Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy:
Obstacles and insights from an Intercultural Transposition

Indija Noesbar Mahjoeddin

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School of Drama & Music,
Faculty of Arts, University of Newcastle

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Supervised by: David Watt
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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Table of Contents

Index of Images ........................................................................................................................................... 4
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................................ 6
INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................................... 1
   The Gap Between Randai And Western Theatre Assumptions................................................................. 1
   A Distinctive Randai Logic .......................................................................................................................... 2
   Underpinnings in fieldwork and creative practice ....................................................................................... 3
   Previous work .................................................................................................................................................. 4
   An Outline Of This Exegesis ......................................................................................................................... 5
   Contexts .......................................................................................................................................................... 7
CHAPTER 1 - Background and Methodology ................................................................................................ 10
   Introducing Randai And Its Source ........................................................................................................... 10
   A basic description of the principles of Randai ......................................................................................... 12
   The Discussion and Practice of Randai in Indonesian and Western Sources ........................................... 16
   Understanding innovation in tradition ......................................................................................................... 18
   Tension between academy and kampung Randai ....................................................................................... 18
   Hybridity and the Australian position ......................................................................................................... 21
   Using an Emergent Research Methodology .............................................................................................. 23
CHAPTER 2 - Towards a Systematic Enquiry ............................................................................................... 26
   Making Randai Beyond The Ethnographic Frame ..................................................................................... 26
   Maker As Researcher: Investigating Emerging Questions ....................................................................... 32
   Four Main Issues to Surmount .................................................................................................................. 32
   Questions that invite further investigation ................................................................................................. 34
CHAPTER 3 - Case Studies ............................................................................................................................ 37
   Moving Towards Australian Neo-Randai .................................................................................................... 37
   Two Case Studies in Detail .......................................................................................................................... 39
   Boldenblee: A case study in transposing Randai as a collective expression of community ....................... 39
   The Butterfly Seer: A case study in reinterpreting Randai for a contemporary theatre audience .......... 47
   Case Studies as a progression from convention to reinvention ................................................................. 51
CHAPTER 4 - New Forms in Old Spaces ...................................................................................................... 54
   Introduction to the Problem of Staging ....................................................................................................... 54
   Community as Venue .................................................................................................................................. 59
   Space, Sound and Light: The Impact Of Technical Design On Audience Reception .................................. 60
   Finding a Round Peg in a Square Hole ....................................................................................................... 66
CHAPTER 5 - The Physical Language: Negotiating 'Silek' ............................................................................ 69
   What is Pancak Silek .................................................................................................................................. 69
   Negotiating Silek in the Rantau .................................................................................................................. 73
   Repetitivity and Meaning ............................................................................................................................ 76
   Galombang Dance as Stillness .................................................................................................................... 77
   Creative Negotiations Issues In Movement (Case Studies) ...................................................................... 78
Index of Images

CHAPTER 1 & 2
Fig. 1 A recent Randai production, Nan Si Jundai by Indra Utama. Experiment Theater. ......................... p. 13-14
Fig. 2 Tapuak pants slapping in Padang and Brisbane 1996.
Fig. 3 Cimpago Biru's Firdaus plays Bujang Baganto in a scene from Zulkifli's Palimo Gaga.
Fig. 4 Diagram - 2 speakers in a circle; the inward staging of Randai
Fig. 5 Diagram - Side elevation of the wok-shaped Medan-nan-bapaneh showing galombang.
Fig. 6 Diagram - Southern's elevation of a medieval Plen-an-Gwary.
Fig. 7 Diagram - Side elevation showing the dome of sound-space.
Fig. 8 The entrance procession of the Brisbane cast of The Horned Matriarch................................. p. 36
Fig. 9 The Horned Matriarch lingkaran chorus.
Fig. 10 The Sydney remount of The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam.

CHAPTER 3
Illustration 1. Local and historical landmarks underpinning the narrative................................. p. 46-47
Illustration 2. The Metalmen and the pubic artwork that inspired this episode
Fig. 11 The Ballad of Boldenblee, at The Boilershop, Newcastle 2004
Fig. 12 Using Basl masks to underscore aspects of the collective identity.
Fig. 13 Portraying The Rock as acro-balance with circumnavigation
Fig. 14 Using Poi as galombang and within scenes.
Fig. 15 The use of fire in combat scenes.
Fig. 16 Counterweight ropes at the ready.
Fig. 17 Use of fire combat and physical theatre in scenes.
Illustration 1. The main stage picture of The Butterfly Seer................................................................. p. 53
Fig. 18 Actors in The Butterfly Seer working the expanded circle......................................................... p. 53-54
Fig. 19 Musicians onstage as singers and silek artists.
Fig. 20 Puppetry and shadows at work in The Butterfly Seer.

CHAPTER 4
Fig. 21 Typical Randai venues - Taman Budaya Padang, and at Kampung Kapal, Branang
Fig. 22 The habit of audience to surround a performance.
Fig. 23 The arangement of captive school audiences.
Fig. 24 Bondi Beach Pavilion amphitheatre with satay kiosk and rear audience.
Illustration 2. Van Gogh's painting, The Potato-eaters................................................................. p. 64
Fig. 25 The Boiler Room as venue for Boldenblee; Musician's Dais ......................................................... p. 68
Fig. 26 Plan of the Courthouse Theatre, Carlton with floorplan for The Butterfly Seer.
Fig. 26A Plan of the Princess Theatre Brisbane as set up for The Horned Matriarch.

CHAPTER 5
Fig. 27 Silek practitioners in Padang and Brisbane................................................................. 71-72
Fig. 28 Australians training in West Sumatra.

Fig. 30 The cast of The Horned Matriarch training with Miko Saeri, Brisbane, 1996

Fig. 32 Rehearsing silek and galombang with the lingkaran.

Fig. 34 Using silek pasambahan moves to step into the space.

Fig. 35 Clare Apelt and Ron Morelos work from far sides of the circle.

Fig. 36 Drawing on established stagecraft in The Horned Matriarch

Fig. 37 Approaching Randai acting in the Sydney production.

Fig. 38 Using the alienating device of a microphone substitute.

Fig. 39 Stage business in lieu of debate.

Fig. 40 Using real world objects as props.

Fig. 41 Clowning and Doubling.

Fig. 42 Using hip-hop in the gestural vocabulary.

Fig. 43 Working the rectangular end stage as arena.

CHAPTER 6 & 7

Illustration 4. Reading The Butterfly Seer at the Playlab Weekend workshop ................................................................. p. 99

Fig. 44 The typical music ensemble of talempong, gandang and traditional reed pipe. .......................... p. 109-110

Fig. 45 Music facilitator Kari working on the first phase of development.

Fig. 46 A rapai’ensemble and dendang sampeling as incidental music.

Fig. 47 Biduan: Singers from 3 shows.

Fig. 48 Consulting with musical director, Megan Collins.

Fig. 49 Erin Jacobi onstage amidst a flurry of tapuak.

Fig. 50 Instrumental colours used in The Ballad of Boldenblee.

Fig. 51 Sherriff’s instrumentation charts.............................................................................................................. p. 118-119

Fig. 52 Volume and a fat percussive texture achieved using dhol and rabana

Fig. 53 Tuba associating a song with the Bullock.

Fig. 54 Other instruments used in The Butterfly Seer.

CHAPTER 8 & 9

Illustration 1: Plen-an-Gwary re-envisioned for Randai ................................................................................................. p. 147

Illustration 2: Philosophy Nights at Steki Taverna ................................................................................................. p. 148
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INTRODUCTION

The Gap Between Randai And Western Theatre Assumptions

Randai is a syncretic music theatre based on martial arts, epic narrative and song traditions that evolved among the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra taking its current form (as a circular dramatisation of classic and popular stories) in the 1930s (Cohen, 2004). In 1996 I staged the first of a series of fully-fledged Randai productions in Australia, featuring performers who had trained with me for three months but never seen Randai performed.

In training, creating and presenting these performances I found myself confronting the gap between conceptual assumptions in Randai and those assumptions more familiar to players trained in Western concepts of theatre, if I may invoke a catch-all that is problematic without distinguishing between conflicting ideals of performance from Elizabethan through to the post-dramatic avant-garde. However in most tertiary actor training institutions this diversity is distilled into a more limited range of dominant performance concepts that have come to be expected by audiences and it is these that I will have in mind when using this term.

The intercultural exercise of transposing Randai through the Western body and sensibility for uptake by a globalised audience brought to light many insights into the way Randai functions which are not immediately accessible through interview, observation or participation in situ when performed by Randai ‘insiders’ - practitioners or companies who take these functions as given. So, whereas to date most scholars write about Randai as observers from an ethnographic point of view, this exegesis illuminates my performed investigation of Randai as a ‘dramaturgy’, from the viewpoint of a creator/initiator as well as performer.

The intercultural context, as an intervention itself, immediately raises the question of what interventions will be necessary to sustain the essential integrity of Randai in an environment where different assumptions, values, skills and infrastructures - that is, different social-cultural and aesthetic frameworks - are at work. How does Randai in practice reflect these differences and how do Western assumptions intervene to disrupt and transform the material manifestation of Randai? How might these observations be useful in understanding Randai as a performance system, and can they provide valuable insights into how we approach similar performance forms especially those built on pre-modern dramaturgies?

Emergent research does not test a hypothesis but sets out to find what theory accounts for
the research situation as it is (by progressively applying emerging findings to re-evaluate and refine a hypothesis. “The aim, as Glaser in particular states it, is to discover the theory implicit in the data” (Dick, 2005). In keeping with this methodology, my initial enquiry necessarily bifurcated to examine firstly, how we might define ‘Randai’s essential integrity’ and secondly, how we might identify the cultural underpinnings of obstacles and resistances arising with the new terrain. In a sense these two concerns interact to form a dialectical field of tension within which my findings emerge.

A Distinctive Randai Logic

As should be true of every unique performance tradition, beyond its material surface, I found Randai’s ‘essential integrity’ to be defined in terms of a distinctive internal logic which shapes its creation, performance and reception. This manifests in several unique performance conventions within a highly flexible yet highly compartmentalised framework. The driving logic, although derived from an ethno-culturally specific mindset is not however necessarily unique to the Minangkabau. It pivots on indigenous concepts of gathering and community performance by means of which an ephemeral frame (the circle) is performed, providing a sense of collusion with its audience. It uses principles of stillness and motion, progression and repetition, action and tension, space and time in ways that often differ markedly from Western dramaturgies. While it is physically dynamic, adapting combat forms as dance, gesture and design, nevertheless to the extent that it can be understood as a storytelling form my findings suggest that Randai is more a language-based art form, arising from a culture that relishes the invocational power of words (in metaphor, riddle and discursive reasoning) teased out through dialectical rhetoric. As a ‘listening theatre’ it privileges the aural plane. Proverbs and cultural icons bind its stories to place.

Furthermore, the viewfinder of Randai, while not always strictly epic according to the definition of Scholes and Kellog (1966: p.13) still derives its narrative design from oral epic traditions rather than from what Brecht referred to as the ‘aristotelian’ tradition, meaning the neo-classical interpretation of Aristotle’s term, ‘dramatic’ (in contradistinction to his ‘epic’). This interpretation, which upholds the three unities of time, place and action, has in some form come to dominate Western dramaturgy since its European adoption in the late 17th century, at least until Brecht’s attempts to unsettle it in the 1930s.

Where Western theatre therefore tends to present a single dramatic arc as one performance event, I would interpret Randai events as presenting a narrative over several energetic cycles comprising contrasting episodic phases, creating an ebb and flow effect in which animated negative space becomes a performed frame for the potent active and thus content-driven
INTRODUCTION

phase of each cycle. So while it is possible to read Randai within its particular ethnographic frame, this study is more interested in understanding ‘frame’ as a conceptually shared ‘container’ or border that functions to delineate time or space, such as might bracket a unique unit of meaningful narrative content.

Frame in this sense is first a structural strategy for defining or even sanctifying the ritual of performance as separate from functional daily reality, and thence a rudimentary device to delineate between chaos and order. While performance everywhere features some framing device ranging from the purely conceptual (stylistic or socio-cultural frames of reference) to the concrete (architectural structures or other substantial devices such as the proscenium arch, curtain, lighting blackouts or the cinematic screen), Randai’s highly structured format compensates for a lack of architectural framing by embedding several hierarchies of performable frames into the performance itself, which at first glance appear to constitute the content of the work performed. The apparent rigidity this implies is a foil for the flexibility and relativity in performance on which the dramaturgy of Randai pivots.

My intercultural translations of Randai automatically put pressure on many of its fundamental features by disrupting or misreading these frames. Whilst broad, unencultured audiences have responded enthusiastically, accepting the narrative within whatever structure is given, advocates of and participants in the dominant theatre ideology are often sceptical that the strategies of this form will sufficiently engage Australian audiences. I trace some of the resistance I encountered to a compulsion to blur the performance material that functions as frames with the dramatic content of the performance. Either they are seen as extraneous or they are seen to promise content in vain. Both approaches overlook the value of the repetitive device of negative space, which creates the ebb and flow that shapes the Randai experience.

I use the challenge of alterity (in the form of unfamiliar environmental, human and infrastructure resources) to problematise the underpinnings of Randai and formulate an understanding of Randai as a translatable, dramaturgical approach to performance-making whose structural, technical and aesthetic features support a particular philosophy of audience/player transaction.

Underpinnings in fieldwork and creative practice

These findings and the works created in the course of this investigation build on my experience studying and performing Randai in Sumatra (mostly in 1989 and 1997) and writing, teaching and staging Randai in Australia (1995-2006). Approaching the field using a ‘Practice
As Research in Performance model, I derive data from a body of publicly produced intercultural Randai performances, with all the contingencies and variables that such a real-world context implies. The non-Minangkabau settings arguably influenced the transmission of meaning highlighting how the application of space, time, sight and sound differs in a Randai ‘world-view’.

Previous work.

Previous work in this field outside Indonesia would appear to have been limited. Traditional Randai works are undoubtedly attempted by expatriate groups, one would speculate, where conditions are conducive. One such is Pandeka Mihar’s ‘G=Sentak’ martial arts school in Vienna which (according to their website www.pandeka.com) extended the training of Austrian silek students to include various traditional arts. Rather than transform the work for the cross-cultural context they appear to have aimed at reproducing a traditional Randai in Bahasa Minang. More professionally, Randai has been presented in translation by Dr Kirstin Pauka to urban audiences in Honolulu (Magek Manandin, 2005, and Umbuík Mudo, 2001). Performed by her American theatre students and guided by visiting Minangkabau Randai practitioners available to facilitate and perform key functions, similar obstacles to those I address here were undoubtedly met with although mitigated by different aims and circumstances (Pauka, Askovic, Polk, 2003). Pauka’s project reproduces conventional forms for scholastic purposes within an academic enclave rather than creates viable expressions of contemporary relevance for and with the target culture.

There have also been a few incidences of particular Randai devices being applied to classical Greek productions. Randai scholar, Craig Latrell, produced Euripides’ Alcestis, deploying Randai idioms selectively to draw out themes such as the narrative circularity of the Greek text (Latrell, email comm., 2004). More recently, Randai ideas, passed on through ex-students of Pauka’s, were freely interpreted by the director of a production of Euripides’ The Bacchae in Pennsylvania (Lake, 2004). A more formally Randai-structured production of Lysistrata was marked for production circa 2006 by an Indonesian group based in Java (email comm., 2006) although my search for further evidence or documentation of it has not been forthcoming.

My point of difference is that each of my works have been new works, not translations. A closer comparison would be the approach taken by fellow Australian, Mike Burns in his work for Javanese dalang, gamelan and celtic harp, Wayang Kelly (based on the Australian historical narrative of Ned Kelly). While remaining true to form they developed as original artworks in collaboration with artists not versed in Randai conventions, therefore relying on the coher-
ence of a strong and resilient framework that would offer within itself a certain degree of creative licence. Beyond describing the issues and differences, I strive to draw inferences about the social and cultural assumptions these reflect, pushing my research to explore alternative approaches to surmounting these dilemmas through creative practice.

The live performances which constitute the practice component of this investigation (included in appendix as show-length DVDs with scripts and program notes) demonstrate two possible approaches that such a theatre form may make in adjusting to a new paradigm.

An Outline Of This Exegesis

My findings arise from a series of public performances of three productions, The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam, The Ballad of Boldenblee and The Butterfly Seer. These are appended in the form of DVD documentation. In this accompanying exegesis I lay out background information and a description of the case studies and their creative and presentation rationale, before teasing out in detail the process of making and reflecting that has engendered new thoughts on Randai beyond its ethnographic identity.

To convey a comprehensive sense of this performance genre, Chapter 1 will first introduce Randai in the form in which I found it in West Sumatran village events. I then consider how Randai has been presented as an ethnographic phenomenon by Sumatran and Western commentators and in anticipation of challenges from arguments against interculturalism (following Barucha, 1993) I note how the contemporary practice of traditional arts such as Randai are positioned between Minangkabau society and the Indonesian Academy.

In Chapter 2 I introduce my first explorations of making Randai from the ground up, and the questions that arose when negotiating the process and parameters of presentation in Brisbane, Australia. The challenges of practicing in an intercultural terrain prompted this systematic investigation, which I pursued according to qualitative research methods akin to Grounded Theory and Action Research outlined in the remainder of this Chapter.

Chapter 3 moves the work beyond an ethnographic frame to extend the Randai palette towards new frameworks with contemporary relevance. I will provide a fuller description to accompany attached DVD documentation, of the settings, processes and outcomes of the inaugural project and later case studies, which were originally presented as public performance seasons between 1996 and 2006. (For printed scripts and documentation see Print Appendices #1 to #3)
The next five chapters unpack the details, juxtaposing Minangkabau conventions against logistic and perceptual obstacles, and then examining our interventions for their impact on form and meaning in the two main case scenarios.

In this regard, Chapter 4 addresses physical space, role of audience and the interpolation of technical logistics. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, pertaining to movement, text, music and the collaborative community, concern the particular resistances of the performer and collaborator, where resistances are sited in the body, in language as well as in social and aesthetic assumptions. How, for example, is an actor challenged conceptually by Randai dialogue expectations, the Western dancer by silek body principles, the co-writer/composer by structural givens in Randai or by timbrel conventions. And what is it that the timbre or the floor-pattern does, or communicates, that may be necessary to the coherence of the whole structure?

Chapter 5 considers the silek body, addressing circular choreography, the meaning of repetitivity, acting and directing as they relate to physical gesture and use of space. Chapter 6 examines text as story, as dialogue and as invocation, and considers the problems and opportunities in writing Randai as a collective enterprise. Chapter 7 focuses on compositional features and their effect on the vocal score, in particular instrumental texture, character motif and the use of vocal timbre for telling emotional story. Chapter 8 examines creative roles, repetition, and social environment to interrogate how creatives, performers and community supporters converge on the task of making and presenting Randai.

Interconnecting these four main strands are overriding findings that tie Randai’s modular framework and culturally-derived ethos to its flexible performance principles and collusive audience/player relationship.

Through reflecting upon these resistances, and in the apparent absence of a coherent philosophical ‘theory of Randai’ in tradition, I seek in Chapter 9 to arrive at my own articulation of Randai in which I address how, sociologically and aesthetically, Randai operates upon its audience. I conclude that many of the resistant responses to Randai by theatre practitioners and audience acculturated in the West, arise from a misreading of Randai’s differentiation between performed frame and performance content, based on the normative assumptions of a theatre orthodoxy that holds sway beyond its limited mandate. This may be read as an argument supporting a broader palette of dramaturgies to be acknowledged in the cultural sector, or as a suggestion that alternative platforms for Randai may be more readily found outside of this paradigm.
INTRODUCTION

Contexts

Scope

As the general thrust of the work has not been surveyed before, I have deliberately chosen to keep the scope broad and consider developments arising throughout my whole body of work, aware that several ideas touched on here could usefully be analysed in more depth.

Whilst much of this enquiry was intended to pertain to a global or Western contemporary milieu these trials must be understood to have occurred in a specifically Australian environment. My findings may not necessarily be extrapolated to apply to European cultures across the board, but I suggest may be indicative of responses at least in other first world Anglophone cultures such as Britain, Canada and America if not wherever commodification, psychological realism and a Grotowskian concern with the revelation of the interior life of the performer have influenced the prevailing values in theatre.

The influence of Ideological timing

At the time of initiating this exploration, the question of cultural diversity was salient.

It frequently tended to obscure questions of form and genre under the more dominating category of multiculturalism, setting Randai aside from consideration as contemporary art.

Those lobbying for de-centring notions of high art away from the Western paradigm (and I include myself) ranged from the brazenly orientalist through progressive 'ethnic chic' to hardcore revolutionary multiculturalists (My examples are taken from field observation among the constituents of the Brisbane Ethnic Music and Arts Centre during this time). But whether pursuing the exotic as cultural artefact or as exploration of the unknown with a view to expand frontiers of perception, both positions put alterity at the foreground of experience.

Critical of the transgressions of intercultural expropriation - mining one culture for benefits that will accrue to a target culture (Pavis, 1996) I have tried to circumvent claims of universality that would make of Randai some sort of 'primal performance' resource to be appropriated by an agenda aimed at refining the toolkit of Western theatre. Rather, this research evolved from the position of an artist situated between cultures responding to the validation by the 'performance studies' discourse of endeavours to “enrich [one's] own theatre-making vocabularies” and “de-exoticise Indonesian culture by pointing out commonalities” with Western contemporary viewpoints through a “practice based exploration of Indonesian theatrical idioms” (Cohen, Noszoply & Royo, 2007).
Although mindful of my role as 'double agent' indebted to the genuine interest (and often concrete support) generated by Performance Studies' engagement with interculturalism, the alternative approach taken here uses cultural responses to understand and isolate formal principles and aesthetic values (deemed neutral, unique and worthy) for promotion as a distinctive voice within a new context.

While Coldiron has since pointed out what we suffered to discover, that “audiences for intercultural theatre are not necessarily stable or homogeneous” (Coldiron, 2004: p.56), I was then envisioning new, heterogeneous, even hybrid audiences with bicultural experience, in which I could imagine myself, able to bring with them a different sensibility than that normally encountered in the echelons of state arts centres. But questions as to broader community relevance prompted by funding checkboxes as much as by the formal properties of Randai, led to a slight shift in my approach so that these studies concern themselves as much with a culturally dominant sector, where the push for audience diversification to non-mainstream ethnicities might also reach mainstream, but non-theatre-going, audiences. Finally I brought the project back to the theatre-going elite in the final phase to see whether a Randai, confident of its essential underpinnings, could answer the challenges raised by gatekeepers of the cultural sector who provide the means and platforms for presentation and discourse.

Contexts For Applying These Findings

Knowledge about Randai derived from this process may inform the way in which new Randai projects may be approached in future, particularly, but not only, in urban societies beyond the Minangkabau heartland. I would like to propose Cohen’s term, ‘neo’-Randai, coined to refer to the same ex-Minangkabau Randai works currently under discussion (Cohen, 2004) be specifically applied to Randai theatre that has reconsidered its original structure, process and hermeneutical implications because of a new social context, while maintaining continuity with the deeper principles of Randai, which this exegesis hopes to articulate.

In Asian and in Western cities, movement toward such a a neo-Randai, could increase in response to two factors:

In the Western context: Once every four years American performance students graduate from University of Hawaii with a six month semester of practical Randai under their belts (offered in rotation with three other Asian performance units) increasing the likelihood of Randai influences and new fusion projects developing from amongst those graduates. Meanwhile it remains to be seen whether hybrid explorations like Robert Wilson’s much vaunted Bugis epic, I
INTRODUCTION

La Galigo (Esplanade Theatre, Singapore, 2004) which reinterpreted an epic text from a regionally related Buginese oral tradition (Smith, 2004, Cohen, 2005, Mahjoeddin, 2006), may yet open the way for such sources to be considered as compelling raw material for art house audiences.

In the Asian context: On the other hand, in urban Indonesia, Malaysia and perhaps Singapore, new global terrains have become the norm and exposure to Western media might be said to constitute a hybrid upbringing for Malay and Minangkabau youth. Where cultural continuity is at stake, cultural regeneration and youth development projects may benefit from this fresh evaluation of how indigenous art forms may become a basis for contemporary innovation.

To move away from this binary, neither should one disregard the potential for geographically ‘other’ cultural settings, (especially where exchange with the Malay world may be long established and mutually relevant), to benefit from what has been learned in this project, whether to apply the principals or the art form itself to their own context.

My focus however has been weighted toward the Australian setting. One hope is that formal theatre practice may find it useful for revisiting pre-modern dramaturgies that have resisted historical record, to inform speculative reconstructions.

But leading theatre figures had been frequently calling for a reinvigorated Australian theatre, variously one that better exploits its visceral physicality, that engages with Asian influences or employs new media and hybrid art forms, in a bid to reach new audiences excluded by theatre’s commodification and elite cultural associations. The currency of these themes was underscored by a keynote speech that coincided with the second staged reading of The Butterfly Seer (Mellor, 1999). Yet despite an increase in circus and physical theatre, most training being taught in drama departments still offered only a limited range of non-naturalistic techniques. In this landscape Randai seemed destined to fit the rhetoric, offering one such alternative system for performance building.

However, if Randai’s structure and emphasis support a greater resonance with communitarian values than with the fragmented individualism which colours much contemporary theatre, then the target platform for presenting Randai in a contemporary urban setting may not be the formal theatre sector at all. There is rather a broader spectrum of participatory cultural events existing outside the orthodoxy of high culture where Australian communities do enact the kind of values embedded in Randai. This research extends an invitation to consider such performance forms as sites for intercultural cross-pollination, where art forms like Randai may make their most wholistic contribution.
CHAPTER 1 – Background and Methodology

Introducing Randai And Its Source

One of the attractions of Randai for me was the fact that, at the time of my first engagement with it at the academy of arts in Padang Panjang in 1989 Randai was almost unknown in the English-speaking world. I was able to access a seminal article by Margaret Kartomi (1981a) and Mohammad Anis Mohammad Nor had written and published his research on Randai using Labanotation (Nor, 1986). Randai also got a tiny mention in Nigel Phillips’ monograph, Sijobang (on one regional variety of the oral literatures from which Randai stories typically emerge) (Phillips, 1981). Fitting thus into both frameworks of exotic world heritage and authentic personal lineage I made it my project as theatre-maker to introduce it to a world at that time just embarking on engaging with the Asia-Pacific.

Randai is a hybrid community theatre form that emerged as a dramatic art in the 1930s (concurrent with the rise of Indonesian nationalism) in the Minangkabau territory now the province, West Sumatra. Any number of studies focus, feature or are prefaced by a précis of the cultural key points of Minangkabau’s matriarchate. For a broader grounding on this culture group see Kahn 1993, de Josselin de Jong 1980, Von Benda-Beckman 1985 or Errington, 1984). To avoid repetition and imbalanced attention on the ethnographic background to this study, any focus of mine on ethnicity will be aimed at understanding Randai through the mindset of its original audience.

In brief, the Minangkabau are a Malay people sustained by agriculture and trade. Their traditional cultural lore (adat) was grounded in indigenous Malay animism before being finally syncretised with Islamic precepts, initially accommodating Sufism, introduced around the fifteenth century, before orthodox Sunni teachings asserted dominance in the 19th century. (Sufi devotional practices, now marginal in religious terms, maintain a residual presence through cultural performance, especially music forms (see Kartomi 1979 and 1986). This strong Muslim identity sits paradoxically within an indigenous matrilineal social system (sistem matriarkat), which determines kinship, residence patterns and inheritance by the women’s line. This adat system, as I observe, serves to protect women from the vicissitudes of conjugal insecurity. While such vicissitudes are not exclusive to the Minangkabau, their tradition of dual matrilocal/uxorilocal residency and the dominance of property by the female line promotes male diasporic activity, firstly, in the principle of rantau, temporary migration.
whereby young unmarried males are encouraged to give vent to their more unruly energies abroad, and secondly, by tying male prosperity to trade as they are denied control of property.

Life between puberty and marriage spent living in the male world of the *surau* (prayer-house) learning scripture and *silek* in preparation for the *rantau* may have provided the environment for the development of Randai and inspiration for its stories (Kartomi 1981, Nor 1986, Pauka 1998, Cohen 2004, Latrell 1999). But even more relevant to this study than kinship and migration patterns are the social principles that underpin Minangkabau *adaik* systems and personal interactions. Flexible, egalitarian systems pivoting on twin processes of debate and consensus, a structured management of order and chaos, mutual community assistance, and the ability to accommodate contradictory systems, are features of Minangkabau's resilience-inclined *adaik*. (I invoke this term based on a definition of resilience as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks" (Walker, Holling et al 2004).)

The Minangkabau place a high value on such flexibility, building into their customary lore the accommodation of new adaptive interpretations, which always pivot on an unswerving regard for original intent. Enabling this is an explicit separation between 'original' *adaik* (*cupakan usali*, the measure of intention), which is beholden to quintessential or natural laws, and *adaik* of the particular, (*adaik-istiadaik* or *cupakan buatan*, the constructed measure) which is subject to change through reinterpretation (Errington, 1984: p.100). I have not only attempted to apply this distinction between original intent and negotiable, material manifestations to the task of innovation within the microcosm of Randai, but I also find it is the associated processes that support such responsiveness that materially shape Randai practice and stand it apart from contemporary Western practice.

Likewise my purpose is not to enter into a detailed survey of Randai in its cultural context here below. For this I refer readers to the works of other writers. In particular, as movement specialists themselves, Pauka and Nor include detailed attention to performance actions and training methods. My intention is to indicate what is commonly experienced as Randai in its place of origin and how a performance plays out in a typical context, in order that the developments and insights into the form derived from my experimentations with Randai can be placed within a framework. I use the term 'typical' as distinct from 'traditional' to avoid the inaccurate idea of a deeply ingrained ritual context for Randai. In fact the Minangkabau word 'tradisi' ('traditional') is a borrowed word for a borrowed concept. The stylistic historicity it suggests is better described by the term 'asli' ('original'), which more accurately refers to an
archaic indigenous provenance, without implying obsolescence or rigidity, and relates more to the physical circumstances and social outlook of its immediate community.

As a young hybrid cross cultural (post colonial) art form Randai folk opera is not often described as ‘asli’ (except perhaps when intended relatively), and in-as-much as it is a living, evolving art form it should be understood that its various manifestations of development and modernisation exist concurrently across the Minangkabau world, defying the binary distinction implied by the idea of traditional and non-traditional. I will however use the word ‘tradition’ in referring to aspects of cultural life as idealised in the Minangkabau imagination - usually sustained historical practices enshrined in the oral literatures, such as ‘Tambo’, the written text of an orally transmitted canon of pre-islamic lores on which the Minangkabau understanding of themselves and their ‘adaik’ (customs) is based, and ‘Kaba’, oral epic narratives which will be described later in this study.

A basic description of the principles of Randai

In its dramatic form, for there are also song and dance forms that do not incorporate story, Randai performs an episode from oral epic, folktale or community legend, within a circular formation of martial artists, presumably retained from an older martial dance form, Randai ulu’ambek. The story is delivered in two alternating modalities: narrative song and poetic dialogue. Episodes in song accompanied by dance-like martial movements around the perimeter of the circle alternate with rounds of debate between two standing players presented in melodious declamation within the circle of now seated players. Starkly marking the boundary between these two modes are outbursts of frenzied body percussion played on the baggy trousers worn by players, which also delineate the end of verses within each song. Randai brings together three fundamental Minangkabau traditions - the Malay-Indonesian martial arts practice of ‘pancak silek’, the oral tradition of story telling known as ‘seni bakaba’ and the songs of lamentation for voice and flute called ‘dendang jo saluang’ in a hybrid genre inspired by the mimetic role-play of European theatre and operetta that were touring the Dutch colony at the end of the 19th century. It is clear from Matthew Cohen’s survey of historical influences and events leading up to the first documented ‘story’ Randai in 1932 (Cohen, 2004) how Randai grew out of the meeting between Western ideas of dramatising a story through song and spoken dialogue, with the Minangkabau community’s own social ethos and practices. They took their cue from the successful syncretising of comparable influences by the Bangsawan Comedy of Malaysia, also known to have toured the region around the same period, (Cohen, 2004).
A typical schema from the performers perspective

The most salient features of Randai in rehearsal or performance are the pants slapping and the circular formation (see figure 2). A corps of twelve to sixteen players encircles a playing area of 6 to 8 metres diameter. They wear voluminous ‘galembong’ trousers which, when struck in the empty area between the legs effects a loud drumming sound. In the middle of the circle one or two singers convey the story through ballad-like songs, strophic in form. Each short verse of which is accompanied by a corresponding sequence of martial arts gestures danced by the corps (lingkaran) in unison round the perimeter and finishes with one such burst of percussive rhythm by the dancers combining vocal yelps with clapping and slapping of pants.

Each percussive flourish known as ‘tapuak galembong’ (galembong slapping) subsides into a relaxed walk, single file round the rim of the circle awaiting the singer’s next stanza. The narration is sung usually a capella, sometimes accompanied by a single instrument - typically the bamboo flute, ‘saluang’. The vocal line is shared seamlessly with a second singer so that, by overlapping the transition, a longer melodic phrase is achievable without breaking for breath.

Another percussive break seats all but two players who re-enter the circle as the others sit down. As characters, they address each other from the perimeter of the space using poetic speeches that represent scenes from the story. Between speeches, they walk round the arc to take up a new perimeter position maintaining a diametrical relationship with each other (See diagrams, figure 4 to 6). They step and gesture in rhetorical manner, and perform silek duels where the story calls for them. As the final line of each scene is uttered, a caller gives a sharp vocal yelp and the company rise to their feet amidst percussive, clapping rhythms, ready for the next song and dance. This alternating pattern may proceed for a few hours until the story is done, or a break is due.

The whole performance is bracketed by opening and closing protocols - special songs, speeches and an opening procession of choreographed silek sequences addressing audience, dignitaries and the spirit world. Factors beyond this depend on social, cultural and geographic context, for Randai may be used in a number of ways in the contemporary landscape (sometimes in distorting or commodifying situations). However having just described the basic mechanics of a Randai performance I will now describe a typical performance context confident that this scenario is not only predominant, but is the one in which Randai is fully at home and understood by both its hosts and its audience.
Fig. 1 A recent Randai production, Nan Si Jundai by visiting Minangkabau performance expert, Indra Utama, presented by performance students at ASWARA, the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage, Kuala Lumpur in their well-resourced Experiment Theatre featuring full lighting rig and 3 video screens exemplifying contemporary movements in Randai. November, 2010. [A.H.,H.D.S.]

Fig. 2 Tapuak Galembong (pants-slapping): Desmal Hendri in the lingkaran of Palimo Gaga, Padangpanjang, 1989. (left) and Karen Timbacan and Larisa Chen in the lingkaran of The Horned Matriarch, Brisbane 1996 (right)

Fig. 3 STSI Lecturer in vocal music, Firdaus plays Bujang Baganto in a scene from Zulkifli's Palimo Gaga. Padangpanjang, 1989.
Fig. 4. Richard Southern’s diagram (left) of the natural dynamic that forms around a 2-person dialogue (Southern, 1958), reflected in the inward staging of Randai (right). The blue figures are musicians, singers and offstage players. The cyan lines indicate centre, diametric polarity and rotation of the axis of play, the red sector indicates the limited area of compromised viewing in relation to the proximal actor.

Fig. 5. Side elevations of the flat, and alternatively wok-shaped profile (overlaid) of an original medan-nan-bapanah gathering place, showing the proximity of audience to the lingkaran (black figures) pictured during an episode of sung narration.

Fig. 6. (Below) A comparable wok-shaped earthworks arena drawn from Western theatre history may be recognised in the Plen-an-Gwary of Medieval Cornwall, discussed in chapter 3 (from Southern, 1975).

Fig. 7. The dome of space above and between the players (blue) is energised by the heightened declamatory dialogue of the speaking player from his position on the periphery, extending beyond the listening player, opposite, to include, overarch and envelop the audience beyond.
Preparations and Mise en scene.

