

Cross-Gender Attempts by Indonesian Female Impersonator Dancer Didik Nini Thowok

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the creative stages of Didik Nini Thowok (1954–), a female impersonator and cross-gender dancer based in Java, Indonesia. In addition, it discusses his endeavours of crossing gender boundaries by focusing on his use of costumes and masks, and analysing two significant works: Dwimuka Jepindo as an example of comedic cross-gender expression and Dewi Sarak Jodag as an example of serious cross-gender expression. The findings indicate three overall approaches to crossing gender boundaries: (1) surpassing femininity naturally expressed by female dancers; (2) mastering and presenting female characters by female impersonators and cross-gender dancers; and (3) breaking down the framework of gender itself.

Keywords: *Didik Nini Thowok, cross-gender, dance, Java, Indonesia*

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the creative stages of Didik Nini Thowok (1954–), a female impersonator and cross-gender dancer based in Java, Indonesia.¹ In addition, it discusses his endeavours of crossing gender boundaries by focusing on the human body's role and Didik's concept of cross-gender dance, which he has advocated since his intensive study of the subject in 2000. For the female impersonator dancer, the term "cross-gender" represents males who primarily perform female roles and explore the expression of stereotypical femininity.

Through his artistic activity and unique approach, Didik has continued to express various types of femininity to deviate from stereotypical gender imagery. Didik's concept of cross-gender dance is not only the realisation of femininity but also the "subversion" of existing gender imagery. Among the numerous gender studies, Judith Butler criticised the essentialism and advocated the concept of "performative subversions" (Butler 1999: 107–193). While Butler's focus was mainly on the "social body" that functions as the basis of reproduction or labour, in the study of performing art forms, we need to consider the body as the basis of performance or display. It is important to consider the way of description of construction of the body in studies of performing arts. In fact, the most characteristic aspect of Didik's activity is his unique use of masks and costumes. Therefore, this article describes the effective use of costumes and masks in Didik's works as the external elements of the human body, and considers his manner of "subversion" with regard to gender imagery. Although it is difficult to analyse the human body, the author investigates the characteristic dance movements in Didik's works and examines his discourses on gender expressions.

Several informative articles about Didik's dance activities exist. For example, Mrazek analysed the artist's works and performances as reflections of his unique personality and life experiences (Mrazek 2005). He also discussed Didik's identity and conducted an analysis of gender boundaries, ethnic boundaries, and Didik's use of various masks (Mrazek 2005). Subsequently, Hughes-Freeland examined Didik's work in relation to an analysis of cross-

cultural collaboration and gender in performance culture (Hughes-Freeland 2008). When examining the differences between the Western concept of "drag" and the Asian concept of "cross-gender," Hughes-Freeland noted that Didik's performances needed to be analysed in relation to local contexts and culturally defined spheres (Hughes-Freeland 2008: 7–33). She also considered Didik's work titled *Budhoyo Hagoromo* from various viewpoints (Hughes-Freeland 2010; 2012) and described its creative process, particularly with regard to interweaving established practice (tradition) and invention or innovation (Hughes-Freeland 2010: 42–43) as well as the framework of "hybridity" in this work (Hughes-Freeland 2012). In addition to these studies, Janarto, an Indonesian journalist, wrote Didik's biography in the Indonesian language (Janarto 2005). This publication, which included numerous images, provided valuable information about Didik's artistic activities.²

Studies regarding this extraordinarily talented dancer have now arrived at a point in which it is appropriate to focus on more detailed descriptions and analyses of more specific topics such as the expression of gender imagery in his recent pieces, expression of the artist's identity as a member of an ethnic minority in Indonesia, and the quest for the revival of "tradition." In addition, we need to focus on the changes in his artistic activity, especially in his transition of becoming a mature artist.

This article examines Didik's cross-gender endeavours and the expression of gender imagery in his representative works to reveal any changes in his artistic activity. In addition, it analyses two of his significant works: *Dwimuka Jepindo* and *Dewi Sarak Jodag*. With regard to the first work, the author examines Didik's process of wearing makeup and costumes as well as focuses on the work as an example of comedic cross-gender expression. While comedy has been dominant in his works, Didik has also created serious works, especially after his study in other Asian countries. The second work, created in 2005, utilises three types of masks and it is discussed as an example of serious cross-gender expression. Through an analysis of both works, the author compares the deconstruction of the gender stereotype in the first work and the female impersonator dancer's expression in the use of various masks in the second work.

