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Purbo Asmoro approaches a lakon or lakon compilation by trying to view it through different lenses than have been used in the past. He then creates a dramatic presentation that highlights this new angle, using the techniques of all-night garapan. As he often tells his students:

Strive to present something different. Find something different to say, and a different way to say it. Not just for the sake of different-ness, but rather, because it is compelling—both the message and the method. Something no one has thought of before. Yet once you present it, people wonder how could it have been missed (Pétruk in Gara-gara, Banyuanyar, November 2015).
Striving to present aspects of a lakon in a fresh way is not new to wayang, nor unique to Purbo Asmoro. The search for original sanggit (interpretation) is an aspiration of every dhalang I have spoken to, heard stories about, or read about. Classical elders, however, seemed primarily to realize originality through subtle, relatively minor tweaks in story details: the reason a character may give for a certain decision, the particular circumstances of an obstacle or plot complication, the manner in which a dhalang reveals the true identity of a character in disguise. When I arrived in Solo in 1991, many highly classical dhalang still actively performing were considered notable for their original sanggit in specific areas of performance practice: philosophical commentary (Sutino Hardokocarito of Wonogiri), expressive movement repertory (Puspocarito of Klaten), unusual musical accompaniment (Sukron Suwondo of Blitar), gripping dialogue and conflict in court scenes (Mujoko Joko Raharjo of Boyolali and Tristuti of Solo), quirky and innovative troop departure or battle scenes (Gandadarman of Sragen). The late Nartosabdo was held up as a model of originality in the realm of musical accompaniment and scene structure. Anom Soeroto and Manteb
Soedharsono were, at the time, revolutionizing the nature of the two entertainment interludes. Manteb Soedharsono was setting a new standard for virtuosity in battle scenes. On the campus of ISI every day since the late 1970s, discussions had continued unabated on how to create padat scripts that were entirely reconceptualized from standard practice, as described in detail in Chapter 3.

For Purbo Asmoro though—and the dhalang who have been inspired and trained by him, such as Sigid Ariyanto and Cahyo Kuntadi—presenting the lakon in an original way is no less than a global concept. It is an essential starting point. It is not a matter of one or two interpretive points throughout the evening, or one area of expertise that is considered original. Just as the padat practitioner does, Purbo Asmoro starts from the vantage point of a more-or-less blank slate, and truly strives to see the lakon through new lenses from the very beginning of his process. Beyond this, he strives to express his interpretations through the repertory of padat techniques in narration, musical accompaniment, movement, scene structure, and character development. Yet different from the padat practitioner, he attempts to manage all of this originality, in both content and technique, across a seven-hour performance, and often within complex, multi-episode constructions.

Purbo Asmoro’s ruminations on how to be compellingly different are built upon decades of experience. He is not only well-read (in dhalang manuals, lakon synopses, and other primary sources) but also has more than four decades of experience watching and listening to wayang. A decade in his youth of listening to radio broadcasts of Nartosabdo and Anom Soeroto was followed by two decades of watching performances by the classical masters of Solo, Klaten, Sragen, Boyolali, Wonogiri, and Sukoharjo at Rebo Legèn and in the field. His ruminations are also built upon a continuous immersion in pedhalangan developments. For almost four decades, he has been an active participant at ASKI-STSI-ISI, first as a student, then as an assistant instructor, and finally as a senior instructor. His daily activities on campus include not only the coursework he teaches, but also sitting in on rehearsals and exams of his advisees, being on the exam jury for almost every candidate not his advisee, and attending a wide variety of performances. In his own
performance travels across East Java, Central Java, and Jakarta, Purbo is known for spending his pre-performance time talking to musicians and other dhalang from the locality, rather than sponsors and officials, thus picking up on local developments. He attends most of the routine dhalang get-togethers around Solo, as well as sponsoring his own every 35 days on Sunday Paing. Here, dhalang discuss ideas and sanggit, while watching performances.

