



## AFRICAN-AMERICAN STEP-DANCING meets Balinese 'kecak'

JP/Anggara Mahendra

Sanggar Cudamani is rehearsing a new dance in Pengosekan, but the drums and gongs in the group's thatched-roofed pavilion are silent.

Ron Jenkins  
CONTRIBUTOR/BALI

The percussive beats that pulsate in the balmy night air are not made by musical instruments. The dancers generate the complex interlocking rhythms with their bodies and voices. "Imagine taking away a drummer's drums and putting the sound in your body instead," says Khalid Freeman, an American dancer working with Cudamani in Bali while on break from his international tour with Cirque du Soleil.

"That's what body music is. My version bridges the gap between body percussion and hip-hop. I call it Khalid Greens. It's a word play on 'collard greens', which is soul food with great flavor when you know how to cook it."

Freeman is collaborating with Sanggar Cudamani on a performance that combines the syncopated vocal chanting of *kecak* with the dynamic art of African-American step-dancing. He demonstrates the moves to Cudamani's dancers with deft precision, rapidly slapping his hands against his thighs and chest as he stomps his feet in a rhythm that is contrapuntal to the sounds of his upper body.

The technique has links to the 19th century African-American slave tradition of "patting juba", which can be traced back to the African body slapping dance called *giouba*. Scholars believe that the form flourished in America when slave-owners banned drums from their plantations for fear that their music could be used to signal insurrection. The slaves responded by communicating to one another with rhythms sounded out on their bodies instead of drums.



JP/Ron Jenkins

**The steps:** Freeman and Cudamani perform at Betelnut, presenting the call and response technique that is part of the traditional African-American step-dance tradition.

The tradition was kept alive by free black minstrel performers and African-American college fraternities. Now that the form has been featured in Hollywood films like *Step Up* and *Stomp the Yard*, step-dancing is entering the global mainstream of popular entertainment.

On Thursday evening, Freeman and Cudamani presented their new work at Ubud's Betelnut stage to raise funds for the Rotary Club Bali Ubud Sunset, which supports local education and health projects.

The event was orchestrated by Rucina Ballinger after seeing Cudamani and Freeman perform last year at the International Body Music Festival in San Francisco.

"The Cudamani *kecak* dancers picked up the American body music techniques so quickly," said Ballinger, "that I wanted to give them another chance to marry the forms". Dewa Ayu Eka Putri is grateful for the opportunity to inhabit the dance steps of another culture.

"Working with Khalid gives me a chance to discover another part of the world through dancing," she says. The niece of Cudamani's founder Putu Dewa Berata, Ayu, joined the group in 1987 when she was 6 years old.

"I started out playing the drums," Ayu explains. "Maybe that is why I

can learn the American body music techniques so quickly. When I hear the rhythms of Khalid's body music I feel them internally like a drummer does, and then it is easy to play them on my body."

Ayu connects the positive energy she feels when performing American body music to the exhilaration of performing Balinese *kecak* chants.

"The feeling starts with your breath," she says, demonstrating the sharp percussive sounds of *kecak*.

"You can't be lazy. You have to breathe with an intensity that matches the intensity of your body movements. That's why when Walter Spies came to Bali in the 1930s, he saw that villages where this kind of chanting was performed were cured of diseases. The deep breathing brings good health and the strong exhalation expels whatever is troubling the body."

When Ayu refers to the German artist Walter Spies, she is recalling the origins of *kecak* chanting as an accompaniment to sacred trance dances linked to ritual healing ceremonies.

Spies worked with Balinese dancers to reshape these ceremonial chants into a spectacle for tourists that helped villagers generate income.

Step-dancing has undergone similar cross-cultural transformations as it was passed on from its sacred roots in African ritual to African-American slaves to college students in black fraternities to Hollywood, where some fear it is in danger of being appropriated as a commercial commodity.

The collaboration between Freeman and Cudamani continues the cross-pollination of art forms across national boundaries. Freeman hopes to create more work with Balinese artists.

"It's one thing to read about another culture in a book," he says while the Cudamani dancers gather around a cell phone to watch a YouTube clip of a college step-dance competition in America.

"But it's something else to be here in Bali experiencing the dance in a hut with crickets all around us. There is nothing in the world like making your own music with your own body together with other people. And there is so much foliage. Home in Las Vegas you can't even water the grass, but here everything is so green and fertile. The possibilities are endless."



JP/Kusumasari Ayuningtyas

'DRUPADI'

## The classic role of women

Kusumasari Ayuningtyas  
THE JAKARTA POST/  
KARANGANYAR, CENTRAL JAVA

Master gamelan musician and composer Rahayu "Panggah" Supanggah has been on a new project that he sees as a challenge.

