

Helly Interview

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So I at this stage of my life, I just, I just finished doing my Phd in Dance studies. And it's all about Indonesian and Asian modern and contemporary dance. And it, and it relates to my work, my own practices as you know researcher and sometimes also, now start being active again programing dance programs. I did Jakarta Arts Council and also being a co-curator at the Indonesian Dance Festival.

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Basically I'm an independent scholar specializing in dance, Indonesian dance. And I contextualize my work with you know many, some practices. Such as programming, dance programming, dance activities and also for festivals and um cultural activities. In general.

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So as, we Indonesians like to be proud of us. Our country as being the largest archipelago in the world. At this, the latest count we have apparently 17,000 islands and on average probably only 6,000 inhabited. And the implication of this is we have so many ethnicities, between 300 to 600 you know depending on who you ask. And many, we speak many languages, local languages. It's not dialectics but really languages. So if you come to Java, which is the most dense island in the world, you can drive for 2 hours and then you will be arriving in a place, you know, whose people talk different languages and live culturally different culture life.

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So geographically we have an area so ? archipelago um covers quite a big size. Probably like the size almost like the United States of America. But in the form of archipelago. Archipelagic islands, so it's you know from the west to the east you've got, you know, many, several like main islands from Sumatra to Papua. And it hold diverse --- in the western part it's more like, I'm not really an expert on this --- but you know it's um Malay cultures and in Java and Kalimantan. Then going eastward it would be more connected to the um what they said, oceanic, but you know, it's, it's totally contrasts different cultures. And sometimes you can't really have a really clear "track?" between east and west, for example, and anything in between.

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So um, Indonesian is basically culturally diverse. It is very much entitled to the the geographical location. So we, we kind of like, everybody pass and then stop by and then they leave influences. I mean for example in 4th century, 8th century all these Arab

and people from Gujarati you know they trade Indonesia and then they bring all, they brought all that culture from textiles to religion. And then the Chinese . And then from 14th . 15th century the West, the Western people start to come by from the Portuguese, the British and the Dutch. So uh, that makes Indonesia really a “seatback?” for this cross cultural, you know, activities and context and encounter, through this travels, through this peoples travels. You know that makes, that help form Indonesia as what it is known now.

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It was “andrusani”. He was a poet, a poet and then an intellectual and also a filmmaker later. I mean, when back in the 50’s 1958 actually he published this article – it’s known as a cultural manifesto declaring that Indonesia is part of, is heir of world cultures. And I think it is valid for him to say that because especially looking at the specific of time That you know we were influenced by many kinds of ideas from the world. So we had our own, but then again, we also connect, connected to many influences in the world, for example back then we have many cultural organizations linking to you know Islamic movement, in in Cairo, the “artsat??” school. And then you know we had also flirted with you know, the left, the leftist ideology and then also many kinds of western modernity. So it’s quite you know juxtaposing ideas at that time. Because we were like the intellectuals I think they were looking for they were trying to imagine what modern Indonesia should be like.

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Well um, traditional dances and contemporary dances or the notion of traditional, modern and contemporary in the context of Indonesian dance , uh, has been has been, has been much talked about within the dance community in Indonesia and also within the dance scholarship. But it’s also, but I would say it’s in the on-going discussion. So if you talked to different people you could get different answers to it. If you asked me now, in the year 2013, I would say this quite one of the interesting times, because um we’ve been always since the Indonesian independence in ‘45 and then we start promoting our cultures abroad. I mean inside as a tool for uniting Indonesians, but also abroad, we start having this notion of what traditional dances is. Or what traditional dances are. Because Indonesia consists of many ethnicities. So ethnicities and sub-ethnicities they all have dance they perform in various rituals, whether religious ritual or social ritual or cultural practices. So, and so during the national term in the 50’s when our government our leaders our national leaders start to use dance you know as a national expression. That’s where those traditional dances became uh a tool, cultural promotional tool, and sometimes in a kind of tourism context and after that you got to witness the founding of national academies, arts academies. Where these traditional dances became institutionalized. So now then, long story goes, I mean this form of traditional dances were broadcast in national tv’s up til 88, (closer) because you know up to 1988 we had only one national tv and nothing else. And after that so it’s the process, I think Indonesian cultural process it’s up throughout the year. To become what it is now.

