

Opera Batak Si Mardan between Kitsch and Merchantilism

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Abstract. Globalization affects every line of human cultural life, including theater arts. As an important subsystem in culture, art is a manifestation of the complexity of human culture which is embedded coherently in its cultural identity. The city of Medan is a city with relatively dynamic theater development which has various groups with various theater genres. This tendency has also given rise to a trend to use traditional culture as the basic material for creating theatrical works, for example the Bandar Peran group. The group staged the work "Opera Batak Si Mardan" which involved Batak Toba and Malay culture simultaneously. So in this article the results were found that the group used a dual orientation imagination in the creation process and the traditional idiom used led to postmodern aesthetic tendencies. This research uses qualitative research methods to understand in depth the conditions and phenomena in the field. Apart from that, this article is also directed as a form of inventive criticism so that the content of the article will use the critical framework explained by Benny Yohanes.

Keywords: Comodity Aesthetics, Tradition, Theatre, Inventive Criticism

1 Introduction

Today's performing arts are developing rapidly, leaving behind palimpsest traces in their various manifestations. Various references and ideas are scattered in the realization of the work which in the end only leaves questions regarding its meaning and purpose. Therefore, much of today's art is misinterpreted by the audience despite the saying that the meaning rests with the audience. This of course indicates that there is a gap between the knowledge of the creator and the viewer of the work of art. This is also what Sal [1] seems to be concerned about, where he quotes JB Kristanto's statement that artists today tend to mess with a culture, the important thing is that it fits. This condition can be understood as an impact of globalization on art which emphasizes the collage effect alone without a deep understanding of the culture being quoted.

Globalization as an important discourse in the development of performing arts gives rise to contradictions simultaneously, namely the conflict between political-economic forces and socio-cultural forces. On the one hand, artists contribute to creating a free market, but on the opposite hand, they also become agents who support diversity. So the paradoxical conditions between homogenization-heterogenization, standardization-plurality, internationalization-

locality can't be avoided. It turns out that globalization, which in the modern paradigm is understood as driving progress, has finally uncovered itself as a double-faced agent [3]. The impact of globalization also influences theater which also opens up various possibilities for this double face.

Theater is a complex performing art. In a theatrical performance, other art genres are also present, such as drama, dance, music, art (make-up, lighting, artistic design and props). The various artistic genres that appear as texts will actually be related to the context that emerges in the emerging theater works. In Indonesian theater, this context will be related to the character of the community because of bicultural tendencies (between regionalism and nationalism) as well as problems related to the conditions of the surrounding community [8].

Medan is one of the cities in Indonesia where theater development is relatively dynamic. There are quite a lot of communities that organize theater performances sporadically, such as those carried out by several theater groups from the campus environment or from outside the campus, such as; Teater Rumah Mata, Teater Iqro, Medan Teater, Bandar Peran, Aka Bodi Theatre, etc. With the proliferation of activities held, although sometimes there are ups and downs, it is worth appreciating the various efforts made to reach the audience market or introduce theater as a culture that is full of meaning. Apart from that, a criticism mechanism is also needed to critically and rationally review work practices that are taking place in our society [1]. However, it does not go hand in hand, the splendor and increasing quantity of performances in Medan are not comparable to the reviews of the works that appear.

Reflecting on previous assumptions, a condition emerges where the audience feels unfamiliar with the spectacle because there is often a mistake in accepting or alienating the audience. So the question arises whether theater in North Sumatra does not speak to the paradigm of its audience? The answer to this question can of course predict the future fate of theater in North Sumatra. Many theater observers and theater critics are worried that an apocalyptic disaster will occur in the world of theater; "theater that has lost meaning, theater that is dry of discourse, theater without an audience." Based on this assumption, the author states the urgency of this 'two-faced' research (borrowing Piliang's term) [2], namely as an effort or strategy to connect theater with society while maintaining North Sumatra's traditional culture as well as being a mechanism for criticism amidst the dryness of the North Sumatra theater field from scientific criticism.