A pending Randai performance may be first indicated by a late afternoon public announcement called a 'halo-haloan' (cogn. with English, n. “hello-hello-ing”), a pre-show event involving a handful of performers spruiking from the back of a utility (pick-up) vehicle, along commercial strips and between rice fields, reminding the local populace to congregate at a designated venue for that evening's performance. The site, typically an open yard or quadrangle between residences (the iconic position is in front of the highest status traditional residence) reinterpreted as applicable and practical, will be set up to accommodate a six to eight metre diameter playing circle plus the surrounding swell of an anticipated crowd. It may be masked off by hessian if a donation or ticket price will be charged, enclosed by tarpaulins or shifted to a covered site in wet weather. Passing inside through an approach festooned with pennants, one will find food stalls, benches, a small PA and generator and whatever general lighting can be sourced and powered, frequently gas lamps (hurricane lanterns). Audience numbers depend on context. A village fundraiser during Lebaran festivities may attract several hundred limited only by the site capacity. The empty bare-earth arena (occasionally covered with sand or sawdust if the ground is too uneven) may be ringed by an improvised rail or indicated by seating.

Performers will have gathered at around dusk and undergone a magical protection ritual, burning of benzoin (kumayan resin) and a dab of blessed water, to ward off interference by ill-intentioned spells or spirits. They journey to the host village by chartered minibus, though if performing locally some groups like ‘Sanggar Tari jo Silek Batu Badoro’ (Batu Badoro Dance and Silek Studio) based in Keranjang, Kalumbuak still arrive on foot playing handheld instruments en route to form a colourful street parade, an effect perhaps emulated in the opening processional movement that begins a performance.

Between arriving and beginning, social protocols oblige host and guests to make overt demonstrations of their goodwill and good faith especially when a village hosts an outside group of players. The preliminary rituals of protective magic to augment these social gestures suggest the display is less an expression of interior truth as a performative enactment of surface intentions.

The event unfolds

After 9pm (Isa) prayers, an ensemble of drum, shawm and kettle-gong begin to play, indicating the show is preparing to begin. When the crowd, which represents all levels of the community, seems ready, some formally seated, others squatting or standing, and relevant intro-
ductions are made, a column of twelve to sixteen players wearing voluminous trianguloid pants (*sarawa galembong*), enter the arena accompanied by the intense interlocking rhythms of the band (see figure 8). Musicians may form the rear or advance guard or be seated already, at the inner edge of the audience or more rarely on a featured dais. Typically two-abreast, the procession of players advance through a series of martial moves with hand flourishes derived from blocks and parries, working their way into a circle at the very edge of the space. They pause to kneel reverently during a prologue (*pidato*) and opening song, then, with a loud yelp, rise to perform some rhythmically co-ordinated *silek* partner drills (*aliran silek*) and finish with a flourish of ‘*tapuak*’ hand clapping and pants-slapping (i.e. beating the excess fabric of their pants like a loud drum against a contra-tempo of vocal shouts) before leading off round the circle in a relaxed and focussed walk. The explosive energy settles and the story is ready to begin with the singer’s first narrative song beginning as typically as “Once upon a time…” This sets in train the series of episodes described above alternating sung narrative with dialogue re-enactments.

Typically this first scene is expositionary, establishing the stakes, the promise, the vulnerabilities, eliciting the empathy of the audience. It often features a departure (from home or a loved one) signalling the cultural motif of *rantau*. In the Randai story of ‘*Rambun Sati jo Sutan Lembak Tuah*’ (by a company of the same name in Kubu Nan Ampek, 1997 (1963 to circa 2000) this is where the hero first meets and rescues his love interest, setting up a trope for later events. In Zukifli’s work, ‘*Palimo Gaga*’ a fateful gambling party is planned. The stories, drawing heavily on the ethics of *silek*, generally conform to universals of popular oral literature.

Each verse of each song with its circling dancers, burst of pants-slapping percussion and calming walk-around, thus cycles through three energies - sustained, explosive and release. The ring of dancers (*lingkaran*) contracts and expands between each transition by converging to the centre before sitting and on rising, the tension of opposites in the dialogues gives way to unified group movement in songs establishing a constant rhythmic flux or ebb and flow between the two modes.

**Auxiliary activities**

The audience continue to circulate throughout the event, while those at the front bustle round so close that players are sometimes sitting on the feet of a spectator. Attention is animated and vocal, calling out encouragements or verbalising disappointments as one might at a sporting match. Players not assigned characters sometimes swap with reserves mid scene, gas lamps are re-pumped and microphones are handed back and forth, placed on the ground
or untangled, with no attempt to mask these logistics.

Around 11pm, after several rounds, there is an interval busy with eating, socialising and entr’actes. Entr’actes usually take the form of a fund-raising appeal or auction, called a ‘bagurau’, where audience members bid against each other with a small cash pledge for their favourite performer to start or stop performing requested songs, dances or tricks. The interval is typically long, an hour or two.

The second half opens with a simple tapuak or percussive bridging sequence, and a song that takes up the thread of the story, and proceeds as before through the remaining scenes. Trials and tribulations abroad, love triangles or abductions at the hand of robbers or evil kings are either resolved through the wise and ethical application of silek, scripture or adaik (customary lore), or end in tragedy, tears and vows of reform. (Rambun Sati marries Sutan Lembak Tuah, but Reno Nilam takes her life in grief over the death of her betrothed). But they end, as according to Mursal Esten they must, with issues resolved and loose ends tied (Esten, 1993, p.38).

Only a few hours before dawn, with a final burst of energy and talempong playing, a procession, symmetrical with the beginning, leads the players out of the playing arena. The audience will have dwindled after midnight, perhaps from two hundred and fifty to twenty-five and the last stayers dawdle home when there is no more entertainment to be had.

The Discussion and Practice of Randai in Indonesian and Western Sources

On the whole Randai has been discussed by Western and Minangkabau scholars as a manifestation of cultural identity, that is, in its ethnographic context. The collected conference papers of the 1975 symposium, Sarasehan Randai (Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1975) in which Minangkabau scholars and cultural commentators, under the auspices of the government department of education and culture, debated the defining features of Randai with a view to establishing criteria for its future cultivation, reminds us that its current form is as much a construct of identity politics as an organic folkloric manifestation.

Chairul Harun, amongst those promoting a renaissance of Randai in Padang, was the most influential on my work due to his influence on my Randai teachers and the timing and availability of his key text on Randai (Harun, 1992). I drew from this an emphasis on the conceptual elasticity of Minangkabau arts and by extension, Randai, as a manifestation of adaik-istia-daik, a secondary tier of adaik wherein certain applications of cultural lore are subject to contextual interpretation. While this book clarified and confirmed principles I already under-
stood from my training, I particularly absorbed his weighting of elements and emphasis on principles of flexibility. Yet he perhaps elucidates an 'ideal Randai' which at the time I took to be typical, without critical reference to the variations of ground-level practices. Other Minangkabau sources include Mursal Esten, an artist and cultural scholar, A.A. Naavis writing on Minangkabau cultural identity and customary lore, and later Zulkifli, himself a practitioner and my original teacher.

Esten put Randai into context against the sandiwara (modern Western-style popular dramas) and seni bakaba, the original storytelling art. Comparing typical kampung (village) Randai with the Randai-influenced playscripts of Minangkabau playwright Wisran Hadi, Esten distinguishes sharply between the modernist aesthetic of ambiguity applicable to the plays, and the Randai tradition of completion and moral clarity (Esten, 1993).

I chose to view Esten as perhaps representing an earlier ideal that the global community of Randai audiences might be ready to evolve from, given their regular exposure to international electronic media conveying a wide palette of scripts, characters and philosophical ideals and also to the innovations introduced to Randai by Zulkifli.

Zulkifli traces these evolving community attitudes and the social contribution of Randai through several periods of Minang history from a sociological perspective (Zulkifli 1993) demonstrating the contingent and fluctuating range of meanings that may be evoked or attached to its practice.

In one of the earliest publications on Randai in English, Margaret Kartomi first discussed Randai in terms of the changes and continuities manifesting in its practice within its own society from the first scholarly descriptions of the 1940s to the period of writing (Kartomi, 1981) setting a theme for the field that has been reiterated in many subsequent studies (and student theses). Those by M. Anis Mohd Nor (1986) and Kirsten Pauka (1996, 1998) both dance-based performers themselves, deepen their descriptions through the tacit knowledge of embodied practice and through, in each case, explicit technical examination of one case study (in Nor's case scoring his sample using Laban's dance notation system). Like most scholarship they approach Randai as it is understood and conveyed by the Minangkabau people, usually specialists and spokespeople for the genre (often sharing the same prominent informants), but providing an anthropological and sociological perspective possible from outside the culture. Pauka in particular looks at gender participation and unpacks the silek influences in more detail for which this paper is indebted.

Even the later research of M. I. Cohen and C. Latrell among others, whilst bringing broader
perspectives into play in their respective analyses, such as more nuanced readings of the bi-directional influences, and contemporary diasporic manifestations, have only been able to properly discuss Randai within its Minangkabau socio-ethnic setting, that is, without unpacking its dramaturgical functions sui generis. While the publication of such articles in The Drama Review and New Theatre Quarterly in particular, appears to present Randai as of interest in global performance terms, the discussion nevertheless remains descriptive of an essentially ethnographic tradition, not as a potentially relevant and usable performance idiom of functional value to a wider community of theatre-makers and performance scholars. Veit Erlmann hints at this gap in his review of Van Zanten and Barendregt’s 2001 documentary film Told in Heaven to become Stories on Earth (Erlmann, 2005). He notes that despite its descriptive and historical contribution, “We do not yet know exactly what goes on when Randai performers switch from pencak silat-inspired movements in the galombang dance to spoken (but intensely rhythmic) dialogue and highly melismatic poetry, and we are completely in the dark about what sense Randai audiences make of all this” (Erlmann, 2005). In my attempt to fill this gap I have found it useful to draw on both my own and others’ insights into the mindset that created it.

Frederick Errington’s appraisal of the Minangkabau psyche in his Manners and Meaning in West Sumatra, although male centred, elucidated aspects of the value system I’d felt but had resisted from my own observations in the field. His reading of the role of sign and symbol affirmed my suspicions that the qualities of expressionism, psychological truth and metaphysical symbolism I so favoured in theatre were contradictory to Minangkabau exegesis and, by extension, to Randai. (Errington 1984, p. 83-101). The recognition changed my approach, as I realised I must move toward an understanding of this new paradigm of superficial signs on its own terms rather than draw Randai towards the Western palate in this regard. It resulted in more caution in conceptualising possible fusions, grounding my innovations instead on inherent proclivities within Randai.

Understanding innovation in tradition

Tension between academy and kampung Randai

I first viewed Randai in a state of fatigue when a dozen mature warrior-like males performed foreboding martial gestures and impenetrable utterances in an ill-lit back room at Lake Maninjau. But it more memorably revealed itself to me the next time, in rehearsal at the Indonesian Academy of Traditional Music Arts in Padang Panjang (ASKI, now ISI, Institute Seni Indonesia) where then Head of Dance, Zulkifli Sait, ran an extra-curricular semi-professional
Randai company, ‘Cimpago Biru Randai Group’ constituted by staff, graduates and students (see figures 3, 34). Having the twin advantages of able dance-trained bodies and the rarefied environment of the academy at his disposal, writer/director/choreographer and lead performer, Zulkifli, emphasised choreographic virtuosity and creative innovation. These emphases promoted my perception of Randai as flexible in structure and dominated by physical spectacle (the latter a perception I later revised).

Compared to typical Randai in the kampung, the practitioners of Cimpago Biru seemed to reflect a ‘neo-regionalism’ where-in provincial professional artists mine their own histories and cultural heritage for a unique aesthetic profile, vying for a place on the national stage alongside artists fortunate enough to operate out of the more internationally connected creative hubs of Java and, to a lesser extent, Bali. Viewed from the academy, Randai represented something ancient, local and renewable, resonating with the adaik principle ‘Nan usang andak dipabarui’ (‘may the worn out be renewed’). Nearly 30 years on from choreographer, Huriiah Adam’s successful initiatives to transform and update Minangkabau dance by drawing on vanishing provincial traditions and empowering women to perform them, succeeding generations seek to similarly make their mark combining the ultra-local with global conceptions of art. But while access to national and international forums already existed for dance, Randai’s currency at that time was predominantly with the often older provincial peasant populace.

Differing from the global modernism of urban artists (for Padang Panjang is a small university town situated high in the mountains at the gateway to the interior darek region), Zulkifli used his continuity of, and reverence for, convention to underscore extensions to, and subversions of, the form. These variations were mostly positively received because Randai is popularly defined not ritually determined. Its appeal, though broad, is not universal. A Minang commentator writing in 1944, Karim Halim “is clear that Randai was not popular with everyone in Minang society.” (Cohen 2004: p. 220) There may always be some dissent, not least because of its late-night, slightly unruly masculine energy. While this has subversive appeal for some, with its connotations of an underworld, be it magic, moral or criminal, others it offends, either because it is not for the pious or not for the modern. Islam, for example, has considered Randai an open door to moral transgressions, and even the less puritanical ‘adaik’ lore views active participation by clan leaders as undignified, except as patrons, even while recommending it highly for youth (Harun 1992, Zulkifli 1993, Nor 1986). Issues of dignity and safety also historically discouraged female participation until social changes began to equalise gender representation, (Pauka 1998b).

It is even entirely unfamiliar to many more. For urban Minangkabau living in Padang, and
those for whom twentieth century history disrupted their contact with the homeland, Randai is of little more than a quaint regional anomaly, a scant awareness of which matters little to their continued identity as Minangkabau, indicating that the notions of Randai and Minangkabau are not coextensive. Disdained, despite its urban provenance, by the urban intellectual class as a kampungan (rustic, parochial) practice, its flourishing since the 1960s and resurgence in the 1990’s, has been to some degree stimulated by the encouragement of regional festivals sponsored by the department of education and culture. For many emigres and city dwellers to whom I have spoken, Randai was never a factor of their cultural identity.

I therefore feel that Latrell over-emphasises Randai’s symbiotic relationship with Minangkabau culture as an enactment and reflection of the rantau tradition of circular, or temporary, migration (Latrell, 1999). Matthew Cohen’s valuable historical reconstruction of the precursors, permutations and diasporic manifestations involved in Randai’s ongoing evolution, characterises its emergence as a response to a hybrid contemporary cultural landscape; a modernist impulse to complicate, advance and innovate in the interests of attaining “parity with other cultures through the possession of a vernacular theatre form” (Cohen 2004) echoing somewhat the 1990s impulse in Australia to redefine the Australian voice in theatre in line with its more tangled and shifting real-world narratives. Yet his challenge, for the prodigal art form to return from the rantau, nevertheless appears to locate Randai solely as an expression of cultural continuity.

Veit Erlmann similarly disputes the equation of Randai and ethnic identity noting that the uniformity and homogeneity of Randai across regions, and its ‘modern’ origins, rather than reflecting an existing identity, may suggest Minangkabau identity and Randai both emerge from similar processes of homogenization and modernisation (Erlmann, 2005).

Reading Randai as a modern and only partial cultural phenomena suggests any imperative for Randai developments to please the entire populace, therefore, is not necessarily as constricting as it might be if Randai were indeed a more symbiotic core expression of ritualised Minangkabau identity. In this context Zulkifli’s respect for convention can no more be read as slavish perpetuation of tradition than can his formal experimentation be read in terms of an avant garde, in that stakeholders (at least at the time) were not consciously engaging that Western discourse. (In sharp contrast, in Taman Budaya Padang, the urban arts centre in West Sumatra’s capital, groups like Teater Nan Jombang and Teater Jenjeang were explicitly experimenting within a Western dramaturgical model (Latrell 1999).

I am trying to articulate the distinct position of the academy in tension with traditional custodians, where, far from the ‘high arts’ epicentres like Jakarta, these artist/researchers act
as both cultural custodians and intermediary exploiters of traditional informants. (One might compare them to N.A.I.S.D.A. graduates, situated half way between urban dance companies such as Banggarra and Arnhem Land elders). Unlike their kampung counterparts, they are sustained by the state and protected by the campus community’s shared perspectives. Off campus, the surrounding population does not constitute a social environment where creative individualists could survive as independent critical artists. These move to Java, leaving what the Academy refers to as traditional artists ('seniman tradisional') to function commercially within the social fabric of rural life - usually an after-hours adjunct to primary income activities such as farming. In between, the academy provides a unique if disputed context for contemporary reworkings of 'traditional material' (kreası baru) that generally manifest within the global discourse of World Music. So although the Cimpago Biru Randai Troupe prepared professionally and artistically within the cloisters of the academy, conscious of the national arts echelons, they relied on building profile by playing to local audiences.

I was not fully aware of the academy/kampung tension until 1997 when, as an Asialink resident, I shifted my association from the academy to the kampung. But in 1989 travelling in small belching minibuses with Zulkifli’s academy trained troupe playing to village communities across the region, I was observing strategies for balancing innovation and individualism with deference to community-defined principles of form.

If the art form, Randai, as adaik-istiadaik, has a more contingent place in the Minangkabau realm, the circular migrationary motif of 'rantau' on the other hand, is undeniably a core tenet of both Randai and Minangkabau adaik. Yet considered historically, Randai theatre arose at a time when, socially, colonial fallout begins to present significant challenges for adaik values and practices like rantau (frequently problematised in modern Minangkabau literature since the seminal literary novel, Siti Nurbaya (Roesli, 1966) and continually reflected in the increasingly less 'circular' practice of the contemporary era when outflow migration clearly exceeds the rate of return.)

Proceeding, then, from an array of acknowledged variations in rantau practice in this era, one might suggest that departures from Randai convention ought naturally to follow. As the product of just such a disrupted rantau myself (my father's return from the Australian rantau being disrupted by marriage and family) I situate my engagement with Randai on such a plane. For this reason I chose not to view Randai as undisassociable with Minangkabau culture but as a method of constituting a cross-disciplinary form from elements essential to a culture.

Hybridity and the Australian position
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

Randai may be a local form of expression (dependant on local language and symbols) grounded in premodern traditions, but its inception as a dramatic form in the 1930s was syncretic and inter-regional. Syncretic theatre has been characterised by Lo and Gilbert as theatre that “integrates performance elements of different cultures into a form that aims to retain the cultural integrity of the specific materials used while forging new texts and theatre practices” (Lo and Gilbert, 2002, page 35-36). By inter-regional I refer to a sense that Randai was a pan-Minangkabau response to modern era conditions at a time when each nagari (subdistrict) had functioned as a separate entity with differentiated cultural identities.

My first impulse as an emerging theatre-maker was to engage with the form’s design elements - its use of contrast and repetition, schematic abstraction and heightened poetic style - to shape my expression of my own Sumatran-Australian hybridity. Extrapolating from this approach led me to posit the possibility of an emergent contemporary Randai that would express a position of hybridity for an evolving Australian society.

I was assuming that Randai might naturally speak to this position as it would seem to in the modern Minangkabau world. There, however, ‘hybridity’ involves external influences rather than ethnic diversity per se. (Sufi and orthodox Islam, colonial and modern Europe, and recent globalisation leave cultural traces over indigenous Minangkabau and nationalist Indonesian identities in this 88% ethnically Minangkabau society (ISEAS 2003). But if eclectic Randai reinforces the values of continuity and communality for an ethnically and culturally homogenous people, it does not necessarily follow that it will also speak to our more diverse and hybridised society. I used the current research to address ways in which it might.

To posit such an aim begs certain questions. Firstly, what do I understand as Australian society? Secondly, what am I defining as Randai? Lastly, what can be gained in terms of knowledge through this process.

The first question may be considered in reference to the sociopolitical climate of the 1990s, which saw a rising recognition of Australia’s relationship to the Asia-Pacific region alongside the global emergence of interculturality in the arts. My own subject position, as progeny of Australian-Indonesian parents in the era of the Colombo plan (the international program of study scholarships that brought developing nation students to Australian and American universities in the 1950s and 60s), situates my perception of Australia’s cultural diversity as unarguable from empirical evidence and through my lifelong participation in the construction of the myth of multiculturalism. From this bicultural perspective, it seemed naturally to follow that Australian audiences would be increasingly constituted by Asia-literate people (whether through contact, migration or hybrid birth).
CHAPTER 1 – Background and Methodology

The second question, that of defining Randai, forestalled my pursuit of intercultural innovation, leading me, instead, back to the original Randai model to interrogate the traditional forms for more nuanced understandings of how they worked. Arising as soon as we begin to present, teach or talk about Randai, the question asks how ‘quintessential Randai’ is embodied in its performance conventions, and is thus a response to resistances to such conventions by those new to the form; resistances which are necessarily based on the assumptions of a more orthodox Western theatre. This need for return, for clarification, created a circular loop whereby the desire to transform begged the question of what it was that was being transformed, resulting in focused attention on the critical difference between, firstly, corrupting that which distinguishes Randai in favour of a more familiar dramaturgy, and secondly, locating in Randai that which might best rise to meet the familiar.

Such close practical attention to the traditional prototype led from ‘how’ questions to propositions as to ‘why’ Randai works as it does, taking into account the perspectives and world views of its practitioners and social environment. Closing in on the third question, herein is (at least) one source of new knowledge that goes beyond mere observational description to a tacit, practice-based knowledge of the interdependent dynamic effects that distinguish, perhaps define, Randai. This new knowledge however was not initially intended as an end in itself but constituted the parameters used, progressively as they emerged, to guide the process of innovation and adaptation to the intercultural environment.

Other knowledges arising from the endeavour include developing an approach to teaching Randai (not treated here), appreciating how Randai skills may be useful for the Western theatre artist, and how Randai might be successfully applied as a tool for community development. It also throws light on some assumptions of the Australian theatre ‘apparatus’ and the difficulties it has in serving alternative performance modalities, (compare Fensham and Eckersall, 1999). Warranting further investigation are the new perspectives it may lend on the performance of pre-modern oral narrative or epic poetic texts that may be useful in the practice of staging a range of classical, pre-renaissance or indigenous epics. Other insights would be gained from the creative process and product itself, such as new perspectives on cultures of storytelling and possibilities for their delivery in performance.

The dialogue between creating new work forward and looping back to confirm or remember, exposed a deeper layer of Randai’s anatomy than would have been possible without both insider/practitioner and outsider/investigator perspectives.

Using an Emergent Research Methodology
Against the advice of some PARIP (Practice as Research in Performance) scholars who suggest that artistic practice as research projects should begin with theories that are subjected to testing in practice (Barrett and Bolt, 2007), I rather sought to derive theory from observing my practice.

My primary method was to weigh the assumptions of Western theatre against the inherited internal logic of Randai, and in this process refine the definition and limits of Randai in new ways. My approach may be most closely correlated to the emergent research techniques of Action Research and Grounded Theory, operating within a Practice as Research paradigm. The plan-act-reflect model as represented by Participatory Action Research engages the sample group as co-collaborators in an organically evolving line of enquiry.

Even more pertinently, Grounded Theory, a research practice founded by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss articulated in The Discovery of Grounded Theory is a "multivariate" method that "happens sequentially, subsequently, simultaneously, serendipitously, and scheduled" (Glaser, 1967). Its admission of "adductive reasoning", a notion drawn from the work of Charles Sanders Pierce, "starting when an inquirer considers of a set of seemingly unrelated facts, armed with the hunch that they are somehow connected" fitted the pattern of my enquiry. In Anselm Strauss's approach data sampling, data analysis and theory development are not seen as necessarily discrete stages of research but processes that may be repeated until new data no longer impacts on the emerging theory. (Grounded Theory, 2011). It allows that "Everything is data" including the primary knowledge of the researcher, which in my case was built up from extended field practice and informal oral sources prior to the study, and encourages early, ongoing analysis to inform the emerging theory and shape the further collection of data. Critical comparisons between phenomena and contexts are used to strengthen a theory that emerges from the field rather than from hypothesis.

As emergent methodologies these were suited to my project in their qualitative focus and responsiveness to sequential findings.

In this vein, each stage of development, distinguished by specific experimental parameters, was followed by reflection and then a renegotiation of those parameters. The re-negotiation was sometimes framed in discursive terms but more often was simply the search for a way of re-conceptualising a physical approach or spatial relationship in practical terms.

The rest was laid open to be examined for its validation or negation of the paradigm. In this way some of the bigger questions that I addressed by this practical undertaking included: How does cultural patterning influence temporal and spatial organisation and performance...
values? If Randai is culturally determined, what interventions are required and/or possible for Randai to transcend its localism and function in a globalised space? And how can the practice of these inform our understanding of the cultural patterning and performance values?

Thus far I have given a brief historical background and descriptive overview of typical Randai in its place of origin, within a culture that, on anecdotal evidence, exists beyond the imaginations of most Australians. (Several actors have cited uncertainty about approaching the role of a Malay character type as a disincentive to participate.) I have thinly sketched some features of the Minangkabau outlook that may underpin some of the values embedded in Randai. What I have described is a performance practice that exists within the enclave of its own social group, celebrates language and form, flexibility and resilience, with which it disarms chaos into the service of meaning (compare Errington 1984).

The practice of Randai in West Sumatra suggested ways to manage innovation within formalism, and from this perspective I evaluated it as potentially accessible to Australian audiences, in part due to shared resonances with Western historical performance approaches. Whether its social emphasis on cohesion could engage an audience of greater diversity concerned me. That it would be problematic to mount for logistical reasons (in my naivete) did not.

In the following chapter I move beyond the ethnographic frame to find out whether the values embedded in Randai’s temporal, spatial and energetic frames will retain meaning in a globalised space and in particular within the formal theatre sector.
CHAPTER 2 - Towards a Systematic Enquiry

Making Randai Beyond The Ethnographic Frame

Having established that it is fitting for Randai to continue its evolution in the diasporic environment, it was then equally important for me to maximise the academic and creative potential of the inquiry within an ideological position I could be comfortable with, i.e. avoiding a politics of cultural imperialism.

Since its inception in the early twentieth century, Randai has been a process of self-conscious innovation. As an indigenous response to the influence of foreign stage companies touring from Europe and Malaysia Randai reverses the trend of syncretic theatre in most post-colonial societies. “In post-colonial societies, syncretic theatre generally involves the incorporation of indigenous material into a Western dramaturgical framework, which is itself modified by the fusion process.” (Lo and Gilbert, 2002.) Instead of primacy being accorded to the Western frame however, Randai, selectively incorporated aspects of the new within a reconstructed regional idiom, so re-contextualising ancient traditions for an evolving society.

I had endeavoured to build upon Randai’s proposition that innovation could be incorporated into indigenous structures. Setting out to perpetuate this lineage of adaptation to evolving post-colonial conditions, I invited Randai to migrate and assimilate itself in the rantau, or ‘new diasporic territories’, of Australia.

“Randai Telah Menjajah Australia!”: MusiK KabaU and The Horned Matriarch

The Padang daily, Haluan Minggu, announced the first Australian public Randai venture to its West Sumatran readership with the headline “Randai has Colonised Australia!” (Syarifuddin, 1996). It was to be a project in three phases starting with a development period, and followed by two discrete productions, first in Brisbane, as The Horned Matriarch, and then, with a new team and after a major script overhaul, in Sydney under the title The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam.

This inaugural Australian Randai was conceptualised for a main-house theatre audience with cross-cultural interests, insights or connections. It justified its claim for support and production opportunities (attracting funding from the Australia Council Performing Arts Board and Arts Qld) by invoking an increasingly Asia-literate audience, and an overlooked rising demographic of Asian-Australians that seemed set to shape our cultural future. In Sydney this target narrowed slightly to specifically engage the expatriate Minangkabau (perantau) as com-
Community partners (with a corresponding funding shift to the Community Cultural Development Unit of the Australia Council).

Meanwhile I also launched a folktale, *Mr Stupid*, presented as a ‘Randai-singkek’, by which I mean a mini Randai condensing Randai elements for three performers. This targeted Indonesian language learners in Australian schools. Both can be positioned as migrant or multicultural theatre (Lo & Gilbert, 2002) wherein the Minangkabau form communicates Minangkabau themes to inform an empathetic audience. Both were equally important for introducing me to the dynamics of working with Randai in the new terrain representing important processes and considerations that set the scene for the ensuing research. As a basis for understanding the impetus for my subsequent case studies, I will go through the issues arising from *The Horned Matriarch* case study here.

**Developing The Horned Matriarch - First case study**

In the creative development phase I invited two Australian artists (musician, Kari, and performance writer, Catherine Fargher) and my former teacher, the Randai specialist Zulkifli Dt Sinaro nan Kuniang, to join me in a four week collaboration to devise the core elements (story, dialogue, songs, melodies and movement) of a new Randai that highlighted the matriarchal social system represented in the ‘horned matriarch’ figure of the title. Concurrently we had a team of volunteer performers engaged in weekly training and studio trials of the emerging work. The result was presented as a work in progress on the lawns of Yungaba, home of the Brisbane Ethnic Music and Arts Centre.

In creating this Randai we strove to communicate authenticity by self-reflexively dramatising a ‘culture of origin’ centred narrative as a way to demystify the form and cultivate an informed audience. In consideration of the new audience viewpoint we decided against a straight translation of a traditional work which originally would have presumed an insider audience. Instead we chose to devise what might be termed a ‘neo’-kaba, i.e. a story conventional in style and form but referencing contemporary realities and progressive sensibilities, an approach not untypical for contemporary West Sumatra. This of course added to the already technical complication of simply rendering the text features of Randai into English.

The story began with the title concept of *The Horned Matriarch*, referencing the Minangkabau primal mother archetype, the Bundo Kanduang. With the Australian audience in mind, we embedded an extract of her story (from the classic kaba, *Cindua Mato*) as a storytelling event within a main framing story. At this early stage the complications of framing had not become apparent and we were applying the Western tendency to manipulate
framing devices to achieve a layering of complexity. This choice was made in an attempt, on the one hand, to underscore the 'storytelling' tradition on which Randai is based while, on the other, to interpolate a mediating view between the remote arch style of this canonical epic and the contemporary audience's reality.

For our contemporary story we linked into traditional lineage by reworking the story of Palimo Gaga as told in \textit{Curito Randai Palimo Gaga}, a long running Randai work by our visiting collaborator, Zulkifli, from the point of view of its female characters, both named and surmised. In this way we felt a party to the myth-building that embellishes and extends an isolated story into an epic tradition.

Juxtaposing elements of high epic, folk superstitions, and the contemporary realities of mobile technology and relatives living abroad, I not only wanted to appeal meaningfully to knowledgeable audiences (such as Australian resident Minangkabau) but also, for a non-Minang audience I wanted the sense that this culture, despite ancient continuities, exists in our own time and space.

To this end the Minangkabau world-view was communicated through traditional proverbs and aphorisms by a range of unorthodox character hybrids, such as feminisations of male Minang archetypes, reflecting our ideologically progressive concerns to make of this performance a vehicle for female performers and pro-feminist perspectives.

The plot also fulfilled the function of communicating unique social structures and protocols as a way to promote understanding, and to affirm the integrity, of the source tradition and to centre this as a departure point for future interventions. In other words I was attempting to prime an audience, as much as the creative team, for a long term engagement with the form.

The original text did not attempt perfect rhyming quatrains, but used a rhythmic and frequently rhyming free form style of mannered dialogue, in an attempt to remain accessible to the contemporary Western ear. I was more particular about metre as a tool to highlight certain passages, such as the hexameter used to isolate the story-within-a-story. Instead of traditional verse forms many rhythms were derived from natural expressive utterances explored in workshops and then used as templates for subsequent stanzas.

Kari, as musical director on the first two phases, reused selected repertoire from \textit{Palimo Gaga}, adding from her repertoire of Sundanese and Irish music motifs to use as incidental music as well as two additional song melodies (\textit{Hamdan} by Mang Koko and an anonymous flute
melody we named *Dendang Irlandia* (see attached script #3.1). Like the score, Zulkifli’s original choreography initially dominated the galombang dances augmented by newly-created silek-based motifs to blend the non-Minangkabau musical accompaniment into the whole.

**Matriarch in Production: The Brisbane Season**

This first version was presented the following year with an expanded team of new trainees. At each phase a team of professional actors took core speaking roles with the *lingkaran* augmented by community workshop participants to make up the large cast numbers. Typically for such projects (according to Coldiron, 2004), casting mixed Asian-Australians widely varying in age and experience with Anglo-Australian performers identifying through expertise, association or lineage.

In its first full staging in Brisbane’s old Princess Theatre (1996), prepared through two months of movement workshops and professional rehearsals, I allowed the Western habits of performers and target audience to influence a general softening of the epic, mannered style, exercising licence to vary the dialogue rhythms, internalise the acting, broaden the physical and visual stage business to play out more of the implied action and attempting to find a midpoint between drawing an audience to the event style, and accommodating the effects of a remote, static seating arrangement.

These modifications were both intentional, in order to facilitate access for a novitiate audience, and to some degree unintentional through force of Western habit in performance style. Further distortions of the form occurred through logistical barriers vis a vis costs (working within an alien infrastructure and under culturally determined production expectations).

**The Sydney Season.**

The revised version, in which the text was over 75% rewritten under the mentorship of dramaturg, Bruce Keller (sponsored by support organisation for women performance writers, Playworks), was presented as *The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam*, at three open air venues in Sydney in 1998. Here we moved away from ambiguous interventions that diluted the integrity of the form, resisting prevailing pressure to shape the intercultural experience for the eyes of an Anglo audience, in favour of a rendering closer to formal convention in text style, structure and presentation. This showed, for example, in stricter rhythmic integrity, more classic oral epic forms and less ‘aestheticised’ choreography (closer to pure *silek*) and inducements to more informal audience behaviour. If this seems counter-intuitive in a contemporary intercultural setting, it was already becoming apparent that the task was to com-
municate, through the show itself, the conventions at work in its structure, in the interests of establishing a clear benchmark for evaluation and criticism. It was, for the purposes of the research, an opportunity to gauge the response of the public to a text-book Randai prototype.

This made sense in it’s framing as a community development project in partnership with the city’s Minangkabau community pivoting on cultural maintenance with a view to engaging young Australian-born *perantau* in an exploration of cultural memory and diasporic experience. It was made possible by the availability of additional skills and knowledge; I had undertaken a more detailed study of Randai textual structure during an Asialink residency to Sumatra in the intervening months (some results of which inform my discussion of text in Chapter 6); Padang-based Randai and *silek* practitioner, Edi Asmara and specialist in Sumatran music, Megan Collins, as music director, along with expatriate Minangkabau volunteers in performing and auxiliary roles, brought further expertise and shared reference points to this production. But most importantly it was in answer to a range of responses to the initial season which I will discuss below.

**Critical feedback**

In the middle of a spectrum of responses feedback from general audience members was enthusiastic; even transformative for many respondents particularly those with limited exposure to orthodox theatre, and those who shared the migrant experience of tension between homeland (not necessarily Asian) and new values. This position was lightly acknowledged as folkloric and irrelevant in terms of intercultural discourse in a review by community arts-worker, Ainsley Burdell (1996).

At one critical end of the spectrum however, was visiting Minangkabau cultural commentator, producer and arts journalist, Edy Utama’s appraisal of the Brisbane production as “*teater berbau* Randai” (theatre with a Randai flavour). As Utama was aware, it was always important for my research that innovation should stay within the theoretical bounds of Randai, yet already, he critiqued our achievement of this aim in our first season by differentiating the result from true “Randai *berdasar debat*” (Randai based on debate). He pointed out that our physicalised, action-based scenes, use of ‘stage business’ and our mapping of the idea of an environment onto the empty stage was contrary to Randai’s strict emphasis on verbal debate and non-localised space (Utama, verbal communication, 1996).

The other end of the spectrum, the view through a perhaps monocultural lens of Western progressive contemporary arts assumptions, is fairly reasonably represented Ainsley Burdell’s
review (in a community arts sector publication, Network News) calling for “more attention to be paid to the dynamics of the piece as a whole” (1996). For Burdell, a loss of dialogue (caused by a combination of acoustic factors) “meant that the production seemed long and repetitive, its predictable structure constantly alternating between dance and action, between dramatic and comic scenes.” Here I must acknowledge a difficulty in disentangling from responses the shortcomings of the form from the shortcomings of the team in their artistic and production capacity. Nevertheless these descriptives are only implicitly pejorative until engaged with as explicitly functional features of the whole, so leading me to query the functional basis of these features of Randai. Burdell went on to write that

For an Australian audience the choreography and circular flow of the dance was at first interesting but soon became monotonous and limited in its use of space. Where an Indonesian audience would have felt at liberty to come and go during the play’s duration, anticipating the boring bits through familiarity with the theatrical form, the Australian audience was trapped by its own customs of remaining seated until the lights come up.

This important equation between perception or focal interest and audience rights and behaviours fuelled the direction of subsequent study - but not with the intention of transforming the choreography to suit existing habits of approaching theatre. Rather it was in the sense of asking why these patterns had this effect on audiences in Australia and how differently they are approached by a Minangkabau audience, in order to understand what may reasonably be expected of a meeting of Randai and the Western audience.