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So um once this traditional dances institutionalized in those academies, and transmitted in many kinds through television, through media or then adopted in daily life in commercial practices, like tourism for example. It's not so much in that order, then we start having, we start encountering this notion of modern dance. And in superficial ways, because you know all this because I think it's been always um it's been always connected you know the Indonesian modernity, and the word modernity, if you want to call it. Because for example, but it's just different timeframe. So people probably would like to in general in dance now Indonesian dance they like to revert to the 55 you know when Martha Graham and company from the US came to Indonesia to perform, that where the first seed of modern dance in Indonesia, or the first influences of modern dance in Indonesia start. But I would argue that uh that it probably it goes way back because you know like some forms of indigenous, indigenous dances of Indonesia have been performed abroad for like for so many years, at least for example since 18, you know 19th century and I would refer to the particular performances in 18 in Paris colonial exhibition in 1889 and 1931. So the first performing, presenting Javanese dance; the second presenting Balinese dance and you could see um this is um so this is my response to those so called you know grand narratives, that Indonesian modern dance is not that clear cut influenced by you know, other culture. But it was a complex cultural history if you want if you want to call it.

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And then we move to the argument of what is contemporary dance, Indonesian contemporary dance. That's I think, I'm happy to report, that it's um the um discussion now you now is start going to an interesting discussion about it because now we look at our history from the 50's and 60's throughout the 90's and then see how different sense of contemporary dance start performing or start forming in Indonesia.

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I think it's very common, not only Indonesians who loves spectacle.??? Is about spectacles. It's why you once in a while or mostly I mean you've got this big scale production, which is not easy to realize, but you know, when it happens, when there is a chance, it's always artists who like deal with this spectacles. And it's why you've got when it comes to Indonesian dance you've got from very intimate solo or duet piece presented in an intimate setting and then you have, because now we have quite a good theater with you know 1200 seats and then you got to fill that theater and some artists manage to find their way, you know to produce to make you know large scale production. Um so it's applies to Indonesia as well. We have all these range of performances. But basically Indonesian modern contemporary dance, um, is a struggling form in terms of, um, because we don't have constant or stable support, you know, to insure this production. So in a way it's ??? it happens like in a random way. But now you could say there are more ways of realizing artist ideas in one way, but then again it's much more complex when it comes to negotiate your aesthetics artist's aesthetic to present their work in today's setting.

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I think um in the new form, let's say this modern or contemporary, I mean it's not a debate, **but this new form, or non-traditional form dances, uh ...they are influenced by many things. I mean one of them of course, they are influenced by traditional dances because those Indonesian dancers um they would at some stage train some form of traditional whether it's Javanese or Sudanese from west Java or Minangkabau from West Sumatra or you know Papua dances which is like more tribal like.** So it's an now, I think now I would it's not really a 100% like you know fixed thing. It's always negotiable. But you could see that there are many strands of influences of traditional dances in that new form, new dances. And I would say it's Javanese mainly from those people schooled in Solo in Surakarta. So this is like whether it's classical Javanese form, which is a court dance, or more like popular forms from East Java for example like. So dancers, choreographers young choreographers in Java they try to emulate the "banumansen?" style which is the coastal east Java, you know cities. I mean it's a very culturally specific you know place and you got Minangkabau I would say, a good big influence in Indonesian so called contemporary dance. Because it's been propagated since late early 70's some choreographers name, name, who tried to formalize a certain technique, dance technique and vocabulary.