In this research, the author wants to reveal in general the creative practices carried out by theater groups in Medan City, namely the Bandar Peran group which uses folklore from the Malay ethnic group as its basic material. Based on preliminary studies conducted by the author, the Bandar Peran group utilized Toba and Malay Batak ethnic folklore as a 'vehicle of meaning' that brought contemporary issues into the idea of a performance entitled "Opera Batak Si Mardan". In this article the author will explain the ongoing creative practices and the traditional idioms used.

Basically, this article is the result of a research and development process which also links the condition of theater today with a postcolonial theater discourse. Ethnic traditions are often used only as charm in theater so that the existence of ethnic traditions is nothing more than a paradox of sameness and repetition. This also gave rise to Aparna Dharwadker's dissatisfaction with postcolonial studies where there were conditions that hampered the growth of theater scholarship, including; (1) lack of emphasis on the performative dimension; (2) the tendency to hold performances from location to location at any performance event; and (3) a tendency towards westernized modernity and writing in a European perspective rather than indigenous languages and precolonial performance traditions [6]. In Dharwadker's point of view, Indonesian theater is not concerned with the condition of inauthenticity described by

Homi Bhabha as the most basic aspect of postcolonial consciousness. Thus, research to develop a form of tradition-based acting training is urgent to build awareness of Indonesian theater.

In connection with the postcolonial criticism expressed above, the author connects it with the opinion of Umar Kayam who states that a critical mechanism is needed in Indonesian theater to provide common sense, openness, transparency and freedom to express opinions [1]. The next step is to refresh the discursive theater ecosystem, especially in the city of Medan, where there is relatively little scientific discussion of theater arts. Therefore, this article will use the systematic writing of theater criticism proposed by Benny Yohanes as an invention critique [7].

Theoretically, the author hopes that this research can contribute as a cultural defense strategy. This means that the author views artists as agents of cultural change, whether they have the potential to be innovators or degraders. Practically, the results of this research can be used to strengthen the aesthetic-conceptual aspect when using ethnic identity in North Sumatra as a source of creation. Apart from that, the results of this research can also be a preliminary study for researchers who are oriented towards developing tradition-based acting methods in Indonesia.

2 Research Method

This article is the result of a research process in which the author attempts to find meaning and understanding related to a phenomenon and is directly involved with the setting studied [5]. In this research the author tries to understand the conditions that are symptoms of the practice of theater creation in North Sumatra, especially the city of Medan. From this activity the author wants to know how the process of using traditional North Sumatran culture is used as a reference for performances that appear in the city of Medan. The author also wants to know the answer to the research question regarding creative practices involving the use of North Sumatran traditional idioms so that this answer becomes the basis for the author to determine the urgency of the research. Based on this data, the author will conclude the ethnic traditional idioms used by the Bandar Role group and the aesthetic idioms contained in the theater performance "Opera Batak Si Mardan".

Data collection was carried out by interviews and involved observation. The resource person in this research is Thompson HS as a Batak Opera activist who is the main exponent of Batak Opera in North Sumatra. The second resource person is Yumnizar Heniwaty who is a researcher of Toba Batak ethnic traditions. Meanwhile, in the involved observation process, the author involved himself as an active appreciator of the Si Mardan performance so that he could see the data objectively and directly.

To analyze the data, the author used a descriptive analysis method that systematically describes the facts and relationships between variables, used in this research to identify the need for traditional and tradition-based forms of acting training that can be explored as a basis for acting training. This is done by collecting, grouping and interpreting data related to the performance creation process, namely data regarding: (1) the tendency to use traditional idioms in the Bandar Peran group; and (2) the aesthetic tendencies contained in the performance works of the Bandar Peran group.

3 Result and Discussion

The fact that the city of Medan is one of the largest multiethnic cities in Indonesia certainly implies the cultural diversity that surrounds it. Art as a subsystem in culture is the embodiment of the desires, values, beliefs and ideologies of society so that through art humans objectify themselves [3]. So if we relate this statement to the theatrical works that have been staged in the city of Medan today, we can also read the aesthetic orientation that developed in the creation of theatrical works of art.

