

Performance Review

I La Galigo

Directed by Robert Wilson, State Theatre, Melbourne
International Arts Festival, 19-23 October 2006

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There were two twins. One went on a round trip into outer space. When he got back home he was younger than his brother, because his heart, brain and bloodflow 'clocks' had slowed down during the trip. This is because time has a material or 'length' aspect. The space twin was surprised on his return to discover how much older his brother was. (Einstein in Leeming, 2002: 17-18)

No doubt a reference to Einstein's Twin Paradox constitutes a seemingly incongruous opening to an appraisal of Robert Wilson's latest production *I La Galigo*, inspired by an epic poem from South Sulawesi. However, Einstein is not only the subject of one of Wilson's most acclaimed productions, but this brief allusion to his theory encapsulates the hypnotic dilation of time intrinsic to Wilson's theatre. Wilson is known for his ability to transform the stage into a temporal sculpture that renders the presence of time aesthetically tangible through duration and repetition. [1] His unique spatial construction imposes a kinetic logic on objects and the human body to frame motion and open up 'mental space' for contemplation in the theatre medium (Wilson, 1997: 81). What ensues for the audience is an atmosphere analogous to the experience implied by the unearthly 'blood flow' of Einstein's clock. Against this backdrop and what is widely regarded as a revolutionary aesthetic *I La Galigo* emerges as a surprising pause in Wilson's theatre history. In the most recent production to tour to Australia the Texan director's scenic time encounters a different meter. Unlike the poetics of Wilson's earlier work, the perceptual rhythm of *I La Galigo* is underpinned by the narrative of an oral epic and its cultural tradition.

For those familiar with Wilson's production history and captivated by his practice of decontextualising the image in relation to text to form an abstract pictorial bank, the epic

narrative of *I La Galigo* is unusually lucid. Each visual motif stages Rhoda Grauer's adaptation of episodes from the *Sureq Galigo* myth transcribed by the Bugis people of South Sulawesi. Written between the 13th and 15th century, the six thousand page *Sureq Galigo* epic narrates the story of six generations of gods and the destiny of the Middle World or earth. Today the epic is still regarded as history for many in the region and noble families trace their genealogy to the *Sureq Galigo* period (Sirtjo Koolhof and Gilbert Hamonic in *I La Galigo* Program). Grauer's adaptation of the creation myth focuses on the incestuous love between the great warrior Sawérigading and his twin sister Wé Tenriabéng. Wilson's twelve scenes recount the re-population of the Middle World by the children of the gods, the birth of the Golden Twins and the omen that initiates their separation, conflict and hardship in the Kingdom, Sawérigading's ill fated marriage to Wé Cudaiq and the birth of their son I La Galigo, the twin's reunion, the purging of the Middle World and ultimately the closure of the Upper and Under Worlds from the Middle World and the end of the rule of the gods in human affairs in the *Sureq Galigo* cosmology.

A series of frayed characters in a language that fewer than a hundred people can read today on a scrim opens *I La Galigo*. Puang Matoa Saidi, a Bissu priest in traditional dress, walks onto a platform extended from the proscenium stage, sits down and places an ancient manuscript on a wooden stand. Saidi recites from the text and throughout the production constitutes a sacrosanct presence that acknowledges the Bissu priest as, 'the one who holds the secrets of the oral tradition of *Sureq Galigo* which guides the events between the sky and earth', to cite Wilson in the program. Upstage left the musicians seat themselves on the stage floor before composer Rahayu Supanggah best known for his work with Ong Ken Seng takes his place as conductor. The next twenty minutes of the prologue are signature Wilson. As the performers recurrently cross the stage from wing to wing like a procession of figurines initially carved out in silhouette and then lit, the time of ritual seamlessly flows into the temporal rhythm of Wilson's theatre. A woman undulates along the floor dragging a long piece of blue cloth behind her until an identical figure joins her in the convoy. Against the meticulous succession of bodies carrying a series of objects, including baskets and a female figure holding a child, a man leaps like a stag adding to the rhythm and depth of the horizontal passage beneath the proscenium. The Middle World is emptied. Sawérigading's son I La Galigo objects:

Wait! If the Middle World comes to an end now, who will remember the legend of Sawérigading? ... Give me time to tell the story of my family and the gods. (*I La Galigo* Program)

Wilson responds to this mythical plea by resuscitating an epic extinct for the majority of Indonesia and by introducing it to the international community. It is perhaps not surprising that the production not only inspired parallels to Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, but protests prior to its world premier in Singapore in 2004. While project advisor, Andi Anthon Pangerang, ensured that approval was obtained from the elders from the spiritual home of the epic, Luwuq, *I La Galigo* is open to the criticism Helen Gilbert ascribes to Western directors as a tendency to appropriate aspects of non-Western cultures without acknowledging the power structures inherent in this relationship (1998: 9-10). [2]