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The Minangkabau influence it's quite, it's quite visible because through the works of some young or middle career choreographers. It started when I think I would say it started in the 70's when this female choreographer dancer. Choreographer named Judia Adam Started putting the influence of Minangkabau pencak silat or the local martial art into her dance. So it's um,

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So Minangkabau pencak silat is um because I think in it's traditional context it's always part of Minangkabau traditional performing arts. Whether it's you know theater the local theater, or also the village folk dances. I mean they, all they all so integrated pencak silat you know, as a form, you know, as a movement vocabulary. So Julia Adam in the 70's she um codified this movement, this pencak silat movement to be, to be certain technique. So she formed this 13 or 18 movements that she taught her students in Jakarta and in Panadapanjan as a system a movement vocabulary system. And what she started then, one of her important students named Gusmana Sw he, she got inspired by this got inspired by this, But instead of only adapted Julia Adam movements, she created her own based on similar principle. So and Gusman Suwit happened to live longer because Julia Adam sadly pass away you know very young in an accident. So it was Gusmati Suwit who helped popularize or who helped transmit this movement to younger generations, because many of her dancers became young choreographers. People like Jefri andri Usman and some of some of them in this film.

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I think even as an Indonesian I would be, I'm still amazed one minekabow intellectual told me once there is no such like word the word "dance" in menakabow vernacular. So they don't have this, they don't have this, they don't this word, you know, dance in Minangkabau vernacular because for them what we call what outsiders see minekabo dancing, it's actually this balabet " this what the call it flower of silat. It's the aesthetic form of the pencet silat. And in Minangkabau traditional setting if you want to learn silat , you first have to learn this aesthetic form of you know, silat. And then you perform it as a kind of game, as kind of game, as a kind of play, as playful things to kill time, that's how and the outsiders said it's quite dancelike. But it's actually if you visit the original, not so much the original, the source I mean they don't have the word silat. They don't even have word dance as a word. For me that's interesting, It's not only exclusively Minangkabau, because I also heard in Balinese,

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they don't have a word, equal word for vernacular word for "art." So meaning that because at some point in the past, art and culture is so embedded in daily life so we don't even think about it so that's how dance how the relationship between pencak silat and dance it's simply so embedded and embodied so it's become a language in itself. But, you know, maybe at that time we didn't bother to analyze that, it's only in the modern times when especially in the academics when you have the separation of studying dance or music or theater, you know and when we start Westernizing our own dance education arts education . But if you look at the source—I mean I prefer source than original—many of the traditional theaters in Indonesian theaters contain everything. you know They contain music, they contain literature, lyrics and everything. And they contain dance as well. And music. So it's all kind simply embodied. Yeah.

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I'm quite biased. I mean I know that Indonesia as a lot of martial arts. Pencak Silat, we have probably in every island big island. We have many styles in Java, many styles in Sumatra, many styles in Kalimantan and Sulewesi for example. I have been exposed to only a few I must say. But of those few that I have been exposed to I really love the Minekabow style for a certain reason, because I think they are the closest to performing arts. So the relationship between dance and martial arts you know are quite, are quite attached they are attached to each other. And that's why to me to my eyes they are the most fluid. And they are most dancelike, simply because they always incorporate the aesthetic part of pencak silat into their theaters for example. So that's why.

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So "in between" production is a collaboration between Katia Engle, is a German artist dividing her time between Jakarta and Berlin and three Indonesian artists originating

from Minangkabau, but they been living in Jakarta for many years. Um So I'm surprised myself because I think these three Indonesian artists they shared sometimes being a member " "s company, so they were involved in many productions of GS's company in early 90's up til early 2000. So they had this similar sensibility. Um and also they simply talk about the same language, you know, performing language, which is like derived for from Minekabow pencak silat. But as emulated by GS, the choreographer

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who founded the dance company. So when when we put together again the 3 of them I expected, expected as a dramaturg I expected, expected but I was so pleasantly surprised when Bennie came up with this new idea when it comes to choreography. So instead of using the usual suspected movement of GS style, he proposed to do this, to explore a very particular style in Minekabow pencak silat, which is the tiger school. Um David the second dancer was first reluctant about it, because you know it's quite, because apparently it is a quite strong school. And the difference between Bennie and David, Bennie is the senior dancer and he started from silat first before he moved to dance. So he was first of all a silat practioner before he moved to the company in 82 as a young performer, and then

