



# FRIENDSHIP BEYOND BORDERS

*Celebrating Fifty Years of Indonesian-Canadian Bilateral Ties*



## Maxine Heppner

*Maxine Heppner is Director of 'Across Oceans'-International Collaboration in the Contemporary Arts.*

There are places we go in the world where we are always visitors. There are places we go where we are always family. How or why this happens is hard to pinpoint, and I'm not sure if it really matters because both are positive relationships. I do know that in 1989 when I stepped from plane to ground at Soekarno-Hatta airport I was a visitor to Indonesia, and that 2 months later when I stepped from ground back to plane that the people and country had already become an integral part of my life.

I had been creating, teaching, and producing dance and interdisciplinary performance work in Canada non-stop for 12 years. I needed some assessment time. I wanted to be quiet. I craved a complete change of environment. Indonesia seemed as far as I could go for that change in geography, customs, and social realities. I had had superficial exposure to the many arts forms, especially to the influences on the development of New Music. As the saying goes "some of my best friends" play gamelan. But beyond that I knew very little about the place. The trip was for research: to expose myself to other world-views and ways of making art.

A few days before my flight, a friend shared these words with me: "travel with a child's curiosity, an elder's willingness to listen, and a warrior's careful readiness to act". Neither of us knew if this was a direct quote from anywhere, but the spirit was right for me as traveller and, I was to find out, also applied to the people who are now family.

*Maxine Heppner's artistry is both beautiful and inspiring.*





"My" Indonesia is one of personal relationships. At the end of my first two-month trip, I met Farida Oetoyo, director of Ballet Sumber Cipta and the Gedung Kesenian in Jakarta, and one of the animators of Indonesian contemporary dance. I'd traveled the length of Java and Bali alone, on a bicycle, returning to Jakarta spiritually, if you will allow me, thick with the dusts of the roads, the waters of the rivers, the generosity of the people along the way. The child-elder-warrior axiom may have cast a protective shell around me. I had attended every performance, festival, village and town ceremony available: from court performance in Yogya, to horse dance at Bromo. I'd slept in one fabulous hotel but mostly in homestays and on floors. I had spoken little, absorbed much. What I saw at Farida's studio was very exciting, a link to my new experiences and what I already knew. She was producing work that successfully integrated her Russian ballet training with her Indonesian roots. I gladly taught a workshop.

That was the beginning of the yearly residencies I've been doing in Indonesia ever since, teaching, choreographing with professional groups, and presenting my solo work. I now have ties with individual artists in dance, music and visual arts, and with several schools and companies. I have brought Canadians to Indonesia, Asian colleagues for projects in Canada. I speak Indonesian. The continuing interest is the unexpected convergences and tensions in our aesthetic interests, our perspectives towards the use of energy, dynamics and time, as well as our attitudes towards the role of intuition and spirit in artwork.

That first visit was at a pivotal time in my adult life that happened to coincide with a pivotal period in Indonesian history. The country I stepped into in 1989 was

full of optimism, work, and growth. The population was open to new ideas. The people I met: teachers, artists, writers, leaders in economic and environmental issues, village heads, were, for the most part, wise to the potential good that development could bring, and also wise to the cautions needed to safeguard cultural and social legacies. Life was not easy with its poverty, corruption and censorship. The positivism of the times was not naïve. To the contrary, at every level there seemed to be an objectivity that grounded activity in realistic action. The energy was tangible and invigorating and resonated with my own.

Although worlds apart economically and politically, I also felt a link in Indonesian and Canadian realities because we are both multi-cultural countries. Despite the fact that our histories bare little resemblance, a similar goal is present in our two nations: development of a country where people from vastly different backgrounds can find ways to live together. (Back to that axiom: curiosity, listening, wariness and willingness to interact are necessary characteristics that we share.)

Yet, ethnic identification is strong, so both countries have an Official Line to be accepting. To become accustomed to living with difference is the beginning of it becoming "custom", and with custom comes an accepted way of life that naturally develops an identity and group consciousness. Unfortunately we have seen horrible breaches of tolerance in recent years but the official line readies the stage.

Also in both countries our cohesive national identities were (and are) only just developing. In the 90s we had a similar worry that with increased access to foreign mass entertainment, youth would abandon their personal heritages. In Canada, our arts councils were grappling with this.

One Indonesian solution was strengthening the national arts schools system to cultivate the traditional arts as foundations of the society.

My visit to the unknown became a life of observing and recognizing shared qualities and dynamics in personal relations and in artistic expressions, and of coming to understand that some things in life really are very different. Anyone who knows my current teaching and studio research will recognize this in my perspectives.

Today's politics and economics have vastly altered since the early 90s. The two-facedness of growth is now apparent. We all worry about the world, our families. The soft euphoria that pervaded Indonesia then has dissipated. Smiles have more wariness behind them. The challenge to continue to be positive is huge. The artists' response to this is to keep engaged within their communities and to continue to create work that presents alternatives on which to base visions of the future.

Farida introduced me to some of these people. Sardono, Sal Murgyanto, Dedi Lutan, Linda Hoemar, the then-young-upstart Sukarji Sriman, many others, and most significantly her dear friend the late Gusmiati Said, and her student and now colleague Chendra Effendy. As choreographer-in-residence at the 1996 Indonesia International Dance Festival, I met my close collaborator, visual artist Hanafi. He and I have made the study of the metaphorical and actual distances between us the subject of our work together.

I met Rachel Cooper and David Irons at the homestay of artist I Ketut Madra. Andy Toth had recommended the place because the residents were all seriously studying Balinese arts. Rachel, now head of performing arts at the Asia Society in New York City, had lived and worked in





*Maxine Heppner, second from left, with dancers of Gumarang Sakti.*

Indonesia for many years and was a founder of the world-renowned "Gamelan Sekar Jaya". In the midst of producing a massive one-year festival that would bring Indonesian artists from across the archipelago to tour across the USA, she introduced me to a fantastic range of art forms, and to the Indonesian and international gamelan community.

David Irons, an expert on Kamasan paintings, was my partner and anchor between North America and Indonesia. I see him climbing with me through rubble behind Taman Ismail Marzuki in search of the perfect stones for the set of "J'ai perdu les paroles".

Images, conversations, sensations, ideas, stories come and go within us and become us.

Farida recently told me that my trips to study communities from Central Kali-

mantan all the way to Sumba, my learning Bahasa to talk with people at the warungs and pasars, my incessant asking "why (even though I know that there often is no answer) had reawakened her interest in her own cultural roots. I don't think that my Indonesian colleagues know that my learning to work alone in a room crowded with people was a gift. Chendra claims that living with my family in Montréal, active in community and charity work, inspired him to expand his vision of art to create programs in Jakarta for youth and disadvantaged communities. Hanafi found that Toronto's Kensington market reminded him of home.

I honestly don't know how to discern what is from where. Can we predict what we actually give and what we receive from each other? And when it will be important?

A person on stage keeping time with a sledge-hammer on a rock was the music in one of the first works I did in Indonesia. (Was it inspired by Canadian road workers or by kajar players in Gong Kebyar?) Imagination makes unusual links. We are the richer for it.

One meeting leads to conversations, to plans, to life. Is it possible to pinpoint one moment that results in the creation of an artwork? The development of a person's character? Thought patterns? I don't think so. These are processes of accumulation and distillation. The concepts I'm now working with are not exclusive to any particular culture. Yet I know that the life I share with Indonesians and the work we have created together with the accompanying challenges, questions, answers, and unanswerables, have become integral to us.