Therefore, when Purbo Asmoro aspires to have something different yet compelling to say it is a tall order, as he is well aware of the richness of interpretations both past and present. The first time he performs a new lakon, or when performing a lakon he has not thought about in years, he chooses a character, theme, message, or some sort of plot thread to address in an innovative way. In his most recent version of The Grand Offering of the Kings (Asmoro, 2013) he focuses less on the offering ceremony and much more on his portrayal of King Jarasandha as a force of terrorism. His performance highlights that the key to defeating Jarasandha is in understanding why he turned against the world as he did, and how he has misrepresented his belief system. In one of his most recent versions of Rama’s Crown (Asmoro 2013), Purbo Asmoro focuses on the idea that the humble individual striving for virtue can make a difference in the world. He tied this theme directly to the relief efforts after the myriad of natural disasters that had struck Indonesia in the years previous to the recording. This is opposed to a typical, classical interpretation more about the Kurawa-Pandhawa struggle for supremacy coming up to the Baratayuda War.¹

I have often witnessed Purbo Asmoro’s struggle to find that kernel of an idea, that theme or focus which will make his interpretation different. When preparing for his premiere performance of The Life Story of Abiyasa at the University of Mercu Buwana in Jakarta, October 2015, he read everything he could find and spoke to many colleagues, friends, and experts. He arrived at my house in Kemang, the performance two days away, thinking about nothing else. I dug up recordings of bits of Abiyasa’s story from many

¹Both of these Lontar 2013 recordings were made from live performances in 2007. His Sesaji Raja Suya performances since then have been quite similar. He has created a number of different takes on Makutharama since then, however.
different performances by a variety of dhalang over the past decade. He would listen for a bit and then shake his head in frustration, "That's not it. That's just not it. Nothing compelling here." He woke up the morning of the performance, came out to breakfast and said, "I figured it out. Abiyasa himself played a crucial part in the fact that the Kurawa and Pandhawa never saw eye to eye. A good part of the responsibility is on him. But no one ever talks about this." He then disappeared into his room again and did not come out until it was time to go to the venue for rehearsal, this time armed with a full two-column summary of how the drama would unfold via what pieces the gamelan would play. Finding the innovative focus had clearly sparked his creative energy, and planning the rest of the performance went easily.2

The moment Purbo Asmoro finds what he is looking for, his all-night garapan style begins to serve him well. Put another way, special treatment of narration, musical accompaniment, movement techniques, and scene structure means nothing if not preceded by this initial determination of focus, theme, message, plotline detail, and character angle. This is the gagasan pokok principle around which Gendhon Humardani built his pakeliran padat movement at ASKI in the 1970s (see p. 60), and that Purbo Asmoro has remained faithful to in his all-night performances. In a single-episode lakon, this will most likely be a single universal theme or big-issue focal point. In a biography (lakon banjaran) Purbo Asmoro will look for a determining character trait or the effect of a pivotal event in the character’s life, selecting story threads and creating bridges between threads that support the choice. In a multi-episode lakon based on chronologically adjacent stories, he will look for something—a big idea—that binds the stories together other than chronology.

He then uses techniques of the pakeliran padat movement, to craft dramatic hierarchy and emotional poignancy around moments in the lakon relating to his chosen focus. He begins by crafting the scene structure. The

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2 I have also seen him on many occasions reject or be disappointed in his performance of a lakon because he never did find what he was looking for. I had asked him to perform The Life Story of Drupadi at events of mine for many years, before he finally found the original angle he was looking for and agreed in 2014. Before performing Gendrèh Kemasan at SMKI in 2008 he texted me to say, “Don’t expect anything special tonight. I never came up with what this lakon is really about.”
theme or focus will be foremost right from the prologue (the unusual circumstances of Jarasandha’s birth in *The Grand Offering of the Kings*, Arjuna’s search for his role in life in *Rama’s Crown*). These are moments, more often than not, that would fall in the *Pathet Sanga* section of a traditional performance. He crafts the boundaries between Prologue and *Pathet Nem, Pathet Nem* and *Pathet Sanga, Pathet Sanga* and *Pathet Manyura* with a careful eye as to how they can serve as highlights for his unique interpretation. The same is true for three other transition points: the opening to *Limbukan*, *Limbukan* to *Gara-gara*, and *Gara-gara* to the end. Never random, these transitions stand out as structural pillars in building his interpretation. He also crafts how the lakon will end, or the climactic, determining scene (Jarasandha’s debate with Kresna on belief systems, Késawasid’s philosophical teachings on leadership passed on to Arjuna metaphorically as Rama’s crown).