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He and then he it transformed him to be also a dancer. But first of all he is a silat practioner. Well David has never been a silat practioner. He never learned silat as silat. He learned the dancing form of silat as emulated by GS dance company. So it's 2 different embodiments. And for for a close eyes, and if look up close and you know the history and the process of this it's very obvious, you know the different approach the different approaches of these 2 dancers. So that's how it start. In traditional context, you learn pencak silat you have to find a guru. So this guru and disciple relationship is very personal and it's very important. And you can't actually choose your guru. Your guru has to choose you. And uh, so this is what Bennie talk about in the beginning because um he learned that style in a traditional setting and sometimes it involve a—I would say the esoteric part of the teaching

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*** and learning process So that's why they are very careful, because for some practioners of you know, this form it is a very specific cultural form. So it's not only a physical form, but also has spiritual form if you like to say. But when we when we take this form on stage, on a contemporary stage we like to limit ourself only the physical form, not the spiritual form, so to speak.

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Yeah, I think uh, I'm not an authoritative voice to talk about Minekabow tiger school or animal? "school or What happened to Bennie in the early stage he he realize that when by exercising by exercising the movements again he got embied? to what he called the animal? spirit. He said if you are too deep doing it and you could got so immersed, to something else beyond the physical manifestation of it. So that's why he has to be he strongly feels he has to be very careful you know not to enter that space, that third space, you call it if you want to say it you know. So uh, I think it happened in the beginning so he was warned he should know his limit of exploration, which is quite interesting. Because during the first during through run down the first run through of the part,

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I could see the part at the end when he he he moved like so superbly that I was like it was improvisation it was like nothing I had seen in the rehearsals. So that moment, that special moment took place, but yeah. But I think when it was finally staged, it's an aesthetic space.

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I think in general I mean don't want to fall to these generalizations, but I think, I think Indonesian dance because it it started with narrative, storytelling is very important. So when the nontraditional tried you know to do something, which has nothing to do with traditional context, they just they almost automatically work with stories, how to tell stories you know. And then but in a way it's also strange but if you look at traditional forms, they do have abstract forms, so it's maybe there is a story behind it. But it's noit told linear. Maybe for example like some classical Javanese court dance, it is an abstract form so you.

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could contest that you know. Because I think Indonesian dance or Asian dance we also do have abstract forms even in a classical or traditional context. Um But um indeed I would say most not all, I would see most Indonesian choreographers are still seduced by this you know storytelling mood. Um and but few had actually explored other space field beyond storytelling. Even the the early modern chorographer like Sardono, I mean um, he he he even thought his early work was very much influenced by certain stories, but the way he tells the story is abstract you know

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I think Western contemporary dance is just I think that what makes it different from us because I think the production and the discourse, you know the talk about the doing and the talking about it have been going more much more intensively than the Indonesian

Asian dance. You know what I mean doing I mean the doing and the analyzing of what has been done you it happens more intensively. So you know the production and the discourse, the analyzes goes together. While in Indonesia and Asian generally in Asian dance it's just about to happen. It's just started so that's why.

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Women

Um I I tend to disagree with that.

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Even from the beginning from the beginning of the so called modern era, we we've been always having some strong women choreographing. Of course they start from dancing. But then they start making dance themselves, composing dance. And a we I can easily come up with a few names you know alongside those male dead male counterparts. So, I t's even now I could say male are still outnumbered, but it's not it's not an extreme way, so it's like you know their catching.

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It's just any other you know like any other like working women, you know if you want to have family and then you have to juggle between family and career then that's a problem, but it's not like culturally specific you know problem for a women to be a choreographer. It's just like a working woman in any field, you know that you have to

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smartly juggle 2 different life styles.