Burdell makes the point that

Basing works on traditional forms allows the freedom to play with those forms within a contemporary context, breaking patterns and turning tradition on its head. But where those ‘plays on form’ are readily understood by the culture steeped in those traditions, how easily are they translated by an audience with no cultural references to appreciate the breaks with tradition?

She thus answers her own critique here resonating with my intention to lay a foundation of traditional form with the inaugural Randai to be “broken” in future productions. As phase one of a ten-point plan, our choice of story and treatment had precisely “questions of content and contextualisation” in mind, which she says

... is a very real issue involved in presenting culturally specific works to a broad audience and one that needs to be addressed if there is to be a more meaningful interaction between the work and its audience.

With both form and content (and in some capacity skills and performers) drawn directly from the source culture, The Horned Matriarch was designed as a vehicle to establish the conven-

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2 Excluding visiting professionals, 50% of the lingkaran were Indonesian-born, 9 West Sumatran and 1
tion of Randai both with our audience and for ourselves as creators and participants. It asked: what are the mechanics of Randai, what defines it and how do we build it? We aimed explicitly not to deconstruct the form at first, but explore its existing resonances, introducing only minimal interpolations of material from other art-forms judged to locate and support its dramaturgy. Over its two consecutive productions we arrived at the point where we had a handle on the conventional form, and its most obvious and enduring clashes with the new environment, which might become the starting point for a more deconstructive engagement in the future, were coming to the fore. If Burdell perhaps represented a monocultural perspective while I had meanwhile endeavoured to engage a growing bi-cultural Australian experience, nevertheless her review, and the viewpoints it represented, usefully articulated considerations that my subsequent enquiry and artistic choices attempted to surmount.

For an indication of this arrival/starting point, please view the video of a final performance of *The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam* recorded at Bondi Pavilion Amphitheatre, September 1998 (DVD#1: HMRN), with the accompanying script containing notes and season program (Appendix #1.1) before proceeding to the next section.

**Maker As Researcher: Investigating Emerging Questions**

In staging *The Horned Matriarch* we quickly came up against the most recurrent obstacles - artistic, logistical and philosophical: the audience’s experience as it arises from the matrix of audibility, seating and habits of concentration; their expectations in relation to the dramatic, emotive and formulaic; the conflicting discourse around authenticity, tradition and modernity; and the contestable notion of an ‘Australian’ context. Similar issues will be seen to arise with any Western presentation and reception of Randai (as demonstrated in Pauka, Askovic & Polk, 2003) so that details problematised through later productions were first encountered here.

**Four Main Issues to Surmount**

The dilemmas and questions that arose from mounting these initial Randai productions may be grouped into four broad areas concerned with surmounting (1) the limitations of the ‘apparatus’, (2) the habituation of the audience, (3) the limitations of specific skills (performers) and (4) the habituation of co-creators. I will give a brief word on each here in-as-much as they lead me to the concerns of this investigation and the case studies through which these

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Sundanese; of these 7 were young people under twelve years old, 6 (30%) had some Minangkabau movement/dance skills, of which 1 had advanced silek skills with Randai experience.
issues were examined.

1. **Surmounting the limitations of the ‘apparatus’**

By this I mean to recognise how theatre infrastructure is predicated on fundamentally different paradigms in this country, skewing the attempt to achieve a Randai-style event by an often inescapable reframing that has implications for the way audience experience it. Having evolved in a community-rich cash-poor society, the cost of difference (customisation), the cost of proximity (risk management) and the cost of human resources, among other factors, invert the economy of staging Randai when translocated to the West.

2. **Surmounting the habituation of audience**

The dilemma here is that it was not enough to presume that, given the right site set-up and stylistic features, audiences would loosen into the festive participatory creatures Randai is used to in Sumatra. Given that the behavioural conventions of Australian theatre audiences are as much socially conditioned as they are a response to the commodification and stratification of culture, I recognised that to crash through the restraint of Western audience etiquette it would be necessary to rethink habits of reception and collusion beyond the narrow associations of theatre.

3. **Surmounting the limitations of specific skills**

Introducing Randai as a new art form, we inevitably met with a lack of *silek*-trained bodies fluent in Randai performance dynamics. Any solution seemed to require retraining the Western body for what seems a counterintuitive performance paradigm and so required performers interested enough in the project to submit to lengthy preparatory workshops. This begs the question of why they would bother. Is there a wider market for skills thus gained? Do the skills enhance or disrupt more marketable orthodox performance skills? This valid question was also put by a blogger in the audience of *Magek Manandin*, the second public performance outcome of the University of Honolulu’s Randai training and production program. (Patti, 2005). The alternative, I suggest, to examining the skills for broader relevance to the stage professions is to build Randai around existing skills, as attempted in the Boldenblee case study.

4. **Surmounting the habituation of co-creators**

Accustomed to valuing differently their role and scope of influence within a creative process, it was important to establish Randai as a totally new set of rules, especially for those compos-
ing directly into the empty framework of a new show. Differing approaches to framing introduced anything from subtle shifts in emphasis to glaring redundancies.

These new rules can either open up opportunities or be seen as restrictive. Except when cultural background provided tacit understanding, established assumptions about authorship and performance conventions frequently disrupted attempts to arrive at the agreed departure point, i.e. the fundamental rules of Randai.

As all these dilemmas cross-reference, I’ve constantly struggled to find a logical order in which to present them. While staging and auditorium set-up interacts symbiotically with audience habituation, both these influence performance style, and are influenced by compositional assumptions. Four chapters examining, if not neatly overlaying, these core issues are sequenced according to performance environment and thence by what are known as the three pillars of Randai - *silek* (movement), *kaba* (story) and *dendang* (song).

**Questions that invite further investigation**

From the problem of habituation of audiences and the limitations of the ‘apparatus’, then, the questions that invite investigation are: What does it take to induce an audience to relinquish their reverence and rove? And what can we do to satisfy an audience who will not?

The dilemma of the limitation of skill invites investigation to establish what values might be gained for the actor who trains in Randai. And from the ‘baulking’ of creatives at the highly schematised blueprint of Randai we can only really ask what assumptions are at work, and then speculate on whether there is a philosophy embedded in Randai that conflicts with the Western temperament and renders the genre unviable as a theatre for a post-modern society - or not.

These seem a lot of questions to ask within one research project. However the nature of creating and mounting a theatre production is such that all these questions must be addressed at least logistically, and surmounted, whether adequately or inadequately, every time, in order to get to an opening night. This is because each production is a wholistic ecological system encompassing all of the above factors - every time. For this reason, as an investigation, this project is best understood in terms of Practice as Research using procedures which roughly correlate to Participant Action Research as outlined in the last chapter.

**Assimilating Frame or Content?**

Our seminal main-house Randai, and the high rotation of schools performances with *Mr Stu-
pid, had helped to anchor our competencies in the genre and anchor the genre on the geographical terrain of our audiences’ imaginations.

Besides the satisfaction of thus reaching audiences entirely new to Randai these projects gave an initial sense of which sectors of the audience were responding. We had the first anecdotal evidence that the format had significant appeal to non-regular theatre-goers, even those more likely to attend popular commercial musicals, despite its alien aesthetic and setting. At the same time it clearly challenged those already subscribing to an avant garde practice, arguably the current theatre orthodoxy, and its gatekeepers (sponsors, producers) traditionally supportive of new forms. This posed two possible frames of inquiry: how to slip past the gatekeepers and find the universal or avant garde in Randai, or how to reach and engage (in local contexts) new popular audiences currently unengaged by the prevailing culture of elite theatre in the West.

These two strands suggested a choice between assimilating the frame or assimilating the content. Assimilating the frame, which could entail engaging with Randai features and ‘feels’ through the distancing and often fragmenting framework of the Western post-modern performance paradigm, may also be approached in a way that seeks to recast the frame with reference to corresponding effects, (i.e. accommodate prevailing conditions with revised strategies to nevertheless solicit the desired audience response), in order to make sense of the content and its inherent structures (the words, songs, cycles and sparring).

Assimilating the content, on the other hand, would be to displace the culturally associated manifestations of expressivity (body, music and poetic languages) with corresponding expressions of the target community’s culture, retaining the framic structural integrity.

Towards a Systematic Enquiry

In this chapter I have demonstrated how the earliest experiences of making and presenting Randai in Australia posed problems in collision with assumptions and cultural habits of infrastructure, audience, performer and co-creator. Despite positive interest in the new dramaturgy its overall design was constantly undermined by resistance in the details.

To engage with this as maker/researcher I constructed two subsequent shows investigating two strands from among the range of possible solutions.

Around these two strands clustered a plethora of logistical, technical and hermeneutical questions all of which concern themselves in some deeper way with the mutual impact of interculturality; how we might collaborate, advertise, teach or seat the audience and what
value might we assume or must we fulfil to engage collaborators, potential audience or trainee performers in this idiom. The next chapter describes the case studies through which these questions were examined.

The Horned Matriarch, Brisbane 1996

Fig. 8 The Brisbane cast of The Horned Matriarch enter in procession led by Larisa Chen and Clare Apelt (right), musicians (left) bringing up the rear behind Megan Collins (gandum) and Kari (saruni). 1996.

Fig. 9 The Horned Matriarch at the Princess Theatre, Brisbane, 1996 during the sung narration (left) and during an explosion of tapuek galempong, (right). [E.G.]


Fig. 10 (Left) The Sydney remount as Story of Reno Niam playing at Addison Rd Community Centre in the open-air. (Right) Young perantau players were equal contributors in the lingkaran alongside adults and professionals in the Sydney cast.
CHAPTER 3 - Case Studies

Moving Towards Australian Neo-Randai

After Matriarch

I have already introduced The Horned Matriarch as the inaugural Randai exploring convention and authenticity in a multicultural theatre context. While the early work exposed difficulties in matching the staging needs and habits of Randai with the resources and habits of Australian theatre and its public, they did not present a strong case for doing so. Randai as an expression of Minangkabau culture appeared relevant to barely six thousand Minangkabau emigrants in Sydney and of only passing curiosity to others. I felt that to assess the potential of the form dramaturgically I had to move away from the ethnographic content and lay bare the essential structure.

Beyond folkloric - The Butterfly Seer

After the first explicitly Sumatran-oriented community works, my first attempts to situate Randai beyond the folkloric, initiated in 1999 (with the support of Playlab Queensland, a playwrights’ support service in Brisbane, and Australia Council for the Arts funding) resulted in the script of The Butterfly Seer. Initially solely a playwriting assignment it was technically written as close to form as possible while thematically progressing my scope from ‘tradition-based’ Asian of specific origin to ‘Pan-Asian-contemporary’. I was aiming more towards extracting the universal from a contemporary literature source. Following on from Story of Reno Nilam, my take on the story problematised the dilemma of translating across irreconcilable cultural viewpoints (reflecting the internal dilemmas of the current project). Moving on from The Horned Matriarch’s binary of family tradition versus the aspirational individual, The Butterfly Seer pitted the worldly against the spiritual, the temporal against the eschatological. Both expressed a tension between honouring the ‘Known’ and embracing the ‘Unknowable’, yet The Butterfly Seer pitched this theme at a more universal level, hoping to engage a global ‘art-house’ audience. This ambition was ultimately to inform its development and production parameters, bringing into question the formal manifestations of its emerging theories and leading to a more ambitious departure from Randai orthodoxy in which I experimented with the validity of reading Randai as a ‘listening theatre’. For this reason it was, therefore, the last of the case studies to negotiate a staged production.

Beyond cultural diversity
Meanwhile another direction, which ultimately manifested in _The Ballad of Boldenblee_, maintained original principles of cultural identification but shifted this identification to the new locality. _The Ballad of Boldenblee_ applied Randai in a community cultural development setting, and attempted to reconstruct its evolutionary process by beginning from locally sourced cultural materials and evolving a comparable hybrid theatre using the Randai framework. It followed an earlier trial, the _Arthurian Randai Project_ (hosted by Valley Artists Inc, in the NSW village of Wollombi), designed to explore connections between Randai and comparative Western techniques such as commedia dell’arte, renaissance sword fighting, and Middle English oral recitation, which due to factors arising from the real life settings, could not be followed through. However I will include a brief mention of this work because it not only shows an effective multi-disciplinary translation of Randai into another coherent, homogenous target culture and period but also because, in outsourcing to a director new to Randai, choice of text and some directing decisions provided quite particular insights which, as a Randai-trained practitioner, I had hitherto taken for granted.

In order to optimise community wide participation I planned the _Arthurian Randai Project_ as a year-long Randai development project hosted by the amateur dramatic group of the rural village of Wollombi, NSW. In content it was inspired first by certain resonances between the period, cultural values and oral narrative style of Malory’s _Morte D’Artur_ and Minangkabau _adaik_ and _seni bakaba_. Secondly by this Australian village setting which, geo-socially, most closely corresponded to the _kampung_ settings where Sumatran Randai thrives. My emphasis was on relating the socio-cultural phenomenon of Randai to equivalent material elements drawn from the mythos of the local community’s dominant culture, in this case, Anglo-Saxon. Despite Sussman and Day’s critique of the use of “Great Narratives” in intercultural work (1997), my aim here was to find those very canonical resonances with the community that Randai normally enjoys.

As my first departure from an initial emphasis underscoring post colonial or contemporary Asian relevance, I elected in this work to prioritise equivalence in the iconic status and domestic familiarity of material (choosing a story from the King Arthur legend for the many crossovers this epic has with the socio-cultural manifestation of _kaba_ and Randai, a topic I must leave to be pursued in other contexts). Although my direct input on this project was constricted by circumstance to preparing the ground by teaching the movement, style, form and basic structural principles, extensive work was done on syncretising a movement vocabulary from Celtic broadsword techniques and _silek_ in a developmental ‘Randai fusion laboratory’ session. After establishing a sword based neo-_galombang_ vocabulary, a setting of two different Randai demonstration performances and an emerging understanding of all aspects of Randai, the
group’s resident director, Wayne Van Keren, then took over the reins and reworked this material for his first Randai production, *Quest Perilous*, adapted from Tennyson’s narrative poem, *Sir Garyth Beaumains*. His shift from Malory to the literary text of Tennyson, his use of multiple lines of tension in blocking composite stage pictures and his decision to sustain character-differentiation throughout galombang sequences, contribute to my analysis of the utility of Randai conventions in Chapters 5 and 6 in particular. The intended community wide input normally typical of this intimate community of socially progressive ‘tree-changers’ was however disrupted by a sense, among non-direct participants, that the West Sumatran cultural underpinnings of the performance style were insurmountably ‘other’. With the collapse of my theory that Randai would automatically make sense in this social environment, I embarked on a retrial in an urban subculture, where I presented Randai with no ethnic references, contextualising it instead in terms of spoken word rhymes, beats and body-percussion.

*The Ballad of Boldenblee* followed the same premise that key elements of Randai exist to some degree in the history of Western performance culture. Hypothesising the possibility of realizing a corresponding form of theatre based on these historical Western elements that might reinvent a Randai-type experience, I initially endeavoured to reapply the same principles to *Boldenblee* within a new social and geographic setting. The resulting process and production, which you can view on DVD#2:BL, will be discussed in more detail below.

**Two Case Studies in Detail**

*(Notes to prepare for viewing video documentation of two public productions)*

The case studies I wish to examine in more detail here have been selected for their contribution to the direction of the research, as indicated in my analysis and findings presented in the following chapters. I have therefore provided more detail below contextualising each project, its creative processes and live presentations, to accompany the attached DVD. As with *Story of Reno Nilam*, they were presented as public performance seasons with public funding in real life settings and these circumstances exerted some influence on the final outcomes and documentation.

**Boldenblee: A case study in transposing Randai as a collective expression of community**

I included *The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam* as a case study earlier mainly because it shows the initial attempt to negotiate the form within an Australian production ‘apparatus’. Producing that work provoked challenges for production, marketing, training and collaborat-
ive process, which I will expand on in Chapter 4. While in the Sydney remount some cross-cultural issues, like physical performance style, were mitigated by the preponderance of Asian and expatriate Minangkabau participants, and an appreciative multicultural context for the work was stimulated by association with New South Wales’ State Festival, *Carnivale*, and the Multicultural Artworkers Alliance (then peak bodies for cultural diversity in the arts, now defunct), I nevertheless wondered whether we had not simply slipped into easy cultural celebration and oriental spectacle. I did not want to lose sight of the question: ‘What value does Randai offer as an artform *sui generis*, to Australian theatre and in relation to which Australian audiences?’ To explore this I present the second case study for consideration.

Loosely, *The Ballad of Boldenblee* was the result of my retriail of ideas first tested in Wollombi on the *Arthurian Randai Project*. Local circumstances influenced the parameters of the project which started its public life as CIRDI RANDAI Youth Arts Project with a media release announcing that this company with no prior activity in the community would be “letting loose a Sumatran performance tradition to merge with local youth art forms such as hip-hop, fire twirling and clowning when they present their first series of workshops at the Palais next month.” With funding from the NSW Ministry for the Arts, RANDAI Youth Arts Project aimed to:

“recruit young writers, rhymesters, musicians, movers, twirlers, performers and other creatives based in the Hunter who’d like to join in putting together an exciting physical theatre spectacle built around the unique art of Randai, a circular music theatre of rhyme, rhythm and martial arts.” (see Appendix #2.3).

The project was presented as an opportunity for young people to “Learn [a variety of physical performance] skills, develop new songs, write rhymes & dialogue, [and] create your own audible costumes” as well as to become “involved brainstorming and coordinating the nuts and bolts”.

Describing the “grass roots tradition [which is performed] in a circle like capoeira” as having a very “potent and immediate” audience effect, our media release claimed “The forthcoming project... will be the first time Randai, circus and hip-hop have been brought together” and goes on to draw the connection between the original improvised duelling *pantun* and ‘MC’ battles of hip-hop culture: “The use of movement styled on competitive combat tournaments finds a strong counterpart in the break-dance tradition.” In it I also stressed my intention to “expand all the physical and percussive elements beyond their original forms [by] incorporating junk percussion, tap-dance, an awesome variety of movement, spoken word, visual effects and songs.” Clearly from the outset the aim was to transcend folkloric exoticism and energise a self-discovery of Randai interconnections between existing impulses.
'Grunge-Randai'

This workshop program, initially promising a “Slap-Hop-Rap-­Tap-­Randai for a Capo-­Era”, eventually manifested in the scripted production of *The Ballad of Boldenblee*, a fire-twirling, aerial ‘grunge-Randai’ presented in an old railway workshop on the Newcastle, NSW, foreshore development owned by the Honeysuckle Development Corporation in 2004. Being based in a down-at-­heel, regional industrial city, it was necessary to target a quite specific demographic that could be recruited through local networks, public street media and word of mouth. This situation was automatically more selective than operating visibly within a whole small community as we had in the ‘Arthurian Randai’. The target range was youth to young adults, after the Minangkabau model, and I expected some drama undergraduates from the university, unemployed youth and angry older teens, with workshop skills offered to appeal to this age range. Actual participation was significantly broader, at one point ranging from six to fifty-six year olds. In accordance with the project’s community arts emphasis promoting an ethos of participant empowerment, I undertook to be much more responsive to participant direction. Inevitably, compared to the Arthurian Project, the radically different participant demographics and social context in the Newcastle project resulted in vastly dissimilar solutions for often similar problems despite starting with the same basic agenda.

*The Ballad of Boldenblee* was therefore a two-phased project beginning with a stand-alone public workshop series (funded by the Community Cultural Development Unit of the NSW Government Ministry for the Arts), from which a core group stayed on through a creative development period, and into preparation and presentation of a preview performance and six public showings over two weekends (the latter funded by the Performing Arts Board of the same Ministry). The resulting show was devised and performed by the almost entirely amateur group using locally pertinent skills, story and creative content.

*The process: aims, recruitment & research*

Holding true to the fact that Randai evolved from pre-existing forms with strong iconic relevance to its community, the call-out aimed to attract youth engaged in existing activities which might be shared to establish a common locally relevant skills base, rather than putting Minangkabau cultural skills centre stage.

With a focus on matching popular practitioners in relevant fields with the young people who identified with these skills as an expression of their own subculture, the skills workshops were therefore as much about recruiting and researching as delivering skills and involved a degree of trial and error resulting in more eclecticism than originally intended.
These skills would then be combined in the manner of Randai to tell a story that would likewise arise from the experiences and aspirations of the participants.

We particularly targeted those involved in hip-hop activities centred around the Palais Youth Venue where we held our rehearsals. This was not an insincere attempt to appeal to young people, but rather because of strong parallels between the range of manifestations of hip-hop culture and the skills comprising Randai, such as the extemporised, rhyming declamations of rappers, the rhythmic emphasis especially in beat-boxing vocalisations, the martial arts influence in break-dance, the competitive street tournament ethos in its mode of practice, even extending to the way communities gather as audience/participants.

Other skills we sought out or aimed to cultivate - such as circus, clowning, spoken word, tap dance - I saw as possible familiar substitutes for Randai elements (tap might replace tapuak for example) that would have some currency among the local community. In reality, however, I was to be guided by the availability of tutors and the creative input of participants.

While Rapping started out provided a model for a rhymed, rhetorical declamatory debate form, for example, the hip-hop agenda was diffused to the point that we did not follow through using backing beat in dialogue and fire-twirling, by popular demand, displaced breakdance as our silek substitute.

Recruitment flyers on campus, in youth arts venues, in the street and even in high schools (due to the demographic of our 15 year old publicist with street press connections) sought out young people with (1) existing skills, interests and motivations, (2) verbal art forms such as rapping and poetry, and (3) youth input in steering and managing the project. Aiming to attract spoken-word artists, for example, one recruitment strategy was to stage a Poetry Slam with prizes, in collaboration with Citizens of Language, a Sydney based performance poetry collective. Despite these efforts no skilled rappers were able to become a significant part of the project as they saw themselves as endowed with a commodifiable asset (A talented nine year old offered to tutor the breakdance routines for a fee but was not interested in being a participant.)

The objectives of this project may be summarised as follows:

To incline the perception of Randai towards that of a grass-roots tradition valuable as an inclusive means of expression where “the effect for the audience is potent and immediate” (CIRDI Media Release, Appendix #2.3).

To relate the conventions of Randai to expressions of local cultural relevance. (gurindam to rap, silek to breakdance)
CHAPTER 3 - Case Studies

To extend the physical and percussive elements beyond their original forms, (using tap, junk percussion, beatboxing, circus.)
To allow the tension between frame and extended possibility to give rise to creative input by participants so that the result could be fully evolved within and from the participating culture.

The Creative Process

Much of the physical material arose from skills workshops, weeded out and refined according to competencies across the group. All stage combat was developed by pyro-artists, and aerial scenes were written and choreographed by the aerialists and their rigger.

It was intended that story material would initially arise from the spoken word workshop sessions, but these were outsourced to a tutor who focussed on non-epic quirky, realist material which unfortunately did little to further the aims of the project. A medieval Saxon romance already vetted for suitability, The Tale of Sir Gowther, was used as focal material in the rhymes’n’beats sessions, but was voted out at the eleventh hour in favour of a contemporary fairytale synopsis proffered by participant, Joel Teasdale.

Like the pidato tradition of invoking litanies that reference great symbolic sites of Minangkabau history, the synopsis was constructed around several motifs that highlighted Newcastle’s local socio-geographic features. These centred around a notorious boulder, ‘The Rock’, that had literally fallen from a cliff-face onto the road blocking off a coastal thoroughfare for years (Norrie, 2002; Keen, 2004), the so-called ‘cardboard hill’, a once natural grass tobogganing site that had since been acquired by Honeysuckle Development Corporation and filled in for development and in a minor reference, the iconic children’s seaside bathing pool (‘Canoe Pool’) at Newcastle’s foreshore which had once featured a mosaic map of the world on its tiled floor (see Illustration 3).

Even the name, Munnysuckle, (on diplomatic advice performed as Munny-Sucker), derived from a widespread euphemism for a key development company in the region (which also happened to sponsor our use of their venue, acknowledged by the so-named character in Round 9). The Metal-men were inspired by a public artwork that stands on Newcastle’s main thoroughfare, Hunter Street, consisting of a life-size representation of a convict chain gang. Four cast bronze convicts stand on the pavement in a ring facing inwards. Chains from wrist to wrist close the circle, while a fifth stands a little apart. Referencing forbears, heritage and a sense of place cognisant with similar themes in Randai literature, the spatial configuration also resonated with the performed circle (see Illustration 4).
The inclusion of motifs of mentorships and initiations were intended to combine the mystical *rantau* journeys such as found in *Anggun Nan Tungga*, (Phillips, 1981) or *Umbulik Mudo* (Pauka, Askovic and Polk, 2003) where self knowledge, and coming of wisdom themes are played out within a wrapping of adventure and martial displays, with a more contemporary ethos of the female action heroine - especially given our significantly strongest actor was female lead, Tegan Howell.

**Writing**

*Song melodies* were composed (or appropriated and adapted) by some members of the cast and dialogue was built on drafts written by each performer for themselves. So while the objective was to follow a Rap style in writing, one actor (playing lead villain, Munnsuckle) chose to model dialogue on Death Metal lyrics which suited his character. Others wrote closer to a naturalistic style and then vamped these up into a more heightened style based on inherent rhythms, while certain scenes called for a more formal epic style, such as the reawakened *Metal Men* mentors. The focus was primarily on sharing the creative process, so in the short time available stylistic variations were of less concern than qualities of declamation, non-naturalism, and rhythm.

These stylistic variations combined with individual competencies resulted in a range of performances not all of which fully embodied the intentions of the project. In Round 1 it is worth noting the hybrid Rap-Randai dialogue delivery style embodied by the actor in the title role, Tegan Howell, who had prior exposure to neo-Randai through involvement in other projects of mine, for it comes probably closest to our stylistic aspirations.

From the opposite end of the epic spectrum is the quirky Round 3 opening of realistic phone dialogue, a cast-driven whimsical inclusion which nevertheless may be compared to the comic banter between themselves or audience of bandit or clown characters, in that it sees a character of contestable integrity dropping away momentarily from the formality of *gurindam*-based dialogue.

This was not the only manifestation of the tension between form and function. The ‘Freedom Song’ being neither *gurindam* nor scene as it was written as a regular 3-part song in direct, first person voice, was inserted after Round 8 as a ‘special episode’ unto itself, breaking the convention of alternating modalities, as it didn’t quite fit into the Randai schemata. As the treasured contribution of one novice participant, however, cast consensus forced me to relax my editorial rigour to find instead, a purely aesthetic solution. The use of the *Basl* masks was an attempt to suggest a corps of innocents or *tabulae rasae* that was distinct from the fram-
ing chorus of the lingkaran, for here they assume an identity as escaping slave children (see figure 12).

The Balladeers also transgress their frame, crossing into story to identify with the slaves by participating in singing 'their' song. This partisan identification is not typical of the Randai biduan but owes more to the ambiguity of frame which is attractive to contemporary Western audiences. (I used a similar device in The Butterfly Seer, merging Biduan and Stranger - see case study 2).

In other variations the principles of innovation were much more closely predicated on Randai conventions - extending rather than disrupting them. For example, arising from shared circus workshops we used a multi-bodied acro-balance to create the human rock in such a way that it could be dynamic (self manifesting), real (three-dimensional and concrete), easily disassembled, and have containing properties such that one player in a Randai-typical lingkaran convergence, might be masked within to emerge spectacularly from it in this case clear into the sky by virtue of our aerial technicians, as the Dragon of Cosmic Breath.

This Rock device was our main divergence from the established spatial convention and retained Randai thematics like unity (with the whole lingkaran involved), circularity (here suggesting the spheroidal Rock), and centrality (that is it reinforced the geometry of the circle by clustering at the centre point). The drummer who shatters the rock with her drumming utilised a well-worn Randai convention of external circumnavigation, and reinforced the Randai percussive rhythmic focus even while bringing this momentarily into the narrative fabric (see figure 13).

Deviations and ambiguities in the last moments comment on the conventions as established through the rest of the formulaic presentation. The final song (Song 10) summing up the story and returning us to the extra-diegetical frame was sung up on the pier. This staging deviation balanced the use of space and gained separation from the battle carnage where the slain body of the last scene also transgressed its scenic frame by staying on the ground during the previous song. By differentiating from the usual ground position of the singers the shift to the pier underscored the end of the show. More symbolically, the tower, domain of evil intent within the narrative, having in diegetic mode been stormed by forces of good (see figure 16), is finally, by the presence of the storytellers, neutralised by the shift from the diegetic to the extra-diegetic level. These plays on the formal convention were possible to the degree that they were predicated on the establishment of a rule or pattern in the first place.

A final example of this is a device aimed at destabilising the frame after the final exit. Right
at the end, barely visible in the video, is a non-randai device that served to destabilise the closure of the story frame. After the formal protocols of ending and as the lights reach almost to black on the exiting players, the vision of the goblin, Mahadoth, scurrying golem-like across the shadowy ground after them, just beyond reach of the triumphant heroine’s skirt hem, is similar to devices used in horror genres seeding the possibility for a sequel by, first, seemingly reaping the satisfaction of unambiguous triumph of good over evil on the one hand, yet destabilising this on the other hand, only outside the main frame such as during or after the credits. It is the erstwhile lack of ambiguity in following a very formal framework that allows this subversion to have such a significant impact.

Please view the video, DVD#2:(BL) accompanied by the script and notes in Appendix #2.1.
Illustration 1  Local and historical landmarks underpinning the narrative: (Left) The seaside 'canoe pool' showing its original concrete relief map-of-the-world feature [courtesy NLN]. (Centre and Right) A fragment of a contemporary article (with cartoon accompaniment) concerning 'The Rock'. [NH].

Illustration 2  The Metalmen portrayed by members of the lingkaran (standing), enclose the circle with chains in emulation of the public artwork that inspired this episode [AB]. Inset: Evolution 1 by Sandra Minter-Caldwell 1998 at the Hunter St mall. [Photo: Karen Hayes, NCC]
The Ballad of Boldenblee

Fig. 11. *The Ballad of Boldenblee*, at The Boilershop, Honeysuckle Developments, Newcastle 2004. [A.B.]

Fig. 12. Using Basl masks to underscore aspects of the collective identity of the *lingkaran*, which assumed a narrative role as a slave uprising in the Freedom Song episode. [B.F., A.B.]
Fig. 13. Portraying The Rock as an acro-balance, circumnavigated by Slave Drummer, Beat'n'feet (Jesse Jackson). [AB]

Fig. 14. The Boldenblee lingkaran using Poi, a Maori-derived combat technique popular in the fire-twirling movement palette but used here with glow LEDs for safety hazard reasons. (Right) Munny-Suckle (Sam Taylor) wielding fire-poi within a scene of heated dialogue overpowers Boldenblee after an unbalanced physical struggle.

Fig. 15. (Below) Experienced fire-twirlers Andrew Matsen, left, and Taylor commanded the use of fire in combat scenes, and as with silek, the distribution of this competency influenced casting and writing.
Fig. 16. (Below left) Counterweight ropes at the ready, Munny-Suckle (Sam Taylor) prepares to brand his captive bride, Boldenblee (Howell) before he is thrust from the pier by the Dragon of Cosmic Breath (Todd Kilby). (Lower left) Winding their lines, Todd Kilby and Aleksandra Vuckovic prepare to transform a classic silek scene into an aerial display as Poppyfresh and the Goblin, Mahadoth respectively.

Fig. 17. (Right top) Howell faces off against the incendiary swordsmanship of Metalman and pyrotechnics tutor, Andrew Matsen. (Lower right) Exploiting the vertical dimension in yet a third way, 13 year old actor Zac Ralph mounts an acro-balance based by 17 year old Kilby, as Beryhuckle anticipating a joy-flight aboard Poppyfresh. [AB]
CHAPTER 3 - Case Studies

The Butterfly Seer: A case study in reinterpreting Randai for a contemporary theatre audience

The policy of group ownership, which brought to The Ballad of Boldenblee a typically robust eclecticism of popular theatre, certainly demonstrated one effective way of making Randai work within a diverse urban Australian community. What propelled me on to a third case study production, however, was that I didn’t feel I had established with any clarity the way in which the Randai actor’s performance style itself was being received, due mainly to an inexperienced cast. Audibility issues often obstructed the audience’s full engagement. I wanted to take what I had learned into a more professional environment with control over performance style and acoustic conditions. In the final case study, therefore, I shifted the variables to the spatial dimension, retaining sequential form, of course, but with a much more accurate delivery style. Where interventions were necessary they were exercised in the way that we dealt with professional conditions such as non-circular space and cast size, opening the way for a more radical distillation of the idea of Randai as a ‘listening theatre’.

The Butterfly Seer was presented as a Chamber Opera at Carlton Courthouse Theatre in 2006 and may be viewed on appended DVD#3:AYBS. The production you will view, the first public season of The Butterfly Seer presented in a form adapted for a non-circular stage, came after three earlier public readings - at La Boite Theatre and Playlab Writers’ Weekend Workshop (both 1999) and at Australian National Playwrights’ Conference (ANPC), Adelaide, 2004, the first two of which were moved readings using a fully circular Randai presentation style. Industry feedback from some of these early readings (conducted prior to both the Arthurian and Boldenblee projects) posed questions about the validity of Randai conventions for a Western audience, prompting the bulk of this research. I particularly pursued this script to public production in the hope of answering questions raised in these forums. However as emergent research evolves, the original questions had ‘thickened’ in Geertz’s sense (Shankman, 1984) and the final result demonstrated answers to questions I was barely conscious of when I began. The main function of this third case study is to problematise my efforts to reframe Randai to sit with Western “high theatre” assumptions.

Chronologically, the Butterfly Seer project straddles the Boldenblee project. It was first conceived out of the climate of the 1990s when cultural diversity was still “interesting” and is less a departure from interculturalism than The Ballad of Boldenblee. It is however more of a radical departure in terms of staging where, in pursuing the assumption of assimilation into a formal theatre milieu, I radically recast the frames to interpret end-staged theatre architecture and high theatre expectations on Randai’s terms.
I wrote the script in 1999 as a structurally formal Randai text. It was drawn from a passage in The Satanic Verses by Salmon Rushdie about Ayesha, a self-proclaimed Muslim charismatic. A discussion of the process of creating the script may be found in Australasian Drama Studies (Leonard, Mahjoeddin & Sherriff, 2004) and on this production of it in Suara Bendhe (Mahjoeddin, 2006 and Sherriff, 2006). For the purpose of this discussion I want to focus on staging choices and the impact of the Western mindset on the convention of frames in Randai.

A Listening Theatre - Aurality as a staging approach

This production of the script was an attempt to find an approach to presenting Randai in a new way that, firstly, retains Randai principles in its response to the limitations of an orthodox venue and, secondly, that is more astute in how it cues the audience to anticipate the dramaturgical style in which it is rendered. On this basis I attempted to highlight the aural dimension and remove the expectations of 'acting as being', to allow the story to take centre stage.

It was presented by La Mama at the Carlton Courthouse Theatre, a converted rectangular heritage courtroom with a retro-fitted bank of steeply raked rows seating eighty, and a floor-level performance area. Fixed doors led to the foyer and dressing room and a trapdoor at the top rear of the auditorium was used as an alternative exit when passing through the audience (see figure 26). I kept the open interface between audience and actors' space, choosing not to hide the architecture or 'artificialise' the stage using enclosing tabs or stage dressing other than those necessary to provide shadow and projection surfaces.

In several ways the work had to be re-imagined for presentation in this end-stage venue. Logistics and layout prevented the actors from consistently remaining onstage, which I had wanted in order to counter-balance the effects of the forced audience-player separation. Instead we had to surrender to the convention of off-stage as the neutral norm, losing an important unifying element of Randai - an example of one departure from form leading to a follow-on concession.

I set up the stage as if for a musical concert to be listened to, placing the singer centre stage with a music stand. Song text was projected several stanzas at a time, to retain a sense of unity consistent with exposing the text's centrality, as if the singer were reading from the same page. Keeping the potential for high production values and industry conditions in mind (to fit options for remounts and touring) meant constraining cast to an ensemble size affordable at professional rates.
Though originally written for six to eight actors plus lingkaran, singer and musicians, potentially a cast of sixteen or so, in this chamber version several devices reduced this to the available nine - four actors plus singer and musicians. Aside from normal doubling of minor roles, all musicians voiced crowd scenes and some (fortuitously endowed with martial arts skills) played the fundamentalist Jihadi.

In Episode 12 the multiple voices of the press were played by one actor, and certain characters (Khadija, Mohamad Din, and the Bandits) manifested only as pre-recorded voice-overs. The onstage character generally played to these as if they were positioned behind the audience, consistent with other scenes where live actors occupied such positions, in both cases reinforcing the listening principle (see figures 18 and 20).