In addition, the author considers his diverse expression of cross-gender, which includes his approach of "subversion" in gender imagery.

The following sections in this study will discuss Didik's cross-gender activities and his expression of gender imagery by first providing a brief biography followed by an examination of his performances, costumes, and masks used in his two significant works. In addition, the meaning of gender and various methods adopted for crossing gender boundaries in the performing arts will also be the subject of focus. Gender rules in dance are usually related to those that apply in everyday social life. Clothing, physical characteristics, poise, and behaviour established as gender "rules" within society are related to various elements in dance. However, in dance, such societal gender representations are somewhat abstract and they are conventionalised to a significant degree using costumes, makeup, and physical movement. This is apparent in performing arts fields such as dance and theater that create their own fictitious worlds and exaggerate real-life gender rules to an extreme degree.

According to Hughes-Freeland, we need to consider the concept of gender in relation to local contexts and the culturally defined spheres (Hughes-Freeland 2008: 7–33). Gender in Javanese dance is not restricted to simple male-female division. Instead, it is classified into representations of multiple "characters" or *watak*. In other words, for males, the characters range from sophisticated to violent, while females are viewed in several variations³ even though they are generally portrayed as sophisticated characters. In addition to these characters, there are demons, monsters, gods, animals, and clowns. The reason for these diverse characters can be traced back to the history of Javanese dance and its development based on epic poems or stories. The deciding factors of gender, including character representation, are not only the contributors of particular visual expressions (such as makeup, costumes, hairstyles, headgear, and masks) but also the dancers' physique and physical movement. With regard to the physique of male dancers, a slim and slender figure is suitable for a sophisticated figure such as a prince, while a large and stout physique is better suited to a violent character such as a demon king. However, characters cannot be determined by their physical qualities

alone. Concerning physical movement, factors such as posture, stance, angle of the head, hand positions, length of stride, and momentum are also determining factors.

PERFORMANCES BY DIDIK NINI THOWOK

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Didik Nini Thowok was born in 1954, in Temanggung, Central Java, Indonesia. In 1974, he entered the Academy of Arts in Yogyakarta (now known as the Indonesian Institute of the Arts, ISI Yogyakarta) to study Central Javanese dance. He derived his stage name from a traditional Javanese performance in which a doll named *Nini Thowok* appears.⁴ While at the academy, he garnered critical acclaim for his part in a performance based on this ritual play, and ever since, he has been known as Didik Nini Thowok. He subsequently founded the *Bengkel Tari Nini Thowok* (*bengkel* means workshop and *tari* means dance) dance company with fellow performers of the work, and appeared in numerous performances. By the time he graduated from the Academy of Arts in 1982, he had gained a good understanding of numerous genres of dance, including female dance forms (Janarto 2005: 77). Among the many dance types and characterisations, he felt that his physique was best suited toward sophisticated male characters, especially during his early days at the academy (Janarto 2005: 39–63).

Outside of the academy, Didik became a disciple of the contemporary dancer Bagong Kussudiardjo (1928–2004), who was actively staging creative performances in Yogyakarta at that time. Meanwhile, within the academy, Didik developed his skills in Western Javanese dance under the tutelage of Endo Suanda. After graduating from the academy, he continued to acquire knowledge of several dance genres beyond that of Central Java and he traveled to various locations to learn traditional dances of different genres in more detail. For example, in Cirebon, Northwest Java, he studied traditional mask dance under Mimi Sudji (an inheritor of the Palimanan style). He also traveled to Bali to study the female dance, *Legong Bapang*

Saba under I. Gusti Gede Raka. Furthermore, in East Java, he learned a female dance called *Beskalan Putri Malangan*. In 1980, Didik established his own dance studio called *Natya Lakshita*. In addition to managing a modern dance studio, he taught juniors and continued to perform (Janarto 2005: 71–75; Kazama 1994: 248–254). As of this writing, Didik performs as a cross-gender dancer in various parts of the world (including Japan) in addition to appearing as a comedian and actor in a television series (Fukuoka 2006: 86).