After crafting the scene structure, Purbo Asmoro determines the gamelan pieces used to highlight important emotional and structural moments. He also considers elaborate, expressive movement sequences and how the music will support these. He may also consider the variety of *wanda* (forms of wayang figures) he wishes to use, and this may in turn influence accompaniment choices or small matters of scene structure. In one of the last steps of his process, he will create narrations to emphasize the important structural and focal points, or to further communicate the inner state of a character. Sometimes these will be carefully thought out and refer to historical poems or other sources. Purbo Asmoro tends to leave these until last, however, sometimes even creating them in the car on the way to the performance, or in the green room waiting to get dressed. This is not because he is careless with literary passages, but rather, it appears to me from observation, that his mind enters the space of the lakon the closer it comes to performance time, and this is when the poetry flows. Many of Purbo Asmoro’s creations feature a debate sequence (Jarasandha and Kresna’s debate on religion, Kunthi and Basudéwa’s debate on loyalty to child or nation) and these are developed thoughtfully, weeks before a performance.
Aside from the focal, emotionally poignant, and structurally crucial points, Purbo Asmoro allows other parts of his performances to relax, and to ebb and flow. He offers some of the more traditional visual attractions, battle scenes, and slapstick, comedic routines. In every performance, without fail, he will grant the audience two entertainment interludes, each about one hour in length and having nothing to do with the story, as is typical practice for all high-profile dhalang these days, regardless of style.

Purbo Asmoro’s life’s work is centered on crafting the most meaningful dramatic, narrative, musical accompaniment, and movement structures possible to explore and communicate theme and character in key moments. This was the mission of the pakeliran padat movement as well. But in the all-night garapan style, this intense treatment of theme, character, and plotline is interspersed with traditional and generic visual attractions as well as entertainment interludes. The techniques of pakeliran padat are used toward a specific purpose—as the tools to craft special focus or interpretative points. Many of Purbo Asmoro’s colleagues, former students turned professional, and even dhalang senior to him such as Manteb Soedharsono, experiment with the use of pakeliran padat techniques. But very few, in fact perhaps only Sigid Ariyanto and Cahyo Kuntadi, approach the insertion of padat techniques into all-night wayang in the same way Purbo Asmoro does.

Having summed up what defines Purbo Asmoro’s style, also interesting to encapsulate here is what he therefore rejects, and why. First and foremost, as outlined in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, he rejects the idea that quintessential classical, condensed, or hura-hura style performances are useful models for the future of wayang. Although he is experienced in all three, immersed in all three on a weekly basis, and his all-night garapan has elements of all three, he rejects them as models that stand on their own for the audiences of today.

**Classical Style: Rejecting an Artifact**

Purbo Asmoro grew up with classical models. He was born into a family of traditional dhalang in Pacitan, and schooled at SMKI and ASKI. From the radio, to wayang at Rebo Legèn and elsewhere, he was steeped in the
classical. To this day the classical style is, as he often says, part and parcel of his "daily fare" on campus. Teaching assignments at ISI rotate, but he often finds himself as an instructor for first-year students, who are in the process of mastering palace-classical style much as it is represented by manuals from a hundred years ago. Yet he strongly believes that this broad category of style (from palace-classical to various village styles across Klaten, Sragen, or Boyolali, to Nartosabdo-style) is only relevant for him now as a historical phenomenon.

My performance practice stands on the structures of classical style. It references classical styles. It is encased within classical styles. Its foundations are classical styles. It can be thought of as classical style modernized if you like, as opposed to some of the other styles that are clearly outside the boundaries of anything that could be called classical. But to follow classical stylistics to the letter these days: a court audience scene complete with a full gamelan piece, generic narration that everyone knows but doesn't listen to, long sulukan, elaborate introductions? A major antagonist like Jarasandha only appearing for the first time at 3:00 in the morning? Exploration of the point of the lakon beginning at 3:30 in the morning with only fellow dhalang and hired facilities staff remaining in the audience? Well, as I have said over and over again in public, it is time for us to let this go. Let's give the audience something to take home from the lakon whether they leave at 10, or at midnight, or at 2 in the morning (phone conversation, Oct 2015).