The colossal dance performance *Pulung Gelung Drupadi*, involving 50 vocalists, 70 dancers and 30 *pengrawit* (gamelan musicians), conveys a grand vision, Panggah said.

The performance will not be a one-off event but is designed to become a series of performances that will take global stages.

*Drupadi* is one of the main characters in the *Mahabharata* epic. The team picked *Drupadi* because the character could serve as an entry point to address the lives of women today.

Panggah said many women as wives and mothers today had important roles in the success of men, albeit behind the scenes.

The *Mahabharata* has many characters that each has her or his own story. *Drupadi*, the wife of the five Pandawas, is only one of them, hence the idea is to make a series showcasing different characters in the colossal performance. The team will pick one character that is most relevant to the social condition at the time of the making of the work.

For Panggah, *Drupadi* had a strong affinity with today's women. *Drupadi* represents an ideal woman and mother, who gives positive encouragement to her family, especially her husbands, he said.

"*Mahabharata* is the source but today's condition is the peg," Panggah says.

Panggah is one of the country's most important composers especially in traditional Javanese music *karawitan*.

Once a resident artist of UK arts center, the Southbank Centre, Panggah has vast international experience under his belt. He first went abroad

for a cultural mission to North Korea, China and Japan at 16 years old during the rule of president Sukarno.

"Since then, I go abroad almost every year," the father of two children said.

He said his life as an artist was not an easy path. Therefore, he felt grateful for his wife of 37 years, Sundari, a homemaker in their house in Karanganyar, Central Java. "She is not an artist but she is willing to understand art and the life of an artist," Panggah said.

He added that his work forced him to miss the birth of both of his sons, but his wife did not complain.

"Nowadays, many women play important roles although in the background. If the woman is good, the husband will be good as well. The policies [the husbands] make are usually good," he said.

For this project, he made more than 20 new compositions, he said.

"Each composition has to be preceded with research and attention to actual issues. These things make a work acknowledged and lasting," said the holder of a doctorate degree from the University of Paris.

He said this project was a challenge for him because he had never collaborated on such a large performance that involved over 100 performers. Another challenge was to find performers who could both dance and sing.

Directed by Wasi Bantolo, *Drupadi* has been in the making since February last year, and is scheduled for performance in April this year at Teater Jakarta in Central Jakarta.

He said although the process was long, he did not feel bored.

Panggah, an associate artist at Southbank Centre in London, said he would use "gamelan *ageng super*," an ensemble that included also non-gamelan instruments, in *Drupadi*.

*Drupadi* will feature Panggah as the music director, Wasi as the director and Sri Wardoyo, Dhestian Wahyu Setiaji and Anggono Kusumo as choreographers.



JP/Kusumasari Ayuningtyas

Rahayu Supanggah

### Guess what?

#### Maya performs surprise gig

**JAKARTA:** Harpist Maya Hasan made a surprise performance at the Java Jazz Festival last week, sharing the stage with guitarist Jonathan Butler, saxophonist Michael Paulo and trumpeter Rick Braun on Sunday.

Maya, whose name was not on the list of the festival's performers, said she was introduced to Butler at a dinner on Saturday.

"He asked me to play with them. I didn't know they were serious," Maya told *kompas.com*. She then raced to learn to play one song and prepare for the show in a single night.

An hour before the show, Butler asked her to play in another show.

"I googled the song while changing my clothes. But it was a lot of fun, it was the best show I ever had," she said. ■



JP/PJ Leo

#### Travolta apologizes to Menzel for flub

**NEW YORK:** John Travolta has apologized to Tony Award winner Idina Menzel for mangling the pronunciation of her name during the Oscars telecast, saying he'd been "beating myself up" over it.

On Sunday night's Academy Awards show, Travolta took the stage and introduced Menzel, but he seemed to say "Adele Dazeem" instead. An estimated 43 million people were watching, and social media has been mocking him relentlessly ever since. Menzel seemed unperturbed by the flub.

Travolta said in a statement Tuesday: "I've been beating myself up all day. Then I thought [...] what would Idina Menzel say? She'd say, 'Let it go, let it go!' Idina is incredibly talented and I am so happy *Frozen* took home two Oscars Sunday night!" — AP



Reuters/Judy Nicholson

#### Acha keeps wedding date a secret

**JAKARTA:** Actress and singer Acha Septriasa is planning to tie the knot in the coming months, but is keeping mum on the date.

"*Insyallah*, the wedding will be held this year. I need as much support as I can get," said the 24-year-old artist.

Acha was proposed to by Ditto Rukmana in August last year. The actress, who was named Best Actress at the 2012 Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) and nominated in the same category at the festival's 2007 edition, said she had special plans for the wedding.

"But I don't want say anything about it. I want to plan it thoughtfully and thoroughly, but my plans will remain a secret until the wedding day," she said. ■



JP/Hwik Kusumasi