HIGH REGARD FOR TRADITIONAL DANCE

Dance education at Indonesian art institutions place importance on "creativity based on tradition" as well as learning about local, traditional dances. In addition, the influences of Indonesian cultural policies aimed at developing a new national culture based on the cultural traditions of various regions are apparent (Sutton 1991; Fukuoka 2002; 2010). Yogyakarta, the home base for Didik, is not only the center for traditional royal culture but also the birthplace of many types of contemporary art. In this thriving artistic environment, many creative dancers have staged performances based on traditional Javanese dance. While a number of these creators were influenced by concepts of Western art, Didik not only mastered dances from Indonesia, India, Japan, and China but also combined these dance forms in his creations. This mastering of various traditional arts had become a rich source of his creative activity. However, such acquisition of knowledge has not limited him to using it as a behind-the-scenes inspiration for his new creations. He is also a highly professional on-stage performer of each traditional dance form (Mrazek 2005: 253, 271). The traditional elements of each dance are enriched by Didik's various movements that characterise the dance styles. While visiting Japan in 2000 on a fellowship from the Japan Foundation, he studied classical Japanese dance and Noh-play movements, which resulted in the 2001 performance of *Bedhaya Hagoromo* (Hughes-Freeland 2008: 7–20).⁵ Didik's ultimate goal, in addition to creating a catalog

of dance techniques, was to understand individual dance forms by properly learning and mastering each of them (Janarto 2005: 66; Mrazek 2005: 253, 271).

CROSS-GENDER ENDEAVOURS

In addition to his deep respect for various traditional dances, Didik was intrigued by the genre of cross-gender dance seen in many parts of Asia. According to Didik, such endeavours of male dancers date back to a sacred court dance called *bedhaya semang* during the reign of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono I in Yogyakarta (Janarto 2005: 191). However, what specifically caught his attention was the tradition of trans-gender portrayal (also seen in Javanese dance forms) in which a female acts as a male and vice versa. For example, in *ludruk*, a popular theatre in East Java, male actors appear as female actors and singers (Peacock 1968).

Typically, both male and female dance forms are required in Javanese dance. In fact, both male and female students at the Institute of the Arts study the basics of these dance forms. On stage, it is quite popular for a female dancer to pose as a male before an audience and in theater, a "sophisticated male character," such as a prince, is frequently portrayed by a female dancer.⁶ However, while a male dancer has the opportunity to teach female dancing, it is still rare for one to perform as a female role in front of a live audience. Didik hopes to pass on the tradition of female impersonation, which has diminished significantly in recent times.

As mentioned earlier, Didik felt that he was best suited to the role of a "sophisticated male character" during his time at the academy. The physical movements of a "sophisticated male character" are similar to those of female dancers, thus making the transition to a female role relatively easy (Janarto 2005: 63–69). In addition, Didik often performed female dances during his childhood, as seen in a photograph of him performing for his high school classmates (Janarto 2005).

Didik became seriously interested in creating female dance works during the late 1970s, and produced several female dance performances for students at his dance studio.

After these works were performed at an Indonesian dance contest and they received excellent reviews, he was encouraged to establish his career as a cross-gender dancer. In addition, his visit to Japan in 2000 and his acquisition of classic Japanese dance and Noh-play genres had left quite an impression on him. While the term *onnagata* can be found in classic Japanese dance, its equivalent term did not exist in Javanese dance. Therefore, Didik proposed the concept of "cross-gender" in 2000, and he is proactively staging performances that cross-gender boundaries (Janarto 2005: 187–188) and collaborating with dancers from other Asian countries who are involved in the tradition of female dance. Some of his representative cross-gender performances include *Topeng Nopeng* (1997), *Panca Muka* (2000), *Bedhaya Hagaromo* (2001), *Kipas* (2001), *Impersonators* (2003), *Trance-formation* (2004), and *Dewi Sarak Jodag* (2005). As discussed later in the article, Didik's notable performances include several that effectively use masks.

CREATIVE USES OF COSTUMES

Traditional dance costumes

It is rare for male dancers to act as female dancers in Javanese dance, as opposed to the tradition of female dancers portraying sophisticated male characters. There is little evidence to suggest why there has been a decline in numbers of female impersonators but, according to Didik, one factor could be the costumes worn in Javanese dance. Javanese female dancers wear upper-body garments that are rather revealing, baring the neck, arms, and shoulders.⁷ While it may be possible for a male dancer to acquire the techniques of female dance, transforming his figure or physique to suit such costumes is obviously difficult. Hence, only a few dancers are physically capable to successfully enact such roles to an audience.

