

REPORT

JEJAK TABI EXCHANGE SYMPOSIUM

July 14 2021

Speakers:

AGNES CHRISTINA (Yogyakarta), IBED SURGANA YUGA (Yogyakarta), MAKOTO SATO (Tokyo), SHOICHI TOUYAMA (Naha)

Moderator:

MASASHI NOMURA (Tokyo)

MUHAMMAD ABE (Yogyakarta)

If there is any question is there any connection between theatre in Japan to Indonesia? Seems like that can be answered as easy as; there must be a connection, there are some Indonesian artists performing in Japan, and there is collaboration between Japanese and Indonesian artists happening through the years. But if we go specifically, is there any connection between theatre in Naha, Okinawa to Yogyakarta, Indonesia, we can easily say that there is none.

Even in Japan itself, Okinawan arts and culture seems to be different from other islands in Japan. By searching in google or Performing Art Network Japan we do get a lot of information on Okinawa traditional performing arts, but we don't get a lot of information on contemporary theatre. My opinion of there is gap of culture between Okinawa and other Japanese culture are supported by the fact that Okinawa National Theatre's (since 2004) main goals are connecting performing art in Asia Pacific (and not connecting Okinawan to Tokyo's for example, the program in Okinawa National Theatre seems not to link to Japanese contemporary theatre in the mainland).

The symposium in Jejak Tabi Exchange between Japanese and Yogyakarta theatre is trying to introduce the scenes between Naha in Okinawan, Japan and Yogyakarta in Indonesia. This is part of series of showcases and a discussion of Jejak Tabi Exchange 2021. From Japan the presenter is Shoichi Touyama (Atelier Mekar Base, Naha) and from Yogyakarta the presenters are Agnes Christina (Independent) and Ibed S. Yuga (Kalanari Theatre Movement), Makoto Sato is the discussant, and the discussion is moderated by Masashi Nomura and Muhammad ABE.

As Shoichi Touyama from Atlier Mekar Base presented his experience in Naha, Okinawa, he was always trying to be connected to the mainland cultural center- to Tokyo, Yokohama, Kyoto, etc, and what Makoto Sato tells him to get more connected to other artists (which mostly are people in the mainland of Japan) after his presentation shows how wide the gap between Tokyo and Naha. But this is my early impression of the relation between Tokyo and Naha, without knowing more depth of the cultural and political context of both cities in Japan.

Makoto Sato who is based in Tokyo/Yokohama has his dream to connect cities in Asia in his place, Wakabacho Wharf. He has already been running the program for more than a decade,

and is known for his free spirit creativity. Makoto Sato seems to be not quite interested in Naha & Okinawa's theatre scene, rather he seems to be more excited to look through Asia without the development of performing arts scene in other cities in Japan and Asia.

While the presenter from Yogyakarta, Ibed S. Yuga and Agnes are describing their practice in theatre. Ibed, who was born and raised in Bali, moved to Yogyakarta to study theatre in the art university. From the university he started to become director and playwrights, he mapped out his journey as part of theatre community in Yogyakarta. Ibed was highlighting that the network in Yogyakarta can only be built based on trust in a personal level, and not an institutional relation between communities.

Agnes which came to Yogyakarta's theatre scene from a different route, sees the theater network in Yogyakarta differently. Her work seems not to be a representation of "Jogja Theatre Aesthetics" at first, but it does not matter for her because she found her audience are different from the general Jogja theatre audience. Realizing that in Jogja there are audience for all kinds of art production, she started to work on her audience. Being different from Ibed, who established a theatre community to support his work, Agnes believes that theatre artists can be independent and do not have to be attached to one group (which is a rare case more than a decade ago in Yogyakarta, actually).

Like other people in the world these days, especially for performing artists, the Covid 19 pandemic that has been with us all since last had much affecting our lives. So all the artists in the symposium are missing the live performance, and the warmth of live interactive discussion. Much of the program in Atelier Mekar Base in Naha are postponed or changed into online format, while the program in Wakabacho Wharf had been stopped since last year, but Makoto Sato changed his space as an open space for everybody who want to used it for the benefit of society. The situation in Yogyakarta is similar, in 2020 there are still some online performances happened but this year there is fatigue in artists and the audience following online performances. There is also a common understanding between the artists in Japan and in Yogyakarta that online platforms are not ideal ways to deliver a performance. Though everybody does agree that the online platform is a good way to communicate between networks in these pandemic times.

The difficulty of online platforms especially in Indonesia is there is not much audience who are willing to pay for online performance and subscribing to online streaming platforms is a new thing in Indonesia that is also difficult even for local cinema streaming platforms. So many online theatre performances go to free platforms such as Youtube, which does not give an unique experience to shows. Some projects are interesting, trying to play with the notion of online platforms such as zoom and google meet, but mostly artists just put the documentation of a performance online.

Other interesting thing is theatre as a community, we used to be in a community together seeing each other, but the situation we have right now limiting our mobility and our "togetherness" migrated to "online platforms" as a way to communicate. At first this is difficult. In most of the performing arts community shaped by direct meeting and live conversation, for instance rehearsal for a production is very complicated if it is done in a zoom meeting. Also the sense of community is re-imagined during these time, with

technology apparatus we have right now, there is a chance to develop a trans-national or even trans-island community without having to leave our guest room. These actually already happened in the younger generation, such as gamers and fan-based communities.

In the case of Yogyakarta and Indonesia, online platform helped us to see a “broader cultural context” by discussing the contemporary arts with our friends from outside of Java that are rarely discussed in national contemporary culture. Yogyakarta is often seen as the centre of performing art in Indonesia, but by getting to know other people from other places, we realized that there is a lot of things happened also outside of Yogyakarta. Of course online discussion is only one step to get to know more about other places, we need further mapping and interacting with other people.

In the case of Japan, Okinawa seems to be “outside” of Japan. Even in the Jejak Tabi Symposium, Makoto Sato seems more interested to get to know Yogyakarta more than Okinawa. Atelier Mekar Base had their program for theatre, but there is not much theatre groups outside of Okinawa that perform there. Seems that there is not much contemporary theatre happened in Naha, though I found an interesting fact that one contemporary theatre from Okinawa had performed a play titled *Human Pavilion*, written by Chinen Seishin directed by Koki Ryoshu and performed by The Creation Troupe from Okinawa in 1978. The play potraying the discrimination of Okinawan people. The theme of the play is about a museum displaying human, with the actor performing the human mannequin in the display.

From the discussion and from the information in the internet, I think Okinawa can have a fruitful relationship with Yogyakarta. Both region have similar strong traditional culture base, and we have same tendency to be critical by using satire, but if there is possibility to link Okinawa with artists from outside of Yogyakarta, such as artists from Papua or East Nusa Tenggara which considered as “second class citizen” in Indonesia that will be enrich and problematize the relationship between Tokyo-Okinawa-Yogyakarta-and Eastern part of Indonesia. Those things I believe will help to find a common ground to create something together in the future.

Muhammad Abe