In Wilson's defence Matthew Isaac Cohen noted that Indonesia did not have a theatre that could accommodate a performance of the scale of *I La Galigo* in his comprehensive review of the European premiere of the production at Het Muziektheater in Amsterdam in 2004 (2005: 5). However, the following year *I La Galigo* appeared at Teatr Tanah Airku in Jakarta. In an Australian context and despite the Melbourne festival's billing of the performance as longer than the *Mahabharata*, the immediate reference is arguably Paul Grabowskys's collaboration with the Balinese composer I Wayan Gde Yudane and director Nigel Jamieson to produce the music theatre work *The Theft of Sita*. A modern account of the Ramayana, *The Theft of Sita*, transformed the ancient Indian Sanskrit myth into a political satire on the contemporary socio-political climates of Australia and Indonesia. This is not to impose a similar political agenda on Wilson's aesthetic, although it is interesting to note that *I La Galigo* directs a local and an international audience to a cultural legacy that pre-dates Indonesia's conversion to Islam.

In over a hundred productions Wilson has established a reputation for the acute geometry of his stage design, and *I La Galigo* is no exception to the principles of Wilson's spatial composition. A bamboo ladder creates a strong vertical line for Batara Guru's descent from the Upper to the Middle World. Son of the Supreme God of the Upper World and father of the Golden Twins, Batara Guru descends head first from the top of Wilson's pictorial plane to slide gradually down the ladder. In the immensity of Wilson's stage, Sawérigading and his twin sister Wé Tenriabéng are drenched in red light behind a sarong scrim held by their parents signifying their in utero communion prior to birth. Wé Cudaiq, the conceited Princess of Cina and Sawérigading's reluctant bride is wrapped in seven sarongs by her attendants as part of her refusal to meet Sawérigading. It's an image Sawérigading duplicates in the same scene as he turns in the cloth of a sarong. Wélenrénggé, the largest and most sacred tree in the realm of the *Sureq Galigo* is depicted by the simple coils of a gigantic metal frame that is lowered to dominate the stage, before breaking up to form a fleet of ships emerging from the Under World. Wilson's recurring visual motifs unfold in vertical lines symbolising the structure of *Sureq Galigo* cosmology. Throughout his career Wilson has emphasised that his role as a director is formal, as opposed to interpretative on the basis that the audience is responsible for elucidating or explicating his creative work. In his Director's Note to the *I La Galigo* production, Wilson reiterated this sentiment. It is ironic in this context that the subtitles narrating the epic storyline of *I La Galigo* arguably undermine the connotative impact of Wilson's images and in doing so, the mystery and abstraction of tableaux.

Influenced by Lucinda Childs, Andy de Groat, Kenneth King and Meredith Monk the highly stylised lines of Wilson's movement vocabulary are as unmistakable as his idiosyncratic visual structure. However, the choreography of the battle for Sawérigading's lost pride upon Wé Cudaiq's rejection of his marriage offer and the slapstick antics of La Pananrang and La Sinilélé, Sawérigading's cousins and sidekicks, appear to reflect more strongly the dance-drama of Indonesian theatre than Wilson. The tension that emerges between Wilson's aesthetic and the tradition of the epic is particularly evident in the representation of the animal kingdom. La Pananrang and La Sinilélé's masks, the frog masks, the magical cats sent by Wé Tenriabéng to assist Sawérigading find Wé Cudaiq's room and the

procession of animals closing the first scene described as ‘unforgivably kitsch’ by Cohen did not reflect the designs synonymous with the team of European collaborators central to Wilson’s theatre. But there is no confusion in terms of the lighting vocabulary. Wilson’s fluid transitions created in conjunction with lighting designer A J Weissbard, heighten the spectator’s sensitivity to the experience of light in the theatre medium. From the ancestral hues of the twin’s birthing chamber to the incandescent sun and the gradients of the colour plane that forms a backcloth orchestrating the mood of the *mise-en-scène*, Wilson’s visual technique constructs a striking and intricate tonality to express the sacred cosmos and consciousness of the Bugis’ myth of creation.

It is a technique that responds to the archetypal registers of the costumes created by the American director’s long time collaborator designer Joachim Herzog. Herzog adhered to the styles and colour symbolism intrinsic to Indonesian tradition. Sawérigading, as a descendent of the gods is dressed in a yellow tunic and his pants are adorned with a dagger signifying his status as the warrior king. Batara Guru’s costume provides a rich counterpoint in red. In dark green Sangiang Serri, the Goddess of Rice played by seventy-seven year old Coppong Daeng Rannu, a traditional dancer and farmer from South Sulawesi, appears to conduct the dance ritual around her with her fan, while the men’s yellow head cloths double as sparring puppets in a cockfight. Herzog’s design predominately depended upon sarongs and the contrast between the brilliant colours of the main characters and deities and the simple blouses and sarongs of the commoners emphasised the hierarchy of the *Sureq Galigo*.