Both classical and creative forms of female dance can be seen in Didik's works. When performing classical female dance, it is important to dress and act "feminine." To be seen as a

female, not only the costume but also the body must be transformed into a female form. Didik is naturally blessed with an appropriate physique, and through weight control and exercise, he has maintained an amazingly slim body for a man in his 50s. Under his stage costumes, he wears undergarments that help to accentuate feminine lines, and he keeps his hair short so that he can easily wear a wig for each situation. In addition to these aspects, makeup is also an important factor. Didik both mastered and taught makeup skills while studying at the Academy of Arts. After graduation, he became well-known as a makeup artist upon winning the grand prize in a makeup contest. Furthermore, he has naturally narrow eyes with a slim nose, and he utilises his makeup techniques to emphasise these features to complete the overall "feminine" effect (see Photo 1).



Photo 1 Pre-stage makeup

Creative Dance Costumes

Performing creative dance onstage requires not only the skill to quickly change costumes but also a physical regime that helps to develop and maintain an appropriate "feminine" physique when using the undergarments required for classical female dance. Didik's choreography includes numerous dancers and his stage is replete with creative ideas ranging from solos and duets to multiple dancers. The accompanying music is usually a pre-edited recording and scenes are changed quickly during the musical interludes. When performing solo, Didik wears layers of costumes and reveals them in sequence (based on the different styles of dance) and he changes behind a screen placed on stage.⁸

Wigs are worn on stage, as seen in traditional Javanese dance performances. Unique wigs (specially made or store-bought) are also used for various purposes such as disguising the dancer as an old woman, a demon, or an animal. In addition to the wearing of wigs, a particularly notable characteristic of his creative performances is the frequent use of masks (Mrazek 2005: 254–261). It is possible to transform oneself by altering the facial appearance with makeup, but it is also time-consuming. Therefore, a mask provides an excellent and effective solution, which not only saves time but also enables the actor to become an instantly recognisable character. Mask dance is a genre in Javanese and Balinese dance, and the distinct characters that masks represent are important. Didik effectively balances the use of masks and dance in traditional dance works. His performances are not limited to following the rules of mask representation in traditional dance, but he occasionally deviates from traditional mask usage and deconstructs such representation.

PERFORMANCES

Dwimuka Jepindo and Use of Costumes in a Comedic Work

Many of the works created by Didik Nini Thowok are comedic in nature. This fact is also related to the negative perception in Javanese society of male dancers who perform female roles. According to Mrazek, Didik has had experiences of being ridiculed by some people following his performances (Mrazek 2005: 264). In the Javanese society, there is a category of persons known as *banci* (or *waria*), which are cross-dressing males. This concept of *banci* represents unisexual persons, which are not the same as homosexual men in Western society (Oetomo 1996).

Didik is not *banci* since his cross-dressing is completely reserved for his performances. However, he is conscious about the negative images of *banci* (or *waria*). In an interview Didik stated as follows:

Cross-gender performer is actually different from *banci*. *Banci*, especially in modern life, in their everyday lives have a tendency towards prostitution. Not all, but usually they make themselves up and at night sell themselves. The image of *banci* in society is that of someone who tends towards prostitution. And in the performing arts there are cross-genders who may be *banci*, but they do not prostitute themselves because they already have a position or profession in society as a stage artist. And there are also those who have the profession as beauticians, they work in or own beauty salons, and so forth. The same as in society, it is a personal choice; there are *banci* or *waria* who choose to prostitute themselves or those who look for a profession that is respected in society.⁹

According to this discourse, Didik is conscious about the negative images of cross-dressing males and he intentionally presents comical elements related to these images on stage such as behaving in an exaggerated feminine manner. Part of his strategy is to raise questions regarding gender framework and shatter stereotypical gender perceptions.