Episode 17 had the Biduan step into the diegetical mode to play Stranger. I hoped such devices would reinforce a Brechtian ‘alienation’ rather than merely blur the respective functions. The ambiguity implied by the Stranger/Narrator connection was also intended to add a layer of speculation that the narrator may be implicated in the story itself, in a bid to appeal to the literate audience.

The reduced cast was also augmented by puppets. Although introducing puppets and object manipulation was intended initially to ‘alienate’ naturalistic expectations of the human body in ‘character’, in the end, after the departure of our main puppeteer, this medium was retained only as a practical design solution primarily to solve the dilemma of the animal characters - the bull and the butterflies.

Significantly we omitted the spatial frame of the lingkaran circle, thus omitting the visual spectacle of dance that would normally accompany songs, recasting the zone it encloses to include the audience. This cut out the major unifying circle with its galombang tapuak dances, except in the final song where we included a lingkaran movement sequence to close the whole event, creating a balanced pair with the opening song. Blackouts were used between scenes instead of lingkaran convergences, and musicians took responsibility for calling out each scene, which they did with a vocal yelp followed by a twenty second stock tapuak or percussive motif (using voice, hand clapping and thigh clapping as their seated playing position limited the use of galembong pants). The same motif was used for every bridge segueing each song to scene and scene back to song. As we did not set galombang movement routines to the songs I did not pursue the usual tapuak breaks between strophes.

Frequently scenes were performed in circumstances that occluded the audience’s visual access - in the dark, in amidst or behind the audience, behind shadow screens - to emphasise
the aural dimension and trigger focussed listening. “Whereas we see things ‘out there’, the experience of sound, like touch and taste, is internal, ‘in here’”, note Barrett and Bolt (2007). Cognisant with their observation that “Sound penetrates us, engaging us on a bodily level in ways fundamentally different from the visual” (Ibid.) our aurally focussed staging also aimed to reclaim a sense of visceral proximity.

Meaning to mitigate the loss of the lingkaran, this strategy also allowed us to bodily surround the audience so that sound would be felt to proceed from a shared space. This might be understood through reference to Walter Ong’s notion of three-dimensional, non-directional ‘felt’ sound, where we allowed the sound itself, without the lingkaran, to embody the dome of sound (Ong’s ‘sphere’). Ong’s idea is that acoustic space extends outwards from a person in the form of a sphere that dynamically “takes shape around them in the very process of their auditory engagement with one another and with the environment” (Ong, cited in Ingold, 2000, p. 250).

Framing The Butterfly Seer - Music, space and protocols

We did not begin with a procession or pidato (speech) to frame the work, using instead the familiar framing of theatre convention (program, foyer, etc). An opening apology was retained and performed by visiting Sumatran guest artist and long time collaborator, Admiral in Bahasa Minang as if for the benefit of the bilingual company rather than the audience. It also helped set it apart from the main fare. Without opening up a whole debate about interculturalism and orientalism, my rationale was that it was an authentic expression from the heart and tongue of our Minangkabau mentor and teacher, to introduce and honour the work in his usual way. Like the aliran silek, it established the ground from which we drew inspiration. The information it conveyed, if not the poetry, was repeated in the program.

The venue itself provided a concrete frame associated with high-art low budget theatre; the support from La Mama geared audience expectations for earnest, new work. Fixed seating and a change of floor level defined the stage so the lingkaran was not necessary to isolate the performance area. In its temporal function - bracketing each sung verse - musicians temporally framed the episodes with tapuak. Its inclusive, identifying functions were redistributed to the audience themselves by shifting the circle out to include the auditorium. This expanded ‘inclusive zone’ was communicated by actors working behind and within the audience.

Stepping up from the reliance in earlier projects on found folk melodies and later group devised songs, this score (funded by the Australia Council for the Arts) was a wholistic, through-composed commission of equal or greater status than the text itself. As a new composition by
Adrian Sherriff, a jazz performer and composer of some standing, the score would influence the overall pitch of this production as a contemporary crafted Australian artwork with a unified and unique aesthetic vision fusing Asian and Western music and narrative elements. It was not commissioned until well after the text was finalised. The brief included some six weeks in Sumatra during which the composer immersed himself in the music culture and was able to observe Randai in situ. The score brought influences from Jazz and Western music together with Dendang Minang, Karnatic Indian ragas, Japanese shakuhachi and other musical motifs in an original score.

The song texts were written with conventional framing in mind, but with the intention of being blended with Western sensibilities. The impact of musical decisions on framing is discussed in Chapter 7. Without the lingkaran, the visual, aural and rhythmic variations of the galombang were reduced to a brief and always identical short tapuak burst performed by the musicians. Loss of embellishment was made up for in accessibility. Rendra Freestone reached across the audience/player divide by teaching, just after interval, the established tapuak convention to the audience.

Blurring the frame selectively as an exception to convention, we also introduced diegetical action into the song frame by having the pilgrims progress their journey throughout a non-narrative song, ‘Ansuri’, a well known Islamic song of praise which was used elsewhere with gurindam lyrics. More detailed discussion of variations and their implications is found in relevant chapters.

The script, including full text, songs and a summary of scenes, is attached as Appendix #3.1. Please view the DVD#3:AYBS before proceeding to the discussion that follows.

Case Studies as a progression from convention to reinvention

I set out in Case Study One to see how Randai, in its typical form, would go down with Australian audiences, and I presumed the proper platform was an independent theatre pitched at an audience attuned to the exploration of cultural diversity. This process answered fundamental questions about the mechanics of the form, but raised new questions about how production assumptions and industry infrastructure effect the performance outcomes, while, on the rehearsal floor, I found Western actors resisting from a clash of body culture and their assumptions about the player-audience transaction.

The two subsequent case studies examine how Randai might respond to these Australian cultural assumption. Boldenblee abandons attempts to fit Western bodies to Eastern forms and
instead strips Randai’s structural elements of their ethnic particularities in order to render up the frame free of exoticising associations. By re-associating the forms with familiar urban street art-forms like fire-twirling and hip-hop, case study 3 demonstrated the translatability of Randai’s formal structure, highlighting in the process strategies for inclusive collaboration, co-writing and community ownership.

Investigating what interventions would be necessary to successfully hybridise Randai principles with the values of high art culture, *The Butterfly Seer* took shape through rethinking how Randai’s distinguishing values may be formally manifested in a more classic venue format. I altered the balance of elements in an attempt to draw the audience unwittingly into a more Randai-typical response. The collaborative approach highlighted differences in notions of creativity, narrativity and aesthetic priorities.

What these case studies showed was a range of resistances to the conventions of Randai. It is not possible to identify each insight with one particular case study. Through incidents in the rehearsal room, reflection and refinement between projects, discussion and observation in the field of origin, and many repeated approaches to the same issue from different pathways, certain recognisable patterns emerged. Resistance to circularity, resistance to the ebb or the emptiness part of a cycle, resistance to repetitivity and resistance to discomfort (which could be restated as ‘audience aliveness’) were chief among others that at first seem unrelated.

Where the resistances prevailed I felt they interfered with truly testing the validity of the form with an audience. *Boldenblee* in 2004 provided significant data at the level of process but if my question was “how can Randai read to an Australian audience?” it was unclear against what expectations audiences measured their responses. So I pursued one last case study staging the existing script of *The Butterfly Seer*, with a professional, ‘Randai-experienced’ cast. Working from a baseline of more reliable Randai performance methods would enable me to confidently address the sector which had raised the most articulate concerns. Yet here again, with new variables such as a through-composed score and a complex staging approach, the hybridity we aimed for raised questions about enculturated responses to musicality and the balance of texture, visuality and aurality.

The following chapters tease out the issues as they arise within four different areas of practice - the role of the presentational environment (Chapter 4), the way *silek* vocabulary is embodied, and how the body moves within the performance circle (Chapter 5), the textual language and writing process (Chapter 6) and the way vocal timbre and musical structure support or resist the storytelling (Chapter 7).
In Chapter 8 I will use these findings to refine an understanding of Randai based on its principles and attempt to place this within a broader spectrum of world theatre that should demonstrate the accessibility of its underlying philosophy while acknowledging its otherness as a matter of lifestyle, community and historical differences rather than simply matters of ethnicity. I demonstrate this with reference to three popular performance forms that could be argued share a comparable platform with Randai.

Illustration 3: The main stage picture of *The Butterfly Seer* with musicians visually dominant and singer centre stage. Melbourne 2006. [M.R.]
Fig. 18. (Left) Working the expanded audience circle: Mirza Saeed (Wayne Van Keren, top), standing halfway up the aisle stairs, addresses Ayesha (Tegan Howell, lower left) who speaks from the ground level stage under a cloud of butterflies.

Fig. 19. (Right) Musicians asked to multitask: Admiral sings the opening song (top). (Lower right) Musicians with silek skills double as Kommando Jihad. [M.R.]

Fig. 20. The Bull puppet manipulated by puppeteer, Carol Chong (far left) and by the clown himself (far right). Working the shadow screen, (centre left) and butterflies manipulated by Elizabeth Sisson, (centre right). [M.R.]
Venues and Audiences

Fig. 21. (Left) The unique roofed ‘Medan Nan Bapaneh’ in Taman Budaya Padang. (Centre) A typical public gathering space during a daytime rehearsal of Randai Nan Si Jundai, Kampung Kapal, Branang, Malaysia. [I.U.]. (Right) A similar space fitted out for a kampung performance, with audience pressed up against a circular railing at rear. This image also shows use of literal props (a live caged bird) and incidental music played in the foreground.

Fig. 22. Crowds queuing on the Wheeler Place square in Newcastle, for a pop concert at a nearby theatre (left) and milling media personnel at a NSW festival launch (right) both spontaneously reconfigure to form a natural Medan Nan Bapaneh in their dynamic response to the entry of Randai players (from The Ballad of Boldenblee and the Story of Reno Nilam casts respectively) forming a tight-knit yet dynamic donut-shaped audience.

Fig. 23. School audiences, some standing on desks and chairs, tightly surround, and define, the Randai circle in lieu of a mediating lingkaran in the ‘randai singkek’, Mr Stupid, (1992).

Fig. 24. The Story of Reno Nilam played it’s final week at Bondi Beach Pavilion’s open-air amphitheatre (left) where a satay kiosk (centre) and additional cafe seating, set up within the ‘skene’ (behind the rear roller door) drew audience from the fixed frontal seating toward the back of the ‘orkestra’.
CHAPTER 4 - New Forms in Old Spaces

Introduction to the Problem of Staging

The foundational point of difference between Randai and Western theatre (at least that of the last few hundred years) is its manner of staging. Despite avant-garde experiments with arena theatre, theatre-in-the-round and semi-circular staging, the fully circular stage in Randai consistently caused issues in production in the Western context. The frame of the stage denotes more than a spatial arrangement. It encompasses the fundamental interface between player and public. Audience reception pivots upon this interface, suggesting that making sense of the performance itself would depend significantly upon getting the staging right. Because Randai does not presume the use of a devoted architectural frame that materially isolates the performance from real life, the idea of appropriate staging must be taken to extend to appropriate site design. However neither does it stop at configuration of the audience and playing area. Throughout the case studies I worked on trying to understand how technical production values alter the reading of Randai elements. Only much later did I finally distil these ideas into the realisation that in fact an important difference is that the frame in Randai is most often contiguous with the performance, wherein performed devices function in place of the technical or architectural framing devices we are used to in the more fixed theatre of the West.

Manifesting early on and most frequently, I was especially prompted to troubleshoot these logistical concerns in response to resistance met with in the ‘mainstream’ industry. I use the term in a broad sense conscious that, beside an older ‘mainstream’ of 19th century realist and popular theatre that still prevails in the commercial marketplace, there are now several different layers of ‘mainstream’, as once avant-garde devices of modernism are taken up into a contemporary orthodoxy, without fully displacing earlier ‘mainstreams’. Here I refer specifically to representatives of the funded arts sector which splits its allegiance between the flagship State theatre companies and an increasingly mainstream albeit more stylistically courageous secondary tier of professional companies such as the Belvoir St, La Boite or Malthouse theatres in Australia.

Despite a diversity of objectives though, many of the culturally inflected values that prevail within the Australian industry apply across the board, either by default, or even embedded in a concerted effort to invert them, because of the wider social context that creates and sustains them.
CHAPTER 4 - New Forms in Old Spaces

While Randai is traditionally a highly flexible, highly transportable and low production-value enterprise in Sumatra, in the new environment a new set of parameters had to be negotiated. For one thing, as soon as a government agency funds the project it is pitched into a professional industry where labour costs and conditions, industry practice, risk management, public equity and marketing squeeze the vision toward more familiar formats; the kind that can survive in our economic conditions and within our existing cultural frameworks.

Frequently responses to Randai from otherwise enthusiastic production houses were framed in terms of perception and marketing. The concern that it doesn’t fit conceptually into the company’s regular season and uncertainty about how it would be marketed suggest that habits of programming set up expectations in a subscriber base that favour familiar frameworks; or that marketing relies on established language codes to communicate a familiar order of known products. We can’t sell something people have never heard of and we can’t service something with custom production requirements.

Despite calls throughout the 1990s for new theatrical forms, exemplified by Aubrey Mellor’s keynote address at the 1999 Playlab workshop weekend (where *The Butterfly Seer* was first showcased) (Mellor 1999), existing infrastructure really continued to support prevailing paradigms, the normative only subverted at considerable cost. This meant closely appraising the pitch of each production to divine which mechanisms might be kept or adapted and which relinquished.

For example, despite the conceptual simplicity of Randai staging, we found customising a traditional-style venue was too costly to be justified by either the target audience, the optimum playing capacity or the presentational style. On top of a perceived necessity to duplicate in-house facilities (ticketing systems, rigging from the ground up, wet weather accommodations and 3-phase power) escalating aversion to public safety risk in the mid 1990s ensured the cost to fit out and insure an empty plot or flexible civic space (a more appropriate Randai site) easily outweighed the rental of an orthodox pre-rigged theatre, inverting values that pertain to the *kampung* village context where purpose-built indoor venues would have been much more out of reach. Inevitable compromise compelled me to dissect the values of conventional Randai performance sites to determine the justifiable or workable alternatives.

*The right venue*

Traditional purpose-built Randai venues, according to Minangkabau ethnomusicologist Zahara Kamal (personal comm. 1989, 1995) were open-air wok-shaped earthworks of which I’m informed none of the originals are extant. They were known as ‘*Medan nan Bapaneh*’, literally
‘hot plain’ (as in, level field) suggesting the English vernacular, “hot-spot” which partially shares some functional connotations with the ’agora’, market plaza or civic square of ancient Greece, as a ‘cultural hub’. It more strongly hints at resonances with the Plen or Platea of medieval theatre.

From Kamal and Zulkifli’s descriptions, surrounding a flat playing space of six to eight metres diameter rose an encircling mound of earth on which, crouching or standing without individualised ‘seating portions’, an informal audience gathered to surround and overlook the central activity.

M Anis Mohd Nor, however, mentions only the later built structures of the same name initially erected under Governor Azwar Anas during his 1980s reassertion of regional identity (Nor 1984). These facilities are more like small full-circle amphitheatres of tiered cement seating. The one at Taman Budaya Padang, the capital’s cultural centre comprising a cluster of built performance stages and rehearsal rooms, is by contrast shallow, more open sided, with an elaborate overhead structure reminiscent of a Javanese pendopo except that it is the seating area rather than the playing area that is raised (see figure 21). If my informants are to be believed both may be understood as elaborations of the earlier type of crude earthworks arena which did not survive periods of civil unrest in the 50’s and early 60’s (Kamal op. cit.). In either form, the Medan nan Bapaneh serves local communities as their site for civic as well as cultural assembly.

An equivalent site is surprisingly hard to find in Australia whether searching purpose-built performance venues or parks and gardens (respectively disrupted by a notional back wall or a central ornamental feature). Theatres-in-the-round work with a different kind of focussed intimacy and an entrapped, highly concentrated audience, and amphitheatres, a compromise on the full surround, classically work on a much larger scale. Both rely on outward projection albeit at two ends of the dimensional, and thus stylistic, spectrum. As the perfect Randai venue, the Medan-nan-Bapaneh lies between these in scale, with more relaxed seating encouraging audience circulation, and accommodating inward rather than outward focus. But while the perfect venue is hard to find in both countries now, the currently typical setup in Sumatra relies significantly on audience and community collusion to replicate its effect. Whether placed in a car-park or on a proscenium stage a Minang audience will often transform the space with their own habituated behaviour (Latrell 2000), for example by encircling and encroaching at the edge of the performance area.

I should have realised at this point that the frame was all along designed intrinsically to be a flexible and spontaneously performable concept. The Medan Nan Bapaneh as purpose-built
venue is more a convenience than a necessity; merely a public ground that would be animated and shaped by the activity enacted within it.

The habit to surround and circulate

Burdell’s review articulated the dilemma that, without the habit of familiarity, Randai-suited audience behaviour must be strategically engineered to redirect or override already binding conventions of theatre consumption. *Randai* feeds off audiences that gather close round a performance in a bustling, informal mode, little concerned with personal space, fully surrounding the site as pedestrians might gather around a busker or street event of interest. In Minang culture there is no courtesy space between the front (innermost) ‘row’ of audience and the *lingkaran* or ring of *galombang* performers. Audiences, there, encircle by instinct.

In contrast with our formal tendency toward seated rows, this spontaneous encircling kind of public feels free to push forward for better vantage points, move back to take a break, wander to another position or to avail themselves of refreshments ad hoc. As with watching a street performer they feel no pressure to commit for the long haul and no automatic rights to sightlines. When they’ve had enough they leave.

The question is, ought we replicate these settings (and if so, how?), or ought we, rather, explore the impact of the Australian-preferred seating mode on Randai? How do we cultivate a Randai-savvy audience and what implications for performance success arise from the different social approaches to performance?

A culture of personal space

One of the factors differentiating these styles of viewing is the assumption of an audience demand for comfort and ‘territory’: the auditorium Ironically as personal, passive, private space. In these early experiments we had already attempted several approaches to balancing the expectations of theatre audiences with the use of site set-up to encourage Randai-fitting responses, noting the impact of these on reception, and therefore interpretation, of the staged performance.

It is easy to blame cultural habit for the difference but, while the commodification of Western theatre ensures every patron with a ticket equal leg-room, sightlines and minimum seating dimensions (determined by safety regulation), in the mosh pits of a rock concert, at sporting events or pub gigs it may be first-in-first-served. Often being seated or caught in the crush comes by the luck of the draw. These examples demonstrate that contexts do exist in Australia where Randai-fitting audience behaviours are indeed engaged. They also highlight
how marketing factors, including the popular profile of a venue, contribute to expectations and social ambience. In a sense this research may be seen as an attempt to get the Randai 'buy-line' right - how to pitch Randai in the west.

The Horned Matriarch and its revision as Story of Reno Nilam offered the opportunity to trial several different venue formats. First Brisbane's gutted Princess Theatre was chosen for its raw internal space and historical identification with an eclectic range of independent performance, consciously inviting a reading as drama rather than as an exercise in cultural maintenance. We initially avoided the full round, instead placing raised bleaches on three sides of a rectangular area of auditorium floor. The rear of this was closed by a musicians' rostrum backing on to the theatre's external wall. The improvised setup, however, compromised audibility without increasing audience circulation or proximity despite attempts to discreetly augment the sound with amplification (using PZMs, that is, Crown International's Pressure Zone Microphones mounted on soundboards).

In the Sydney version of Reno Nilam, we had programmed three different outdoor venues and played a further three wet weather alternatives ranging from a 400-seat amphitheatre to picnic blankets on a hillside to conventional community halls (see figures 10 and 24). The indoor spaces allowed cabaret-style tables. This induced a level of informality though audiences were still quite spaced apart and aloof from the lingkaran. With the empathetic input from the perantau (expatriate Minang) community, the proximity, abundance and sensual allure of food stalls were more effective in mobilising the audience here than in other examples. Even so, it took rigorous debate with an orthodox production manager to overcome resistance to the 'distracting' backdrop of food service, especially in the amphitheatre where the stall was literally framed behind the skene. If read with Greek usage in mind it may have appeared as part of an 'on stage' set, even though, in Randai fashion, our use of the performance area clearly did not extend beyond the orkestra circle. Nor do Randai abide non-functional simulacra. The atmospheric effect as much as the distraction of satay smoke go hand in hand with the functional activity of food service. As with other aspects of performance there is no attempt to literally exclude or disguise the social environment. Also as part of the overriding event that frames the storytelling, it offers an optional break, or ebb, to the flow of audience concentration, cognisant with energy cycles that pervade Randai, which I will discuss in later chapters.

Despite experiments with cabaret seating and picnic seating, I nevertheless felt we had never gone far enough toward cuing the audience through the performance itself, something I tried to address in The Ballad of Boldenblee. The kinds of performance modes we engaged - hip-
hop, capoeira, fire-twirling and aerial acrobatics - suited the street or grass roots festival contexts where audiences pay witness in standing clusters or simply settle on a convenient sod of ground.

So in the cavernous railway workshop in which The Ballad of Boldenblee was staged, we provided no seating at all. This informality was cued in our advertising encouraging audiences to bring a cushion. Several brought deck chairs, demonstrating an attachment to furniture and the very territorialisation of ‘real estate’ that we were trying to subvert. Our intention was to enable audiences to stand, crouch and circulate as discomfort would prompt. Refreshments were served throughout to reward circulation as was also done in The Story of Reno Nilam, where the haze and aroma of satay smoke became part of the set. Audiences for Boldenblee, however, were very small and most settled in ring-side for the duration. We also hoped to encourage multiple entry with special ticket deals so that on second or third viewing audience members would become familiar with the story, begin to lose their preciousness about attentive viewing, and begin to seek alternative viewpoints, but this option, an attempt to cut through the decorum associated with a commodified experience, was not really taken up by the public.

Community as Venue

Schools as ideal community settings - Mr Stupid

Between versions of The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam I also mounted my ‘randai singkek’ (truncated for a small cast based on the folktale, Mr Stupid, (also touring as Pak Pandir and His Waterbuffalo). This bilingual Randai vehicle targeted primary school audiences and effected the sequential format of Randai but for playing by only three performers. The formalities of Randai were slightly rebalanced to suit the younger audience but not beyond recognition as Randai. Formal characters were few with clowning freedoms extended to most of the dramatis personae, the cyclic sequence was maintained but each episode and song was very short to suit short concentration spans. Where The Horned Matriarch featured eleven songs in ninety minutes Mr Stupid features ten in thirty minutes. Opening sequences were brief and we used the ‘pidato’ (oration or preamble) to explain the form. Organised participation (guided group chants, barracking and bit parts) took the place of spontaneous audience intervention, and the text was written in a range of rhythms owing as much to Dr Seuss as to ‘seni bakaba’. However I include it here because the experience of performing Randai in Australian schools contributes to my perspectives on the impact of performance setting and audience culture on reception of Randai and serves to validate many of the assumptions of
Randai resisted in more open public performance contexts.

Certain features of student audiences attending our schools Randai, *Mr Stupid*, on their own campus achieved, more accurately than any other setting, conditions of a Minangkabau audience. The high frequency of these performances occasioned ideal opportunities to reflect and compare the most effective factors: the closing up of personal body space, effecting a closing in of the circle; an established, closed community; and majority or almost mandatory attendance. But school tours also gave us insight into enculturation of resistances to new or unorthodox paradigms. Teachers often insisted students would be more attentive seated in rows than in circles, more comfortable on chairs than standing. Experience consistently suggested the reverse to be true.

When our advice prevailed, two to three hundred kids would sit, knees overlapping, on the floor where, packed in circles like sardines, they hermetically sealed us in. When we could add bench-seating for the middle circle and encourage the back row to stand they recreated the rise effect of a raked audience such as rings the *Medan-nan-Bapaneh*. The standing rows contained the sound, even where huge gymnasium spaces dwarfed the entire group, even creating a wind-break when performing outdoors, so that all sectors of the audience were actively engaged. With the front rows close enough to touch our props, the standing rows were barely a few metres away, creating a feedback loop that enhanced audibility, energy and focus.

When schools imposed the formality of chair rows, increasing the personal space of each spectator and adding metres between the front row and the playing space, energy and participation was reduced to aloof observation, encouraging the Western adult tendency to sit back and look at the circle instead of becoming part of, indeed creating, the circle in their midst. As a three person cast without a *lingkaran* to perform this encircling effect, the collusion of audience in defining our space was essential, and underscored the significance of this two-way agreement to maintain the frame for the duration of the performance. Without it we did not have a Randai circle. (See figure 23)

**Space, Sound and Light: The Impact Of Technical Design On Audience Reception**

Other issues arising from the presumption of audience comfort influenced lighting and sound decisions. Audibility was consistently a problem and arises from a clash between aesthetic assumptions and logistics - and (in the particular hybrid terrain which this project negotiates) between popular and high art, festival and theatre.
Actors, audibility and amplification

Randai actors stand at the edge of the circle and speak their dialogue, across the full diameter of the space, to their partner on the other edge of the circumference. Aside from purpose built theatres-in-the-round, not many venues effectively deflect sound from the inner dome of the playing space out equally on all sides to a surrounding audience. In theatre-in-the-round this is overcome by intimacy of dimension and proximity of actor. With Randai actors facing across and working to the player (and audience) opposite, back facing the near segment of audience, audibility is often a problem. In the noisy rabble-filled outdoor venues of a village Randai event immediate sound bleed is unavoidable. Beyond this however there is much less of the ambient sound bleed from freeway traffic or the city hum which limits open urban venues in Australia. Rather, here the reverse pertains where there is a substantial degree of sound control on site while ambient sound from traffic and even weather (wind) interferes with most outdoor or non-purpose-built venues. However, to deal with prevailing conditions, Sumatran actors typically share two or three handheld cable microphones patched into a small public address amplifier cranked way up over the red to give a loud and snowy distortion of the dialogue.

In my productions, however, there has been considerable resistance, from both cast and production personnel, to working with the inelegant ‘intrusion’ of hand held microphones despite their currency in the ‘traditional’ context. Actors see vocal audibility as part of their expert credentials, and resist the hand-held object as a limitation to free physical responsiveness. Handsfree alternatives raise the costs exponentially as they must be fitted to every speaking player and cannot be as easily shared mid show. Our most successful solution was the use of ambient microphones (PZMs) suspended overhead of the playing area. Three overhead positions in both indoor and outdoor venues for Reno Nilam in Sydney (city Botanic Gardens, a beachside Amphitheatre and a suburban Community Centre) were sufficient though a similar strategy for Ballad of Boldenblee was less successful where novice actors with inadequate vocal skills also played a part. Some particularly cavernous venues were simply too live causing a blurred and echoing sound.

Despite the best laid plans for ‘subtle’ or ‘elegant’ amplification, when it becomes obvious in production week that the promised strategy is not going to work we are usually at a point when it is too late to begin to integrate the hand held microphone into blocking, or workshop a solution to the cable ‘maypole effect’, a product of the ever rotating perambulations of Randai pembalok curito (actors).

Despite dawning recognition that attachment to hand held microphones in Sumatra, as much
in Randai as in all other formal public and private occasions (even children's birthday parties, for example), could be saying something culturally important, the Western conviction that live theatre relies on good vocal techniques and acoustically well-designed venues has continued to lead me away from following through with this particular Sumatran convention. Even these case studies failed therefore to press beyond this resistance.

Looking closer at this issue we see it may be more than a matter of amplification. Despite mitigating individual circumstances (novice actors, acoustically poor venues and urban hum) my continuing failure to resolve this forced me to think about what the hand held cable microphone enabled. Two factors emerged.

First, through alienation of the voice from the body, it disembodies the sound from the speaker. *Randai* is aiming, as was Brecht, for a recitation that quotes or paraphrases a (fictional) historic dialogue rather than playing out the scene in the present with an illusion of reality (comparable to Brecht’s recitation of the events of a car accident in his description of the V-effekt, (Willett, 1964). Amplification works with the non-realistic poetic syntax as a frame to underscore the separation of the event from the telling.

Secondly, it facilitates identification with the narrator's voice. With the vocal text delivered through the same speaker-boxes, not only do audiences hear the voices with equal volume and clarity regardless of their own position and sightlines, but also the singer/narrator's voice is delivered through the same sound system as the 'assistant storytellers' (i.e., the actors). The sense of a continuity of narration maintains throughout, despite changes of speakers, because the aural feedback on location of sound remains constant. It is therefore not through understanding visual signs, actions or positions on stage, that the dialogue is interpreted. The presentational style of performance and heightened rhetorical dialogue make the actor's body merely a mouthpiece for the story teller. The text is not inextricably linked to the actor delivering it. Schematically, he may be wearing appropriate costume signing his representation of the character, but beyond this really any actor could speak the part. Through amplification there can be an identification of all voices with 'the voice', not necessarily of the narrator, but of narration. This line of thought led to my staging approach in *The Butterfly Seer* and to our flirtation with the hip-hop 'EmCee'-style delivery in *The Ballad of Boldenblee* even though in the end resources precluded our following through with this overt use of voice amplification itself.

I've touched on the convention of dialogue delivery in relation to amplification and audience but the ingrained values of actors also influenced the decision. I found that sensitivity to the need for Western actors to round out their gestural expressivity left us unable to easily take
on personal microphones. Handhelds, while having the desirable effect of alienation, inhibited the use of both hands which, through either force of habit or creative innovation, always seemed to have become non-negotiable. In The Butterfly Seer it was to the butterfly effects and the bull puppet, frequently manipulated by the actor playing Osman that priority was surrendered. Radio battery packs proved problematic in the three-hander, Mr Stupid, even when all actors were supplied. Added mid-run they disrupted integral physical action, which we had elaborated without them, specifically to enable us to keep the casting down.

But even that judgement contains embedded values. Continuity of sound is not attempted in Sumatra where the microphones are put down ready for a fight scene even though dialogue may continue for a moment unamplified, but this is a technical inelegance not tolerated here. That microphones became more imposition than aid indicated how far we had moved toward a dependence on more developed physicalisation in our work and the increased value we therefore put on this modality (and perhaps also thus on the actors themselves).

**Audience, Sightlines and lighting angles.**

In Sumatra three hundred people can adequately see and appreciate a Randai by the light of 2 or 3 gas lamps. The intrusion of an assistant to re-pump the gas, perhaps being such a utilitarian part of after-dark street life, attracts no more attention than would a stagehand in blacks crossing to clear a set piece. The silhouette effect of a central gas lamp with 360° throw which alternately shines in your eyes or is blocked by a silhouetted (proximal) actor reminded me of the effect of central firelight. Again discomfort may be alleviated by moving as no-one is bound to their chairs. As gas lamps have no remote control Randai uses the galom-bang chorus, instead of lighting cues, as a performed framing device, like blackouts, to manipulate the visual focus.

Trying to achieve a similar coverage of light dispersing from the centre to illuminate the inside of the circle with conventional stage lights and linear lighting positions gets more, not less, complicated, again inverting the production values attributable to typical Randai. Besides cost, explicit resistance by some of my participating lighting technicians argued against the wisdom of directing light toward the audience, creating a silhouette of the proximal action. Yet because light requires distance to disperse the beam, the alternative strategy, illuminating the external face of the circle, would not only require many more lamps, but would also significantly change the nature of the Randai.

The powerful central focus of an interior light pool enhances the sense of audience as witness to the interior action. This light effect is well demonstrated in paintings such as Vincent
Van Gogh’s ‘The Potato Eaters’ 1885. In fact as one contemplates ‘The Potato Eaters’ one realises how close to the table it would be possible to approach without intruding; even to stand, say, just behind the girl in the foreground. And it becomes clear that it is precisely because her back is toward us, and the light interior, that we can close the space up thus and gaze over her shoulder.

If this depicted an activity such as a card game in process, such a posture struck by an observer might suggest a sense of collusion with the seated player, inasmuch as the observer at the card table would have the vantage point of that player’s cards in his view. I relate this to the relationship between front row Randai spectator and the proximal actor. It becomes clear that the appropriate ambience requires several factors working together; the actors’ energy directed inwards, the lighting supporting the players’ view of each other (more than the voyeurs’ view of them as a spectacle), and a seating arrangement that allows the viewer to close in around the circle.

Lighting directors are trained to aim for even cover, to shutter off any spill, avoid glare in the patrons’ eyes, maintain dimmer board control, and cue the audience with houselights and blackouts. Aside from the compulsion to create and enhance, they are responding to the expectations of a Western audience as well as to the aspirations of their profession. The rustic aesthetic of traditional gas lighting in Sumatra is not the artifice of design but a familiar limitation of night activities and is thus tolerated as a campfire glare or torchlight might be when camping. But should it be assumed that conventional lighting improves the package?

Where municipal halls are in use in West Sumatra, local civic showcases of Randai are presented on open-end raised platform stages sometimes with a proscenium frame. Lighting, as far as I have witnessed, has been general, that is, a wash of open white on stage with house lights also up full. In arts academy venues, where Randai has played on full, professionally fitted proscenium stages Western style dramatic lighting plots have been implemented, with house lights down and even elaborate audiovisual projection screens have been used (see the ASWARA Experiment Theatre, figure 1). But these combine aspirations to fit into a transglobal art-world paradigm with the trappings of technological advancement. The fact that the proscenium staging is often transgressed, and thus somewhat reframed, by those who know Randai well, (Latrell 2000) suggests that these alien fixed staging contexts do not satisfy or support the ‘Randai sensibility’ of the performances. Rather than repeat this situation in Aus-
tralia I've attempted to examine and give voice to this particular sensibility and let it indicate the adaptations that best support Randai.

**Discomfort as a feature.**

I wondered also if it could be argued that these primitive lighting and sound technologies add a level of discomfort to the event which may be intrinsic to the audience's sense of adventure and transgression? In one sense heralding special activity, the extra lighting, in its partial efficiency, also deepens the shadows, awakening a sense of danger akin to the anonymity of carnival (perhaps validating the Islamic discouragements). I wondered if this was similar to the dim, partial light of a night club or rave party, suggesting that over-concern with our audience's comfort may undermine some aspect of Randai participation. The lighting design in *The Ballad Of Boldenblee* hinted toward this in its attempt to appeal to a subcultural youth demographic, so that, consistent with the fire-twirling performance feature, it included rope lighting and strobe effects, changing image projections on the floor canvas and intense saturated colour gels. We did not have total control over the effects due to limited hanging points and external light bleed, and in this regard emulated the *ad hoc* venues of typical Randai. But whether it assisted the Randai sensibility and promoted circulation there is no specific feedback to indicate. As I have already observed the audiences didn't circulate, but by anecdotal evidence I think we were heading in the right direction.

Discomfort and adventure of another kind were also factors in the most Randai-like performance of *Reno Nilam* when due to an 8 o'clock downpour the open air audience at the Botanical Gardens trooped off into the tree-shrouded darkness toward the unknown in procession with performers and crew. We reassembled at a nearby unadorned hall where, under general fluorescent lights, without the formal trappings of theatrical illusion or sacral separation of space, this singular performance resonated with the kind of energy I've otherwise only experienced in Sumatra. The disruption and shared discomfort had made participants of the spectators, and a community of the disparate individuals present.

For an even better example of these effects combined, I describe at length, in my conclusion, the Bohemian Love Theatre's Cock-Fight act performed in a variety marquee, which managed to engage several Randai-like principles with material much less removed from the binary drama of a showdown of sporting skill between protagonists. This event disrupted a seated audience, forcing it to reconfigure to accommodate an unexpected performance in its midst for the last moments before interval. Follow spots set up for the end-stage action, however, were too close to flood to a wide enough angle for this item, and were further masked by standing spectators. Even in this grass roots scenario where bare feet, cushions
and milk-crate seating were *de rigeur*, complaints about lighting and visual sightline discomfort were received and acknowledged. But most endured the brief ten-minute ordeal, participating by way of sound and energy transfer if they got squeezed to the back or outer rings. The sudden discomfort and disruption bonded audience members in accommodating an unforeseen event and almost seemed implicated in their identification with the protagonists, a pair of chicken-suited volunteer contestants. The adventure, the crush, the noise and the dark made them participants rather than pandering to their need to be passive viewers. Neo-Randai perhaps needs to aspire to this carnival quality, where the socio-cultural framework resonates best with its material framing devices.

**Finding a Round Peg in a Square Hole**

This chapter has considered some of the cultural assumptions embedded in infrastructure and production values and their impact on the audience-performer transaction. First I suggest that the *Medan Nan Bapaneh* is best understood as the concept of a flexible communal space which allows the Randai event to dynamically perform its own frame, exploiting a natural audience habit to surround and circulate which, I argue, also exists within our culture if not in our theatres. I also looked at how closed community audiences engaged in active viewing postures e.g. standing, which elicited a more collusive response than that elicited from a society of comfortably accommodated strangers.