All-night garapan is so embedded in who Purbo Asmoro is at this point, and so much more satisfying to him artistically, that he will gravitate to this style no matter what. The only real limiting factor to using his entire all-night garapan system, is the gamelan troupe. Yet he will sacrifice the iringan garap element if necessary and go ahead with all other elements being garaped, rather than revert to a traditional style, if performing with a local troupe with no rehearsal time. From Seattle to Kalimantan, Purbo Asmoro has still chosen to start with a prologue, write his own narrations, use expressive movement sequences, and employ innovative story details, all to the accompaniment of ayak-srepeg-sampak if necessary, rather than revert to telling the story using traditional elements. Garapan is not determined by one element, but rather by the recrafting of the majority of elements of the performance, even if the gamelan accompaniment element has to be left out.
**Condensed Style: Rejecting Art for Art's Sake**

Purbo Asmoro also rejects certain philosophical points that the condensed style was built upon at ASKI in the 1970s and 1980s, whether he is performing in actual condensed format or simply using the techniques interspersed in his all-night performances. He rejects, for example, the often obscure, lengthy, dense movement sequences designed by Bambang Suwarno, in which not a word is spoken and every gesture is symbolic. Originally conceived with the ideal that movement can represent words in a more artistic and abbreviated way, these sequences are revised in Purbo's performances. They include the addition of dialogue or narration to help the viewer along. In essence, these *sabet tématik* sequences are used to deepen the expressive meaning of the moment, but not as a substitute for narrative descriptions or dialogue. This is an example of how Purbo's use of condensed techniques does not serve to abbreviate or minimalize the sequences in which he uses them but rather to lengthen and elaborate, or "thicken" them. In general, Purbo rejects the "art for art's sake" basis on which much of the *pakeiran padat* movement was based (see Chapter 3). He employs the techniques to enhance certain moments, but without being obscure or too abstract:

> We have to retain our idealism on the one hand, but we also ultimately need to be successful among the masses. This cannot be art for art's sake. A meaningful and virtuous art form [such as wayang] needs to speak to the public so that they can enjoy it and so they are in fact able to access the deep and honorable values within (*Adiluhung*, July 2015).

**Hura-hura Antics Rejected as Not Worth the Time**

Purbo Asmoro's initial boost into superstardom was built upon opportunities handed him by the *hura-hura* movement of the early 1990s. These started with the colossal wayang put on by Governor Ismail at the national radio station in Semarang (1990–1993), and PANTAP performances put on by Ganasidi's Sudjadi and Governor Suwardi in Semarang (1993–1998). Most importantly, sponsors in general during this period wanted extra-long entertainment interludes, extended battle scenes, and a drastically reduced emphasis on lakon content. Although he did not refuse prestigious and widely broadcast engagements with PANTAP, Purbo struck out on his own when performing
at non-PANTAP events, and espoused his own principle that lakon integrity was his priority. To this day, Purbo Asmoro is keenly aware when an engagement "smells" of the PANTAP-era aesthetics. He holds the reins tightly in such events, making sure that the entertainment interludes do not go on too long, and that stand-up comedians and other sponsor-invited attractions are kept in proportion. He has been asked to start the entertainment interludes early or to make the entire lakon's atmosphere light, yet, as of early 2016, I have never seen him stray from his ideals in these situations.

Stark Realism Rejected in Favor of the Timeless
One area of innovation that Purbo Asmoro rejects entirely is a movement toward realistic representation in wayang. He keeps his story interpretations in the world of allegory (pasemon, in his words), and his visual presentation in the world of symbolism. Certainly the themes he addresses are real and current (love, power, corruption, betrayal, the nature of death, the meaning of life, the environment, war, peace, motherhood, fatherhood, life’s rites of passage), but he continues to use traditional tales and characters as his vehicle to address these big issues. Some dhalang, such as Enthus Susmono and Jlitheng Suparman, question the feudal, out-of-date structure of the wayang world. They experiment with a new paradigm, telling stories through modern international figures such as Saddam Hussein, George Bush, or Osama bin Laden, or generic local governmental figures like Pak Camat or Pak Lurah, or other modern-day artifacts. Purbo Asmoro has often commented that these are by definition fleeting and hence not satisfying to him:

We have everything we need in the allegory (pasemon) of wayang. The internet? Wayang has always had that in the cupu manik asthagina. Text messaging? Wayang has always had that in aji pameling. Every emotion, every type of conflict, every human struggle, every eternal question

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3 Jlitheng Suparman, a talented dhalang and graduate of ISI Pedalangan, created Wayang Kampung Sebelah, which in 2015 was extremely popular both in live performance and on television. It is a wayang-based storytelling medium exploring everyday life in villages and metropolitan neighborhoods, and the conflicts between everyday people and local officials.