Bandar Peran is one of the developing theater groups in Medan City which in the last three year period (2021-2023) has experienced increasing productivity. Apart from that, Bandar Peran is a bona fide theater group that is able to sell tickets and has its own market share. So reviewing the performances created and managed by Bandar Peran will be very useful discursively in developing the theater ecosystem in the city of Medan. Because this group already has its own share, it is very likely that it will influence cultural conditions in the city of Medan, either as a cultural preserver, modifier or even cultural degrader.

This article will exclusively discuss the practice of creating theater from Bandar Peran entitled *Opera Batak Si Mardan*. This performance was staged three times in just three months (September, October and November) with different locations (UNIMED Auditorium, Dharma Wanita Tanjung Balai Building and North Sumatra Cultural Park Building). Public interest in watching the show was also high if we look at the number of spectators present. However, the high level of audience interest is not directly proportional to the number of reviews of the performance or criticism, which can actually act as a control in a theater ecosystem. Therefore, the author directs this article to critical studies apart from the fact that the performance in question uses tradition as the main material in creating the work.

In recent years, the development of theater in the city of Medan has moved towards rediscovering cultural identity. If we look at recent theater performances, we emphasize local elements such as storytelling sources, speech acts, visual elements and phenomenal issues. The approach used also tends to be eclectic by choosing various idioms which are used as the charm of the show. These tendencies open up space for diverse interpretations in society, resulting in an outpouring of diverse meanings. By opening up the relationship between ethnic traditions and today's theater productions, the possibility of traditional codes being reborn by theater performances through a process of reinterpretation, recontextualization, recombination, recodification or repositioning of traditions is also open.

This is different from what was performed by the Bandar Peran group with the work *Opera Batak Si Mardan*. This performance seemed to indicate a disconnect between ideas, discourse and their realization. There are several key words that become references and lose relationships on stage, for example the interpretation of Sampuraga Folklore, the story of the Mardan and the modernized Toba Batak ethnic traditional clothing. This cultural identity tends to be disarticulative because it cannot convey a complete idea in the performance but rather fragments that are disconnected from one another. The telling of Si Mardan on stage seems to be a deviation from the original source story which is strengthened by the parodical narrative of the Dalang character and the declamative acting of the actors. The presence of actors actually strengthens the existence of elements of ethnic tradition in the show as the insertion of traditional elements into individual themes such as romance.

Opera Batak Si Mardan is an example of the latest theater development in the city of Medan. This development can be seen from the insertion of elements of ethnic traditions into interpersonal relationships such as the loyalty of a lover, rejection of love, and even the determination of a person's heart. Bandar Peran in seeking the innate values of a particular

ethnic culture can have implications for individual themes. Each element that makes up the show is loosely structured such as; title, theme, synopsis, action and performance text. This loose arrangement of elements has implications for partial semantic relations. However, what was interesting about the performance was the emergence of traditional elements which produced an impression, such as the very eye-catching Toba Batak ethnic costumes and the playing Batak music.

The text created by the director Bandar Peran in this performance displays the process of reading a tradition known as trans-aesthetic. This strategy is interpreted as an effort to reinterpret various traditions with other traditions in a complex dialogue space [3]. This strategy opens up various opportunities in today's art creation despite contradictory tendencies. The aesthetic tendency that emerged from the Batak Si Mardan Opera performance can be called Kitsch aesthetics. This term refers to the process of reproducing various sources to produce a surface effect rather than combining various fragments of certain works as the material for creating a work of art. The use of various sources such as the use of the Si Mardan identity as a Malay folklore entity, modified Toba Batak traditional clothing as a representation of Toba Batak ethnicity, Sampuraga as an exploration of ideas, etc. These elements are actually just images presented as text that are mixed and superficial and even contradictory.