Western production values, which are part of the assumed frame in our new presentation context, were found to explicitly support the Western conventions of reception, presenting us with the challenge of rethinking their design to serve the Randai dramaturgical framework. I describe several alternative interventions to induce informality and mobility, including discomfort, which I suggest may be considered part of Randai’s seduction.

Grappling with resistance to sound enhancement highlighted how the typically overt use of microphones reinforced the alienation effect of the acting style. The difficulty with which we incorporated them however highlighted the shift we had already made towards a physical style of acting not native to Randai, suggesting a more text- focussed aural emphasis is typical. Grappling with the introduction of theatre lighting highlighted the relationship between lighting direction and audience intimacy, where typical Randai lighting facilitates rather connection than creates illusion. Negative and positive incentives (discomfort, food-vending, amplified voice) influenced circulation or at least a relaxation of intense gaze. Blackouts and masking, lighting cues that colour or frame the edge of the stage, as factors also performed by *lingkaran*, become extraneous.
In general, I found an inversion of values in how the theatre service industry operates reinforces familiar forms despite calls for the new. Having evolved in a community-rich cash-poor society, the cost of difference (customisation), the cost of proximity (risk management) and the cost of human resources, among other factors, invert the economy of staging Randai when translocated to the West.

What is clear is that simply presenting a ‘performers’ Randai’ to order, on a stage space designed and lit according to Western dramaturgical notions, denies the symbiosis that must exist between Randai and its immediate audience. Whether it is possible to challenge the received way theatre may be presented, necessary to evolve the way Randai is presented, or easier to find a more appropriate paradigm perhaps outside the formal theatre sector where communities do enact the kind of values embedded in Randai, remains to be examined over the next few chapters.

The case studies represent these distinct approaches. *The Horned Matriarch*, initially aiming to challenge how theatre was presented in-house, in its later incarnation as *Reno Nilam*, like *Boldenblee*, searched out alternative community paradigms. Meanwhile *The Butterfly Seer* took up the challenge to find radical ways to work with the tools and habits of Western theatre to find new triggers to Randai sensibilities. Without pre-empting a more favourable outcome for one strategy over the other, there is an underlying suggestion here that the way of formal theatre makes too narrow a distinction to accommodate new forms like Randai that have evolved outside of the Western dramaturgical lineage.

But to press my findings that a Randai performance needs a certain type of space, I needed to examine more closely what was actually going on in performance at the level of the body performing. The next chapter considers the body disciplines of Randai as derived from *silek*.
Fig. 25 (Above) The Ballad of Boldenblee playing in the Boiler Room, Honeysuckle Developments. Main picture shows the position of the ‘stage’ in relation to the musician’s dais, near left (detail at right), and the bar, far right. The apocalyptic dragon sculpture at rear remained lit throughout. (Right) Audience response. [AB]

Fig. 26: (Right) Plan of the Courthouse Theatre, Carlton, Victoria with an overlay of my rough floorplan for The Butterfly Seer, showing the circular flow of stage action (small dark blue arrows) and this extrapolated to overlap the audience area (lighter blue arrows). [La Mama & INM]
CHAPTER 5 - The Physical Language: Negotiating 'Silek'

The shape of Randai: The three pillars - Silek, Kaba & Dendang

I have chosen to discuss the negotiations that took place at various critical intersections of the staging of these works, under headings that accord with what are generally understood to be 'the three pillars' of Randai: the martial art, pancak silek, the oral storytelling 'seni bakaba' (the art of telling kaba stories) and the classic repertoire for voice and flute known as 'dendang jo saluang'. This allows me to compare, across case studies, resistances that can be associated with the body, the text and the music respectively (although the interrelationship of these three factors makes it impossible to separate them entirely). Further, while their equality as the 'three pillars' is stressed by Minangkabau scholars, I would distinguish between the foundational art forms of kaba and silek and the functional element of dendang jo saluang in the way the latter transforms the other two from their pre-existing forms towards their manifestation within Randai. Dendang reshapes the pre-existing kaba text for delivery as narrative songs and provides a rhythmic contour for the adaption of silek to its more dance-like manifestation as tari galombang. (In practice, rather than in evolution, this may work the other way round - the galombang movement being choreographed to fit with a dendang selection, however in my experience the choice of dendang melody is the least stable of the elements. When a new melody is substituted the continuing text and the movements, unless the change involves strictly rhythmic gembira melodies, are simply reworked to suit.)

There are two further factors unexpectedly subordinate in this schema. The most salient and identifying element of Randai, the distinctive tapuak 'body' percussion - which as a major contributor to Randai's soundscape might be grouped for its musical contribution - is actually just one aspect of silek (in which context they are attention grabbing sounds that either distract or confuse the opponent) aestheticised for application in its dance mode. Another element, 'Akting dan Dialog', as one of two modes of delivering the kaba, also depends for its expression on the body vocabulary of silek, so is touched upon in both relevant chapters. The encounter between silek and the Western body presented common problems across each of these studies.

What is Pancak Silek

Silek (Ind. silat) is an indigenous martial art prevalent under various regional names throughout the Malay-Indonesian region but strongly associated with the Minangkabau where it mani-
fects as a low-grounded style of open-hand combat with particularly artful stylistic embellishments. It is practiced by two opponents who circle each other in preliminary steps, frequently spiralling in and out from a centre point.

Where the word *silek* describes the efficacious, often secretive, pure combat techniques, *pancak silek*, from the term *pencak* meaning "trained or skillful movements of the body" (Latiff 1995), connotes the many aestheticised versions sanctioned for public display, from sparring demonstrations to dance derivatives. Following Minangkabau usage I will use *silek* to refer broadly to the field of practice including its derivatives.

Once an essential and complete education cultivating young Minangkabau males as full members of society, it “both represents and transmits” Minangkabau *adaik* in its functional, symbolic and spiritual values, largely influenced by its merger with Sufi philosophies (Barendregt, 1995). It now exists as an international sport, as a range of regional performing arts and, in just one of its spiritual dimensions, as *ulu’ambek*, the extant ‘shadow silek’ of Pariaman (Coastal West Sumatra), a non-contact ‘mystical’ *pancak* form and the most likely precursor for Randai’s theatrical paradigm (Pauka 1998).

**What Silek brings to Randai**

The martial art, *silek*, constitutes the principle vocabulary of physical movement in Minangkabau society, with well-developed training practices and aesthetic values. Randai’s grounding in *silek* assures it a tried and tested ethical philosophy well embedded with social values, and a spatial orientation that effectively lends itself as a foundation for staging.

The language of *silek* provides Randai with a lexicon of terms with which to describe itself. In this vein, for example, ‘scenes’ are referred to as *adegan*, ‘revolutions’ or ‘rounds’ (as in the parlance of boxing). Its masculine lifestyle and character archetypes provide story lines, influencing the nature of conflicts and their resolution (see especially Pauka 1998).

**How Randai uses Silek**

Randai uses conventions of ‘*silek*’ for their stylistic, structural and ethical dimensions, some of which I will probe in more depth later. *Silek* is used directly in its fighting form to convey any aspects of the story that may be so interpreted. Disputation, heroism, inter-regional belligerence, random misfortune, and even social events may be conveyed as duels, battles, bandit attacks or tournaments providing ample opportunities for virtuosic martial arts display. These usually employ unchoreographed sparring that calls on legitimate technical prowess, including the use of weaponry, that will be recognised by an attuned audience who
may have learnt silek in their youth.

Outside of direct combat, the vocabulary is used decoratively in choreographed dance and demonstration sequences and expressively in the gestural vocabulary of speakers.

**Silek As Dance: 'Galombang', 'Tapuak', 'Jalan' and the 'Lingkaran'**

The unison, circular silek dance that accompanies each verse of song is performed by the 'lingkaran', a ring of all physical performers who function to spatially define the limits of the acting area, separate the action from narration, and represent the audience, i.e. the social community. In this capacity they are available to add interjections just as a spectator may do so, enabling scripted 'crowd' voices to be assigned to them. They are uniquely responsible for the overall dynamics and unity of the form by the fact that they are not bodily identified with, nor costumed as, any particular character.

*Tari Galombang*, the dance performed by the lingkaran, circumnavigates the space, at times doubling back and occasionally converging toward the centre. Its gestural sequence is devised from the silek 'aliran', the branch or style particular to the relevant school or village. Its movement consists of the tai chi like preparatory moves of *kembang silek* in a short routine that is identified with a particular melodic motif and repeated with each verse of song. The quality of movement varies with each Randai company in accordance with the aliran it derives from, but is usually a wave-like ebb and flow of sustained energy.

*Tapuak galembong*, the distinguishing flourish of percussive pants-slapping performed on galembong pants, baggy triangular trousers that sound like a drum when struck with the hands. It has been elaborated from the functional use of body striking in silek. These are used to generate a sharp sound marking the point of impact in non-contact demonstrations and teaching. Tapuak carries over to the tournament situation as a distracting device to disconcert one's opponent. In Randai it manifests as a cathartic release of energy at the end of each lyric verse/dance (gurindam/galombang) cycle. Vocal yelps in contra-tempo (gore) coordinate the action and add extra rhythmic complexity to its momentary explosive outbreak. This controlled chaotic energy dissipates as suddenly as it began with a complete letting go of the performance energy as the company subsides into a relaxed walk (*jalan*). Still in formation, the walk creates a gentle neutral breathing space for re-focussing in which the body walking is quietly attentive, at rest yet live (like the subtle magnetic motion of still water). Into this gently eddying pause the singer opens the next verse. The energetic pattern therefore cycles through the Laban movement qualities of sustain - explosion - release.
Fig. 27. (Left) Rusfarizal practices Silek Kumango with his teacher, Dt Rajo Mudo, in the sasaran of Sanggar Batu Badoro, Padang, 1997. (Right) Miko Saeri, a Brisbane-based practitioner of the Silat Perisai Diri school, demonstrates a kampung-style silek with his student Made Winanto. Brisbane, c. 1993.

Fig. 28. The author and colleague, Clare Apelt in West Sumatra training in Silek Gadang, at Kubu Nan Ampek; (left) and in Silek Kumango at Batu Badoro, Padang (centre and right). 1997.

Fig. 29. (Left) Senior practitioners Mak’Yan and Machudum engage each other in an ulu’ambek demonstration on the bamboo slat floor of a purpose built laga-laga (ulu’ambek performance platform) in Tarok, Padang Pariaman. (Right) ASWARA Randai students form a column for Tari Sado, a processional galombang entrance sequence of silek kembangan moves. [I.U.]
Fig. 30. The cast of The Horned Matriarch training with Miko Saeri, second from left. Brisbane, 1996

Fig. 31. A fragment of the rehearsal white-board shows *galombang* motifs written up in a variety of notations.

Fig. 32. Rehearsing the *lingkaran* The Sydney cast of *Reno Nilam* training using traditional linear (left) and circular (top right) methods of training by practice and repetition. (Lower right) The cast of *Boldenblee* engaging Western theatre games like “Who Started the Motion?” (Speiling 1985), which speaks to the ensemble and peripheral awareness skills of *galombang*. 
The effects of *tari galombang* then are to define space, manipulate energy and act as a liminal interface between player and audience. They are the cohesive glue holding the particularities together.

These purely aesthetic forms draw more on the parries than the thrusts. Although *tapuak* routines, which might be seen as standing in for actual fighting drill, sometimes simulate an *aliran* (a short series of attack and defence moves) which might be elaborated for extra percussive effect, gestures used in acting, *galombang* dance and other purely aesthetic applications derive more frequently from the defensive and preparatory (diversionary) moves referred to as *kembangan* (literally blossoms, or idiomatically, embellishments, of *silek*). In my intercultural practice this had practical and aesthetic implications in translating the form to other movement systems. My *ulu'ambek* teacher, Pak Mak'Yan of Tarok, Padang Pariaman identified such movements as ‘*batino*’ the concept of ‘female’ in non-human contexts (cogn. *yin*), contrasting with the efficacious attack moves described as ‘*jantan*’ (the non-human masculine, cogn. *yang*). This distinction, both valued, may offer a way of understanding the ebb and flow that stretches Randai content to accommodate receding as well as intensifying energies.

**Silek in dialogue**

Dialogue between actors represents an engagement between two *silek* opponents. This distils the circle back into the binary polarity of silek, but without collapsing its dimensions. The two bodies diametrically configured, maintain their relationship to the large circle of space, still operating off its central axis. When speaking, *silek* informs the shaping of rhetorical gesture, footwork and body positioning. Protagonists face each other inwards and speech is delivered directly across the stage to powerfully engage the focus of the other player, (and by overspill, the onlooker). Between speeches, they rotate the axis of play by circumambulating the space, maintaining diametrical tension while the audience looks on as might tournament spectators.

The *jantan/batino* polarity might be seen here in the alternation between potent active speech and the verbally empty space of the circumambulation (or ‘walk-around’ in my studio floor lexicon) which separates moments of sustained verbal engagement.

*How do all these elements work together to form an ongoing flux between unity and division?*

As a dualistic and diametrical dialogue, a *silek* tournament expresses a precarious balance of power between opponents accompanied by suspicion and mistrust, as each party has the skill...
to annihilate the other. Deriving from this, the dynamic tension in a Randai adegan (scene), is always dualistic and dialogical, pitting two parties against one another in pronounced opposition, and reflecting this explicitly in the staging.

The dialogue mimics silek in its verbal rhetoric, and unfolds as a fight tournament might, diplomatic and formal at first, registering a series of points scored, each followed by recovery (the ‘walk around’) and fresh ‘attacks’ by each side in turn.

It resolves with a decisive outcome which cues the dancers to retake the stage. By closing in to the centre to change scenes they subsume the diametrical stage picture, in its wake reopening circular principles of unity and cohesion. Actors drop character visually dissolving dualistic action to join galombang dance patterns that reiterate the unity of the cast as a team of equals, and deliver us up to neutral narrative. This enactment of collective solidarity, encompassing all who are present, brackets the alternating episodes of tension keeping chaos safely within the bounds of a reassuring framework.

Negotiating Silek in the Rantau

The role of silek is so central in Randai it created, as we worked outside the culture, particular obstacles. Either silek skills must travel with Randai or new strategies using local resources or substitutes must evolve. Silek negotiations have influenced our choices in community focus, story content, casting and choreography and prompted the ongoing development of a training protocol while the matter of identification and relevancy led to investigations into context-specific substitutes and how they might interact with the form.

For example one consequence of feminising the perspective of The Horned Matriarch, was a preponderance of older women characters that reduced the credibility of sustained silek sequences. Instead we gave the story a mystery male silek guru whose instruction empowers young Reno to act in her own defence. Adjustments to plot continued throughout rehearsal in the process of matching credible fight skills with actors’ abilities. In Sydney where a knowledgeable Minangkabau audience was anticipated, choosing credible fight practitioners (invariably expatriate Indonesians), meant compromising acting or English language competence. Resolved through rewrites and taking bilingual liberties, (two actors playing entirely in Bahasa Minang opposite responses delivered in English - see figure 33), the issue underscored the significance of Randai as a medium of true sporting skill not just dramatic illusion.

The Dancing Body: A problem of training

Significant adaptation to the new environment occurred through training. Our approach was
dictated by professional conditions, social patterns and expectations and on a more detailed level on Western ontologies and perceptions of body and nature. As training begins with the assumptions of the student we therefore had to evolve our own particular strategies to cultivate Randai intelligence in the actors bodies, most of which Sumatran training takes for granted. Rather than detail the training process here I will address some of the common disconnects that were thus bridged both in training and rehearsal.

The challenge of training was not in conveying new repertoire but that the paradigms of learning and the assumptions of performance were so different. Western participants, whether unskilled or professional, tended to require a set of absolutes that could be memorised by applying the intellect rather than giving themselves to understand the idea of schema constituted from interchangeable modules. By fixing on the idea of a set piece, attempting to memorise more detail than necessary, learning effort increased the difficulty of the task and overburdened rehearsal time. Using a head, not body, approach, undertaking responsibility rather than surrendering it, disrupted the bigger picture of Randai by introducing inflexibility. It may work for the concert virtuoso but, where Randai performers have not fully come to terms with schematic principles the collective focus tended to shift gear to a more individualised, personal concentration that disrupts the repetitive cyclic effect of Randai.

By contrast, the Minangkabau approach of surrendering to the flow of the group (one might say, by 'winging it') made it possible for Reno Nilam actor, Clare Apelt and I to perform in the lingkaran of the group, *Tari Randai Rambun Sati jo Sutan Lembak Tuah* throughout an eight hour Randai, to the approval of a closely scrutinising Minangkabau audience, after barely twelve contact hours with the group. What made this possible was distinguishing between information it is necessary to commit to memory and information that will be available on the night as needed. For example, it is not necessary to memorise the sequence, the timing or the number of repetitions. In fact expecting a certain order may inhibit one’s readiness to respond when the singer, by mistake or design, sings an unexpected song. Effort spent learning the immutable relationships between material pays off, but spent recording the duration of clapping, is wasted, for the gore caller varies this according to his instinct.

As I learnt how Western-trained professionals were used to working and adjusted training to suit, I suspected novices might present more of a tabula rasa in this regard but found rather that the paradigms of performance are culturally determined even where there has been little exposure to stagecraft. Training became a two way process of presenting a proposition of Randai as I understood it, listening to resistances for underlying assumptions, and then representing the material with a refined access point or familiar reference. The teasing out
process contributed to my understanding the gap between the Western performance psyche and Randai. Observing the effect of compromises demystified the nature and rationale of Randai conventions allowing us to be more considered in our choices for compromise and innovation.

Priorities of the training therefore should be to properly establish conventions, convey new material as a set of modular components, and cultivate a skills base that equips the performer to read the ensemble. These notably duplicate the skills required in self-defence systems.

In our first attempt at this, twice-weekly studio trials during the first *Horned Matriarch* creative development phase were facilitated by Zulkifli while I translated for language and body culture. They provided the double opportunity to cultivate the requisite Randai vocabulary (*silek* partner drills, circular and processional *galombang*, *tapuak* pants slapping and *balabek* gesture) for a base cast while also developing my Randai training skills. The cross-cultural teaching situation required more than simply demonstrating body positions and choreography. It was necessary to tailor a teaching style that would bridge the Randai tradition with the mindset and body culture of our Western-trained performers. Insights based on my own bodily experience of learning, and of observing, Sumatran and Western movement systems, were sounded out against Zulkifli's knowledge and experience then tested on actors for further refinement on the floor. This method allowed me to substantially form the foundation for subsequent teaching programs at this time, albeit constantly refined and refashioned in response to the variety of needs arising with future projects.

**Movement Quality and the Space Outside The Body**

If we could not achieve proficiency in *silek* as a combat practice we could at least strive for aesthetic precision through training. Each project has by necessity incorporated skill development workshops from eight to twenty weeks duration. In this context we confronted the divide between body cultures and respective ideas of shape, precision and movement mapping.

Unlike dance moves in the Western balletic tradition, *silek* derived movement is not about shape-making, position in space, or pathway of the active body, a point typically highlighted when teaching Western performers. It is about the space outside the body or, in partner drills, the physical matter - an opponent's arm for example - which is beyond the limits and

*Illustration 5. An awkward grip*
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

control of one's own body. It is that other substance that exists at given or imagined spatial
coordinates, and contains defining properties such as mass, dimensions, resistance and direc-
tional limitations. By maintaining a clear concept of that other object the direction, force
and scope of our own movement possibilities become apparent. This sensation might be com-
pared to techniques of the mime more than the dancer per se. An example is seizing by wrist
and armpit an arm attached to its heavier body, and turning while twisting to swing the body
around, finally pressing the shoulder towards the ground. The practicality of the awkward
grip with distal fingers pointing down while proximal fingers point up makes sense only in the
context of the whole action. Such necessary details help to facilitate the intention, and over-
ride concerns as to how to get there. Any movement intermediate to these functional contact
actions generally takes the most direct route (within broad guiding principles), which ac-
counts for personalised variations that often confuse the trainee used to an idea of 'correct' as
pertaining to an absolute ideal in body shape or pathway. Meaning is located not in the act of
an individual but where an action or utterance intersects with the other.

In line with this I shifted from initiating training with fundamentals of body vocabulary like
stance and gesture, to fundamentals of action and intention, drawing closer to a silek model
but adding some elementary level excercises to cultivate habits taken for granted in
Sumatra. The Arthurian Project, scheduled over a year with down time in the middle,
uniquely enabled a much slower process of initial training allowing us to solidly anchor the
schema before expanding the content. It also helped to separate the learning phase from the
creative and rehearsal phase, so that exceptions, variations and artistic licence would not
confuse the laying down of unfamiliar conventions.

I also shifted focus from teaching repertoire to having participants create it from a model
aliran, ensuring the conventions are internalised. As I deepen my understanding of the con-
nective sensitivities between component art forms (talempong, plate dance, dendang singing)
and the global principles of Randai I am increasingly better equipped to cross-reference
between them and formulate some overarching theories about the form. Some of these I ex-
plore below.

Repetitivity and Meaning

The choreographic convention, matching the strophic song form, is repetitive & circular.
Feelings of discomfort in relation to the repetitive choreography, expressed by critics like
Burdell, forced me to investigate further what the repetitive and circular do for an audience,
and how critics were seeing it differently. My concern was that audiences, distracted by the
presence of dancers in a choreography that frustrated any efforts to decode it, split their fo-
cus from the singer, distancing themselves from verbal content as they searched for absent visual cues in the dance.

Referring to my own sensations as spectator, and through observations of audiences of both cultures it became clear that the Minangkabau focus during dances was not on reading the narrativity of the dance. Despite the abundant visual stimulation, discursive focus was on listening to the *gurindam* (libretto). There, each line was providing new information critical to following the plot. Neither was their attention on the music per se. More epic than lyric, more acoustic folk ballad than operatic aria, *gurindam* text is carried on just two or three repeating lines of melody with no or minimal accompaniment. In European opera key lyric phrases are much repeated to subliminally hammer home thematic textual development while the musical development tends to dominate in intricacy. In Randai it is the *gurindam* text, carrying explicit narrative detail, that demands attention.

The dance, like the melody, simply cycles through several exact repetitions of a single routine as an accompaniment to the text. It neither illustrates nor responds to the narrative detail (except rarely on the most abstract level of mood). But if not commentary on the text, what does this choreography communicate? And how might this answer the concerns raised in various forums (by mentors at ANPC workshop, by composer Adrian Sherriff and others) about conveying detail through the medium of song? On one hand, without the experience to read variations in an alien gestural language, the endlessly circling floor pattern becomes the only truly graspable feature of choreography. It is understandable that the repetitions of this broader motif become monotonous without a more nuanced recognition of the variations within it. To me it seemed the *galombang* in Sumatra functioned as a rhythmic harmonious embellishment rather like the illuminated borders of a medieval text, and reminiscent of the visual mandalas of a digital media player's graphics plug-in responding energetically not discursively to the song.

**Galombang Dance as Stillness**

By its name 'galombang' I'd always understood its semantic derivation from the ubiquitous wave motion of the natural environment - from Indonesian 'gelombang', 'a long unbroken wave or swell' or, as a verb, 'to surge or fluctuate' (Echols & Shadily, 1992). Refining the process of transmission I now began to understand this less as incidental etymology and more as a pertinent reference within the symbolic text of Randai. The unison repetitions and complete circularity become critical for reading the *movements* as neutral, just as, while the ever present wave, wind or breath of life animates the organic world, all is well. Utter stillness is more alarming. Although modernism and naturalism tend to steer away from the
merely decorative, this environmental ‘dance’ is ‘balabek’ (embellishment) at work in the world. It is both natural and has no particularised meaning although its energy and style may vary with prevailing conditions. Thus as ‘edge’, as ‘mood’ and as ‘unity’ Randai choreographers will arrange mesmeric galombang sequences as a kind of ‘non-potent content’ to resonate with the energies of the ensuing scene.

How are these factors valuable in contemporary performance? In 1988 (well prior to my introduction to Randai) one of the vignettes that comprised my experimental composite show, Other Doors (Club Foote, Adelaide, 1988) presented an old man caught in a repetitive loop of action. As the man picks up his hat to place on his head, he fumbles, drops it, stoops to retrieve it and fumbles again, and so on without change in tempo for three minutes, audible even beyond the fading of the light and the sudden cessation of the accelerating musical (by Quentin Grant, Kidney Art Ensemble). The idea was to stretch the anticipation of the audience beyond the desire for narrative satisfaction, to reach a state of acceptance where they view the frame of action as a window giving onto a fraction of an otherwise endless cycle of action. The effect, uncomfortable for an object-oriented audience, is prevalent in Indonesian performance experiences, especially in music (talempong, gamelan and many others) and exemplified by the galombang choreography discussed above. It challenges the Western audience to surrender their pursuit of the novel, inviting a shift in ontological perspectives from the beginning-middle-end notions prevalent in Western eschatology to the cyclic ontology familiar to the east.

Creative Negotiations Issues In Movement (Case Studies)

Innovation vs Balance In Dance.

While I had been initially keen to fully exploit the choreographic potential of the circle by pushing it much further towards contemporary dance, my recognition of these repetition effects and the need to counterbalance the Western audience’s tendency to privilege the visual steered me toward a simpler more silek based palette for our second production. After Zulkifli’s elaborate academy aesthetic, the more traditional village Randai companies of Batipuh and Kalumbuk provided the models for the remount, Story of Reno Nilam. But as an alternative to training bodies in the physical vocabulary of a remote culture, the Arthurian Randai Project and later Boldenblee, looked to local vocabularies for their building blocks where, free of stylistic parameters, different kinds of concerns arose. An example is how aesthetic uses of galombang in Van Keren’s Quest Perilous (the Randai arising from the Arthurian Project) demonstrated the pitfalls of complexity - in that case, ambiguity through inconsist-
ency in establishing conventions.

*Quest Perilous* introduced experimentation that reinterpreted the circle as an optional extra, more a dance interlude which only randomly broke up the sequence of dramatic actions rather than as a membrane which inevitably separates them. Varying not the circularity but the function, these *galombang* appeared as a positive additional feature rather than a negative space and as such begged reading for narrative content or commentary. Were this expectation accommodated it would deny audience precious moments for reflection and distract from the primacy of the singer’s role, potentially precipitating a consequential series of accommodations to restore balance, ending somewhere more familiar like the common musical. If not accommodated (i.e. not choreographed with programmatic relevance) it invites a charge of extraneous decoration or a “what does it all mean?” response. It was not that his interspersing of dancing girls between swordsmen in the *Quest Perilous* lingkaran presented the problem, but the apparent continuity into the narrative of their dramatis personae as dancers which confounded the schematic distinction between these two modalities.

**Silek in The Boldenblee Movement Palette**

The aim of the *Boldenblee* skills development phase was to establish a martial art vocabulary from which to base stage fights, *galombang* choreography and actors’ gestural vocabulary. As it turned out our fire-twirlers sustained the most prevailing community following over the other martial arts workshops we offered. To foreground their skills and tap into their sub-cultural social networks, as much for its spectacle value, fire combat became the dominant martial form wherever possible. It drew on the eclectic weapon techniques typically employed by firetwirlers borrowed from Maori Poi, Asian stick and sword, as well as Capoeira the danced martial art form of Brazil which also influences hip-hop’s breakdance. Fight scenes were necessarily confined to experienced practitioners and the strategy meant falling back to the more accessible twirling skills such as basic poi and stick for novices in the *gurindam* mode. This palette was extended by incursions from capoeira, hapkido and *silek* reflecting our short and overly diverse training period limited by the uneven physical facility of performers.

In adapting these to *galombang*, where we used glow-lights instead of burning poi for safety, the twirling generated a mesmeric mandala effect, which, with its repetitive rhythmic cadence, was perfectly suited to accompany the songs without distracting from them (see figure 14). Perhaps this was because the movement was embodied in the spinning objects and not in the performing bodies of each individual. However safety factors necessitated a larger circle with more personal space adversely effecting visual containment and energetic con-
centration. As with sword in the Arthurian case, the use of equipment limited sound generating capacity by occupying the hands.

**Evolving a tapuak vocabulary**

In the earlier projects standard *tapuak galembong* was used as a distinguishing feature of the Randai genre. Where alternative martial forms were introduced, the methods of generating the percussive breaks were necessarily reappraised. In the Arthurian Project where a sword galombang vocabulary was evolved from a combination of Celtic broad sword and Elizabethan styles, the weapon so occupied the hands it prohibited any supplementary open-handed *tapuak*. The alternative *tapuak* we developed utilised features of sword, hilt, scabbard and armour to generate an equivalent percussive effect. In *Boldenblee* I looked forward to substituting a range of rhythmic media such as tap dance and ‘junk percussion’ in lieu of traditional *tapuak*, but reinstated it when it was clear that as a less specialised skill, it was more easily mastered by a range of participants. There was also some enquiry into the expansion of the sound-making capacity of the costume, using metallic idiophones small enough to be sewn into the design. This promising suggestion was not satisfactorily explored given budget and practical limitations including the design problem of sound control. In the end standard *tapuak galembong* was augmented by simple drum percussion played on home-made instruments by musicians outside the circle.

We explored sharing rhythms with the drummers in both directions, i.e. adapting some Brazilian and African rhythms introduced by ‘junk percussion’ facilitator, Kai Tipping, to generate a complementary *tapuak* part. This exercise showed up the particularities of typical *tapuak* and the difficulties in rendering ongoing grooves and small time-unit syncopations on the *galembong* (percussive Randai trousers). Many of these regular rhythms relied on a scope of tonal differentiation not available on the more restrictive palette of the pants and perhaps more importantly were not wholistically designed for the moving body. *Tapuak galembong* worked best when designed as much as a dance move as a sound bite integrating breath, steps and changes of weight and direction, and taking into account the slower action of whole torso movement compared to that achievable in the agility of a percussionist’s wrist action. More importantly the shape of the *tapuak* needs to resolve within a contained arc, the organic decay of explosive energy. It is after all an accented flourish to close a verse cycle, more akin to a drum roll or the flamenco ‘llamada’, not intended as an open-ended repeating pattern. In this it can also be seen to contrast the security of the repeating cycles with an expression of chaos in this precarious moment of instability.

So far I have mainly discussed the use of silek in choreography. I have indicated the diffi-
culties of translating silek as body movement and as patterns in time and space. I have also
touched on some alternative strategies which I used in bringing the idea of silek in Randai to
an Australian performing community. Establishing silek in the body is an important precursor
to naturally embodying Randai’s unique style of acting - ‘akting balabek’, which I would now
like to consider.

Silek in Acting - Negotiating non-acting techniques

*Balabek and dialogue.*

In Western theatre the actor’s craft is a core element, his or her character and transforma-
tion key processes. In Randai what the Minangkabau refer to as *Akting dan Dialog* (terms
which indicate the lack of precedent in traditional performance forms) brings spoken text
and martial gesture together with very different assumptions about the function of the actor.
This section considers some points of resistance encountered when actors negotiate the
transition from Western playing styles to Randai.

Words and gesture (*kato-kato* and *gerak silek*) come together in what they call ‘*Akting & Dia-
log*’ where some of the most interesting value differences are played out. As the
*gurindam/galombang* players clear from the inner circle the site hosts a scene or round (*ade-
gan*) where two or more players interact. Their dialogue, continuing with the rhythmic pat-
terns of chanted *kaba*, takes the form of a dialectical exchange following the strategy of a
duel.

Randai scholars have made comparisons with the dialectics of Greek drama, Brecht and
Chinese Opera (Damhuri 1975, Esten 1993, Nor 1986, Kartomi 1981a). However the acting it-
self is one of the least examined features of Randai both in practice as in the literature. Ad-
apted from outside influences and with apparently no corresponding indigenous examples of
mimesis in the Minangkabau arts with which to identify it, *Akting dan Dialog* neverthe-
less inherits its principles from other Minangkabau art forms. Instead of emulating Western
concerns with character or psychological truth, Randai ‘*akting*’ is rather a way, schematically,
to represent the key players in the narrative. Higher values continue to reside in the wit of
wordplay, sonorous vocal declamations, and elegance of the actor’s body gesture, a stylisa-
tion inherited from *silek* called *balabek*.

*Actors In The Circular Space.*

One particular challenge for Western actors approaching Randai lies in working the arena sta-
ging - i.e. the use of stepping and walking protocols, the use of position within the circle and
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

the use of body to fill space and work the audience. Randai actors open up the internal space of the stage and direct the dialogue inwards, facing each other, backs to the surrounding audience (see figures 4, 7, 35 ff). This positions the audience as spectators outside the sphere of play similar to the fourth wall effect but without the implied aspiration to realism. To overcome sight-line problems, for example, Randai actors periodically rotate the axis of play.

Another is coming to terms with the poetic dialogue and the narrative tone arising from playing the storyteller not the character per se. The word *balabek* implies ‘rich embellishment’, (from Minangkabau, and cogn Ind. *lebat*, luxuriant, dense, (of trees) fruit-laden (Echols and Shadily, 1992, p.333) and is used to indicate the physical style of ‘langkah’, the *silek*-derived stepping and gestural vocabulary, that underscore the delivery of lines. The text in these *‘adegan’* (scenes), also called *legaran* (revolutions), is in roughly the same poetic metre and rhyming pattern as the songs. Addressing each other from near the perimeter across the wide space of the circle, the players declaim their speeches in a heightened non-naturalistic manner. The speaker steps rhythmically, usually forward and back, accenting the rhythm of the poetry with every footfall and expansive hand gesture. While highly stylised, these moves are neither choreographed nor symbolically charged, and can be read as providing a kind of large physical rhetorical flourish to the speeches. The stepping ebbs and flows, neither travels forward nor creeps around the perimeter, but rather paces on the arc or within the sector as may a speaker at a podium. Between speeches as if to let the last point sink in, the players reposition themselves further round the circle before turning in to speak again. The listener listens actively (with no illustrative gestures or responses) and maintains the diametrical opposition as they circumnavigate the space.

The actor’s body, consistent with *silek* practice, never faces square on to its opponent, but is always oriented diagonally toward one foot or the other. The shoulders and torso turn aside, presenting an oblique and thus narrow target in an attitude of self-protection. The weight thus spiraled, though deeply grounded, feels off balance and precarious to a western-trained actor used to finding their power in a neutral centered stance. Here power is on the side of the agile and quick of reflex. It is very *silek* never to be seen to settle, to keep the opponent on their toes not knowing where the next move will come from. This defensive posture, an *en guard* position, viewed as social body language typically conveys distrust but can also express deference, as it avoids the open and confrontational. The range includes open postures derived from the attitude of invitation where, in a controlled *pancak silek* tournament the defender presents their body by opening their defences as a cue to the aggressor to initiate attack. When combined with all manner of hand gestures, the eight main possible closed and
open foot positions support a surprisingly broad spectrum of character attitudes, made all the more dynamic due to the very precariousness of the stance.

The effect of the spiraling body, accompanied by bold gestures and heightened dialogue, is a sustained tension, an unresolved energy, which breaks only when the group calls out the scene with their cue for the dance to take over, and only really settles, momentarily, at their transitional walk around. Pauka describes these “gestures and steps reinforcing the spoken words (as) a kind of sign language based on silek moves”. I disagree to the extent that this implies some codified system of signs that might be explicitly choreographed to express sentences as in Bharatnatyam for example. In the service of actors, the gestures are only loosely derived from their utilitarian source in silek self defence actions and (notwithstanding any symbolism that mystical Islam has attached thereto) may be better understood as cultural body repertoire.

While dialectical, there is no Brechtian direct address in the dialogues (with only the occasional exception of a self introduction by clown or bandit characters as comic relief). Rather a Bakhtinian dialogism is at work. Characters play out their debates while the audience, as witness, are free to choose sides, not overtly steered by an intervening perspective. The singer/narrator does not so much make value judgments but adds emotional landscape and exposition.

Gesture In Acting.

As with dance an equal and opposite tension through the body grounds the stance and clarifies the effort that powers martial moves. It’s a relaxed tension - the balance of opposite forces - that resonates with tension in the scene. As with dance, gesture makes sense only in terms of the surface and mass with which it seemingly interacts. In silek, the upper arm is used discreetly as a subtle shield connected to gele (the swivel of torso to avoid an attack). For an actor the action anchors the oblique positions meaningfully and naturally, creating a sense that the gesture is deflecting the reactions of one’s antagonist as if deflecting peas from a peashooter.