For composer Supanggih the music of South Sulawesi functioned as a point of departure that reflected the cultural influences linked to the history of foreign trade that has shaped Sulawesi and the Indonesian archipelago. Supanggih combined traditional instruments with sound tools created specifically for the production. In addition to the seven-member core ensemble from South Sulawesi, Supanggih selected two musicians from West Sumatra and two musicians from Java, as well as one musician from Bali. Supanggih based his decision to exclude Western elements on the need to ‘reinforce nuances from Bugis culture’, and set out to compose a piece inspired by music no longer practised (*I La Galigo* Program). Highly convincing to the Western ear, the result is an entirely acoustic soundscape that incorporates the mantra chanted by the Bissu priest and captures the sacred mood of antiquity that the imagination seamlessly associates with the time period of the *Sureq Galigo*.

Grauer first heard of the *Sureq Galigo* in the late 1990s as part of research she had been undertaking for a film on the Bissu. In conjunction with Restu I Kusumaningrum of the Bali Purnati Center for the Arts and Artistic Co-ordinator for *I La Galigo*, Grauer pitched the idea to Wilson in 2000. As part of the project a team of advisors contributed to the development of Grauer’s scenario and the creative and production phase of the performance, and this included facilitating the process of respecting the cultural protocols of the Bissu community of Saidi. Unlike Wilson’s *The Forest* based on the Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh* that had its premiere at the Freie Volksbühne in Berlin in 1988, *I La Galigo* involved negotiations with an epic tradition that continues to inform the ceremonies of the

Bissu. In this context Wilson produced a highly accessible three hour production for the international festival circuit. Grauer's storyline, while exceptionally lucid to the festival spectator, is perhaps too straightforward for Wilson's imagination. Wilson has often pointed out that he creates a frame for the performers and as a result of the fifty-member all Indonesian cast, Indonesian theatrical forms are more recognisable than the expressionistic qualities and critical realm synonymous with the work of Wilson. This is not to imply that the American director is more adept at a European inspired aesthetic, rather it suggests limitations in terms of Grauer's dramaturgy.

Three productions by Wilson have been seen in Australia. In 1992 the Melbourne Festival presented the third revival of *Einstein on the Beach* originally produced in 1976, and the Sydney Festival program included *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* in 2005. From the scientific- rationalist figure of history, Einstein, to Germanic folklore and the Faustian pact with the devil that found literary form in *Der Freischütz* (1810) and inspired *The Black Rider*, Wilson continues to embark on projects of mythic proportion with this enactment of the oral epic of *Sureq Galigo*. In the Director's note in the program Wilson points out that the epic poem of *Sureq Galigo* is classical in nature and that the avant-garde frequently involves the rediscovery of traditional material. In doing so, he states that *I La Galigo* marked a return to his earlier work and more precisely, the way in which he endeavoured to create the experience of an epic, as opposed to a literal translation. With *I La Galigo* Wilson is no longer displacing the feel and the imagination of the epic to create a stagecraft for a disparate range of theatrical material, including major figures of cultural history. Instead, he is staging a rendition. As a consequence, the hypnotic frames of Wilson's images glide into the rhythm of the narrative of the epic, and unlike *Einstein on the Beach* in *I La Galigo* time doesn't stop. *I La Galigo* prepares the spectator for the catastrophe leading to creation. In contrast the circular threat of annihilation intrinsic to *Einstein on the Beach* is challenging to unravel as Wilson juxtaposes the Faustian yearnings and consequences of the scientific knowledge linked to the age of reason. Despite the similarities between ancient myths of creation and theories of the Big Bang Grauer's dramaturgy fails to address the role of myth in relation to modern energies and in doing so, is unable to resurrect the *Sureq Galigo* myth from the past.

***I La Galigo*. Directed by Robert Wilson. Text adaptation and dramaturgy by Rhoda Grauer. Music by Rahayu Supanggah. Co-direction by Ann-Christin Rommen. Costume design by Joachim Herzog. Lighting Design by A J Weissbard. Produced by Change Performing Arts in association with Bali Purnati Center for the Arts. State Theatre, Melbourne International Arts Festival, 19 – 23 October 2006.**

Notes

1. For the German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann Wilson made it possible to propose an *aesthetics of duration* (see 1997: 37).

2. In her critique of interculturalism Helen Gilbert specifically censures the practitioners and theorists Peter Brook, Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba.

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Editorial Note

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