



A glimpse of Japan.



Strings Attached

The Setia Darma House of Masks and Puppets is a jewel of history, art and performance that's not to be missed, writes Stephanie Mee.

IN Colin McPhee's classic work, *A House in Bali*, he recounts a scene from Bali in the 1930s, where crowds of young and old gather around a simple backlit screen to watch a master *dalang* (puppet master) perform his art. Throughout the evening, the crowd watches the puppets in rapt concentration, occasionally bursting into cheers and peals of laughter as the *dalang* unravels stories of ancient kings, princes, princesses, gods, and demons.

Today, this scene is a rarity. With the proliferation of iPhones, Androids, and social media, this once thriving form of entertainment is now taking a backseat to Youtube, Facebook, and Angry Birds. Fortunately, there are a few crusaders of culture who refuse to let this piece of Indonesian heritage die out.

The Setia Darma House of Masks and Puppets was created in 1998 by Hadi Sunyoto, a businessman and avid collector, who wanted to create a space to preserve, promote, and study the ancient arts of the puppet and mask theatre in Indonesia and other countries.



Contemplating Java.



Strung out.

With the help of curator and trustee, Prayitno, Hadi has managed to amass one of the largest and most varied collections of South-east Asian puppets and masks in the world. The collection features over 1,300 masks and more than 5,000 puppets from Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, and regions as far away as Japan, Sri Lanka, Italy and Mali.

This unique museum sprawls across 10,000 square metres of lush gardens amidst tranquil rice fields and tropical jungle in a small Balinese village just outside of Ubud. The massive collection of masks and puppets is housed in five antique wooden *joglos* sourced from Central and East Java.

Visitors are welcome to stroll the grounds and peruse the collections for free, and the knowledgeable and cheerful museum director, Andang Sasongko, is always on site to impart the history and story behind each item in the collection.

Andang starts the tour in the *wayang golek* house, which features wooden puppets that are controlled by rods.

"At the time these puppets were created there was no television, so puppets were used to talk to the people," he says.

"With *wayang*, every class of people came together

to watch the shows. This is why every main religion in Indonesia spread through *wayang*."

The variety of religions and cultures is reflected in the faces and styles of the puppets.

The first *wayang golek* period shows vivid characters from the Hindu *Ramayana* and *Mahabarata* stories. During the second period, when the *Panji* legends were popular, many of the puppets sport Islamic-style skullcaps and Middle Eastern influenced clothing. The third period shows a smattering of Western and Chinese facial features and clothing styles, including Dutch colonial uniforms and Chinese robes.

Popular *dalang* often used their puppets to raise awareness about social, political, and religious issues.

"Take for example this colonial figure," says Andang, pointing to a puppet with Western features decked out in colonial finery.

"He built the first main road in Java. Some believed he was bad because he used slave labour, but others say he was good because now we have infrastructure. The story of whether he was good or bad really depended on what side the puppet master was on."

Politics played a huge role in the decline of puppet and mask theatre in Indonesia. During the 1960s the Suharto regime attempted to eradicate communism



Colonial attention.

in Indonesia and banned Chinese cultural expression throughout the country. Puppet masters and mask dancers were included in the scourge.

With a touch of sadness in his voice, Andang tells the story of the famed Chinese-Javanese puppeteer, writer, and playwright, Gan Thwan Sing:

“He mixed ancient Chinese and Javanese performance styles. But in 1965, when the revolution against communism was going on, all of his work was burned. Now we only have the prototypes.

“It’s a pity because now we will never know how the stories were meant to be told.”

Another sad example of a lost art is the *wayang beber*. Setia Darma features a number of these illustrated cloths that display vibrant scenes of village life, fantastic battles, and political intrigue.

“People would sit and watch while a storyteller slowly unrolled the cloth and told the story. Unfortunately, the last time that this was performed was in 1947,” Andang says.

Setia Darma also features thousands of *wayang kulit*, the popular shadow puppets that Indonesia is famous for. The delicate lace-like designs, finely detailed features, and base materials vary depending on the region the puppets are from.

“This one is my favorite,” says Andang, pointing to the very rare *wayang suket* figures, which come from Purbalingga in Central Java, and are made of intricately woven grass strung together piece by piece.

“We hosted a workshop to make these puppets, but nobody could even finish one. Now there is only one artist left in Indonesia who can do this.”

The museum also houses a massive collection of masks from around the world, including wooden funeral masks from central Borneo; rare *topeng* (theatre masks) from Madura that are no longer made; colorful carnival masks from Venice; and ceremonial masks from Africa.

Perhaps the most impressive of Setia Darma’s masks is the *Seni Reog* mask from Ponorogo, East Java. This massive piece stands over two metres tall and weighs in

at 40kg. It is made of a wooden tigers head covered in real tiger skin, and topped by towering tiers of peacock feathers. The mask is held in place by a dancer using a simple wooden mouthpiece.


“The story behind this mask is that there was once a Javanese king who married a Chinese princess. He was so in love with her that he did whatever the princess wanted,” Andang says.

“This mask was made by an artist to send the king a message that he was a powerful king, like the tiger, yet he was controlled by the princess, the peacock. Afterwards, the king ordered that all artists were to be killed, so the artists fled to the forest where they continued their art.”

Each mask and puppet in the collection tells a story, and it is these stories that teach future generations about the unique culture and history of the regions that the masks and puppets come from. Preserving this heritage was Hadi’s main reason for opening the Setia Darma museum.

Besides simply conserving and displaying the masks, puppets, scrolls, and *barong*, the museum also provides a space for the research and development of these art forms. Setia Darma often hosts performances – sometimes using the masks and puppets in the collection – and holds educational workshops, and exhibitions.

In an age where teenagers watch the latest episodes of Indonesian Idol on their Blackberries, and even toddlers have iPads, it is refreshing to see that there are passionate people like Hadi, Prayitno, and Andang who strive to keep the unique tradition of *wayang* and *topeng* theatre alive for future generations.

The Setia Darma House of Masks and Puppets is located in Banjar Tengkulak Tengah, and is free to visit every day between 8:00AM and 4:00PM. Donations are welcome. 

www.setiadarma.org