Although it feels bizarre and over-regulated to do one move for every line of speech from a limited palette (for example, frequent alternation of just two main gestures interspersed with an occasional third or wild-card move), this repetition of few components actually appears much more comfortable to an audience than a long string of ever changing postures. Reiterating the theme of repetition and simplicity, the limited palette establishes itself as an ebb and flow, which throws focus to the dialogue. In contrast, a constantly varying gesticula-
tion implies a naturalism not supported by the mannered style and tends toward the baroque (rather cluttered and clumsy) distracting by its apparent significance. Meryerhold’s comment on the ill mix of naturalistic tendencies in a stylized form, in his case Western opera, was that “The better the acting, the more naive the very convention of opera appears. As soon as stylization and reality are juxtaposed, the apparent inadequacy of stylization is revealed. and the whole foundation of the art collapses” (Meyerhold & Braun, 1969: p.81)

How has progressive experience coaching amateurs and professionals throughout the case studies led me to these insights?

In the inaugural study, *The Horned Matriarch*, we groped between Randai’s stylistic conventions and the acting techniques brought in by the cast. With more confidence in the choreographic and schematic elements, it was a slower process to devise a strategy and assume the confidence to subvert Western acting habits. By the time of its revision as *Story of Reno Nilam* despite coaching away from the idea of subtext and characters as psychological individuals, I was still attempting to use interior motivation to animate an essentially rhetorical style, drawn by the assumptions of actors and my own tentativity. Recognising this I have subsequently leant toward a clearer articulation of the original declamatory style with fewer concessions to naturalism. In *Boldenblee* this was applied less rigorously with hip-hop as an alternative model fulfilling many of the same functions.

In a successful incorporation of *Boldenblee*’s new movement palettes into the gestural language of scenes, the character of the Cook wielded her utensils in the manner of the firestick twirlers, to enhance her speech as she addressed the escaping children. Admittedly, this dialogue was a precursor to a physical confrontation where more directly combative gestures are generally valid. Obviously one important factor about Randai is the symbiosis of the movement of *silek* with the premise for the form. Not all body vocabularies translate as comprehensively as *silek* especially when weapons are involved. However more devoted studio time with physical performers of excellence may have resulted in more profound gestural expressions from the available vocabulary.

Many of these insights have accrued from responses in training to individual actors, for example working with Dana Diaz-Tutaan and Elizabeth Sisson showed me how much closer such delivery is to the art of a singer than an actor, with its heightened emotive force bounded by rhythmic resolutions. One incidental opportunity to apply the style to a speech from Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* showed me how anchoring, i.e. pinpointing 3 or so audience positions to direct the address alternately, helps to naturally manage the pivoting gestures which enliven delivery whilst reaching all 360 degrees of surrounding audience. Choices made by act-
ors that didn’t work only highlighted the logic of the customary style in its context. Trial and error has contributed to a training system only briefly touched on here.

**Performer and Space**

The silek dancers are configured in a circle, their movement circumnavigating the playing space. Ideally, an audience closes tightly around the playing circle, an extension of it, so that the lingkaran delimits the edge of the viewing space as much as the performing space. Within an energetic intimate audience the circle is less observable as a choreographic choice than experienced as a hole in the midst of a crowd in which the action occurs, the lingkaran forming a liminal interface between audience and story. In the The Arthurian Project’s Quest Perilous the size of the circle and remoteness of the first row was necessary for safety because of sword play on the periphery but it changed the active-passive factor and set up the lingkaran as a positive floor design - a circle - rather than as the edge ringing a negative space. In other venues, despite informal seating arrangements to encourage this, Western audience behaviour persisted in maintaining a polite distance. Only in my company's mini-Randai, *Mr Stupid*, performed for schools did audience manage to create this energy field around the performance. In *Mr Stupid*, where a cast of three presented the folktale of Pak Pandir and his Waterbuffalo in a 'bare bones' Randai format but with no lingkaran to separate the innermost circle of spectators from the playing space, audience shaped the venue. Less accustomed to personal space, children packed around us like sardines, cross-legged on the floor, with outer rows on chairs or standing, forming a wok-shaped human sound-shell that enhanced the centripetal focus.

**How can we understand the circular space.**

Inside the ring the circle remains unlocalised, a neutral space for discussion and consensus. While opposite sectors correspond to the corners in a boxing ring, but where the polarity is not locked to place but moves with the players, the centre is a point of convergence. General action mostly happens near the periphery and there is always the same directional flow within a given group. The space outside the circle suggests parallel action, same time - different plane (e.g. a hidden presence, distant city, or metaphysical dimension such as dream or memory - Munnysuckle's tower in *Boldenblee* (figure 16) for example). Circumnavigating the space, usually three times at a brisk pace, indicates travel or passage of time. These spatial devices, though observable from my first engagement with Randai, gained sharper definition though practice as not just arbitrary director's gimmicks but part of Randai's schematic world.
Landscape in a schematic space

Naturalism in the acting style, and action dominating debate, such as using stage business to help establish character and scene (e.g. Mande Rubiah busy with her cloth in The Horned Matriarch - figure 39), muddled the message in our first effort. Not fully appreciating the symbolic power of the staging geometry, we indulged in action against the circular flow to imply particular environments, instead of placing the responsibility for exposition solely at the feet of the text. These adaptations - concessions for a Western audience as much as for actors concerned with subtext, super objectives and mimetic realism - compromised the fundamental nature of Randai by privileging concrete temporal reality over abstract principles. If my desire was aimed at creating fusions I needed to clarify any confusion of the languages of space at work in both cultures.

Robin Laurie, as consultant director on the inaugural version, brought her background in clown to assist the ‘Aunties’ of The Horned Matriarch to develop a kind of lazzi style comic business which was in the physical sense very comparable to the Randai clowning antics (see figure 41). In the spatial sense, though, it etched a particular localised terrain into the space of the circle and so redefined its function. Instead of obstacles appearing in the schematic path of the circumnavigating travellers leaving the untravelled terrain an infinite and undefined possibility, the travellers seemed to navigate according to a predefined if invisible landscape, whose limitations were therefore circumscribed by the circle. As a result, the perspective shifts to emphasise the site/landscape of action over the action itself and, although momentary, it nevertheless begs the question of how long to sustain an illusion that disrupts the conceptual clarity of unlocalised space.

Lines of tension

Van Keren’s direction of Quest Perilous showed me what happens when blocking and tableaux more typical of conventional theatre-in-the-round are used in Randai. The potency of a tableau that visually communicates status relationships in a radial (out-focussed, centrifugal) interpretation of space is defused when played in an interior circle (in-facing, centripetal). It seems blocking in Randai needs to relate to the circle in more schematic ways.

In Randai, tension of opposites is the point - two sides of an argument. Like a tennis match, the face off is what engages the audience. The principle extends to bilateral tensions in the body, as much as between two bodies or two parties on stage. Thus when there are three or four bodies they need to polarise into opposites whether Master/servant, hero/villain, Mentor/student, boy/girl, parent/child or simply two equals with differing points of view. By way
CHAPTER 5 - The Physical Language: Negotiating 'Silek'

of emphasising this I posit as exception the neutral central space (and also the ex-circular space) as traditional alternatives that underscore the duality of the traditional hemispheres within the playing space.

In discussing the neutral space I offer as example a scene from Quest in which a knight summons his three maidservants to arm him. A Randai treatment would maintain a strictly dualist staging where the maids cluster as one entity, the Servant Party, in opposition to their Master at the other pole. After preliminary speeches the arming would take place centre where opposites or opponents meet in neutral space. It is after all the centre of a fighting ring where two sides grapple for power, as also the centre of a fire where logs intersect that burns hottest, as Minangkabau proverb “dima kayu basilang, di sinan api manyalo” (crossed pieces of wood, there the fire burns) reminds us. When a third party enters, Master and Servants ideally form a united team retiring to their ‘corner’ now in opposition to the newcomers, maintaining the diametrical. In Quest these newcomers also posed a problem. Antagonism between the Hero and the Lady may have been the main narrative interest but from a Randai point of view they would enter the aforementioned scene as one team united against a common opponent, highlighting the primary dichotomy of Knight vs Hero, whereas Van Keren’s treatment resulted in four separate interest points and a therefore diffuse staging distribution without reference to hierarchy and spatially relating neither to edge nor centre, the only real geometrical landmarks of a circle.

Within the design of a circle, which reads in this context as a negative space, not as a positive shape from which the audience stand back as in conventional theatre-in-the-round, it appeared necessary to have clear structures to maintain tension and gravitational pull. Because here random objects have no edges or frame to relate to, the multidirectional approach featuring a hierarchy of positions and criss-crossing lines of tension, translates as amorphous and random. There is no clear backdrop in Randai to help define the stage picture.

While the diametrically linear blocking pattern represents a standard pattern, secondary variations such as tri-radial can be used where several bodies or viewpoints are involved over a single issue, their interests intersecting at the centre-point. Approaching centre to meet or physically connect (a mother taking leave of a kneeling child, for example) and circumnavigaton, either inside or outside the ring as used for travelling interludes, have special applications but are equally schematically determined.

Throughout the case studies we sought innovations in blocking that were nevertheless consistent with these principles, notably in Boldenblee where we successfully rendered them in the air. What seems to upset the circularity is two or more unrelated lines of tension operat-
ing at the same time in different quarters, where neither cross the centre-point therefore failing to reference the symbolic geometry of the circle. This returns us to the concept of mandala, a balanced pattern containing contrasts and variations but each part representing abstract relational notions inherent within the design, rather than arbitrary design or programmatic notions particular to the scenario or individual personae rendered therein.

Finding Randai in the moving body

This chapter has explored issues arising in the physical domain - the body-work as derived from *silek* and its application in dance and acting. I have surveyed the culturally determined approaches of participants to embodying this vocabulary and noted what challenges arise when attempting to cross-pollinate these with corresponding forms that may have more apparent relevance in a globalised space.

What I gleaned from this material is a recognition of the different sense of body, personal space and performance values as patterned by culture. In terms of the physical presentation, it is about effect not effort; about group not individual. It’s from *functional* integrity that the aesthetic is derived. These factors change the psychology of performance and performer preparation. Dependence on the collective is generally privileged over personal virtuosity and effort.

Energetically I have characterised Randai as a constant ebbing and flowing, which resonates with the cyclic flux of life. There are theoretical resonances here with Richard Schechner when he says that "All art is generated by a fundamental, aesthetic conflict between form and impulse, between the containment and the release of energy, between something coming to be and something ceasing to be." (Schechner, et al, 1972). In Randai this is made explicit between the *jantan* and the *batino*, the attack and defence, action and emptiness, where the ‘empty’ is a frame that contains the potential chaos of an unrestrained impulse to action. As a prophylactic against the merging of creative strands, the frame facilitates external clarity inviting a broader, collective (less specialist) participation more dependent on interpersonal connection than on personal responsibility. But such principles, eminently suited to the community context, also abound in the avant-garde, at least in theory (see Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2006 among others).

I also note how the repetitivity of the *galombang* begins to implicate speech and listening as keys to Randai. Schechner observes that "Speech forms a kind of pointing, and more specifically a kind of grasping. [...] At some point [babies] discover that the voice can reach further
than the arm. The word or sound becomes a way to possess, a kind of long distance tasting. Language from the beginning has this physical basis as a way of extending the power of oneself through space” (Schechner, Benedetti, Jaeger & Cerf, 1972). In arguing (against Artaud's anti-verbal stance) for a restoration of language to the stage, Schechner's choice of terms strongly resonates with the physical performance of word with gesture in the playing style of Randai, suggesting it may have a significant contribution to make as a manifestation of such discourses. Indeed it is explicitly Schechner's performance studies that has attempted, through his recognition of forms that typically fall outside the received notions of theatre, the more inclusive conception of performance that my findings invite. In theory at least various principles embodied by Randai seem to have been tossed around the avant garde for some time.

With this in mind the following chapter will look at the place and structure of words and text in Randai, originating from seni bakaba, the storytellers art, and will consider whether these support or undermine a global contemporary manifestation of Randai.
Fig. 33: The gambling scene from *Palmo Gaga to Reno Nilam*: (Left) Zulkifli tosses the coin as Palimo Gaga in Padangpanjang, 1989. (Centre) Paul Cordeiro as Cik Menan and (right) Edi Asmara as Palimo Gaga in Sydney 1998.

Fig. 34: Two actors playing servants use typical *siek pasambah*an moves to step into the space to kneel before Palimo Gaga.

Fig. 35: (Below) In Scene 1 of *The Horned Matriarch* Clare Apelt and Ron Morelos work from the periphery of the circle with classic Randai gesture and listening postures. [EG].
Fig. 36. Drawing on established stagecraft in The Horned Matriarch: (left) closing up the space to express greater intensity (Ron Morelos and Clare Apelt); (right) Larisa Chen as Mande Rubiah interpreting her role as a character study used a broad vernacular accent inspired by the indigenous Australian voice in order to naturalise some of the heightened dialogue. [E.G.]

Fig. 37. Approaching Randai acting in the Sydney production: (left and centre) Actors used naturalistic improvisations to establish relationship dynamics; (right) Classic balabek style was used with the text (above right) .. and in Fig. 38 (below) with the alienating device of a microphone substitute in subsequent rehearsals.
Fig. 39. Stage business in lieu of debate: (Left) The lingkaran come alive as shadowy tiger spirits in a comic 'lost in the woods at twilight' moment drawing more on clowning and pantomime. (Right) Exposition of symbolic cultural protocols was oriented around the stage business of a gift of fine cloth presented to Mande Rubiah.

Fig. 40. Using real-world objects as props rather than techniques of illusion – the Brisbane version featured a mobile phone and a live bantam fowl. (See also Fig. 23: Right for a traditional example.)

Fig. 41. (Above Left) Clowning is a comic technique common to both traditions, used here by the Aunties, Mak Tuo, (Penny Glass, front) and Mak Etek, (Avril Huddy, rear) in a travelling scene with Reno Nilam, though usually reserved for male roles. (Centre) Doubling (my term for) a Randai convention of presenting two speakers of the same party as a pair, shadowing each other's movement and sharing an ideological position if not actual lines. Fig. 42 (Above Right) When Beat’n’feet meets Boldenblee Hip-hop gestures replace the gestural vocabulary of classic Randai delivery [AB]

Fig. 43: Working the rectangular end stage as arena: circular blocking evident in this moment of circumambulation between speeches (left) and diametrical delivery of dialogue (centre and right) in The Butterfly Seer. [M.R.]
CHAPTER 6 – Writing Randai: Negotiating 'Kaba'

The Medium of Words

If Silek is the first tiang or pillar of Randai, the second is Kaba (story) and Dendang (vocal music) the third. Both the latter are comprised of those ephemeral units we call words, 'kato-kato' which also means speech ('dialogue' in the context of theatre). Utterances, not images, are the seeds of artistic expression. Poetry, songs, stories, speechmaking, riddles, proverbs, praise, debate and an indigenous semiotics predominate in Minangkabau expressive arts.

From knowledge of names as ancient magical practice to political speeches and marketing spin, language is clearly a powerful tool conferred on the literate. "Evocative powers" have been ascribed to "lovers' verses" in highland Sumatra where "skill and verbal ability in poetry were a passport to female favour" (Barendregt, 2006). If words confer power, the subtle play of intellect and rhetoric required to parry with riddle and meaning in silek lidah ('word silek' or literally, 'silek of the tongue') is to the Minangkabau an indication of civil society. It is true of daily speech idioms as much as in refined art forms that the Minangkabau distinguish 'man from beast', as it were, by the ability to divine encoded meaning deeply embedded in figurative speech.

Aphorisms and simile, still a frequent feature in vernacular usage amongst the Minangkabau, may be strung end to end or further developed as sustained metaphor when embellishing the verbal arts including Randai. The pantun - a rhyming quatrains consisting of one couplet expressing a figurative image (called 'sindiran') followed by a rhythmically symmetrical couplet expressing the point of the poem ('isi' - contents) - is a ubiquitous Malay poetic form cropping up as song lyrics, in speech-making, in storytelling, and at the heart of a good Randai dialogue along with proverbs (pepatah) and riddles ('teka-teki'). Other important rhetorical skills are the pidato, high ceremonial speech-making full of high protocol and references to folk icons and historic landmarks, and more generally, the performance of status through apt choice of hierarchical modes of speech - kata mendatar ('level' speech between equals), kata menurun ('descending' speech - unadorned, even blunt, directed to children and inferiors), kata mendaki ('ascending' - deferential speech to seniors, superiors) and kata melereng ('oblique' speech) which must be refined, aesthetic, diplomatic, poetic and cryptic to be deemed therefore most appropriate to Randai and other arts.

To be adept at extemporising in such oblique poetic languages allows raw issues to be diplo-
matically delivered, exercising interpersonal skill and political wisdom. It is considered coarse and insulting to suppose it necessary to be blunt (Manggis, 1975). While the natural world may be held up as teacher, as custom holds in the Minangkabau maxim ‘alam takambang jadi guru’, social harmony pivots on transcending raw nature, by mastering the inflections of communication, of language, and by exploiting its ambiguities as practiced through oral arts. Despite similar displays of verbal mastery in Western theatre history (the Elizabethans spring to mind), proposed as the core of a contemporary populist theatre it appeared to contradict Western playmaking that leans toward a terse, contemporary vernacular, after the fashion of film dialogue.

Kaba as source:

*Kato-kato, Gurindam and Pantun (Dialogue, Lyrics & Poems).*

The textual component of Randai is rooted in seni bakaba, the oral art of story telling. Traditional kaba are long chanted heroic poems, the oldest of which, Cindua Mato (Majoindo, 1964, Abdullah, 1970) may be compared to the Homeric epics or Beowulf on some levels, but they include more recent, minor and regional legends and romances both classic and modern, a distinction delineated by Djamaris which closely echoes Scholes and Kellog’s division of epic and romance (Djamaris 2002, Scholes and Kellog 1966). As an independent live art form the kaba are chanted solo in distinct rhythmic melodies, often self-accompanied by a single melodic or rhythmic instrument. In Randai, stories originally manifesting as kaba are edited into two strands. Incidences of direct speech are set aside to become spoken dialogue (*kato-kato*) while purely narrative material, including reported action and functional links, becomes *gurindam* to be sung.

The poetic structure and formulaic features of kaba prevail when adapted as Randai libretti and generally apply both in the *gurindam* (song lyrics) and in dialogue. Isosyllabic lines of four words, usually nine syllables, feature two symmetrical down beats per half line with a caesura between, either before or after the fifth syllable. The tonal patterns of each half line often correspond, with rhyme, assonance and euphony in dominant positions reinforcing this rhythmicality. For Harun more important than end rhymes are that the patterns have assonance on interior words (Harun 1992). Others emphasise an alternating end-rhyme scheme that is ideally crafted when it sustains a progressive interlocking pattern that reiterates the second line of each rhyming pair as the first and third line of the following stanza (Yogi 1980, Djamaris 2002, Phillips 1981, Mulyardi, personal comm., 1997). This is difficult to craft and, typical of many of Randai’s embellishments, can extend a single idea into several stanzas of metaphoric development lengthening playing time. In script samples I have seen though, a
simpler alternating end-rhyme pattern is enough to establish a sense of metricality - and even this is not sustained consistently throughout the kato-kato. I mention this here because style does vary between gurindam and kato-kato and getting the balance right between different levels of formalism may change how the form translates across cultures and languages. What they have in common is a heightened formal style featuring the rhythmicality of oral traditions and a schematised template.

In delivering dialogue, actual pantun (with sindiran and isi construction) are set apart in their declamatory style with a particular melodic intonation, thus reading as a quotation for which the flow of conversation is momentarily suspended, just as it may be indented in writing. The main structural difference between gurindam and pantun is that there is no sindiran (figurative image) in gurindam; all four lines are isi (contain content) and progress the narrative, flowing forward into the next stanza into new material rather than reprising a theme. This priority of forward progression, of which more in the next chapter, is a notable priority of the narrative songs where gurindam lyrics are paired with traditional melodies. For example they do not make use of thematic refrains in what we typically call the chorus, preferring responsorial repetition of a gurindam line, or a one-size-fits-all nonsense refrain.

Performing 'kato-kato': words as dramatic dialogue

Modern theatre’s predilection for a gritty vernacular will find no place for these linguistic formalities of Randai, but while oblique figurative formulations in the dialogue and lyric may appear to make the text more opaque, it seems such stylistic turns of phrase are more likely to constitute familiar building blocks particular to the cultural group. Quickly understood as standardised idioms of elliptical speech, they reinforce the function of repetition and formulae (and even what we may disparage as cliché).

For Harun good Randai dialogue demands a special deftness and agility to deliver lines expressively even within these set patterns, so markedly different from daily speech. The importance is not in tonal changes but in tempo variations - fast or slow - and in the emphases - hard (harsh) or soft (gentle). (Harun 1992)

Through working with actors we found the random mix of five+four and four+five syllable patterns in dialogue unseats the tendency for rhythmic text to sink into a symmetrical ‘sing-song’ groove. The syncopation on the five beat half-line contrasted with the dogmatism of the even square beat of four despite the whole being anchored in a metrical symmetry (in the end more rhythmically consistent than the traditional versions). When combining this with mannered gesture and langkah, i.e. stepping or shifting the weight on the initial downbeat,
we realised how the slight asymmetry lends a hint of the precarious instability of spontaneous speech in its emphasis. The effect is helped by the lack of wrap-around lines, allowing each short line to begin with a new breath. The form can be dynamic and aggressive, or lyrical and melodious. It can also be formal and monotonous. Native acting ability and vocal timbre play a large part in the delivery of the text.

*Extra-diegetical text: - Pidato and Dendang Pembukaan*

There are two other significant text items aside from the narrative; they are the *pidato* and the *dendang pembukaan*. The pidato in Randai is an opening speech, by a spokesperson or leader of the troupe, that frames the performance, acknowledging host and guests and introducing the troupe and their story. It is delivered in the high ceremonial style used in *adaik* council deliberations and civic solemnities from which model it is derived (thus employing a separate aesthetic code from the more metrical *kaba*). Errington calls it a kind of quintessential *baso-basi* (polite protocol) where form takes precedence over content (Errington, 1984: p.136)

Despite its oral formulaic and an historical function that suggests a comparison with the mediæval 'banns', the Randai *pidato* contributes more than a nod to tradition. It is important to remember that the *pidato* continues as a living functional mode of public address still emulated (if enfeebled by contemporary accents) in any Minangkabau speech-making context.

Neither is the introductory *dendang pembukaan* part of the narrative cycle but an invocation to ancestors, absent teachers and high ranking guests. It conveys humility, requests the goodwill of spectators and apologises in advance for any offence that the performance, in its content or the shortcomings of its players, may give. It is balanced by a corresponding closing song, which together explicitly establishes the diegetical frame. Both are set to melodies recommended by custom for this purpose, marking them out from the main fare for familiar listeners.

Both the *dendang pembukaan* and *pidato* are unique to the prevailing context of each performance, identifying the company, their home base, acknowledging teachers or significant sponsors as well as introducing the story and message of the Randai play, much as a paper program does in our theatres. Originally extemporised from typical constructions, in our new context these need to be rewritten with each new season. In the printed scripts I have usually offered a sample to be customised by any subsequent production group. Typical of the performance of frame, the task requires lyric-composition to present local production information in song form, and a singer to express this musically, implying melodic selection or
composition in the process. In Sumatra, working to a predetermined melody, the singer takes these tasks in stride.

During the seminal development project in Brisbane, visiting artist, Zulkifli, wrote a special *pidato* speech to introduce our nascent endeavour (the cultivation of Randai in Australia) at its first work-in-progress showing. It was later adapted into English and delivered by a member of the cast when he was unable to return for the performance season. In other cases we dispensed with the *pidato* to tighten the opening protocols for a Western audience keen to cut to the chase and get away early. This omission seemed justifiable particularly where it retiterated the function of the Western frame that locates this detail in a paper program.

We have never omitted the *dendang pembukaan*, however, which without the *pidato* becomes the only remaining extra-diegetical direct address that is performed, and part of a framing pair with the closing song. Where expert Minangkabau vocalists were participating, we used the classic Minangkabau form to incorporate local production information and performed this untranslated (or, where space permitted, translated in the program notes). While conscious of the intercultural implications, this decision was based less on the aesthetic effect for audience as on the authenticity of the singers’ message, a personal obeisance delivered in their own words according to existing skills on behalf of the company. In other shows, new Opening Songs were composed with English lyrics or set to familiar iconic melodies accommodating to the scansion of English text. The challenges of writing to the classic Randai form in English language were significant and I address these next.

**Writing Randai**

This section examines how I approached the writing of Randai scripts in English. There were three broad approaches. The first was satisfied to loosely emulate perceived qualities. The second followed closely the conventions of *kaba* style, and the third moved away again to find equivalents in non-randai languages while retaining and emphasising a dramatic relevance that would justify the Randai presentation.

**Writing Reno Nilam**

Our first English language Randai script developed in 1986 was initially crafted by Catherine Fargher from a group process that integrated input by all collaborators including senior Randai figure, Zulkifli. There, Minangkabau formulae and English literary formulae borrowing a lot from Shakespearean devices, met head-on on the page. In my subsequent revisions and new scripts (*Mr Stupid* and *The Butterfly Seer*) the hybridisation increasingly occurred in a
single creative process with more control over the outcome. Finally the third writing stage involved passing on the principles through practical workshops and facilitating development of script by a novice group.

What I found comparing these with a script development process in Bahasa Minang begun in collaboration with my Sumatran collaborator, Admiral, during an Asialink artist residency in Sumatra in 1997, was that composing in English in this idiom is more challenging due to having to take into account iambic stress, making scansions in songs more tricky. A further problem is our paucity of true rhymes thanks to the abundance of phonetic sounds we have incorporated from other languages. By contrast borrowings into Bahasa Minang are brought into line according to consistent phonetics. Unlike Bahasa Minang which is more evenly stressed, poetic schemas for English concern the foot rather than the syllable. Using a syllabic model, Randai dialogue is not always rhythmically consistent. Even when nine-syllable lines are sustained, varying short and long beats and caesura placement alters the rhythmic pattern keeping the poetic cadence dynamic and prose-like. This reverses the strategy of blank verse which, by keeping the rhythm and losing the rhyme, achieves a similar end, evident if one compares the speech-like qualities of Shakespeare's tragedies with his more overtly rhymed comedies. Hip-hop demonstrates the effect of syllabic-based rhyme even further, in that textual rhythm is not just supported but indeed created by the recurrence of rhyme (Pihel, 1996). We therefore initially avoided sustaining strict meter, letting the dialogue fall in and out of rhyming patterns. In rewriting the text for Reno Nilam (under a formal script development program), however, I was encouraged by dramaturg, Bruce Keller, to be much more precise and consistent in matching rhythms and end rhymes, resulting in a much bolder verse form which is attempts to be more regular than that sustained by most Sumatran Randai. To achieve this throughout a two hour work required close attention to rhythmic features of the convention and decisions about where to allow more rhythmic latitude.

With the addition of only one stressed beat the dialogue easily slipped into the comfortable groove of iambic pentameter, so perfectly suited to spoken English, but this tended to lengthen the feel of lines, losing tension and forward progression. Another tendency was for lines to drop into a pattern of triplets (3+3+3) which fitted the nine syllable schema but lost the dramatic tension of the five+four split, and in songs might be disrupted by a refrain intended to divide a line at the usual caesura.

Using the Elizabethan model early on as a point of access, Fargher had incorporated Shakespearean devices like the final rhyming couplet to end scenes on a decisive beat, and perhaps overused the lyric form in lieu of the epic. After further field study on Randai dia-
logue I re-scored the rhetorical arc of each speech, sharpened debate protocols and made pantun more distinct from general dialogue by more strongly asserting the sindiran/isi form where the sindiran is an upfront establishing image put forward without apology or introduction.

The first and the final scenes of The Horned Matriarch: Story of Reno Nilam (Sydney version, Scenes 1 and 10, Print Appendix #1.1) came the closest to traditional dialogue style with sustained use of duelling pantun between the lovers and proverb and counter proverb as a didactic vehicle between mother and son. The comic aunties take a more tongue in cheek approach to the conventions of kato melereng, self-consciously foregrounding if not sending-up many of the formal features of the epic tradition.

In general, expressions and aphorisms were drawn most frequently from Minangkabau pepatah (proverbs), thence from English and Arabic sources. These were adapted, sometimes extended, others simply invented in kind. In The Butterfly Seer Quranic and Sufi writings provided additional models. This question of sourcing culturally established expressions offers an example of balancing interculturality against formalism. If proverbs represent an ethno-specific shorthand that anchors the form to a given history of ideas and identity, then new or exotic proverbs would not do this for a Western audience. But for a story set in exotic Sumatra, some of my dramaturgical advisors found local symbolism inconsistent with the mise en scene. The very question betrays a fundamental perspective shift where the dramaturgs were seeking a naturalistic continuity rather than a symbolic one.

Writing The Butterfly Seer

The Butterfly Seer refined my approach to text begun with Story of Reno Nilam, redirected slightly from the populist toward a higher aesthetic anticipating a highly concentrated auditorium-bound audience. Written well prior to making final staging choices in the context of this research project, I made some adjustments to appeal to the anticipated literacy of a sophisticated viewer, and to accommodate the more wholistic expectation of dramatic representation such an audience would bring. I endeavoured to keep the text playful and self reflexive, philosophically literate, yet physically grounded in the speaking body.

From the kaba tradition Randai inherits the device of long repeated descriptive motifs (often fleshing out a moment’s meeting to several minutes with a litany of stock characteristics) that serve to populate a simple plot with baroque embellishment indicative of oral derivation and the informal performance context. For the more attentive audience of high theatre, I
veered away from such overt blocks of repetition managing a constant tension between the leisure to savour verbal prowess and the pressure to keep the performed length under ninety minutes.

I used this more concentrated forum of *The Butterfly Seer* to interpret the florid style more in terms of breadth and depth of vocabulary than in repetition, not unlike the greater historical shift from orality to literacy as noted by writers on narrative history (Scholes and Kellog 1966). I was also conscious that, without repetition, we risked compromising the audience’s chance to relinquish their pursuit of the novel in favour of the flow of stock themes and phrases which provide both accessibility and a backdrop for sonic, linguistic play.

I followed the metrical form more closely than in previous scripts. But still allowed some English-friendly rhythms to infiltrate the dialogue. To facilitate strophic composition of the songs, I endeavoured to attain consistency in the rhythmic scheme and placement of caesurae. In English the placement of the caesura is both more critical and more difficult than in Minangkabau due both to language features and listening habits - they are less fazed, for example, to hear a word divided intersyllabically by a nonsense refrain.

Physical workshops had demonstrated the importance of opening lines on a fresh thought and preferably a downbeat (masculine opening). But I offset these formalities with occasional counterpoints. Metrically irregular lines such as sharing a metrical line between two speakers, wrapping a thought or sentence through two or three lines, and extending final lines of speeches, all helped to loosen the formality without displacing the convention entirely. The important parameters were the fresh breath and attack for each beginning, and the possibility to break a longer line down into parts that may be each matched with a clear single gesture.

Similarly I followed Minangkabau phrase constructions where possible, particularly the pattern of making a statement in figurative form before stating its meaning in plain speech, rather than placing the image afterwards to qualify or elaborate a stated point.

Overall my aim in *The Butterfly Seer* was to relax the formality only slightly by using and occasionally disrupting structural features to achieve warmth, humour and a vernacular tone interspersed with the arch poetics, according to character. This was part of the attempt to draw the form closer to a tone acceptable in the specialist theatre environment without strictly departing from the form under examination. It demonstrates the kind of issues that arise when writing between cultures. It was also to be the blueprint for a second phase of experimentation and so it was important that the form retain its structural formality as repres-
entative of the Randai convention.

There were concerns (arising under industry attention at the Australian National Playwrights’ Conference and other professional showings) that the density of the text and the foreign language used would obfuscate the story. Feedback from various audiences did not support this concern even though we found it helped to project the song texts as a visual reference so audiences would not miss important narrative developments delivered amidst the unfamiliar textures of the music, but I will discuss this aspect of text in the next chapter on the vocal score.

These texts consciously aimed to transpose the textual conventions of Randai to the English idiom. In the context of a Randai-centred enquiry, failure to consider the native gestures and verbal rhythms as a wholistic package would have limited the value of the data, and potentially undermined any rationale for using any other aspect of the Randai micro-ecology.

A less conscious attempt at an English language Randai may serve to illustrate.

*Achieving a high poetics without shifting to a literary cadence.*

The challenge of balancing the high baroque verbal style with an oral poetics is more overtly illustrated by the text choice made by director, Wayne van Keren, when, in the context of the *Arthurian Randai Project*, I was engaged to pass on sufficient insight to equip a company to pursue Randai in their own right. This included a long search comparing the merits, for Randai dialogue, of a number of Middle English verse renderings of the tale of Sir Garrayth of Beaumains, which I had initially proposed in Malory’s prose version. The intention was to exploit the correlations between Randai and medieval romance, but it soon became apparent that Malory’s prose version was not as ideal a counterpart to *kaba* as his own earlier sources, the Middle English lays and stanzaic verse romances of the 13th century. Similarly placed at the junction between oral and written culture, they feature many correspondences to Randai in their composition and delivery. However, Van Keren opted in the end for Tennyson’s much later poetic interpretation of the story. By doing so he traded features of orality for literary cadences less suited to Randai delivery. Despite storyline advantages - a more developed lead relationship, more resolved ending, and dialogue more fully extrapolated from Malory’s
barely sketched indications of speech - his choice showed up disadvantages that provide an opportunity to better understand how the orality of the text should work symbiotically within Randai performance.

Tennyson's text, a product of the Victorian renaissance of chivalry, is a literary work not an oral narrative. Its sentences are long, multi-claused affairs meandering through several lines and resolving often in counterpoint to the metrical pattern. These cadences were particularly hard to embody using Randai's schematic gestural language and rhythmic flux. Changes of thought often occur mid-line so that actors were uncertain whether the body should work in accordance with the rhythms of punctuation or in accordance with poetic metre.

In *The Actor and the Text* Cicely Berry advocates a more rhythmic reading of Shakespeare, encouraging actors not to suppress the rhythms as written (Berry, 1993). This is even more necessary in Randai where the ebb and flow of the movement makes sense only when each line is powered by a separate thought and a separate breath.

Though Van Keren's direction did much to moderate this physically passive style, the experiment highlighted a distinction concerning the floridness of the Randai texts. As an oral form, designed to be taken in on the run and recalled without reference to written record, ornamentation is implemented to aid memory and aural apprehension, making more use of shorter repeating patterns than text composed and embellished on the page. The complex syntax of Tennyson's poem was difficult to deliver with any sense of immediacy in its spoken-style, endorsing the view that, despite the poetic virtuosity of the *kaba*, Randai's rightful context is the popular.

The close work on traditional form, juxtaposed with the effects of less conscious adaptations, led to intrinsic understandings of the mechanisms and seductions of the formulaic text, which might be applied in inventing or appropriating new strategies for writing Randai. *Boldenblee*, on the other hand, employed an entirely different strategy which sacrificed the high epic oratory of the original tradition in favour of increased collective ownership and community *gotong-royong* principles.

**Writing Boldenblee**

*A method for group devising a contemporary Randai text.*

From choosing the text to co-editing rhyming verse, *The Ballad of Boldenblee*’s collective writing process was a first experiment in communicating the idea of Randai as a particular set of objectives that pertain to creating and combining all the elements of performance, in-
CLUDING story, and using these with a group of unskilled writers. We had originally proposed to examine local issues of concern to youth participants through the medium of an Anglo-Saxon oral romance, the tale of the monstrous knight, Sir Gowther, to follow through research begun in the Arthurian project. Circumstances propelled us toward a more ambitious project to self-devise our own local narrative in the oral romance style rather than using a medieval source allegorically. Beholden to community cultural development processes, I accepted a participant-proposed draft scenario (by adult participant, Joel Teasdale), an environmentalist fairytale about Newcastle's accelerating corporate development, written in only a vaguely epic-derivative style, challenging us to structure these conventions in as we developed the text specifically for Randai.

Brainstorming the narrative thread with the group involved them carefully re-thinking the plot as an heroic narrative, resisting individualising and psychologising character development and focussing on an action-driven through-line with bold, unambiguous stakes. Considering the draft synopsis as our *kaba*, we separated key rounds of dialogue from 'narratable' episodes according to Randai conventions.