Let us now focus on Didik's costumes and dance performance considerations, as seen in one of his representative works titled *Dwimuka Jepindo*. This dance incorporates aspects of Javanese, Japanese, and Balinese dance, and its title is a compound word derived from *Jepang* (the Indonesian term for Japanese) and *Indo* (a common abbreviation for Indonesian).¹⁰ The performance consists of six acts: (1) a dance with a Javanese mask; (2) a dance with a Japanese woman's mask; (3) an Indian or a Balinese dance without a mask; (4) a Javanese dance without a mask; (5) an act with an ugly woman's mask; and (6) an act with an old woman's mask.

When performed in Indonesia, especially in Bali, a Balinese dance is staged in the third act. For the purpose of this article, the order of costumes is based on an August 2008 performance in Bali.¹¹ First, the makeup for the Balinese dance in the third act and the Javanese dance in the fourth act was applied before donning the appropriate costumes. For easy layering of the costumes, a tank-top-like shirt and a calico-turned skirt were worn beginning from the third act (see Photo 2).

Over this costume, another layer created especially for the first and second acts was worn. The front of this costume is a Japanese kimono while the back is a Javanese dance costume (see Photo 3). To match the costumes, the face mask is a Japanese woman while the back of the head is a mask of a Javanese woman. Appropriately, the unique wig includes a topknot in the front and long black hair in the back.



Photo 2 Wearing a necklace



Photo 3 Wearing a two-sided dance costume

The performance begins with Didik's back toward the audience as he performs a dynamic folk dance in the Javanese costume and mask. Accompanied by drums, this particular dance is extremely difficult since the performer must complete the various movements while facing away from the audience (see Photo 4).

The music changes in the beginning of the second act, and Didik performs a classical Japanese dance while slowly facing the audience. At this point, the audience realises that Didik actually performed the first act while facing backwards. To enhance the contrast of tempo and movements in the first and second acts, the music changes accordingly, and the dancer turns back and front while performing both dances (see Photo 5).

At the conclusion of the second act, the lights are dimmed and the outer layer of the costume, mask, and wig are removed on stage. Beneath this layer is the costume for the subsequent acts including the Balinese female dance titled, *Legong Kraton*, which consists of an accessorised wig, costume, and no mask. At the conclusion of the third act, the dancer moves upstage to remove the costume and accessorised wig. He then dons a wig with a Javanese woman's topknot, and performs a West Javanese *Jaipongan* dance without a mask in the fourth act. In the fifth act, Didik wears a mask that depicts an ugly woman and a wig with a shaven hairstyle. The initial appearance alone causes the audience to giggle, but the subsequent comical performance causes outburst of laughter. In the sixth and final act, he dons a long cloth (that covers the head) and a mask of an old woman. While emulating the stiff movements of an elderly person, he then performs a surprisingly aerobic dance routine, which inspires laughter from the audience.

In this performance, we see Didik's creativity, especially with regard to changing costumes on stage. This concept of quick-change on stage is a characteristic of the classical Japanese dance with an element of traditional Javanese mask dance in which performers typically change masks or parts of their costumes while still on stage. It is possible that Didik borrowed such techniques from traditional dance forms, but the idea of wearing contrasting costumes and masks on the front and back of the body is Didik's creation.



Photo 4 Performing the Javanese dance while facing away from the audience



Photo 5 Classical Japanese dance

With regard to comical aspects that inspire the audience's laughter, we can see the various devices in this performance. In the first act, he wears a Japanese *Otafuku* mask on his face and a Javanese mask on the back of his head as he presents his extraordinary dance skills to the audience. Then, he causes the audience to laugh by changing on stage and turning his back to reveal his cropped hair and the undergarment beneath the costumes. Indeed, it appears that he is deliberately evoking the comedic aspect of cross-gender dancing.

Regarding the physical dancing movements, *Jepindo* is essentially based on conventional genres of dance and it requires a high level of skill to perform such traditional dances. The Javanese folk dance in the first act is characterised by dynamic movements in which Didik convincingly performs them with his back to the audience. In the classical Japanese dance in the second act, a comical mask of a Japanese woman is worn and graceful movements are achieved by utilising the sleeves of the kimono and a fan. The Balinese dance in the third act accentuates Didik's physique and virtuosic technique as he performs a highly energetic Balinese *Legong Kraton* with a technique comparable to that of a female Balinese dancer. In the fourth act, he acts as a traditional Javanese dancer and demonstrates his technique in that particular dance form. In the fifth act, he dons a mask and wig of an ugly woman while performing a comical act, while in the sixth and final act, he disguises himself as an old woman and brings the audience to laughter by pretending to be breathless during an aerobic dance (see Photo 6).



