

## **News about the Gambuh Desa Batuan Ensemble**

Letter from Bali

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05.10.2008

All of us who knew Cristina Wistari Formaggia were worried about what would happen with the Gambuh Desa Batuan Ensemble after her death. Cristina had dedicated herself completely to this Balinese village troupe of dancers and musicians in order to save the ancient Gambuh style of dance/drama from extinction. She took care of the artistic coherence, of finding the masters to teach the children, of guaranteeing the funds to pay for rehearsals and performances.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2008 I arrived to Bali with Eugenio Barba to visit the group and see if it was possible to help them continue their work in some way. I am writing this report on my way back to Europe the 5<sup>th</sup> of October to share the news with the many who I know will be interested to hear it. As I write I feel optimistic for the future. Our visit has been a success, and we expect to meet the Balinese group in Wroclaw, Poland, in June 2009, to perform UR-HAMLET again.

On the first evening we met Pino Confessa and Antonella de Sanctis, two old date Italian friends of Cristina's. Pino has collaborated with ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in the past and now, as Italian Honorary Consul, has been active in maintaining contact for us with the group while we were on tour with Odin Teatret in Brazil, Italy and Mexico. Antonella I had written various emails to while trying to help Cristina's family in Milan, Italy, to organise practical things concerning her belongings. Antonella told us how she had finally packed everything from Cristina's house, and that the things were soon to be sent from Bali. With Pino and Antonella we spoke about the meetings they had had previously to our arrival with the group, of how the group expressed their will to continue and their concern about organisation and economy.

The next day we met Gabriella Medici, a Danish woman who has lived in Bali for ten years and who had shown herself interested in working for the Gambuh project. In the evening we had our first meeting with the group.

We arrived with our hired car at the temple for the dead in Batuan where we have always rehearsed together with Cristina. We have collaborated for two big projects, UR-HAMLET and THE MARRIAGE OF MEDEA, consequently spending various weeks with them, sometimes even twice a year. It was strange not to see Cristina's familiar old blue and white van parked at the entrance. As we got out of our car we could see the members of the group come towards us with faces which deeply expressed a contradictory happiness at seeing us and the sadness of the first meeting since Cristina had died. Sudi, the teacher of female dances, and the oldest of the women Gambuh performers, was the first one I hugged. She was crying, so I stayed with her a long time, while the others started crowding around, divided between men and women, as they greeted Eugenio, and also Gabriella who accompanied us. It was good to recognise and respond to each of the dancers and musicians. As usual I felt out of proportion and enormous as I shook hands, lifted my palms together in front of my eyes and smiled at the men, and hugged the women. The Balinese are so small. They seemed to all be there, ready for the meeting.

The temple had been decorated as if to present a performance; mats were placed on the floor for the Balinese in front of the chairs for us Europeans who suffer sitting on the floor for a long time. Ni Nyoman Candri, the female arja opera singer and dalang, arrived a little late. As Janto fetched his motorbike to go and get Ri, he

appeared from round the corner. Pino also arrived to help us with interpreting. Pia, the little girl who had joined the *Ur-Hamlet* performance when she was twelve, looked grown-up and serious. I gave Made (Medea) a letter and present sent from Tage (Jason) while the other women giggled. Naka, the responsible for Gambuh music, busied himself around us. Rawa, Cristina's right hand for all that concerns props and costumes, had prepared the decorations. Pak Suamba, the 'political' leader, and Pak Kader, the practical leader, were obviously very glad to see us.

We spoke about the responsibility of continuing the work Cristina had established, about the cultural importance of maintaining the Gambuh tradition alive, and about the big task that lay before us for the organisation, communication and realisation now that Cristina was not there to help. Eugenio and I asked questions. Do you all want to continue? Yes! Have you been performing in these months after Cristina's death? Yes; once only for two spectators. How many times do you rehearse and perform and teach? We rehearse Gambuh once a week, the other performances once a week, we teach the children on Saturday, we perform twice a month. How much did you used to receive for this? Everyone receives a food box after rehearsals, the children as well after teaching. The food box costs 10.000 rupies (about 1 \$). For performances, if the ticket sale did not give enough, Cristina would supply more so as to give everyone of the 32 performers and musicians a payment of 20.000 rupies. The four gurus (Sudi, Bawa, Naka and the eldest of the group) would at times receive 35.000 rupies for teaching the children. Cristina would also provide the money when costumes needed mending; some of the women's costumes are broken now.