Thus for example we open Round One typically, with the departure of the hero/ine from her family. Not only is the motif of setting off to the *rantau* on a quest typical but, following Pauka's thesis that places *silek* as central to both content and form, (Pauka 1996, 1998) we already have Boldenblee's untutored misuse of physical combat between father and daughter causing the disgrace that launches the subsequent action.

Having established character objectives for each round, and plot trajectories for each song, participants got underway writing dialogue and song lyrics each choosing a part to work on.

*Using 'Silek Lidah' and Hip-hop to Write the Script.*

Features of writing had been included in our general induction sessions. Alongside these, spoken word, performance poetry and rap workshops provided a comparison and a familiar point of identification while preparing participants for the concept of the primacy of words over mimesis to communicate story, emphasising dialogue as a continuation of the narrator's text.

Rhyming with beats aimed to encourage a rhythmic delivery anchored in the body and helped to moderate the breath. Where full participation of the body was achieved and respiration synchronised with metre, the stylistic embellishments were more integrated and the message delivered with more clarity. It seemed greater commitment to the rhythmic mode enabled
the audience to ‘step up’ to the stylisation instead of becoming distracted by it.

Using the model of an ‘MC’ battle to understand the dynamic of Randai dialogue I encouraged each actor to develop their own ‘sides’ that is to build up their argument as if they had the floor to themselves to present it, generating the longer rhetorical speeches of Randai and so avoiding ping pong dialogue. In an ‘MC’ battle, each ‘MC’ takes the microphone and stands and delivers his case making a series of points and rebuttals while self reflexively referencing his mode and medium. It is a verbal spar like silek lidah with its attitude of combat, rhyming word-games, and bold, rhythmic delivery making it the nearest contemporary equivalent of the duelling pantun traditions referred to in Randai.

Participants worked on elaborating familiar proverbial themes into their arguments as cultural reference points aimed at both affirming the values of the audience and relieving their concentration load through the familiarity of formulaic constructions. In songs proverbs helped to define and underscore core themes. They not only preserve the kata melereng tone but are a means to abstract the core message from the narrative and promote a discursive engagement with the event.

**Shared authorship and the idea of gotong-royong.**

Writing with so many hands on the job generated an over abundance of alternative detail as simultaneous solutions were generated by different writers and efforts to keep abreast of continuity sometimes lagged. This was resolved by an overriding editorial role by the primary facilitator, myself, churning out material to segue between participant contributions after working closely with young authors on continuity, rhyme options and rhythmic integrity.

Such mass democratic co-authorship is less gotong-royong than based on Western ideas of fairness and equality. In gotong-royong, as in the organisational culture of Randai, each contribution no matter how lowly is recognised as equal in value, and there is no status need for them to be equal in nature or centrality. The way is of recognising the value of different roles rather than sharing the limelight of a central role in a hierarchy. (This also, incidentally, works in Minangkabau's sistem matriakat - the matrilocal social system - with regard to gender roles). On the other hand, old Randai used to rely on improvised dialogue and in this way the self-authorship of dialogue sides has a coherent relationship to Randai principles. My editorial role also made up for limits of poetic skill, one of the reasons for the decline of extemporised Randai in West Sumatra.

**Metaphysical potency: Narrative as frame for invocation.**
I have gone in to some depth concerning the text, its conventions and our interventions because it's centrality to the Randai paradigm was becoming increasingly apparent.

Against the reassuring reiterations of form, and knowing, as we now do, that mimesis, as a ritual of transformation, is not at the heart of the enactment, the potency of an unfolding narrative stands highlighted. For a long time I took this to mean the story - a plot-line of actions and events. But a Randai text is more than the narrative action and events it tells; it is also the words with which it is told.

After all, underlying the narrative trajectory of beginning, middle and end, is a clearly cyclic foundation suggesting an older world-view. I wondered if one might not look, besides upscale to the broader social factors of society building, also down-scale to the microcosmic level of word magic, to poetry as shamanic spell, for its more profound significances. Vladimir Braginsky demonstrates the magical potency of the poetic devices of alliteration, assonance and rhyme which he suggests are residual in Minangkabau *kaba* and *pantun* from the older Malay incantations and charms (Braginsky 2006). It seems such devices set in train a sonic composition of frequently repeated phonemes that embellishes a semantic text with a secondary layer of meaning.

In contrast, then, to a Beckettian mistrust of language Randai pivots on a huge confidence in the power of words and utterances to convey (or deliberately misconvey) meaning. Using the material effects of sound, style and register (*kata*-mendaki, -mendatar, -menurun or -meler-eng, to talk up, down, on the level or obliquely) we become, in an almost post-modern sense, beholden to this surface 'game' as the only 'knowable'. That which is said to be, is. Not because the speaker can be trusted implicitly. Duplicitly is an acknowledged cultural trait ('takuluak tunjuak; kalingkiang bakaik', 'the index finger points straight, but the little finger is hooked'). But that by saying it, it is brought into being even at a vibrational level. Added to these words and phonemes is the seductive power of the voice itself, often said to bestow on the singer a superordinary capacity to entrance a particular listener by the same order of power that the shaman uses to invoke the compliance of both organic subjects (tigers, bees, lovers) and assistant spirits (cf Kartomi 1972, Skeat 1966). If the charm is deemed efficacious in the mesmeric seduction of both ethereal and organic entities one may by implication suppose the same devices work on the human audience of *kaba* and Randai. In this sense Randai seems to evolve as a 'talkfest' where sung, intoned and spoken word creates dialogue within a community, engendering that community by what it says and more deeply activating it by its rhythmic accents.
Findings on the nature of Randai text

In this section I have examined the metric features particular to Randai performance text and tried to show how they support what I am positing as the Randai paradigm. Use of meter in dramatic text will naturally tend to the formulaic and Randai is by no means unique in using it. Meter is by necessity one way of framing, or containing, the ideas of a text. As a scaffold for delivery of the verbal content of song and dialogue it is itself a performed frame.

Even the plot itself may be understood as a modular frame on which to hang the virtuosic and exegetical embellishments of sindiran (figurative speech), tekateki (riddles), pantun and the more didactic maxims, aphorisms and proverbs (pepatah petitih, pituah). The ephemeral structure reiterates a culture of traditional wisdom wherein creativity of the individual is expressed in the detail without disrupting the supportive communal super-structure which is sustained, not by the imposition of standards through overarching external mechanisms, but from within, by the consensus of audience and performers.

Words and style reflect an attitude to the social contract as played out in the Minangkabau strata of language (kato melereng, etc). Our comparison to hip-hop (in Boldenblee) offered a means of connecting with this idea of highly formalised language and collaborative modes of dialogue-making. The prevailing impulse to hide artifice with naturalism contrasts with the approach, evident in both Randai and hip-hop, that foregrounds their artifice. In this sense it roughly corresponds with hip-hop street poets who embrace the artifice of street battles and a non-high art method of cultural production that eschews illusion and is highly reflexive in its content. Both are public, collaborative and orally transmitted, by a culture that revels in the sound of its own language. Like hip-hop, Randai works equally playing by us and playing to us (i.e. to the players' own community), engaging a knowing audience well versed to contemplate and evaluate the aesthetics of performance for their own sake.

So while my first impulse was that this style of theatre framing, and audience response of analytically observing and appreciating a familiar artistry, may be more Elizabethan than avantgarde, we find it again in more contemporary form amongst the rappers and MC's just because certain parallel conditions prevail, parallels that have been explored elsewhere in hybrid hip-hop performance such as Baba Brinkman's Chaucerian Rap, pointing up the relationship between rap and the oral poetic of Chaucer (McGilvray, 2007).

Without making claims for the Boldenblee text as in any way approaching an authentic hip-hop freestyle, what was shown by loosely following the guidelines of hip-hop as a tool in the exploration of Randai text was how the collaboration between audience and player, by
means of ephemeral frame, space and imaginative effort, pivots on a sense of community quite different to that engendered by perspective sets, sightlines and hierarchy.

Randai therefore stylistically shares qualities with both the grassroots school of street rhyming and “the techne of rhetorical speech and oral poetics” which Jackson reminds us was, after all, the genealogical antecedent to current day Performance Studies.” (Jackson, 2005). Understanding this spectrum of vitality in the text will help to address the next chapter topic where I consider music in its primary Randai role as a medium for delivering the potent words of *gurindam*.
CHAPTER 7 – The Musical Score: Negotiating ‘Dendang’

So far I have tried to show how the Western value system responds to Randai with a natural tendency that seeks to blur the performed frame and recast its components to carry meaningful content. But Randai, I claim, is dependent on or even defined by its frame which as negative space is symbiotically associated with its internal structure, its energetic ebb and flow, its rhythms and repetitions and the constructs of its text. I’ve shown why this constitutes a challenge and how I have approached a solution where it pertains to physical environment, movement and text. It remains to show how this applies to music.

Central to the sound-scape of Randai is its song cycle which carries the narration. Another distinguishing sound thread is that of the tapuak rhythms played out on galembong pants interspersed with shrill vocal cues, gore, essentially an extension of the silek movement. Beside these is instrumental music with both structural and illustrative functions.

Creative approaches to an intercultural Randai may seek to retain, re-codify or critique the traditional interplay of music in Randai according to a desired outcome. I tried three different approaches using progressively more original musical composition. Each provoked further insights into the distinctively Sumatran-derived principles of creation and performance. In this chapter I will focus on three issues that support my characterisation of Randai thus far as embodying an ebb and flow of energy, framing expressions of interiority, and reflecting a discursive oral culture through a text-based aurally delivered art form.

Vocal and Instrumental Music as Separate Strands

Dendang Gurindam

The vocal score for Randai is built on a set of ‘found’ melodies, that is, melodies from songs in the public domain. These are typically drawn from a canon of classic folk tunes called dendang. The most renowned and highly regarded form of dendang are the laments, ‘ratok’, also sometimes called dendang ‘sadi’, sad dendang, although Randai varies these with up-tempo ‘indang’ and ‘gembira’ melodies (see Kartomi, 1979). Such music derives from an indoor, late night ‘cafe’ style song tradition where it is typically accompanied by saluang, an endblown bamboo flute. In the cafe or bagurai context, a kind of musical ‘auction’, the singers must extemporise lyrics for each melody that the audience has requested and sustain this until audience successfully bid for an alternative melody. A consistent lyric pattern between melodies and a strictly strophic structure make this kind of performance possible. This be-
comes relevant in looking at *dendang* in Randai where each passage of *gurindam* between scenes of dialogue is assigned a unique melody sung a capella or with minimal accompaniment by two singers with an occasional unison response from the cast, sustaining this repeating pattern through to the next scene. The vocal score may simply be seen as a narrative song cycle featuring a different song for each scene (or sometimes a limited sequence of set melodies, that may be used more than once as I will clarify below) and the selection and arrangement of those melodies is usually the domain of the singer in consultation with the accompanist and key initiators.

**Tapuak**

The vocal score may be more central, but it is the tapuak score which is most associated with Randai. It is performed in conjunction with the *dendang* melodies, as a unique percussive motif that accents the end of each strophe before the silent walkaraound. Bridging *galombang* choreography to sound score there are as many percussive patterns per Randai as there are songs and dances (sometimes more if there are *galombang* patterns that alternate an A and a B part against a single melody). Even within the *tapuak* score there is a frame and content distinction between the two repeated *tapuak* refrains that mark each rising and sitting of the dancers, and the unique pattern assigned per song embellishing the end of every strophe. Despite its sound integrating with the soundscape of the songs, the *tapuak* must be devised and performed by the physical team and therefore stands aside from both the song-cycle and band music.

**Instrumental, Incidental and Musik Illustrasi**

Separate both to the sung narration and to the percussive dividers of the *tapuak*, the instrumental strand incorporates: 1. music to summon and excite an audience, 2. formal processional music to herald the beginning/arrival and ending/departure of the entire event and 3. incidental music within scenes. All are provided by the instrumental band, typically an ensemble of drum, shawm and brass kettlechimes (see figure 44).

Incidental music, the third application of music by the band, may be further distinguished as either schematic music, literal music or programmatic music. Accompaniment to random *silek* battles and music to convey an elision of time or distance, such as the typical device for long distance travel where a character walks briskly around the circle three times, may be seen as symbolic or schematic applications of incidental music. The depiction of music at weddings, tournaments and festivities, or played by characters within the action, may be accepted as literally diegetic. Atmospheric effects that attempt to simulate realism may be de-
scribed as programmatic. For these the non-indigenous term 'musik illustrasi' is often used.

Unlike processional, festive and silek music which fulfil traditional roles evident elsewhere in the performance of culture, programmatic music in this context does not owe particular allegiances to tradition and offers one area of creative latitude for Randai innovators (Admiral, personal communication, 1998). Three dimensionalising the incidental score with programmatic motifs may add some relief for an audience tiring of the discursive head-space of word pictures. As an example, there were a lot environmental and mystical effects referred to in *The Butterfly Seer* that were unable to be played or staged in any literal sense, offering an open invitation to visual or music design to make manifest these invisibles. Swarms of Butterflies, storm, flood, a Mercedes Benz and the subsuming tide of the Arabian Sea, were among the most dependent among many environmental features of the script that Sherrif's incidental score made three dimensional. Not being a core tenet of Randai, when this three-dimensionality is introduced in opposition to existing conventions, it could be seen to conflict with other aspects of the form. In contexts where there are no existing or competing conventions, such as in *musik illustrasi*, the third dimension increases the situational realism appealing to audiences without interfering with the frame.

**Composing Randai**

As I have indicated, these three main sound strands are not typically the product of a sole composer. The song cycle melodies may be selected by the singer or saluang player. The tapuak are devised by the silek master/choreographer. The band leader really only leads the instrumental music. This distribution of input appears a good indication that the idea of a through-composed unified operatic type score is not native to the form. But does that mean it is incompatible?

In the context of art song, ‘through-composed’ describes settings in which a repeating verse structure is contradicted by the use of substantially different music for each stanza, unlike most hymns and folksongs, where strophic texts are reinforced by an equivalent repeating musical structure (Rumbold, 2010). One significant contra-indication of a through-composed score which I will discuss below is Randai’s dependance on interchangeability. *Dendang* melodies, like other components of the Randai frame, are highly modular, a feature that enables flexibility in performance as well as in the creating and production process. Such modularity depends on structural simplicity that then promotes a certain quality in performance and reception, ultimately manifesting in an audience’s mode of attention.

Throughout I have been emphasising this modular (interchangeable or episodic) quality, al-
ternating ebb with flow (or fullness with emptiness) wherein the ebb or empty components that constitute a performed frame underpin the concept of the form. Without them I am proposing a performance loses its identity as Randai.

The framing operates on several levels, that is, there are frames within frames from the event level down to the couplet. In conventional Randai, *Tapuak* motifs frame each verse of song, and each whole song, from its adjacent scenes, along a time continuum. Processional, overture and interval music (music to call out or call back an audience), as well as the first song of obeisance, are clearly extra-diegetical and constitute another level of frame, bracketing the entire story. The song melodies constitute a linear frame that shapes and supports the key text, the evolving story narration. With the frame consistent, words may be extemporised, stanzas added or subtracted as necessary, without disrupting the dancers or other adjacent, interdependent elements.

In contrast incidental music within a scene adds another layer of content to deepen existing dramatic content. While illustrative, diegetical 'content' music may enhance and communicate narrative reality, frame music on the other hand is generally empty of narrative detail in order to function flexibly as a container for whatever narrative moment may be required.

**Through-composition.**

In all these neo-Randai works I moved progressively toward a uniquely associated, purpose-composed musical direction. *The Horned Matriarch* was traditional with only tentative interpolations from alternative music cultures. *The Ballad of Boldenblee’s* score was all new although, being devised by the group in an ad hoc manner, was unified only to the degree that one musical director finalised, arranged and performed all but the live percussion. *The Butterfly Seer’s* score was the product of a composer commission. Though the terms of the commission were in the first phase aimed only at the song cycle, the authorial overview implied by a single composer lent itself to through-composing across the whole work.

A through-composed score changes more than just the music. It begins to change many other relationships within Randai. For example, it locks in a more complex choreography which is necessarily less modular, thus less responsive to the collective flux and more referential to an absolute score thus changing the playing style by reintroducing the Western measure of perfection against an ideal rather than relative to fellow performers. Instead of being harmonious, organic and ‘easy’ on participating individuals it becomes difficult, complex and expensive by becoming more reliant on specialists.
Fig. 44. Sanggar Batu Badoro's typical music ensemble of small gandang (held beneath the knees, left), handheld talempong, with (right) a split reed shawm made of green rice stalk and coconut leaf. Padang, 1997.

Fig. 45. Music facilitator Kari working on the first phase of development, from a palette of Minangkabau, Sundanese and Irish instruments, (left) and performing Hamdan on Kecapi Sunda as a gurindam (right). [EG]

Fig. 46. (Above left) Megan Collins, centre, leads a rapai (small frame drum) composition as literal festive music within the narrative of The Horned Matriarch. (Right) A typical presentation posture for dendang when accompanied by saluang or in this case, sampelong, here used in a scene from The Horned Matriarch. Larisa Chen, left accompanied by Collins. 1996.
Fig. 47: *Biduan*: (Left) Actors Eliane Morel and Dana Diaz-Tutaan doubled as singers in *Story of Reno Nilam*. (Centre) Jasmine Dixon and fifteen year-old Erin Jacobi were dedicated singers in *Ballad of Boldenblee*. Elizabeth Sisson sang solo (without a *paimbauan*) on *The Butterfly Seer*.

Fig. 48: (Left) Morel and Diaz-Tutaan consult with Megan Collins as musical director. Fig. 49: (Right) Jacobi and Dixon in the centre of a flurry of *tapuak*.

Fig. 50: Instrumental colour from *The Ballad of Boldenblee*. (Left) Junk percussion led by Kai Tipping with ten year old Jesse Jackson augmented *tapuak* in *Boldenblee*. (Centre and right) Guitar and Irish harp featured prominently in song accompaniment by Mike Burns.
Once the roles of processional and incidental music were included in *The Butterfly Seer*, it was easy to slip into underplaying the distinction of frame versus content. Whether or not this was conscious as an appeal to Western audience taste or a result of enculturated assumptions on the part of the composer, I would like to discuss some specific mechanics of the way in which certain Western ideals of composition affected the dramaturgical precepts.

I will focus mostly on the song cycle, partly because I see the song cycle as being at the core of Randai, in evolitional terms, and thus the least contingent, i.e. other factors depend upon it such as choreography, and the delivery of text. Against this, the *tapuak*, while being the most identifying framing device in Randai, has less at stake, i.e. it could be more easily substituted. It also provoked less resistance in our intercultural setting having no Western analogues with which it might be confused or assimilated. (Actually *tapuak* has been appropriated by Minang and Western artists in performance either as a folkloric embellishment (such as the Sofiani dance choreography, *Tari Randai*) or to convey thematic or narrative effects (Latrell’s *Alcestis*), but having not arisen as an issue in the case studies, for the purposes of this research it was a cul de sac I opted not to investigate deeply.

Even more contingent than *tapuak* though is the instrumental music, for it is generally improvised independently to suit the action on the night. In its role as incidental or illustrasi music colouring the scenic action it is the most contingent as this is an optional extra with no structural function. A tussle of power between illustrative functions of music and its integrity as a frame for songs could be said to have arisen in the score for *The Butterfly Seer*. While the songs are particularly sensitive to intercultural obstacles as they are the locus of expressivity, text clarity and style, the integrity and modular flexibility of their melodic frames depend on the degree to which content and framic elements remain discrete, are intertwined or merged.

**Negotiating the Score in Case Studies**

*Found melodies old and new in the early works*

By the time of the current research I had already learned a lot about working with English song text and *dendang* melody in *The Horned Matriarch* and *Mr Stupid* projects noticing how the liberties we took with lyric distribution to overcome limitations of rhyme and iambic emphasis, adversely affected our flexibility to transpose words to other *dendang* melodies. For us the issue occurred more in pre-production when scene orders had not been finalised, but it exposed the advantages of the traditional system in other performance situations. In rectifying this I became increasingly conscious of scansion and rhythm. For example, working
alongside Admiral as he performed English lyrics with ingrained rhythmic fastidiousness, I discovered it more effective to treat diphthongs and long vowels in English as two syllable beats when distributing them as a *dendang* lyric. My premise, then arrived at by adductive reasoning, was that it would be preferable to preserve the integrity of the *dendang* melodies, but I was yet to establish exactly what function their current form served.

Already seeking to underscore points of connection beyond the Minang canon, The Horned Matriarch’s musical director, Kari had from the outset incorporated two non-Minang melodies analogous in their qualities to Minangkabau *dendang*. She selected ‘Handam’, by Mang Koko a 20th century composer of the pantun song tradition, Tembang Sunda, which corresponds to West Sumatra’s *dendang jo saluang*, in particular for its *kecapi* accompaniment in the madenda mode, the “mode most easily accessible to Western ears” (Kari, personal comm., 2004), and a traditional Irish instrumental lament whose pentatonic scale and melismatic ornamentation resonated with the Minangkabau style. Both were interpolations attempting to bridge sound cultures.

That Celtic correspondence was furthered in the *Arthurian Randai Project*, the gurindam of which I set to found Scottish melodies featuring similar strophic folk structures, timbre and ornamentation but without *dendang*’s interchangeability. But all these earlier scores otherwise followed the convention of using found melodies, that is, folk songs in the public domain, and so did not face us with compositional issues *per se*.

**Group songwriting in Boldenblee**

The current research objectives sought to further localise the outcomes by developing new musical material arising from the relevant contexts for performance. *Boldenblee’s* focus on community therefore suggested co-devising songs with a facilitating local songwriter. Group song writing’ however posed a new challenge.

In our initial foray, which kicked off our intensive period of constructing the performance scores, the first song of the agreed narrative (see Song One: Rock of Ages in Appendix #2.1) was written in a group workshop where the whole cast responded to a short sample of recorded popular music by choosing a pair of musical phrases (‘A’ and ‘B’) as a melodic base. Using a collective brainstorming approach on a whiteboard an opening account of the story was put down to these riffs. Then, by themselves or in groups, participants came up with 2nd, 3rd and 4th verses. This resulted in several variations of the A and B riff, however, due in part to rhythmic differences influenced by text phrasing. We very quickly had a multi part song where a loose approach to syllabic rhythm resulted in melody versions A, B1, B2, B3, C, D1,
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

D2, and so on. Editorial intervention cleaned these up to one A, one B and a B1. The disadvantage in having so many variations within one *gurindam* sequence is that the *galombang* dance always moves to the sung line of text, not to the underlying musical beat. Several different rhythmic versions demand several different choreographic solutions. Following through the implications - one minute of memorised movement can in this way become 12 minutes of through composed choreography multiplying rehearsal time by a factor of 12 for uptake and similarly reducing the number of repetitions per practice run. Extrapolate this over ten or twenty songs and it begins to demand specialised performers and a more concentrated, orchestrated and inflexible performance approach. Even the impact on production resources, logistics and training shifts the pitch of a production beyond the reach of a low budget community project.

More importantly, such choreographic complexity would have implied the presence of programmatic meaning to an audience used to expecting a semic unity. Feedback like Burdell's that worries at the meaning and monotony of the *galombang* dances reflects a tendency to read the singer as merely accompanying the dance and thus distract from the lyric in an effort to decode the dance. If in further response, they did contain illustrative themes, whether in sync or in counterpoint to the singers’ text, we'd begin to lose the distinction of the frame. Departure from or narrativising the frame may be used as a device of variation where the convention is already clearly established (Zulkifli broke the circle's formality leading into the *galanggang* (tournament) scene in his *Randai Palimo Gaga*, and I followed similarly in *Reno Nilam*) but without the unique performed frame, Randai loses its point of difference.

Boldenblee’s songwriter/facilitator, however, was pulling in another direction. Unable to attend my Randai briefing, our initial songwriting facilitator, John Papanis, subscribed to a concept of song that may be summed up as the three minute A-B-A-B pattern with a variation, C, and return to form, anchored to a given chord progression. The very structure presumes a movement from one verse straight on to the next, making the variation important to break the repetitive pattern and to anticipate a sense of resolution in the return that leads to a natural ending.

In Randai’s strophic ballad-style form it is in the melodic embellishment, vocal ornament and melismatic coloratura that complexity is achieved. Rather than segueing straight into the next repetition, each strophe gives way to a cathartic percussion break of *tapuak* and then a silent walk-around before returning to the melodic theme. This complete letting go of the pattern of the song between each verse negates the need for a variation. By presenting us with a chord progression rather than a specified melody, our songwriter was inadvertently ass-
serting an alternative conflicting structure that destabilised other factors in the mix.

**The Butterfly Commission**

For *The Butterfly Seer* I was attempting to push the creative frontier by engaging a composer to rethink the musical score, to create hybrid textures and original melodies that would act as connective tissue between the ‘faraway lands’ of plot and genre on one hand (respectively India and Sumatra), and the more familiar ‘faraway’ places of Western imagination and memory. Adrian Sherriff was the perfect choice of composer. Born in a ‘faraway’ land himself, the cultural manoeuvres this commission required of him were not entirely unfamiliar. The syncretic score he produced amply fulfilled this brief by creating new evocative sounds from an eclectic blend of traditions, while consciously marking up pertinent juxtapositions with the text that made sense of each of the sound colours in his palette. The score was operatic in dramatic scope, profoundly narrative and carefully articulated to support his deep analysis of the text. What is interesting to consider is how these undeniably positive elaborations of the role of music in Randai coexisted with the underlying precepts of Randai and whether, in doing so they extend or eclipse the form.

The composer, Adrian Sherriff, was chosen for his jazz and new music credentials over-laying extensive expertise in Karnatic Indian and Balinese music cultures, and a sensitivity to indigenous aesthetics acculturated through his upbringing among the Dani of West Papua. He embraced the new musical territory through a 6 week residency in Sumatra.

The brief was to complete the score by writing melodic settings for up to twenty *gurindam*. That is, twenty melodic strophes of two to six lines, each representing a unique inter-*adegan* narrative episode. As an innovation, and wanting to leave the composer some creative latitude for the possibility of a convergence of Western, Indian and Sumatran timbres (i.e. representing the triadic loci of creation, narrative setting and origin of form), the commission included accompaniment for one to three instruments. As a production was not scheduled at the time I considered incidental music could be left for consideration later when resources, venue and location became concrete.

The resulting score was accomplished perhaps almost too brilliantly for Randai, because it overwrote parts normally left to the other elements of play. Sherriff ultimately brought to the work a score comprising big textural compositions for multiple instruments, including outdoor ensemble instruments not normally accompanied by voice such as *dhol* (double headed bass barrel drum), *pupuik sarunai* (bamboo double reed shawm) and tuba. The songs were through-composed often featuring three or more melodic motifs each, disrupting the
simpler pattern of strophic repetition. Motifs linked to character themes recurred according to personae rather than according to narrative action. The composition incorporated evocative musical exposition of environment, events and other dramatic elements of the plot. While the score fulfilled my stated objectives to weave the disparate music cultures into a dynamic contemporary mode that neither surrendered to folksy ‘ethnicism’ nor to avant-garde cleverness, at the same time it presented unexpected provocations.

I’d envisaged that creative innovation on the musical score would transform the detail within the framework, as a contemporary form of embellishment. But some compositional values introduced in the interests of appealing to a Western-style of receptivity operated as much on the framework as within it. Three areas I want to consider that are impacted by a dominant instrumental texture are vocal style, inter-strophic space, and how the mechanism of forward movement was challenged by the idea of character motif and thematic reiteration. To do this I need to elaborate on specific features of *dendang* that became pertinent to its intercultural re-siting both in *Boldenblee* and *The Butterfly Seer*.

**Dendang Style**

*Timbre, speech and emotion*

Whether ancient or newly composed, the term *dendang* implies stylistic features consistent with older pre-colonial repertoire, especially in structure, timbre and ornament, scale and pitch range. (Modern genres with Western diatonic and other non-indigenous influences tend to use the term *lagu* or *nyanyian* and have been used in Randai in outlying areas remote from the high classic skills base of the heartlands, but as they are outside my field of experience I have not considered them as part of my lineage here). In fact my assumptions rest on the premise that this older style of singing has something significant to do with making sense of the form.

The aesthetic qualities associated with dendang are distinguished by its open throat vocal technique where a hard palette, narrowed mouth cavity, lots of head resonance and twang relate it to belting as used in Bulgarian voice (arguably better known from Broadway music theatre). Belting has been described as “a pre-electronic amplification technology” (Edwin, 2007) but its primary goal according to Lisa Popell is “emotional expressivity and storytelling” over vocal beauty (2007: p.79). Its bright, horizontal, narrow vowels and chest-dominant register are more “speech-like in quality” (Edwin, 2007) than the ‘tall, round vowels’ of bel canto. When actor Matt Bean says “I can only speak my text until my need to communicate becomes so strong that I cross that threshold and begin to sing” (Bean, 2007) he speaks to the
significance of this register for the narrative communication of Randai.

Dominant use of a solo vocal line (usually shared sequentially with a second singer, the 'paimbauan') allows latitude for individualised interpretation of the frequently rubato tempi. The paimbau part segues seamlessly on a given handover note, matching the continuity of sound achieved by the fluteplayer's circular breath. If there is an accompanying instrumental line - not always used in Randai where the narrator 'biduan' originally sings a capella - it is usually an understated homophonic arrangement following the singer's melody with only slight deviations. Pitch range is often quite narrow, seconds and fourths are frequently encountered, and long or strong notes are embellished with melismas, glides, or a variety of ornaments that include an indigenous garinyiak bleating style, the smoother cengkok (closer in style to Indian gamak ornamentation) and vibra (vibrato), thus continuing the theme of embellishment as an aesthetic preference in place of structural complexity. The style is generally intimate, drawing the listener in, and privileging the singer's lyric.

As with timbre these pitch patterns, breath rhythms and ornaments are closely related to the natural speech register and also evidence a stylistic relationship between technique and interiority. For example the ornamentation techniques use the same physiognomy as natural human crying. One cannot technically perform garinyiak unless one truly feels emotional (penuh perasaan), according to ISI Padangpanjang lecturer in traditional music and composition, Admiral (in frequent personal communications 1998-2006). One must find the emotional trigger to the muscular tremor so that it does not become mechanically controlled. In this sense the dendang aesthetic supports more than the emphasis on storytelling through verbal communication. The inner perspective of emotion and the subconscious or unspoken drives which, for Western taste appear to be lacking in the representational enactment of Randai scenes, is here embedded in the profoundly interior cry of dendang ratok.

Dendang Structure

I previously equated the word dendang with 'melody' but more correctly each named dendang denotes a particular 'irama'. The irama of a dendang describes the musical pattern of a single melodic strophe mostly two or three lines long. Irama in this sense is a concept which includes both melodic contour and rhythmic phrasing, and indicating a particular syllabic distribution. It is not however tied to a given lyric but interchangeably accommodates any nine syllable lines of pantun text as in the bagurau context mentioned above. A dendang's irama frequently includes non-lyric refrains or vocables in its determined structure turning what may be a longer motif into a container for nine syllable lines of text.
Each *gurindam*, comprising anything from two to sixteen stanzas of *pantun* verse, is assigned a particular *irama dendang* which, like a ballad, repeats strophically with each new stanza or often half stanza (i.e. sometimes just one couplet may constitute a strophe, separated from its rhyming partner lines that make up the quatrain by a *tapuak* and walk-around.)

When *dendang* is sung for its own sake, the accompanying *saluang* plays on between each strophic unit, while the singer takes their breath. (Using circular breathing continuity is sustained by the *saluang* player some 30 minutes at a time). In Randai, however, each strophic unit (through its accompanying dance) is tailed by the percussive eruption of *tapuak galombang* before the energy subsides into a silent walk-around waiting for the singer's first notes of the next strophe/stanza. The 'whole song' - strophe to strophe or stanza to stanza - is thus not continuous but is interrupted as the energetic cycle peaks and subsides.

*Inter-strophic interludes create ebb and flow on the musical plane.*

*Dendang* therefore are short, while the songs may be long. The fact that many *dendang* require two strophic repetitions to complete one quatrain of lyric stretches the text out two lines at a time reducing the density of information and lightening the concentration load at a cost of longer, slower progression through the story. Although each is on average under one minute long, to each melodic strophe Randai adds about forty-five seconds in *tapuak* and walk-around, repeating this cycle as necessary, say 8 times for a four stanza *gurindam* (which can be up to eight or nine stanzas in typical Randai). This group of verse cycles is further bracketed by opening and closing *tapuak* bridges of up to one minute each adding, in this example, almost 8 minutes of non-textual embellishment - apparent empty space - to an 8 minute song. Concerned to move the plot along, Western collaborators may well seek to omit entirely, or increase the programmatic significance of, each interstrophic interlude. But while tightening up the active content may indeed be a valid response to Western conditions, we lose the ebb, the *batino*, in favour of unrelenting flow.

It's easy for these spaces in between to get forgotten in the compositional process and end up written through with instrumental music. Reasserting the requisite structure in rehearsals may resolve each individual case but I think it is important to note that what is happening is a shift in focus from the vocal/textual line to the instrumental.

**Impacts of Instrumental Accompaniment**

*The Instrumental Override*

One of the pleasures of performing Randai *galombang* is anticipating the vocal entry. The
lingkaran is walking, softening, letting the explosive energy of the tapuak settle, and listening, as one corpus, to the first tone of the next stanza to be sung. When it comes, the recognition of that single syllable sets off a spinal memory and the whole company moves in synchronicity with the swell and release of the singers voice. The singer is commanding the 'tide' with the small freedoms I have already mentioned, determining pitch and the rubato tempo with ornamentation, refrains and vocables of her choice. When the verse ends the singer hands back the leadership of rhythm to the tukang gore and the tapuak explodes at its own optimum tempo and amplitude.

When instrumentation pre-empted the song however, (as used throughout Boldenblee to assist the novice singers) I found the following things happened: the dancers tended to follow the beat not the singers, the singers tended to follow the beat instead of commanding it, the vocal line began to read as subordinate to the instrumental, and our musicians felt it counterintuitive not to sustain the tempo through the vocal break. Against this momentum it felt more 'fitting' to beat out the tapuak 'in compas' with this overriding beat. Yet for the tapuak to do its job energetically it must be allowed to 'have its head', to determine its own explosive tempo, decoupled from the ordained tempo. It's not that this was unachievable but it required explicit instruction against the normative to get the musicians to let go of their hold at the end of each strophe.

We faced this in Song 9 of The Ballad of Boldenblee (Appendix #2.1 P.31 “The Captain led a raggedy mob...”), where we allowed the tapuak to fit to an already fast-paced galloping rhythm, respite from which was only achieved finally at the end of the tapuak. After the walkaround the guitar riff again set the somewhat relentless pace for the next verse, triggering the lingkaran dancers into action at the behest of its established dominance, which even the singers never fully surmounted. With less rhythmically pronounced arrangements the effect on the relationship of movement to voice was not so profound, but it still compounded the impulse to synchronise tapuak to the preceding tempo. When the accompaniment was supportive rather than leading, and especially when the voice entry preceded the entry of the accompanying instrument this effect was mitigated.

To recapitulate this point, when a strong instrumental arrangement introduces the song it sets itself up as a 'given' with a strong tendency to override the rhythmic contour of significance, i.e. the vocal line. For those new to Randai it is also tempting to intrude into the phase assigned for Tapuak.

Returning to the traditional template for a moment it is true that there are instances where a dominant instrumental accompaniment is used, usually with the uptempo dendang gembira
or *dendang indang* more typical of *rantau* (outlying or coastal) areas. In Bonjol, the group Tari Randai Gemorah exclusively used such Melayu and Middle-Eastern derived *dendang* with *rebab pasisir*, (two string viola-shaped fiddle) and percussion accompaniment for their entire *galombang/gurindam* repertoire. In *Rambun Sati Jo Sutan Lembak Tuah*, a frame drum played by the singer or one of the *lingkaran* accompanied two of their ten song melodies. In both examples these were accompanied by *joget*, a simple social-type dance ‘groove’ involving swaying on the spot, rather than *silek* movement, clearly an aesthetic variation in the latter, but perhaps a shortfall of skills in the Bonjol community, as stylistically these represent a more vernacular style than the more classic *ratok* and *silek*. In both cases there was a very short instrumental lead in of two to four beats.

Did these fall into the same traps I found in the case studies? The *joget* is certainly danced to the ‘back’ beat ploughing right through vocal phrasing, and inviting audience to lighten up and relax back into the groove rather than 'listen forward'. If this compromised the foregrounding of text (and I cannot be certain of the effects on audience as I am reflecting in retrospect) it can only have been a trade off for a desired dynamic contrast in the case of *Rambun Sati* because their cycle of ten melodies potentially pairs different passages with each *dendang* as it repeats the sequence from the first of the ten after an overnight or other significant interval whose position is determined by circumstance.