Photo 6 Old woman's act

The fifth and sixth acts are liberally choreographed compared to the first four acts. For example, Didik performs the amusing movements of an ugly woman who gets her arms entangled with one another and a tottering old woman who suddenly bursts into disco-style dance moves. This expression represents Didik's endeavors to challenge gender stereotypes by breaking down the perceptions of "beauty" and "youthfulness" that are typically associated with notions of femininity.

Didik often performs *Jepindo* as his representative work of comedic expression of cross-gender in Indonesia. According to Didik, in an interview, he attaches significant importance to his comedic performances:

Comedy is actually higher or at a different level than serious art. A comedian can undertake the serious, but it is not necessarily true that a serious artist can perform comedy. I experienced this and also in dance. I became a comedian dancer but I went through studying serious dances, traditional dances. Once I had well and truly mastered the technique of the serious dances, then I could perform it in the direction towards comedy, because I knew the rules, so it was easier to play with it.¹²

While Didik often presents comical works in Indonesia, he also produces and performs works with a serious tone, especially abroad. According to Didik:

When I studied *onnagata* in Japan, it turned out that *onnagata* as an artist or as a branch of the performing arts is highly valued by the public. An *onnagata* artist performs a female character who is perfect; there is no joking at all. So for me, that was something new to learn and very interesting.¹³

After this experience, Didik began to create the serious dance works such as *Bedhaya Hagoromo* (2001) and *Dewi Sarak Jodag* (2005). While the former was based on both of Japanese and Javanese traditional dance, the latter was based on traditional Javanese folktale.

Dewi Sarak Jodag: Masks and Performance

Among Didik's creative performances, *Dewi Sarak Jodag*, produced in 2005, is a serious dance based on a traditional Javanese tale. In this dance, Didik wears the traditional *kebaya*-style blouse and long skirt with no subsequent costume change. This performance is based on the *Panji* cycle of stories, a 15th century anthology from East Java. *Dewi Sarak Jodag* is a princess who falls in love with Prince Panji Asmoro Bangun. Dewi hides her ugly appearance and disguises herself as Panji's sweetheart Candra Kirana to get closer to Panji. However, as she loses herself in the excitement of Panji's touch, she accidentally reveals her identity. Dewi, in shame and chagrin, subsequently transforms into a demon.

Three masks are used as the story progresses. The first mask depicts Candra Kirana, who, in Javanese mask dance, represents a character with a beautiful and smart personality. The hair is drawn on the top of the white mask, together with long, narrow eyes and a slender nose (see Photo 7).

The second mask, which depicts Dewi Sarak Jodag, represents an ugly face (see Photo 8). This mask is also white, but the eyes are large and round, and the nose is broad and flat, which is in stark contrast to the features of the first mask. This type of mask is typically worn in a dance by a person performing as a clown.



Photo 7 Mask of Candra Kirana



Photo 8 Mask of Dewi Sarak Jodag

The third mask represents Dewi's anger. Didik borrowed the idea from the mask worn by a *prajna* or *Hannya* in a Japanese Noh-play, and he had it specially created by a mask technician. The design is derivative of a *Hannya* mask to express sadness, anger, shyness, or jealousy. Although it does not include demonic horns, the color of the mask is similar to the vivid red of a "violent" demon's mask, but the wide-open mouth and the shape of the eyes resemble the features of a *prajna*'s mask (see Photo 9 and Photo 10).

The part in which the first mask is worn is accompanied by traditional gamelan music from Central Java. Here, Didik performs the first segment of a representative dance titled *Gambyong*, which primarily consists of acts of grooming, such as applying makeup and brushing hair in front of a mirror. The scene represents Dewi's excitement as she prepares to meet Prince Panji.

The second scene, in which the next mask is used, includes a Javanese folk dance that is freely choreographed and does not adhere to conventional mask dance styles. In

addition, some parts are performed through acting rather than dancing. Didik's portrayal of Dewi is emphasised as "she" calls out to Panji and sings in a frantic search for the prince. The smooth and comical female voice used to lure Prince Panji reveals Didik's excellent skills in mimicking female expressions. The dance is a combination of Central Javanese folk dance and *Jaipongan*, a form based on West Javanese folk art accompanied by the dynamic sounds of drums. To perform *Jaipongan*, Didik invited drummers from West Java to participate in a recording session.