4 Amulets that various wayang characters have had in their possession over time. The cupu manik asthagina is a kind of small looking glass one can look into that contains the entire world’s essence and all its meaning. Aji pameling is the power to call forth and communicate with people not in your presence.
already exists in the world of wayang. The feudal structure, the godly world of wayang—these are only allegories. As a modern dhalang I am not advocating a return to feudal interactions, or any belief system in particular, just because I tell these stories. It is all allegory. As long as audiences can access the language and the meaning and the content of the story, they will see themselves somewhere in every lakon, no matter how old-fashioned the medium may seem to some. If we start presenting wayang in a modern setting, by contrast, it will go out of date and become more trite every decade (informal gathering in Kemang, Oct 2015).

While some superstar dhalang, such as Enthus Susmono, have added elaborate realistic scene backdrops or props (trees, realistic kingdom entrances, clouds) and modern elements such as pistols, motorcycles, or cellphones, Purbo Asmoro has referred to this kind of thing as a slippery slope (interview at his home, August 2008):

Once you start adding these elements, where are you going to stop? To an audience used to realistic tree figures and clouds and waterfalls, suddenly scenes not reflecting the actual backdrop will come to seem primitive. I prefer the kayon, the kayon, and the kayon always. Either the stage is elaborately decorated, or the whole world is represented by the kayon. I prefer the latter, in order to engage the imagination of the audience.

This being said, Purbo Asmoro, as of his December 2015 performance of Dèwi Sri (The Goddess Sri) at UGM in Yogyakarta, started experimenting with a few, limited realistic backdrops in the form of lush, greenery. He used these again in a number of performances throughout December 2015 and January 2016. It remains to be seen where he will take this new development.

**Every Element in Equal Proportion**

Purbo Asmoro strenuously rejects attempts to label him. He does not like to be termed an academic dhalang, a master of interpretation (dhalang sanggit), a master of the biographical sketch (dhalang banjaran), or a dhalang who excels in the area of dramatic expression. While he grew up with other dhalangs' labels, such as: dhalang catur, alluding to Nartosabdo’s talents as an orator, dhalang kung, alluding to Anom Soeroto’s beautiful voice, and dhalang sabet, alluding to Manteb Soedharsono’s virtuosic talents, he strives to be a dhalang komplit. As he expressed through Pétruk in a performance in Banyuanyar in November 2015:
Back when Gusti Benawa referred to me as a dhalang *sanggit*, I didn't accept this. I am not just a dhalang *sanggit*. My interpretive details would only score about a six [out of ten]. I'm also a dhalang *sabet*, but my movements only score about six. I might aspire to be a talented comedian, but no matter how hard I try I will only score about six. A dhalang needs to have it all, in even measure. No one element needs to rate 10. If they rate six, all elements should be six; if seven, all elements should score seven. There is no particular area I specialize in. Because the dhalang's interpretation, drama, poetry, movement, musical knowledge, humor, and everything else is of equal importance in a performance. If a dhalang can only interpret a lakon profoundly but can't get his audience to laugh, he doesn't really have it. If all he does is joke around but there's nothing meaningful to his performance, he doesn't really have it. If everything is deep and meaningful but his movements are horrible, that's not right either. No one element should stand out over the others. Everything works together in even measure to create the aesthetic.5

Ultimately it is this outlook that shapes Purbo Asmoro's all-night *garapan* style. Each element is recrafted, each element holds equal importance, and each element plays its part in underlining the greater focus or meaning the dhalang is trying to communicate. The dhalang needs to have confidence, experience, and a repertory of ideas and references with which to craft these elements. If a dhalang focuses only on startling musical accompaniment, the music will steal the focus from the poignant moments or structural points. If a dhalang becomes self-absorbed in complex narrative passages or obscure movement sequences, these will also steal the focus from the message.

Purbo Asmoro's all-night *garapan* is a holistic, integrated system—a system that Purbo strives to apply with less and less rehearsal, and within which he emphasizes the importance of his own improvisation at the screen. It is a system that combines elements of classical, condensed, and *hura-hura* wayang styles, with the intent of exploring eternal questions through the allegory of wayang. Most of all, Purbo Asmoro's *garapan* style was born, and continues to develop, as a medium meant to be compelling to contemporary audiences.

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5 Purbo Asmoro makes this point clear again in a 2015 interview with Adilahung magazine (Sardjono, 2015).