary female activities like looking at ourselves in the mirror, combing our hair, or reading. Tingtong would also be playing the xylophone and Titik would make drawings while singing in between dancing on her own. I would be looking up words in the dictionary to prepare sentences in Indonesian (the national language) or in Javanese (the mother tongue of Tingtong and Titik), or I would make exercises like stretching my hamstrings. Some of our individual daily activities later entered into the scenario for our performance. While having group activities, that is when training in Javanese dance and in free, non-stylized, improvisational movement, we would of course use the whole space of the *pendopo*. When moving and dancing freely, we often used objects from our daily individual activities, like mirrors and textiles in bright colors, and we danced and moved with these objects. We related to them not only in the usual way of looking in the mirror or of tying a scarf around our waists, but we *moved* with these objects, using an *Amerta* Movement object technique by responding to these objects physically as based on our senses. Hence, we would feel these objects, smell them, touch them physically, and so on instead of judging them or analyzing them. We would let our impressions or inner stirrings be transformed like an energy in the body into physical movements in the outside world, embodying them. In summary, our

⁸ My fieldnotes, Java, 1995.

⁹ *Ibid.*

performance took place based on a scenario of chosen points/objects/ingredients from our daily practice, carried out in movement- and dance-improvisation in the here and now.

Performance

Our whole project of training and of performance constituted an embodied encounter and a cultural exchange between East and West, the collective and the individual, in the form of a collaboration and a search of identity. It also dealt with beingness and togetherness while exchanging our skills.

We opened the performance by walking in a procession in the *lukmaksono* gait from the top of the Amerta School's hilly landscape to the bottom by the river, where the main practice hall (*pendopo*) was situated and back again for the closing. Due to the roughness of our path, too many steps in an uneven, hilly, dried up, tropical landscape, our *lumaksono* gait was rough. Tingtong and Titik walked with their hair neatly arranged in a Javanese-style knot at the back of their heads. Once we reached the *pendopo*, they let their hair fall loosely over their shoulders, a sign of surrendering oneself to life in Java. We then moved and danced with our mirrors and textiles, as mentioned above, improvising over actions from our daily training with which our bodies were familiar, and which had a communicative value, such as combing our hair, as women do, reading, drawing, making exercises, and singing and playing the xylophone.

At the end when we were getting ready to leave the *pendopo* again, Tingtong and Titik arranged their hair in a tidy knot. The music accompaniment for our performance, apart from the many sounds of Javanese village life surrounding us, consisted of the highly pitched singing, characteristic of Javanese female voices, by Titik and Tingtong, and of the playing on a bamboo xylophone by Tingtong. The spectators had been asked to witness our performance with an open heart, much in the same manner that one looks at a scenery in nature. The performance, nevertheless, still was all process. We did not yet manage to form a unified group in terms of dance and movement. Nor am I sure that this would have been a good solution or that it was our goal. Maybe a dialogue, an exchange between our different backgrounds and learned skills in terms of dance of movement was what we were looking for since we were very different from each other. Nevertheless, due to our interactive process training for the performance, I had stopped seeing Tingtong and Titik primarily as Javanese. Now I was primarily seeing them as friends, and then as Javanese.

Later developments

Since 1995 where *Perempuan* took place, many changes have occurred in the world politically and socially, not least in Java, Indonesia. And I agree with Sally Dean, the American performance artist and choreographer, when she states that, “[i]n a rapidly developing country like Indonesia, tradition versus modernity is a theme running through many aspects of life and art. It was [is] evident everywhere in Solo ... ”.¹⁰ I have lost connection with Titik, who moved to another part of Java, but my friendship with Tingtong has lasted to this day (2016). We have made several other projects together. Tingtong has also collaborated with other Western artists, including German-born puppeteer and *Amerta* Movement teacher Susana Miranti Kröber, who lives in Solo, Central Java,¹¹ and Sally Dean, mentioned above. Furthermore, Tingtong, with some of her Javanese art colleagues, has founded *Sahita*, a Javanese female theater group an initiative of modernity, that has been a great success.¹²

Personally, through my experience with *Perempuan*, I have gained a deeper understanding of the Javanese way of life, culture, and society, and broadened my outlook on life so as to incorporate solutions experienced during our *Perempuan* project. This has added to my sense of identity, an influence from Javanese culture and dance. I see more possibilities in my private and professional life than before, more ways of making solutions, of dancing, and of making dance-performances. When faced with a challenge, I will think, “What would they do in Java? What would Titik and Tingtong do?” Even though our feelings might be the same in Java and in the West, we express and value them differently. Insights such as this have enriched and still are enriching my life and work with dance and movement.

Young people, dance, and identity

For young people, dance helps them to define and perceive their own and others’ identities, whether in their home countries or when traveling the world. In my opinion, this is because dance and movement involve the young person’s whole being and not just her/his intellect. In that way, dance and movement, more easily than words, express my felt sense of where I belong and what I like and of who I am: my identity. Of course I have to look at the

¹⁰ http://www.sallyedean.com/wp-content/uploads/Departing_from_Tradition1.pdf
Downloaded 12/30/2015.

¹¹ <http://www.kemasaja.com/Susana%20Miranti%20Krober.html> Downloaded 12/30/2015.

¹² <https://www.blogger.com/profile/10506973627489135539>;
<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/09/04/nostalgia-and-experimentation-solo.html>
Downloaded 12/30/2015.

dance and movement also based on my intellect for a more clear understanding of who I am. And I am sure that our culture and society play a major role in our choice of dance and movement and consequently in the forming of our individual identities, especially for young people whose bodies are still in development. In this context, I think that Javanese culture and Javanese dances with their collective attitude have formed the identities of Tingtong and Titik and constituted the basis for their personal, collective attitudes, as seen above, just as my identity and predilection of individuality was formed by my Danish, Western culture and society.

In conclusion, I am convinced that through dance and movement, young people can research their identity and that of others in terms of issues like: “Where do I come from?”; “Who am I?”; “Where does he or she come from?”; and “Who are they?” Moreover, they can research their future identities, about “Where am I going?” They can do so, for example, through dance- and performance-projects with people from other cultures and civilizations and, they are doing it! Events like the daCi Congress in Copenhagen, July 10-15, 2015, furthermore represents a convincing opportunity for the continuation of such a development.

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Lise Lavelle, Copenhagen, Denmark, holds a PhD (Fil. Dr.) in Indonesian from Lund University, Sweden. She is a trained teacher of relaxation and movement from the Ingrid Prahm School, Denmark, and a recognized teacher of Amerta Movement by Suprpto Suryodarmo, Java, Indonesia. Her own free movement work, taught since 1988, is termed "Embodiment, dance of release and transformation." She has also made many movement and performance projects with Indonesian artists.