Table 1. Elements quoted and mixed in the Batak Si Mardan Opera

Quoted Image	Previous Form
Legenda Sampuraga	The Sampuraga story comes from Mandailing. Tells the story of a young man named Sampuraga who intends to migrate because he wants to become a successful and rich person. When he migrated, Sampuraga was betrothed to the daughter of King Silanjang. When he married, his mother came and Sampuraga denied it because he was embarrassed until he was cursed and drowned.
Legenda Si Mardan	This folk tale from Tapanuli is said to have occurred in Tanjungbalai City. The pattern of the story is as follows: a young man who migrated - was successful - came to his village and refused to acknowledge his mother - was cursed to become an island. There are several versions of Mardan's rejection of his mother, namely; (1) ashamed because his mother still adheres to the Parmalim belief, and (2) rejects his mother because she is poor and wears tattered clothes.
Opera Minangkabau Malin Nan Kondang	A musical theater performance that deconstructs the legend of Malin Kundang. This show presents the story of a young man who wants to go abroad and is ultimately successful. The author can briefly summarize the plot as follows: romantic scene between Malin and Nilam, her lover who expresses his desire to go abroad - Malin asks permission from Amak - Malin asks permission from Datuak - scene of Nilam meeting Datuak Kayo - Malin is proposed to by Puan - Malin meets Nilam and declared his intention to marry Nilam - Malin was intercepted by Amak - Amak argued with Datuak - Malin's Amak agreed to Malin and Nilam's marriage.
Opera Batak	Batak Opera is a theatrical art from the Toba Batak ethnic group whose development can be seen from two perspectives. First, Classical Batak Opera founded by Tilhang Gultom and Modern Batak Opera developed by Thompson Hutasoit. The significant difference between the two lies only in the purpose of performing Batak Opera.

Apart from that, in Classical Batak Opera there are certain rituals before performing a performance. Apart from that, there are almost no obvious differences between the two, namely, using Batak language, telling Batak folklore, and positioning all the players on stage (*parmusik*, *panortor* and *pemain*).

In the table above, the author presents several elements quoted by the author which are claimed to be references from the Batak Si Mardan Opera performance. As a brief overview, the author will present the plot of the Batak Si Mardan Opera performance. In the opening scene, dancers perform *Sombah* and *Marembas* movements exploratively accompanied by lively *Gondang* music. Followed by music and the Cawan dance which symbolizes cleansing the self, heart and environment. The story begins with the entry of the *Dalang* character who presents an action that is inversely proportional to the atmosphere created by the Pangurason scene. The *Dalang* character is very attractive, inserting ironic jokes and trying to connect with current issues. The presence of the *Dalang* in this performance is also a transition from one scene to another.

In short, the plot built in this show is a romantic scene between Mardan and Tiur, his lover who expresses his desire to go abroad - Mardan asks his mother for permission - Mardan asks his Uwak for permission - the scene where Tiur meets Juragan Bonar - Puan expresses her feelings for Mardan and wants to mardan - Mardan meets Tiur and declares his intention to marry Tiur - Mardan is stopped by his mother - his mother argues with Uwak the Mardan - Mardan's mother agrees to Mardan and Tiur's marriage. Through a brief description of the show's plot, the author connects it with the references presented in table 1, but no strong relationship was found between the text of the show and the claimed references.

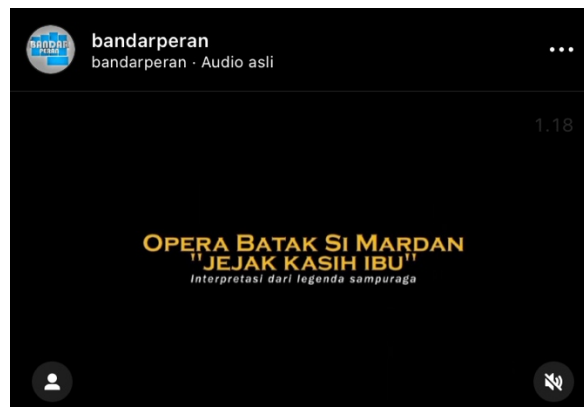


Fig 1. Publication of Performance on Instagram (doc. Instagram.com/Bandarperan)

In the publication design for the Opera Batak Si Mardan performance on Bandar Peran's Instagram page, it is stated that the performance is an interpretation of the Sampuraga legend, meaning that the creator explicitly connected his work with the Sampuraga legend. Through this claim, the author tries to examine the elements that are related to the interpretation that the creator wants to express in the performance, but they do not appear. This is different from the use of the Si Mardan legend where the creator uses the Mardan character as a characterization

of the main character of the show. So through these two references, the author concludes the references above as a strategy to gain market share even though this performance seems disarticulative in conveying the ideas contained in the folklore.

