



Cristina Wistari, ISTA 9, Umeå, Sweden, 1995. Photo: Bernd Uhlig

# Cristina Wistari

## Voice in Balinese Dance Drama

*Abstract: Cristina Wistari describes vocal work in Balinese dance theatre with examples of her training with I Made Djimat and Ni Nyoman Candri, confronting questions of song and spoken text, of ancient and contemporary language in arja, topeng and gambuh.*

*Keywords: Balinese dance theatre, Gambuh, Voice, Opera*

Cristina Wistari first came to an ISTA in 1997 for the session in Umeå. She was part of the Balinese ensemble directed by I Made Djimat, accompanied by I Wayan Bawa and Ni Wayan Sekarini. She lived in Bali studying classical Balinese dance for thirty years. In 1993 she started the Gambuh Project with the aim of preserving the most ancient dance form in Bali. She regularly performed gambuh and topeng in the temple festivals in Bali as well as leading workshops and performing abroad. In 2000 she published the book *Gambuh*. Cristina died in 2008. Here she talks of her vocal apprenticeship in an interview of 2000 for *The Open Page* n. 6.

(...) The first thing I learnt vocally as a Balinese performer of classical styles was gambuh. My teacher, I Made Djimat, taught me the *ucapan* (dialogue), which is a particular way of speaking. He would say a syllable, and I would repeat it. Later I worked on arja with Ni Nyoman Candri, a very experienced singer and teacher, to help open my voice.

The Balinese spontaneously use nasal sounds as part of their language, while I needed a lot of time to learn to take their high pitches. Ni Nyoman Candri would sing the first line without ornamentation, which in arja is always the most complex, and through repetition slowly my voice changed. Only after the basic line has been learnt is one allowed to add variations.

The Balinese don't have specific voice exercises so all I could obtain were the tones. I remember I spat and coughed a lot. Ni Nyoman Candri also remembered that in the beginning her throat scratched and that she suffocated and had to spit many times.

The search for the correct sound has been very difficult, and I have found it



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only recently for the *ucapan*, but not yet for singing, perhaps because I feel self-conscious as a foreigner.

I regularly perform the character of Panji, a male noble *manis* (soft) character in gambuh, and Rangga, the Prime Minister in topeng. These characters should speak with a high pitch and delicate voice. It is very difficult to find men who can speak in the *manis* style for male characters, so these roles are often played by women. An old master known for his excellent voice capacity gave his Panji a very high thin quality.

I remember that when I tried to make my voice smaller, another great master told me not to use falsetto, but my own voice. In the topeng mask dance, I had to find male voices with strong intonations that Balinese women usually do not do, except in the group I work with now. But the women in that group are arja singers, so they have worked with voice since they were children.

In the beginning, when I had to speak the ancient Balinese language Kawi without understanding anything at all it was terribly difficult. I had no points of reference, and I had to learn everything by heart. It is a very complex language that only a few people study seriously, like the Dalang of wayan kulit, the shadow mask performance. Few people really speak the proper high-class Balinese. Although I would never say I know Kawi, one learns certain sentences that are often repeated. It is like Latin for an Italian.

My teachers did not consider it to be important that I understood the words, but that I should understand the situation, the musicality and the feeling of the character. Within the same situation different sentences can be used. For example, in the final duel scene, I now have a series of sentences with which I can improvise.

Gambuh performances today can be full of improvisation, while repeating etiquette sentences like 'come here', 'go there' or 'don't do this'. The sentences must respect the rank of the characters and make some reference to the story, reacting to the situation. If my partners in the scene don't keep to the text and improvise in Balinese style, depending on the intonation of what they say, I can choose one sentence rather than another. To improvise is fun and gives a much greater freedom. The story is always explained in the action and not in the text.

There is a standard style for each character. Generally speaking, you would not say that the intonation is connected to emotion, but if Prince Panji gets angry with his brother, a strong *keras* character, their voices will change and become sharper. When the emotion is over, the voice will return to the tonality that is correct for the character. When you find your vocal score, you keep it. The text can change, but you keep to that way of using the voice.

In gambuh, the teacher brings a story that has been passed down for many generations and everybody more or less knows what it is about. Within the tradition no new texts are written. In the past the master based the *ucapan*, the text that the different characters speak, on a story, and the dancers learnt it by heart. It was not a written tradition: the master prepared the text for a special occasion; it was not something that would be published or kept.

In arja the stories are quite banal, although the voice-work is beautiful. In both



Cristina Wistari and Ni Wayan Sekarini in a topeng performance, ISTA 9, Umeå, Sweden, 1995. Photo: Bernd Uhlig

gambuh and topeng, the main narrative is carried by the servants. The noble roles have the responsibility of character, voice and speech, but the servants tell the story and explain. They speak about all that which has to do with society and religion.

Contemporary comments are never put in gambuh, but always in topeng. So the servants' roles are very difficult and important and they are given to expert people, who have studied and know the stories very well. They must be very quick.

In gambuh, it is very new that women dance since, as recently as twenty-five years ago, men played the female roles. Women have never played topeng, except now in my new group, because women are traditionally mute. Apparently this was because women did not know the language and the texts, and they had not studied, but now they all go to school and artists like Ni Nyoman Candri must learn Kawi. In the new topeng group, women can at last improvise texts that speak of their own way of seeing their life in Bali.