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THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND DRAMATURGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INDONESIAN TRADITIONAL "WAYANG" THEATER

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Abstract: This article examines the "Wayang" theater, which is considered one of the oldest and most complex performing arts in traditional Indonesian culture. It analyzes the origins, philosophical concepts, and unique dramaturgical structure of shadow theater (wayang kulit), wooden puppet theater (wayang golek), and human-performed theater (wayang wong). Furthermore, the study explores the symbolic role of the lead performer — the dalang — within theater aesthetics and cosmological worldviews, as well as the dramatic and emotional impact of Gamelan musical accompaniment.

Keywords: Indonesian theater, Wayang kulit, dalang, Gamelan orchestra, Ramayana, Mahabharata, philosophical dramaturgy, traditional heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian cultural heritage holds a unique and prestigious position in the history of world performing arts due to its rich diversity and deep historical roots. Traditional theatrical forms are not merely aesthetic entertainment; rather, they serve as crucial spiritual institutions that reflect the worldview, mythological systems, religious-ethical beliefs, and social dynamics of the nation. During the 19th century, traditional theater elements laid the foundational cornerstone for the emergence of written Indonesian dramaturgy and professional theater arts. The most structurally sophisticated and philosophically profound manifestation of this traditional system is undoubtedly the "Wayang" theater.

METHODS

This study utilizes cultural analysis, the comparative-historical method, and dramaturgical analysis techniques. The structural organization of Eastern theatrical arts was examined based on international scholarly research, and the various sub-genres of Wayang theater were systematically classified. Furthermore, hermeneutic and structural-functional approaches were applied to evaluate the complex metaphysical and philosophical frameworks embedded within the performances.

RESULTS

"Wayang" is a traditional theatrical form characterized by a complex dramaturgical structure, highly symbolic character typologies, and a deeply syncretic nature. It is primarily categorized into three major forms: shadow puppet theater (wayang kulit), wooden puppet theater (wayang golek), and human theater performed by live actors (wayang wong).

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In shadow theater, the narrative is staged behind a tightly stretched white cloth screen (kelir) using a light source to project puppet movements as shadows. This specific performative process possesses a profound philosophical and ontological essence. The perpetual dialectic interaction between shadow and light symbolizes the cosmic balance between existence and non-existence, materiality and spirituality, as well as the eternal moral struggle between good and evil occurring within the human soul.

The central figure and creative architect of this dramatic process is the dalang (the master puppeteer and director). The dalang simultaneously fulfills the roles of director, actor, narrator, and, most importantly, the interpreter of philosophical doctrines. The artist animates all characters using distinct vocal ranges, tones, and intonations. In cultural anthropology, the character of the dalang is frequently interpreted as a symbol of the Supreme Force (the Creator) governing the macrocosm, while the shadows moving behind the screen represent the microcosm (the human world). The plot of Wayang theater relies heavily on Hindu epic sources — "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata" — meticulously adapted into Javanese and Balinese cultural layers. The overarching conflict between good (the Pandavas) and evil (the Kauravas) promotes universal philosophical categories such as human virtues, justice, duty, and loyalty.

An indispensable component ensuring the emotional-artistic impact of this theater is the Gamelan orchestra. Consisting of metallophones, xylophones, and drums, this musical accompaniment evolves synchronously with the stage actions, determines the dramatic climax of the performance, and induces a state of catharsis (spiritual purification) within the audience.

DISCUSSION

The philosophical framework of Wayang theater is fundamentally constructed upon the concept of the intrinsic cosmic interconnectedness between human beings and the universe. The source of light (blencong) placed behind the screen signifies the eternity of the human soul, whereas the puppets represent the transient and ephemeral material forms of the physical world. Scholarly research indicates that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, this traditional theatrical art served as an effective instrument for raising national self-awareness and establishing ideological resistance against colonial forces in Indonesian society. The successful synthesis of ancient Hindu epics with indigenous cultural layers has established this dramaturgy as a globally recognized, unique artistic phenomenon in modern theater studies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Indonesian "Wayang" theater is not merely an ancient form of spectacle, but a highly complex, syncretic art form that encapsulates the philosophical, cosmological, and religious worldviews of the Indonesian people. Its dramaturgical matrix continues to serve as a rich conceptual and stylistic source for contemporary professional theater in Indonesia. The scholarly analysis presented in this study demonstrates that this theatrical tradition possesses fundamental significance not only within Eastern culture but also across the global system of universal spiritual values.

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