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As I said before most Indonesia choreographers still deal with storytelling, most but not all. Um it's still very much showing in the ?? um so from the works we are discussing now, most of them deal with storytelling except one "in Between" that, you know it's more like dealing with the form, dealing with you know and trying trying to present it in a more abstract abstract way. But um it's also storytelling becomes a strength but also a challenge for Indonesians because now in the contemporary world there are many ways of approaching storytelling, that's wh, that's what I like to see, in the future, in the near future. It's not that I'm saying no storytelling for Indonesian dance because it's very much a part of our culture, telling the storie. But there are a many many ways for example you can see in films. But if you look at you know those works here, they still uses some even some of them still

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use classical stories from Ramayana about trying to trying to reconstruct that stories and reconstruct it to whatever they think or perceive now you know the contemporary world now. So yeah it's I would say it's

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Tom Ibnur is one of Indonesian choreographers you know as known through his Minekabow technique. But in later, I mean he I think he he learn from at IKJ at the dance Academy of Indonesia and he end up also teaching there. You know, he's still teaching there now and uh he I've seen only few of his old choreography. But um yeah, basically

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He deals with two kinds of movement vocabulary. The first is Minekabow closer to pencak silat. But the second one is the Malay or Malayu dance, which is you know is to me is quite different from what Minekabow silat from what Minekabow dance is. So um and then in regards to his big production Padusi, Padusi is Minekabow vernacular for woman. This is also the first time that Tom has to deal with such a big production. And I think he is also very influenced by the current trends in Indonesia now, you know the musical. We been we been the musical genre has been popular since 2009 I think. So since 3 or 4 years. And he it's very clear in Padusi he takes a lot of sensibility, musical sensibility into his work. So whether it's contemporary or not it's contestable but to me I see his particular production more as a musical in which he try to present 3 different stories folklores, 3 different Minekabow folklores, in succession. But I would say

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he used that more, a new hybrid of you know of musical and spectacle you know presentation of a big ...it's characteristic of a large scale dance.

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I started noticing Jefri when he danced for GS dance company back in the late 90's so he was a young dancer dancing for dance company. And of course the style is very particular, of course like Minekabow derived, pencak silat derived you know style. So it's some and from dancing from the GS dance company, he started choreographing himself. And he went through quite a bit of experimentation. Then the Minekabow technique, he didn't always use it, you know in his early works. I remember one work for example he hang himself from the ceiling spiraling going down. And he collaborated a lot with sculptor " " and also composer, contemporary composer Tony Rabo. He did one or two, a couple of productions with them. So I think he tried to and then he and then he did a residency in Germany

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And Japan. Out of this he created choreography inspired by his time in Japan, which has nothing to do with you know Minekabow, so it's just a technique that he could perform at a certain stage but he also used any other materials. As of his latest I I think the last one I watch 2 years ago in 2011 then he return so it's sometimes sometimes he return to his Minekabow you know, sources, but then he always, you know, mix of everything his latest he revisit one of his old. Not so old probably --- 3 to 5 years. But it was I understand.

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So I understand I understand is latelest is Ithink...car noise

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I think I understand his latest as expansion of one of his stage work. So he try to use it in a different site. So it's more like site specific work. So um yeah um Jefri is exploring many kinds of avenues, I think now he also collaborates with his brother. Um when it comes to stage a scenographer, so it's um a Minekabow technique is only one of the materials he often use, but not really in a rigid context, I would say.

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I think um I think I would suggest not only to see Indonesian contemporary work but any other especially non western contemporary art. Not to easy or rush to see it or validate it according to Western contemporary dance. What you been accustomed to see in Western contemporary dance. Because on the surface it may seem the same or you know because it happens so many times that the works of Indonesian or Asian contemporary dancer when they presents it in the US, they tend to or the reviewers tend to compare it American choreographers, which I think is not fair because sometimes it comes from a specific you know point of view, if not culturally specific, it is politically specific. For example like you know a certain a certain work by Chinese choreographer for example. I would say just open your eyes and open your mind and try to and try to see the unseen behind what on stage.

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Maybe the closing line is like as contemporary work implies, it's still always in the making.