The final scene consists of a "violent character" mask dance. This is the climax, and a dance representing Dewi's transformation into a demon depicts her shame and chagrin after her identity is revealed to Panji. To express these emotions, Didik performs a Javanese mask dance titled *Klana* displays unsuppressed, fierce emotions that represent Dewi's darker side. The image of a violent character evoked by traditional techniques of expression is that of an ego lost in desire and uncontrolled emotions. With these images in mind, Didik expresses the shame and anger of a woman who is lost in such emotions. The third scene expresses the evil side of a woman through a dance that requires masculine and violent movements. However, it is not the expression of male dancer but of female-impersonator dancer.



Photo 9 Mask of anger



Photo 10 Performance of anger

He mentioned about this expression as follows:

In the last part of *Dewi Sarak Jodag*, I express the character of a female ogre, or the idea of the mask, but the idea or power is that of woman playing a strong, rough character. This is a feeling I applied when I studied *topeng Cirebon* (the masked dances of Cirebon), because most of my teachers for *topeng Cirebon* were women who could play male characters extraordinarily well, but they were still women playing men, not men playing men. Because I am an *onnagata* artist, my power is perhaps different than that of a masculine man. My masculinity when playing a strong character is that of woman playing a strong male.¹⁴

This discourse indicates that he confirms the construction of female impersonator dancer's body not of male body or female body.

In traditional Javanese and Balinese dance, it is considered important to have a method of expressing different "characters" through mask changes, and in *Dewi Sarak Jodag*, this method is effectively incorporated. When a traditional mask is used in a creative performance, the expression is limited to the "character" represented by the mask. This does not necessarily indicate that the means of expression is faithful to tradition. Assuming that the audience is somewhat aware of the expressive use of the masks, the expressions may be changed. On the other hand, when a clown's mask or an original mask is used, its meaning or expression usually deviates considerably from the limitations of traditional mask dance.

The first mask used in this performance represents the Javanese concept of an "alert character"¹⁵ and effectively used to enact the delicate movements and poise of a beautiful woman. Interestingly, some masks in Javanese mask dances are ambiguous in gender, and it is possible to use such masks to express a male, such as a prince with an "alert disposition." In this case, Didik dons a wig of a traditional Javanese female dancer and uses this mask to

represent a beautiful princess. In addition, by adding a "female" interpretation to the unisexual mask of an "alert character," Didik performs an original piece based on a traditional Javanese female dance. In the second scene, the mask of a clown is used to express an ugly woman. By using a mask that allows free methods of expression, the dynamic movements of Javanese folk dance and a comical representation of an ugly woman luring a prince is effectively presented.

Finally, in the third scene, which expresses Dewi's anger, an original mask constructed with a Noh-play's *prajna* is used to perform a mask dance depicting a demon's "violent character."¹⁶ Originally, this dance of a "violent character" usually represents a male demon, but Didik uses this dance to represent an angry and horrifying woman. This method of using the mask of a clown to express the comical side of an ugly woman, as well as performing dance of a "violent character" to express a woman's demonic aspects is an attempt to cross the conventional gender boundaries in traditional Javanese dance.

As previously mentioned, Didik's creation of this serious work based on a Javanese fable is a result of understanding the significance of cross-gender roles in Asian countries. Although Javanese dance formerly incorporated roles that corresponded to Japanese *onnagata*, this tradition had all but disappeared in Java. From Didik's acquisition of Japanese dance and Noh-play, he realised that many artists challenge cross-gender roles in Japanese performing arts. He also recognised the existence of audiences that could empathise with such practice and using his artistic experiences to create a serious work was his statement to the negative perceptions of cross-gender dancers.

CONCLUSION

As shown in this article, Didik Nini Thowok, as a cross-gender dancer, undergoes several approaches in his creative performances. The first approach is an attempt to surpass the femininity that is naturally expressed by females, which can be seen in his performances of traditional and conventional Javanese and Balinese dance forms. Several examples include

the first scene in *Dewi Sarak Jodag*, as well as popular traditional Javanese female dances titled *Gambyong* and *Golek* (not mentioned in this article). When performing conventional female dances, Didik expends significant effort being "more feminine than female dancers" by demonstrating his expertise in transformation using costumes, makeup, wigs, and even body structure.