Folklore has the function of expressing the norms of life of the community that owns it, social criticism of education and the inheritance of values (Danandjaja, 1991: 17-20). Sampuraga and Si Mardan are folk tales which are manifestations of the spiritual values believed in by the Mandailing, Tapanuli and Malay people. In this performance, the values contained in the legend are converted into an effect of immediacy or allure which is utilized as a commodity strategy for works of art. This can be seen from the motif of the presence of traditional elements which are used as an attraction, an attempt to create fascination which is intended to arouse the pleasure of seeing.



Fig. 2. The Ridiculous *Dalang* Character Creates Attraction

Batak Opera as the main reference in the Batak Opera Si Mardan performance also creates contradictions where there are several things that are common characteristics of Batak Opera. Batak Opera as a theatrical art born from the indigenous Batak ethnic group has a basic concept which must use the Batak language and present stories originating from legends, the struggles of the Batak people, mythology and traditional Batak beliefs. Nevertheless, Thompson HS [4] stated that there is relaxation in today's Batak Opera by using partial Batak language when performing Batak Opera. Likewise, the positioning of the players (including the singer and musicians) are all positioned on the stage so that the audience can see the entire supporting work. This concept seems to have been broken through by Bandar Peran as a typical Batak Opera performance concept or one that tends to free itself from commonly used concepts.

In the last reference, namely the Minangkabau Opera Malin Nan Kondang, the author finds very identical similarities. The differences between the two shows are only in the names of the characters and the cultural background used, namely a mixture of Batak - Malay and Minangkabau. This tendency in postmodernism is called the tendency to pure imitation or more familiarly known as Kitsch aesthetics. Kitsch is understood as the reproduction of various artistic sources including traditions that have sacred, mythological and spiritual values which are processed to produce a surface impression [3]. Opera Batak Si Mardan reproduces various reference sources related to the folklore of several North Sumatran ethnicities such as Toba Batak, Melayu, Mandailing, Tapanuli, and modern art from Minangkabau.

The practices carried out by the Bandar Peran group are also closely related to the practices of the cultural industry. This practice is characterized by reducing the quality of creation by using techniques of reproduction, repetition and imitation of something that already exists. Similar to the Si Mardan performance which is also a reproduction of existing and published references. The acceleration of production obtained from this reproduction technique also seems to be an effort to produce cultural commodities so that the practice of creating the Si Mardan theater is also included in the process of cultural mercantilism.

4 Conclusion

Globalization as an important discourse in the development of performing arts also gives rise to contradictions, namely conflicts between political-economic forces and socio-cultural forces, including theater which is affected. Indonesian theater, which is inseparable from bicultural tendencies, must of course be able to adapt itself in order to maintain the urgent identity of "Indonesian theatre" itself so that the use of ethnic traditions or local culture can be a strategy in building aesthetic tendencies in theater. Bandar Peran is one of the theater groups in the city of Medan which is a bona fide group capable of massive ticket sales in several areas of North Sumatra such as Deli Serdang, Medan and Tanjung Balai.

The latest performance from the Bandar Peran group is entitled Opera Batak Si Mardan which tells the story of a young man named Mardan who wants to emigrate and is successful after ten years of emigration. The performance was arranged beautifully using various references from North Sumatran ethnic traditions such as Sampuraga folklore, Si Mardan, tortor, Batak music and modern Batak costumes. Apart from that, the performance also uses references from the Minangkabau Opera performance Malin Nan Kondang as a reference. In the post-modern paradigm, this kind of creative practice is called Kitsch aesthetics which uses various references to produce surfaces. The use of these attractions is detached or has a loose relationship to the theme of the show.

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