

The Dance of Death When Art Becomes Political

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Posted in [News](#), Volume 40 No. 17



Photo caption: Author Rachmi Diah Larasati.

Dance is political.

Power — including government power — determines who may dance, who may not dance and how that dance may be displayed, hidden or changed.

Rachmi Diah Larasati explores the political nature of dance by writing about the particular case of traditional court dance in Indonesia in her new book “The Dance that Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Post-Genocide Indonesia.” An assistant professor of dance with a graduate faculty affiliation in gender, women, and sexuality studies at the University of Minnesota, Larasati shares her family’s story in this combined memoir and critique of the use of traditional dance by the Indonesian government.

This book will satisfy scholars interested in theories of dance, ethnography and various methodological approaches to dance and choreography. But Larasati’s memoir is compelling and will also appeal to a wider audience interested in traditional Asian art forms and in the history of Asia, particularly Indonesia. Larasati writes this book for many reasons. She writes to seek a real “home,” and to confront the challenges of remembering the past. She also writes of a dichotomy familiar to many: that of obedience versus unruliness. Dancers in 20th-century Indonesia found themselves erased — even to the point of death — if they engaged in resistance rather than adherence to the state’s agenda.

Even more challenging, the boundaries of obedience and unruliness sometimes shifted, making an activity that was formerly legal under the popular first President Sukarno (such as being a member of Gerwani, the Indonesian women's movement, or of Lekra, an artists' guild called the People's Cultural Institution) later an affiliation deemed illegal under second President Suharto.

For Larasati, Gerwani women were her "aunties, dance teachers, neighbors and the parents of many of my friends," she writes. But once Gerwani was outlawed, the esteemed military man who had married Larasati's aunt was arrested and stripped of his Air Force position and uniform. And many former Gerwani women simply "disappeared" under Suharto's 32-year-long "New Order" regime, described by many as one of the most brutal regimes of the 20th century.

Under the New Order, Larasati states that Suharto intended there to be only one Indonesian national reality and story, which was enforced by the military and artistic alliances that erased the past, embodied memory of dancers who recalled or envisioned a different past or future. Using traditional arts to advocate for working-class or women's rights was deemed especially intolerable by Suharto's government. Some of those "erased" included Larasati's neighbor's mother, her dance teachers and even her grandfather, as well as other relatives deemed "subversive."

In addition to Larasati's confusion over these disappearances and the silence that followed them, she also describes how her family tree genealogy was scrubbed clean by her aunt's Air Force husband before he was discharged from the military. It was only after Larasati joined the Indonesian Cultural Mission, and performed and studied abroad for many years, that she began to remember her past and question the official Indonesian state narrative.

She then pursued the opportunity for graduate study at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), and has been working to demonstrate that traditional art and politics are not separate as Western scholars often assume.

Simultaneously, she has challenged traditional Indonesian mores, for which she was put on trial for "abandoning" her Indonesian husband during her UCLA study. She is still admonished by Indonesian cultural representatives who argue that she should come "home" and continue working for her nation.

The results of Larasati's UCLA studies and her challenges to her government include "The Dance that Makes You Vanish," in which she examines "the ways in which culture, art and performance are made ideologically inseparable from national history and the politics of memory, the reconstruction of which serves to erase the extreme violence and chaos on which Suharto's New Order state was

founded.”

Larasati demonstrates that Indonesian traditional court dance is not simply the “pure, authentic or undiluted traditional heritage” that has been presented by the state to its populace and to the world. This art form also foregrounds the government’s narrative of itself and the Indonesian nation, while masking resistance and the repression imposed.

This book contains a wide array of the personal and political, the beautiful and horrifying, the named and unnamed. Larasati reports of those who could be deemed the victims or the perpetrators of recent Indonesian history and attempts to weave these disparate stories and interviews into a brief but seamless narrative of the dangers embodied — particularly by women and for women — even in traditional art forms practiced under a dictatorship.