The second approach is his endeavor to master and present various femininities as a male cross-gender dancer. This attempt is frequently seen in Didik's creative performances, especially in the mask dances in which gender is expressed through characters. For example, the first and fourth acts in *Dwimuka Jepindo* include a Javanese folk dance, while the third scene in *Dewi Sarak Jodag* expresses the evil side of a woman through a dance that requires masculine and violent movements.

The third approach, as seen in Didik's creative performances, is an attempt to break down the framework of gender. A wide array of characters can be found other than those that represent stereotypical female personae such as queens and princesses. By portraying an old woman, a witch, or an ugly woman, Didik demonstrates the diversity of the characters as well as various types of femininity. According to Didik, "By having an ugly woman appear on stage, I try to show that, in reality, many aspects besides beauty live inside of every woman." This comment explains the multiple facets of females depicted in his performances and reminds us of the comparative equation noted in the *Snow White Complex* by Elissa Melamed (Melamed 1986) in which beauty = youth = good while ugliness = old = evil. In the folklore, the comparison between a beautiful young princess and an ugly old woman (or a witch) typically concludes with a "happy ending" for the princess. However, both sides reside in a single woman, and Melamed elucidates that life feels lengthened after youth is lost (Melamed 1986: 10–68). Didik possesses deep insight into such feminine reality, and he frequently includes an ugly or old woman in his productions using masks and gestures to express everything from female ugliness and evil to comical figures. In addition, by expressing animals such as monkeys and the elderly, Didik attempts to make gender boundaries ambiguous in dance. For this purpose, dance forms such as jazz, modern, and aerobics are often incorporated instead

of traditional dances, which is an attempt to break free from the conventional framework of traditional dance expressions.

Finally, by combining gender expressions established by traditional dances with traditional art and various genres of dance from different cultures, Didik has successfully accomplished a new form of gender expression, which is perhaps most noteworthy of his staging.

This article primarily focused on external elements or visual presentations such as costumes, makeup, masks, and hairstyles. Not included was the actual physical transformation into a cross-gender dancer such as sculpting the body's lines and acquiring the physical movements necessary to look like a female. Therefore, I hope to examine the physicality of cross-gender dancers and the actual process of transformation and construction in a future article.

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NOTES

1. In 2004, I had an opportunity to see Didik Nini Thowok perform. Although his works have been observed by a number of researchers since the 1990s, I am mostly familiar with his activity from 2004 to the present.
2. In this biography, Didik Nini Thowok's descent as a Chinese Indonesian was also mentioned. This was the first time he had publicly disclosed his Chinese ancestry.

3. These characters are called *watak* or *karakter*. More specifically, the characters range from "sophisticated" (*halus, lenyep*) to "violent" (*gagah, danawah*).
4. "Nini Thowok" is the name of a traditional Javanese ritual game in which young girls make a doll named Nini Thowok with the help of an old woman.
5. Hughes-Freeland conducted a detailed analysis of this work as the product of complex creative negotiations from various viewpoints.
6. Examples of typical "sophisticated characters" include Prince Rama in the epic *Ramayana* and Prince Arjuna in the epic *Mahabharata*.
7. Javanese female dance costumes differ based on genre, but the arms and neck are usually revealed in all cases.
8. The changing process is deliberately displayed on stage. The method of displaying a shadow on a stage screen is derived from the traditional Javanese shadow puppet show (*wayang kulit*).
9. Interview with Didik Nini Thowok on 19 September 2011 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
10. The name of this work was changed from *Dwimuka* (meaning "two faces") to *Pancamuka* ("five faces"), and various masks and dance traditions have been and are still being used in this work.
11. In 2004, he performed the Indian "Bharatanatyam" dance in Japan.
12. Interview with Didik Nini Thowok on 19 September 2011 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

13. Interview with Didik Nini Thowok on 19 September 2011 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
14. Interview with Didik Nini Thowok on 19 September 2011 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
15. This character is known as *lanyap*.
16. This character is known as *gagah* or *danawah*.

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