

*Stunning males and powerful females: Gender and tradition in East Javanese dance*

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*Stunning males and powerful females* offers a richly grained ethnography of the ways gender, tradition, and power are embodied in and negotiated through dance and associated musical practices in the East Javanese regency of Malang in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sunardi provides a vital contribution that not only expands our understanding of performing arts in Indonesia by focusing on a little-known region of East Java, but also brings greater attention to corporeality as the dancers and people who interact with them negotiate the boundaries of sex and gender — on and offstage — rubbing up against, reinforcing, or transgressing notions of how men and women should look and behave, and how those ideas have shifted over time.

Sunardi is particularly interested in the construction of femaleness and magnetic female power, including how men who perform as women access it and its perseverance ‘in the face of a variety of cultural pressures that work to contain, control, and suppress it’ (p. 1). Set against a backdrop of the sociopolitical shifts in Indonesia over the last century or so, Sunardi’s nuanced discussion reveals moments of tension between historical and contemporary conceptions of gender and between local and national discursive framings of what it means to be an ideal woman or man, along with the ways in which concerns about appropriate gender expressions are wrapped up in anxieties about the continuity of dance and music practices in the face of changing social values.

This deeply interdisciplinary account draws on ethnographic research from 2005 to 2007, including lessons in dance and drumming, interviews with dancers and musicians, and sponsored recording sessions. The book begins with a fantastic preface that reveals Sunardi’s positionality and how that influenced her own access to and interpretations of knowledge. The introduction provides a solid grounding in the theoretical framing of the book, including a rich discussion of power, gender, sex, tradition, and Islam. Studying cross-gender dance, the subject of the first two chapters, reveals the ways in which gender is mapped onto sexed bodies, exposing processes of negotiation and ideological constructions of both femaleness and maleness.

Chapter 2 focuses on women who perform male-style dance, though who never convincingly pass as men as their femaleness always ‘peeks through’, and the associated cultural ambivalence regarding female power. The varying ways in which men express, embody, and present male femininity on and off stage is the focus of chapter 3. Males dancing female-style dance more convincingly passed than their female counterparts, offering up a hypersexualised femininity that held sexual appeal for audience members.

Moving from discussions of cross-gender dance, chapters 4 and 5 shift the focus to the Malangan dance, *Beskalan Putri*, in which the sense of female power is so strong it has shaped how people think about gender in other dances from the region.

The first of these chapters hones in on the construction of gender through a richly textured weave of personal narratives of the dance's origins and history, while the second looks at how performance contexts shifted in New Order Indonesia and how the dance was modified as it has moved from a spiritually potent one to a more sanitised regional art. The final chapter masterfully weaves the main themes of the book together through its analysis of 'micro-moments of interactions' between performers as 'critical moments of complex cultural and ideological work' (p. 158), a nuanced reading only possible through her deep personal experience as a practitioner of both dance and music.

*Stunning males and powerful females* does much to advance and deepen our understanding of the ways in which sex and gender are both conceptual and physical, but ultimately unstable, fluid, and pluralistic. As Sunardi aptly demonstrates, sex and gender are contingent and processual — 'continuously constituted by and through what people do, as well as through the ways people describe what they and others do — or should do — with their bodies' (p. 8). Sunardi also brings our attention to the ways in which performance and gender are mutually constitutive, how ideas about one inform the other, and that performance is not only a viable but a rich site in which to investigate strategies that probe, resist, transgress, or reinforce cultural norms.

Like all scholarly works, this book is inevitably selective. *Stunning males and powerful females* is first and foremost a book about dance; readers looking for a comprehensive account of musical practices will be disappointed. However, the text is peppered with carefully selected examples of way that music structures and reinforces (or not) the gendered experience of dance. For example, Sunardi addresses the subtle ways that gender is sonically negotiated through the choice of register and ornamentation in vocal parts (chaps. 2 & 3), the ways instrumentation reinforces or contradicts gendered expression (p. 84), or through the tempo and density of a piece (chaps. 4 & 5). Given the focus on female power, there is some surprising gender bias in the book. For instance, I find it curious that the title places men first and women second. Sunardi also confesses that most of the teachers and artists she consulted were male, but she is careful to point out that she finds this a way to balance the attention given to women in gender studies. Finally, the book would be challenging to use in a class because there are no accompanying audiovisual materials and the discography that refers us only to two (difficult-to-find) recordings. As she made consistent reference to her personal archives of video documentation, I wondered why the reader wasn't allowed access to some of these materials? Is it that they are 'products of specific cultural contexts and historical moments' and there is no such thing as any one fixed, authoritative version (p. 181)?

In short, *Stunning males and powerful females* presents us with a fascinating, finely grained ethnographic account and analysis of gendered expressions in a little-known region of Java that challenges us all to think about what it means to inhabit gendered minds and bodies and how senses of gender might be claimed, contested, and/or transformed in and through performance.

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