It was impressive to see how the group had discovered an open collective way of talking and presenting their situation; as if, without Cristina, they had suddenly had to become aware of their own strength and possibilities. They seemed determined to continue, although not knowing how to solve some problems. Do you have an email? Yes, some of us do. Do you have a computer at home? No. My son can write for me. Who will play Cristina's role of Panji? Sudi. Do you have the costume? We can use the one belonging to the village temple. Which performance of Topeng can you perform now? And of Gambuh? The same ones as before, we only don't know the lines from *Hamlet* that Cristina said in the clown version of Shakespeare's play; we cannot hear them on the recording. But everything else we can do. Do you have the written descriptions of the performances? Yes. Kadek, you who know a little English can you write them down? Yes. Tomorrow we will rehearse *Ur-Hamlet* and everyone will be paid as usual for this.

We say good-bye confirming the appointment for the next day. During the meeting we were offered tea, water, fruit and some kind of undecipherable Balinese food, as we always have been in the past.

When we arrived the next day, everyone was in front of a big television looking at a recoding of rehearsals of *Ur-Hamlet*. Ketut, one of the new musicians, was laughing intrigued by what he saw on the screen. We went through the Balinese scenes of the performance once with some difficulty while reconstructing and having to substitute Cristina with Sudi; then the costumes were put one and the performance was passed through once again quite fluently. It is always amazing for me to see how the Balinese performers and musicians remember scores and scenes they have not done in years, and are able to repeat them alone without the other performers they shared the scene with. Compared to them, I felt ridiculously lost, as I had no idea what I was doing in the same scene, and couldn't even imagine the amount of work I will need to reconstruct my role.

Then we gathered again and talked. It was then that Pak Suamba spoke for the group saying something which really moved me. He said that our visit had brought Cristina back to them. It was like she was there again. Together we decided that Bawa would be responsible for the artistic quality of the group, that the new musicians were part of the group that would go to Poland; that Odin Teatret would give them enough money to rehearse and perform for the next months; that they had to keep accounts. Bawa looked a little lost when confronted with his new responsibility, and all he was able to say was: which email address should I use? We reconvened in December, when Eugenio will go to Bali again, and in June in Poland. When I said good-bye I asked Made, the male second dancer, to support Bawa. The women I know will manage quite well. And I hope the musicians find a way of collaborating avoiding the conflicts of power and leadership.

Eugenio used Pino that evening to interpret as he directed. As I looked at them instructing Sudi on how to react to being stabbed and Pia on how to pick at a corpse like a bird, I remembered how Cristina would 'resurrect' from her role as the dead king to translate instructions across the room, or how she would appear from under the mat where she was hiding as Corambus to shout a queue to the musicians. How we will manage to collaborate on a new performance without her is still a great question for all of us.

Another Italian woman, Milvia Terenzi, who has lived thirty years in Bali, came with Antonella to the rehearsals that evening. She was also interested in the administrative job as assistant of the group. After rehearsals, Eugenio, Antonella, Pino, Gabriella, Milvia and I talked over supper. It became clear that Gabriella would not be able to do the job because of her returning to Denmark exactly at the moment when the bureaucratic work would have to be done for Poland. So Eugenio and I decided to meet Milvia the next day.

We explained a lot about Gambuh, about Cristina's commitment, about how we could imagine presenting the Gambuh so it could be interesting for some 'special' tourists, how articles could be written in newspapers, and sponsors searched for. We spoke about organisation, interpretation, group dynamics, and conflicts. We made an agreement for a year of work helping the group as a manager, exchanged addresses and telephone numbers and now we will have to see how it all goes.

Cristina's photographs shine on one of the local papers edited by local Italian restaurants and businesses. Cristina never wanted to give much of her time to publicity and selling, as she concentrated on the artistic results. Now the Gambuh Desa Batuan Ensemble has the task of making people aware of the enormous contribution an Italian woman has done towards Balinese culture. I think they have all intention of carrying out this task defending the quality of work they have embodied in years of collaboration with Cristina. And Odin Teatret will do what it can to help them in this task.