For Bonjol I expect the very repetitiveness of their motifs, as with other repetitions, may have allowed it, despite its instrumental texture, to ultimately recede in focus to reveal the text it carried. At the same time, by Minangkabau-set standards of Randai as played out in the evaluations of competitive Randai festivals, Tari Randai Gemorah was not an award-winning company as *Rambun Sati* was.

By contrast, the rhythmic *dendang* used in another exemplar of the form, *Palimo Gaga* (at least in 1989) were not dominated by accompaniment and were paired with *silek*-based choreography. These read as classic in convention and I felt did not relax the active listening posture of audience, while those in *Rambun Sati* almost functioned as a tension-release even though the content of the songs remained as much of a priority.

The other point is that while these Sumatran examples confirm a role for more instrumentation in songs there is no question here of the momentum of accompaniment disrupting the interstrophic space. Clearly if instrumental dominance in the accompaniment of songs is confined to the phase of each strophe, ebbing to give rein to the *tapuak* and walking phases of each cycle, then the listening pattern of Randai is preserved and non-musical elements do not appear to become extraneous.
Fig. 51: Sherriff's instrumentation charts showing the thematic keying of specific instruments.
Fig. 51: Volume and a fat percussive texture was created by the use of dhol (played by from left, Stephen Grant and composer Adrian Sherriff) and Rabana (Admiral and Rendra Freestone, right)

Fig. 52: Stephen Grant on Tuba, a song with an instrumental motif marking its association with the Bullock.

Fig. 53: Other instruments used in The Butterfly Seer. From Left: Grant (Trumpet) Admiral (cymbal), Freestone (Tibetan bowl), (Far right) Outside the Sherriff score Admiral also played the 2-stringed spike fiddle Rabab Darek within the narrative (scene 19) and as a 30 minute preshow set.
**Tapuak and Authorship in a Through-composed score**

How we dealt with instrumental accompaniment and *tapuak* on The Butterfly Seer was quite different not least because of the coherent nature of the work as a product of a single author. Ultimately we avoided part of this problem when we omitted inter-strophic *galombang tapuak* altogether, consistent with our omission of the *lingkaran*. But *tapuak*, the signature motif of Ranai and important divider between each bead could not be left out altogether. The writing and acting style depended on its snap transitions if nothing else.

The dilemma raised, beyond the logistical issue of performance - who should perform the tapuak score - also the issue of authorship. The score had been finalised according to Sherrif’s aesthetic judgement without any loud percussive breaks interspliced between songs. *Tapuak* is normally designed by a movement-skilled ‘pants-slapper’ ensuring physical performability, yet as a rhythmic-percussive motif we equally perceive it as part of the sound-scape. Should I have made it the task of the composer to factor these motifs into his score to his satisfaction? Working in isolation from the performing group makes this unlikely however, unless the composer also has the requisite movement facility as the example below shows. Instead musician Rendra Freestone, who also had experience of physical *galombang* in his work on *Mr Stupid*, designed a single stock *tapuak* motif to be used as a standard bridge dividing songs from scenes throughout the show.

It was a token divider, clapped out in place by the band, that did not aspire to the aesthetic variety normally associated with *tapuak*. Designed from a percussionists point of view, when performed as a physical *galombang* with our closing song we found it needed some adjustment to work effectively i.e. in order to let the rhythm breathe - to allow enough space to assign body moves, for reaching the *sarawa galembong* (*galembong* pants), leg lifts and contra-tempo vocal yelps.

Without prescience of such oversights I had sought the best musical composer for the task in order to elevate the artform, and had not pressed for ensemble solutions in this regard. To preserve the integrity of the three strands of a Randai soundscape however, one would do well to consider composition as either a collective endeavour or as three clearly defined tasks with limited briefs. The former may achieve some semblance of through-composition negotiated with the priorities of all strands in mind, if that is deemed desirable. The latter conforms more closely to the reality of Randai as a populist modular artform.

**Instrumental Texture versus Logos**

Squeezing out the *tapuak* is not the only cost in amping up the accompaniment. I found in-
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

instrumental texture sometimes wanting to impinge on the vocal role. Sherriff used a full complement of outdoor and indoor instruments in The Butterfly Seer. The sheer volume of sound occasioned in some of the pieces placed pressing demands on the singers voice and also, in the intimate venue demanded a balancing act of amplified and acoustic sound for the engineer. Inevitably the distortion of a voice pushed to forte and yet still using open throat timbre and vocal ornamentation from both Indian and Sumatran tradition increased the challenge of audibility of lyrics. Pitch range in Sumatran dendang tends to stay within an octave often utilising just 2 or 3 notes within a range of a third or fourth. While some biduan may pitch high by preference, they always stay within their comfortable range. This may have implications for the degree to which a human speech-like quality is attained. Sherriff's vocal score ranged from contralto to high soprano and used these high pitches to cut through the fulsome bass thunder of dhol and penetrating sarunai. Dramatic as this effect was as theatre, what read strongly was not specific words and phrases but mood, sense of crisis, urgency and passion - indeed enhancing narrative information. At such times the singer resorted to an operatic voice and the additional distortion mitigated against hearing the text through the onslaught of sound. It seemed the fatter the texture the more the voice became another non-verbal sound strand woven in to the overall effect rather than the explicit vehicle of narrative meaning.

Such programmatic use of music may work directly on emotions triggering involuntary memory associations. In contrast, words are processed intellectually where they may be understood to point to emotional states previously experienced or observed. In keeping with the Minang emphasis on mental agility Randai manipulates the latter while my collaborators and our Western audiences are apparently enculturated to relish the former.

Character Motif and its impact on Frames and Forward Progression

One other way in which Sherriff's score made The Butterfly Seer an engaging and accessible experience for audience was in the way in which he brought to life the personalities of the characters through a thematic musical palette. He carefully broke the source ideas down into themes to create a schema that assigned colours, themes and characters to certain instruments, songs and melodic motifs. Elements thus treated included characters, numinous and natural events and social settings, such as the epiphanies and the butterflies, the storm, the beach, the Friday prayer time, etc. (A full table is included in figure 51).

But Randai pivots on a linear narrative with sequential action. Key characters transform themselves in response to a progression of story-world stimuli. It is neither thematic nor lyrical. While Sherriff's introduction of character motif brought out a 'three dimensionality' to the
playing style of the actors, it seemed also to limit the sense of development of a given character from one scene to the next. The consistency of character motifs, even despite variations in mood colour, engendered a kind of musical status quo that dragged against the sense of forward progression both in plot and character. By contrast, this exposed the way in which gurindam typically moves the plot forward.

The Randai convention is to have a unique melodic and choreographic motif paired to introduce each new scene. So a scene starts and ends with a different, preferably contrasting motif. The effect is the sense of musical innovation having set up a new mood for each new song recedes as the gurindam progresses through its subsequent stanzas. Lyrically the development of each gurindam may have three phases, beginning by wrapping up the scene that has just closed with an indication of any immediate effect, action or mood arising from the final outcome of the previous dialogue: “The players went home, The winners were happy, The losers were sad, The mood was tense”. It proceeds, if relevant, through any pertinent offstage actions and thence to set up the mood and circumstances of the ensuing scene. But these phases are usually only textual, in counterpoint to the blanket musical theme of the moment.

Sherriff had taken great care to consider these phases and to understand the nuances of character and theme. He created particular instrumental and melodic signatures to communicate these in the score. He made sense of the three phases of each gurindam by their relevance according to his thematic schema. But this is what often resulted in two or three different melodic movements per song. Also, as the wrap of a scene inevitably concerned the same personae as it started out with, i.e. as set up in the previous song, the new song, according to this schema, frequently had to return to the last character motif before progressing to new musical territory.

I didn’t expect this to pose a problem in itself until it was experienced in final rehearsal runs when it was possible to sense the overall rhythm of the show. After each strong punchline I anticipated feeling tugged forward into the story by the typically abrupt change of mode but instead felt stalled and thrown backward by the thematic reiteration. Where conventionally gurindam episodes hold equal value to scenes, and are separate and further forward in story time, the reiteration created a thematic bracket around the scene, now made static, with the music taking over sole responsibility for forward movement after it has picked up the thread from the scene itself.

Is this just a writer wrestling for control of the forward thrust of narrative with a composer? The question is whether this innovation fatally subverts the notion of Randai. At least I would
suggest that it hijacks the musical frame interpolating content-based motifs that assume prominence over Randai’s formalist paradigm. Frames set up to read as sequential become intermingled with content by their identification with narrative specifics, ie with a given character. It does this in a form predicated not on character but on points of debate.

Transgressing these conventions in production has deepened my understanding of the dynamics of *dendang gurindam* as a mechanism for forward movement. It demonstrated how the combined effect of apparently benign innovations can shift the focus from an active, linear, forward trajectory to a broader, more passive, immersive experience, with accompanying implications for delivery and reception.

**Findings from the Score**

In trying to emphasise the listening qualities of Randai I endeavoured to raise the presence of the key role of the singer, and the music ensemble in The Butterfly Seer. Accordingly Sherriff created a potentially stand-alone master work which has enough musical narrativity to evolve its own contemporary music theatre performance independent of the original Randai-anchored vision. In fact, it is precisely this self-sufficiency that points to potential difficulties of through-composition within the context of Randai. On the other hand it may also invoke a challenge to theatre-makers and directors to rise to these added complexities and create a more complex Randai, virtuosic in all disciplines for a more complex, globally savvy society.

Based on my consideration of musical directions in both traditional work and neo-Randai case studies, I would summarise my findings in this chapter as follows. Through composition is problematic if it substitutes structural uniqueness for the embellishment of a simple core pattern. It invites the problematic possibility of merging normally discrete strands, potentially infilling the white space of frames that occur at multiple levels. It implies using reiteration, motif distribution and instrumental texture as programmatic devices which in key places may interfere with the existing schematic structure. Compromising the consistency of this structure affects in turn the interchangeability of randai elements which is a significant factor in the typically organic flux of its corporate performance approach.

Timbre, ornaments, pitch range and rubato rhythms lend themselves to natural speech register strongly indicating the vocal score as a vehicle for verbal communication accompanied by empathetic emotion that nevertheless remains poignantly interior. Heavy instrumentation on the other hand can distort the perception of the voice, and competes with text for focus. It is powerfully evocative of the immediacy of expressed emotion which is useful in accompanying a mimetic portrayal on stage but it does not trade in the discursive distancing effect that
CHAPTER 7 – The Musical Score: Negotiating ‘Dendang’

characterises much of the Randai paradigm.

Expressivity in Randai is based on embellishment of content within a fixed frame compared to being expressed through the structural embellishment of a monolithic design as in the West. Interiority constrained elsewhere is found here, its expression mediated through a third party in the songs of a singer occupying a quasi-shamanic role rather than manifesting through the individual first person dialogue,

Randai derives from a listeners’ experience where sound is primarily used as a discursive means of communication (language and rhetoric) and only secondarily as a sensation-based medium stimulating mood, invoking image or environmental realism. Music of the highest priority in Randai is that which extends language from speech into song. Certainly it accompanies elements of both content and frame, but does not form a bridge between them. Therefore in-as-much as the song cycle may be accepted as the spine of Randai, musicality in Randai may be seen as an extension of speech, and supports reading Randai as text-centred.

Forward progression of the narrative mood is the equal domain of scene and song, and ideally it is the passage of story-time that is underscored by melodic variation rather than location or character variation.

Finally, despite somewhat raising the stakes of Randai by extending its creative palette, my concerns about through-composition derived from the way it subtly promoted an absolute mode of playing that sits uneasily with a performance style founded on principles of relativity between players. The flexibility normally facilitated by the modular structures of dendang is subverted when through-composition treats frame and content as similarly open to variation. Listening to the softly repetitive, meditative qualities of classic dendang songs away from the Randai context (in a saluang jo dendang format) I recognise further evidence of how this minimalist structure, when engaged in the soundscape of Randai, is not, itself, demanding focussed attention. Simplicity at the macro level allows more focus on micro details within so that content is allowed to emerge as the locus of creative variation, as much in the guise of embellishments as in the words themselves.
CHAPTER 8 Collaborative Intersections

I have so far examined attitudes to space and to the three disciplines of movement, text and music for their implications for the broader uptake of Randai. The final area we might consider, in order to round out our understanding of the cross-cultural interface which a broader uptake of Randai invokes, is that of the collaborative attitudes we bring to the whole process of performing and performance-making. Through the diverse topics of creative roles, repetition, and social environment I aim to show how respective attitudes and values are reflected in the way creatives, performers and community supporters converge on the task of making and presenting Randai.

One approach sees the creatives as elevated specialists endowed with a priestly task of revealing mysteries to an uninitiated audience. Rogan P. Taylor characterises this as reflecting a post-settlement rift between the nomadic shaman and the members of settled theocracies (Taylor 1985). Another reflects a community performing for itself using skills that are available to all. The stakes are clearly different.

All Minang boys were once expected to learn silek for their self-protection in the rantau and towards their maturity as adults. The aesthetic practices deriving from this art-form are not specialist skills in an exclusive sense even though a master silek practitioner may over time attain super-ordinary powers through expert practice of the discipline itself. The featured silek players display a virtuosity understood by a knowing, critical and potentially ‘as competent’ audience. Talempong also (similar to many gamelan instruments) combines several simple accessible rhythms to create a complex whole. In general, aside from the solo virtuosity of flute players and vocalists, much of Randai’s effect lies in the overriding co-ordination of its parts - the regularity of the patterns themselves and the choral qualities of their performance by a group of non-professionals whose ages frequently range from 13 years old to senior adult. This accords to the model of ‘community performing for itself’ - “oleh rakyat dan untuk rakyat” (Naavis, 1984: p. 263) - where the individual is subordinated to the whole.

It is not that Randai is devoid of virtuosity and individual expertise. Indeed one of the difficulties in transferral is that high art and populism sit side by side both on the benches and on the ‘green’. For example, particular specialness is attributed to flute players and dendang singers, for which it is necessary to master very difficult techniques of sound production and circular breathing or to be naturally blessed with the beguiling qualities of a ‘merdu’ (nightingale) voice. But individual contribution even amongst singers and flute players is not inclined, in the context of Randai, to be singled out and elevated over other contributors in some hier-
archy of contributor values. In accordance with *adaik* understandings of consensus and mutuality - embodied in the maxim *barek samo dipikue, ringan samo dijinjiang* - ‘together we lift the heavy, together we shoulder the light’ - all contributors are regarded as having equally contributed.

The principle extends to the creative team - those responsible for authorship and direction. The structure of patterns (cognisant with rules and core principles) are considered handed down, and the varieties of input are considered of equal value whether writing a ‘unique’ text or performing a unison choral dance. Perhaps the concept of ‘unique’ is contestable anyway, where until recently the idea of ‘new’ often implied a re-ordering of the old, not so much a unique expression of the individual’s essence. It is consistent with a culture that tends to suppress the fragmenting separateness of the ‘I’ and always credits a higher authority with authorship or other personal achievements - whether a teacher, an ancestor, a spirit or the heavens themselves (the title of Van Zanten and Barendregt’s 2001 Randai documentary “*Told in Heaven to become Stories on Earth*” quotes a Minangkabau saying to this effect).

This surrender to a higher authority enables a Randai troupe to remain a ‘community performing to itself’ despite disparity in personal undertakings involved in creating it. When crossing into different socio-cultural environments this accounts for one of the more hidden difficulties - the collaborative process. I will take up this thread in relation to working with differently enculturated collaborators.

**On Collaboration - and the perception of Creative Roles**

Mohd. Anis Mohamed Nor makes the point that the “nature of creativity in the performing arts of South East Asia ... may be different from that of the Western tradition” (Nor, 1986, p62.). The collaborative tasks of putting together the script and score for each of the productions examined here brought these differing creative approaches into focus. In an intercultural collaborative situation, not only is it significant how well each party grasps the cultural and disciplinary perspectives of the agreed starting point, but also such a project invites a clash of perceptions about the role of the creative contributor and the scope of any single collaborator’s contribution.

While writing Randai to explicitly explore a South-East Asian making strategy, it has been impossible to pin down with any accuracy to what degree we conceded to more familiar Western strategies, particularly wherever individual contributors had a long-established hybrid practice base, such as in the composition of *The Butterfly Seer*’s music. But underscoring the following examination of our intersections with text, spoken performance and music, is the
implication that interpolating Western creative strategies changes the project of Randai on a broader level. The differing perspectives relate to the structural framework which has been emerging throughout as a key theme of my findings.

**Authorship in Randai: Collaborative and creative roles in Randai in lieu of an auteur.**

In the Western avant-garde, which acquisitively forages from a wide spectrum of cultural and historical sources, form is not so much a given as another element to be selected and manipulated as a reflexive comment upon the text or theme. Although collaboration strategies are many and varied, the typical Western process is more likely to divide the work lineally into disciplinary strands (music, text, movement, design) that each reiterate the agreed thematic form, intertwining to effect an aristotelian unity - the illusion at least of a single auteur. Interaction between such collaborators often demands more subtle and complex negotiation to harmonise and integrate individual visions to create a semic unity where form and content are indivisible. This goal differs from Randai’s episodic, interchangeable modules.

At this point it may be useful to introduce Michael Kirby’s distinction between ‘matrixed’ and ‘non-matrixed’ performance in which non-matrixed performance is one in which the performer is not “embedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time” (Kirby 1972). In these Randai-building projects I asked that each element be composed as a self-contained part, ‘non-matrixed’ in Kirby’s sense, referencing but separable from other parts, as a set of beads to be strung.

For such artists, a division that slices the task horizontally into episodes separated by non-matrixed elements would seem to disrupt control over a unified trajectory. Understandably, fears of a horrible mish-mash arise from the presumption of a composite picture with no overriding editorial perspective, each contribution running into the next. But Randai provides clear, if ornate, boundaries between each component. It is a mosaic of parts in a composite pattern that might be compared to the architectural storyboards seen in bas-reliefs from Borobudur to NotreDame. Even so most creative contributors want or assume a wider brief, a less restricted palette and greater control over overall shape not just to design subordinate content. The model is predicated on centralising the role of the visionary artist whether director, poet or composer.

**Who is directing this show?**

In my initial manifesto I sought to apply the processes of Randai as well as the aesthetics. From Harun’s explanation of roles (Harun 1992: p.78-79), I understood there was originally no
role for a single director, *per se*. Whether the verse has been composed from a traditional, historical or invented plot, by a remote novelist, epic poet or directly by a living scriptwriter engaged with the performance group, for the purposes of the Randai production the two key creative roles would fall to the *silek* director and the *dendang* director.

The *silek* trainer/director (*gurutuo silek*) choreographs dance and combat routines and may, says Harun, also select the story. The *gurutuo dendang*, usually one of the two *pambalok gurindam* (singers, elsewhere known as *biduan*), selects the tunes and arranges *gurindam* lyrics, thus constructing the dominant musical trajectory in a function quite separate from any influence over an instrumental band (see below). An overseeing functionary, the *pangkatuo* Randai, is acknowledged as the group’s leader and public representative, corresponding with our manager/producer/administrator, but is not a performing participant and in my understanding pretense to artistic influence is mischievous although this may depend on their credentials and diplomatic concerns. It’s not impossible that this role as could the others mentioned above, be combined with a directorial vision. In our intercultural environment we had to renegotiate these roles and include representation of hidden functions such as customary dictates.

Redaction of the source epic into dialogue and lyric segments, says Harun, should be brainstormed by the group at large, as we did in *Boldenblee*, although a script is also often written by a motivating individual who may, by virtue of their initiative also become the director. The dialogue (*kato-kato*), historically extemporised by players themselves (*pambalok curito*), implicating them as co-writers, is now more likely to be coached word-perfect by the original writer or an advocate (someone like a *cadiak pandai* - a man learned in *adaik* and traditional literature - who has taken the effort to memorise the entire script as was the case in Kubu Nan Ampek where from 1963 to 1998 transmission of their Randai was still strictly oral).

Besides the design of *silek* fights and advice on *balabek*-style by the *gurutuo silek* where needed, actors seem to be largely self-directed or directed by custom and public opinion, the community at large as represented by interested bystanders. And in a separate, subordinate role to the design of dendang, the instrumental band has its own bandleader who brings in the entire band only for performances.

With or without a director, the process all pivots upon certain assumptions of a shared customary inheritance which, from our contingent cultural perspective, are necessarily taken up by the *auteur* director. Thus up there beside the initial author of the source narrative (the poet storyteller), the Western model might place the entity who perceives the theatrical concept; in Randai’s case this concept has become a customary given and so this role, one we
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

would allocate to the *auteur*, exists in a hazy past. Editorial vision is preordained. Custom has determined the form. It is necessarily so if a company like that mentioned above can rely on oral transmission to preserve and maintain the integrity of an eight hour performance, each individual contributing one rehearsed part of the complex whole. In Kubu Nan Ampek, the group *Tari Randai Rambun Sati jo Sutan Lembak Tuah* now exists only in memory, my field videos and, for about a quarter of the text, in transcripts recorded at the behest of the last *pangkatuo randai* (manager/administrator), now deceased, handwritten or typed by the actors themselves, in an attempt to preserve it in written form. In lieu of a director, it will only be resuscitated, if at all, by the group at large in a process not confined to the troupe but with the benefit of the community's collective memory.

Admittedly elsewhere the concept of directors has become increasingly prominent. Directors after the fashion of Zulkifli, motivate and draw together the troupe, usually undertaking a large portfolio of the creative and performing functions themselves, often writing all the text, photocopied for all to read. Still, the director’s vision will be predicated on, and subordinate to, an over-riding formal convention that is grasped by all comers. In our projects, without shared Randai experience, it was the establishment of this over-riding blueprint that was intended to constitute the primary premise for all creative roles including mine as initiator/director. I hoped this ground map would engender such creative freedoms as tantalisingly arise within its paradigm. It was this, also, that remained the greatest obstacle, and when we fell short, it was in writing and music that the base form and philosophy were most critically challenged.

*Non-Randai and the idea of rules.*

Following these compositional principles on the aural plane seemed to present as more problematic than on the visual/physical. This may have been because aural elements so critically shape the interface of all other components, or perhaps because it was so much harder to demonstrate alternatives in this medium wherever subtle and long-held assumptions passively resisted these seemingly counterintuitive conventions.

Early on in the *Boldenblee* development, for example, superficial exposure to Randai prompted ideas that rushed at the novelty of the genre with their attempt to embed its framing conventions into a matrix of narrative representation, portending a complete override of the premises on which Randai is founded. The idea, which proposed to reassign the functions of body rhythm and verbal speech to represent narrative characterisations, arose from an individual’s creative reaction to aspects of the new medium with scant reference to the formal blueprint. It was not sustained, in part because as a facilitated process I guided the group to-
wards more relevant narrative strategies, but also because it did not relate to the, by then, collective understanding of a transparent structure. In the aftermath we swung rather far the other way by having all rank and file participants contributing on all fronts. The mass democratic creative outburst that followed was in some ways more manageable in its collective reference to a core pattern perhaps because the process was so overtly shared.

On further reflection however, the final event did not arise out of a Minangkabau style ‘go-tong-rayong’ in that we seemed to have reinterpreted the notion of equal value attaching to a spectrum of contributions, to mean equal in kind. It was as if, to achieve an egalitarian principle, we must all become authors. The hidden premise was that we don’t equally value, for example, choral tasks with the more professionalised tasks of writing or composing that can exemplify pure invention on a clean slate. Given the romantic elevation of the creative author in Western culture it may be understandable that it is in this role that participants aimed to make their mark.

In fact, the overarching predetermined pattern limits the slate and thereby brings the elevation of the storyteller back into community proportion. Consensus is achieved not by all giving full rein to an unfettered creativity but by each acknowledging the limits of the collectively inherited mode and so is able to contribute a unitised portion in accordance with one’s competence. A predetermined superstructure facilitates such unitised contribution.

Complex matrices counter this unitised approach to compiling performance. For example, the Western notion of ‘song’ that ties a particular melodic progression emotionally and narratively to a given lyric development requires a more sustained compositional process than a series of unrelated melodic couplets which may be mixed and matched with words and movement to produce an end product, much as the postmodern performance makers following Merce Cunningham compiled performances from randomly juxtaposed modular fragments. In the case of Randai however, these non-matrixed episodes do not constitute the entire experience, but they have a specific function that highlights the thinly matrixed episodes which they frame.

As the last chapter has shown, Adrian Sherriff, composing for The Butterfly Seer, instinctively merged the narrative and the medium when he imported scenic content into his programmatic composition of songs and instrumental variations within songs. Led by creative instinct and compositional training he specifically aimed to highlight the narrativity of the musical strand through matrixing musical motifs to characters, and interscenic music to scenic representations of time and place, sometimes blurring not only the role of music but also the sequential positioning of the representation. If these innovations sated an audience’s appetite for more representational anchors, they also ran the risk of calling into question the remaining Randai
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

Are they retained re-encoded for reasons pursuant to the Western dramatic project or are they left over from a Randai project abandoned in the confluence of form and content? Often the need to see a performance as a uniquely matrixed complex organic structure issuing from the soul of a single visionary has blinded the collaborator or performer to the harmonious aesthetic of an overriding regular structure (the macro design) in which a community can confidently participate. Elsewhere it has been the inability or disincentive to reduce one’s scope and apply one’s craft to such a small (perhaps uncelebrated) component as a single melodic couplet as an isolated ornament of sound which can be repeated or suspended without being explicitly matrixed within the larger “informational structure of the narrative” (Kirby 1972 p.3). While the integrated organic structure of a fully matrixed performance does require as small and specialised a team as possible to envision and render it, a community requires an explicit structure which can readily be filled out by skills and components developed and maintained through practice and memory. In its populist aspect, regular repetition is critical to such a structure by creating a framing logic which makes sense at any point in the performance.

The Recurring Motif of Repetition

What is it that, repeated, creates this framic logic? In Randai there are several levels of regular and irregular repetitions. Here I am not referring to the sonic repetitions engendered by alliteration and assonance that contribute to a magical or metaphysical evocation of an object and its essence as discussed by Braginsky (2006). While those have left stylistic traces on the content and poetic logic of Randai texts, it is too subtle a distinction to discuss here. Intratextual repetitions, such as epithets or descriptive formulae, are not regular enough to create an explicit frame although it could be argued they are still part of the ebb by tapping into a shorthand of assumed meanings that do not require concentrated attention to perceive, while their purpose, once established, is as much sonic as semantic. Rather, regular repetition by manifesting as the ebb of a larger pattern, creates a frame for the unrepeated, and as such, instead of the significant new information being ‘hammered home’ through this repetition, this information is articulated through what is not repeated - the point of interest, the focal centre of unique evolving content. Thus if repetition inversely indicates importance it may be a cue to pay less attention rather than more.

I will try to articulate this by proposing that repetition provides the ebb of a wholistic package containing both ebb and flow. The ebb is the frame that points to or defines the flow. It highlights by contrast. It creates a clearly defined structure of non-matrixed elements to ac-
commodate the matrixed performance thread. This effect is observable through a comparison of typical European opera libretti to Randai’s verbal text.

**Repetition as a frame to isolate focal feature: comparing Gurindam to Libretto**

Repetition is a salient, possibly integral component of Randai and an apparently confronting element for what it communicates to a Western audience. I needed to understand how repetition and variation is read by audience and industry decision-makers as well as why it was there at all, before I could confidently decide whether to flaunt or flout it. Directors and dramaturgs of the Australian National Playwrights Conference counselled against the gurindam structure for song lyrics, arguing that opera and musicals ‘wisely’ use more repetition of simple thematic ideas in their arias. The repeating phrases of operatic libretti, which elaborate a general gist of the narrative moment, cut through instrumental textures in order to be heard and understood. In the section on vocal music I discussed how the ‘*a capella*’ presentation of Randai and the belting voice supports an intimate speech-like expressivity in the storytelling modality of *gurindam*. I also discussed how the effect of introducing instrumental accompaniment shifts the focus away from the text.

I want to emphasise that, in marked contrast to Western song writing (with its reprises and choruses), traditional Randai uses cycle and repetition almost everywhere else but in its *gurindam* lyrics, during which it is the choreography, empty of meaning, that is distinctly repetitive. I contend that this supports my suggestion that listening is the key focus of the audience, superordinate to viewing the visual spectacle. The other critical locus is the *silek* fighting, again by necessity matrixed to narrative and non-repetitive in structure, indicating another key focal point.

In Western opera, understood as predominantly a musical form, the vocal gymnastics, emotional portrayals and compositional features often seem more important than the words themselves, for the narrative is largely carried in the music itself. It is fitting therefore that the role of words is downplayed by repetition just as Randai’s circular dance patterns, cyclic percussive melodies and strophic *dendang* melodies use repetition to throw focus onto that which they frame - the verbal narrative of Randai. Such features only really pull focus, usually between potent episodes, when they are starkly marked up as virtuosic, as does the *tapuak* which, occurring between verses of text, may take full focus momentarily until the song resumes. In contrast, danced concurrently with the narrative verse, a simpler *galombang* choreography avoids vying with the song for attention.

Word and phrase repetition *within* the text, on the other hand, are not regular repetitions
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

and manifest as a form of embellishment rather than a cyclical pattern. Even so one could argue that epithets and motif patterns where sustained descriptive passages are repeated as a formula for a given category of experience, are mental shorthands that allow the concentration to ebb without losing meaning. An example of the latter is where each time a new maiden appears, “her hair ..., her cheeks... her lips...” etc are described in terms matching the introduction of the every other maiden. Unless viewed as magical reiteration at a vibrational level, repetition here may be seen to downplay the individuality and significance of the maiden and mark up the archetypal representation, almost indicating you do not really need to listen carefully to this, it’s the usual maiden routine you have heard before.

The most significant and oft-quoted Minangkabau maxim, “Dimano kayu basilang, disinan api manyalo - Where the wood crosses, there the fire lives”, provides some insight to this thinking. “Where the wood crosses...” that is, what is finally said at the singular intersection of all the preparatory flourishes and arguments, “…there the fire burns hot” - therein lies the locus of significance. Even the stories themselves, following familiar motifs and plotlines, may be seen as a necessary framework or vehicle (the skin) for the verbal invocations embedded within the text (the kernel) which convey advice, socio-cultural affirmation, wisdom, wit, and artistry.

Repetition, therefore, provides respite from a nauseating overabundance of meaning. If this seems anti-intellectual it might explain why the cyclical form reads as simplistic to Western audiences, is subordinated to childhood patterns, and is perceived as limiting to Western creative collaborators trained to manipulate their discipline meaningfully through time or space and not merely embellish a preordained pattern.

Cycles repeating at every level, engender a perpetual return establishing a reassuring handrail, a place of familiarity. I suggest that this reassurance of return, this schematic graspability, tends to ameliorate an audience’s compulsion to ‘menuntut makna’, to strive and grasp for the meaning or message, for the ‘what’, of every moment instead encouraging an experience of the qualities or the ‘how’. It may also be that this allows a wider, perceptive focus, less fixated on what is to come, and allows the possibility to be present to the social reality, even converse with neighbours, while still tuned in to the unfolding drama, without the aid of the Western auditorium’s isolation and darkness.

Spin-offs from this shared focus must surely include more collective social capital if less individual profit. That is, the focus is less on the narrow ‘I’ - on a commodified individualised view of coming to get something from the performance alone - and more on the wider inclusive view of a community which includes a performance at its centre. I speculate that this en-
CHAPTER 8 Collaborative Intersections

genders more social capital as it ticks boxes auxiliary to the gains from the performance itself. This focus on the collective human environment is sustained from the outset in the making process of Randai, differing from the working environment of the Western artist.

The impact of social environment

Compressed timelines, isolationist habits of working and an urban culture of isolation where we can be imprisoned by impenetrable traffic flows, can change the way we gather and rehearse. If it may be assumed that the privilege of a private dedicated rehearsal process facilitates the development of (and thereby the taste for) an absolute score with nuanced but rigid detail and precise juxtapositions, dependent on the coordination of an outside overseer (director), in contrast cyclicity, repetitivity and modularity arise from and allow for a different kind of collaborative approach that puts collective expression at the forefront. The former privileges specialists playing to the uninitiated while the latter accommodates non-professional participants playing in a ‘concrete register’ (Counsell, 1996) to their peers. To be true to the communitarian principles of Randai, rehearsal by participants on the ground might be considered another level of collaboration where consideration of cultural habits may sway the collective agenda.

Lingkaran - Conventions and conflicts in habits of rehearsal.

Typical Randai preparation would normally flow at low intensity over a year or more in Sumatra. As companies generally maintain one-story repertoires, juniors get familiar with a script long before they take up a role that someone else has vacated. Always a not-for-profit endeavour, rehearsals are held weekly at most (unless a new Randai is being mounted, several new performers are debuting, or an important booking is pending) in a yard between houses, in a schoolroom, public hall, or anywhere there is a space. Some groups (Rambun Sati for example) first sweep and sprinkle the ground with blessed water, the auspicious effects of which apparently combined consecration with the practical efficacy of dampening the dust. I make this assumption as the practice so justified was not altered on timber or even concrete where it otherwise only increased the hazard of slipping. It perhaps demonstrates remnants of a sacral aspect to the proceedings.

Usual practice is to start after the 9pm (Isa) prayers, run the whole show once with a break for cigarettes, tea and cakes, and then go home. Extra time may be spent on trouble-shooting issues but the group is rarely split up nor the order resequenced for section rehearsals. Dialogue is prompted and correct delivery is sometimes debated but ‘acting’ technique (more aptly, dialogue delivery) is only rarely attended to and then more often side-coached by opin-
Rehearsals nearly always host onlookers and well-wishers amongst other attendees legitimately assisting with catering, costumes and logistics. The more knowledgeable offer opinions framed as technical or cultural advice. Each practice is thus a community event in itself. Interest and input from a community home audience also feeds into the form and function of Randai as we discovered in our attempts to replicate it.

When using a partially professional cast, our rehearsal process had to sharply adapt to industry conditions. *The Horned Matriarch* and *Story of Reno Nilam* mixed paid actors, rehearsing 9am - 5pm over five weeks, with part-time community participants meeting on weekends over 12 weeks for movement sessions which it was necessary the actors also joined. In an attempt to reduce this hierarchy, other shows were either exclusively professional (*The Butterfly Seer* and *Mr Stupid*) or fully non-professional (*The Arthurian Project*, *Boldenblee*) the latter supported by a professional production team.

While similarities exist in the needs of non-professional participants and their Sumatran counterparts, the professional element in particular introduced a higher focus on efficiency and individual responsibility. Subtle changes to the form result from such differing attitudes, affecting interaction, flexibility, focus and audience connection in such a way as to turn a simple responsive form into a complex multidisciplinary 'tour de force' which then sets up expectations it may not be suited to fulfill. Similar effects are even perceptible when art forms like Randai are taken up by the Sumatran academy. The reasons are similar in that excellence begins to supersede community as a primary objective. (A more nuanced examination of the academy phenomena in Minangkabau Arts is touched on in Fraser, 2007.)

Social conditions and noise distraction carried through to the rehearsal situation in the projects were an opportunity to create an environment conducive to the cultivation of surrender which characterises the Randai performing approach challenging the usual closed, private work environment. An open invitation was extended to community members to drop in as observers at any time, not just as a natural extension of the inclusion of minors (i.e. to parents) but to stimulate wider community ownership, and to cultivate an informal and external playing style in performers where there is a high degree of collusion with the audience. When rehearsal is more like sports training with barracking kith and kin than the arcane aesthetic alchemy of high arts, we come closer to engendering the celebratory environment encountered in Randai.

*Actors on Story of Reno Nilam* in which the Minangkabau community were involved, reported
that the community rehearsal environment, alive with non-relevant ‘white noise’ of jostling onlookers provided a sample noise/distraction level over which the declamatory voice and explosive *tapuak* energy must be volleyed, assisting them in shifting toward the stylistic exaggerations against such a backdrop. Rather than resist this chaos it can be understood as a kind of preparation that ties in with the particular style of performance focus that Randai assumes.

I have claimed that uniqueness rather than repetition is used to impress a point. This is possible, I suggest, because of a broadly cultivated ability to surrender oneself to the flow of neutral business (busy-ness), the live emptiness of an ebbing or non-critical activity, and to pluck out from it the unique and critical. For example the bustle of a market may be treated as a clutter of competing significant specifics that overload perception and vigilance, or else one might receptively flow with, yet not explicitly engage with, the ‘rabble’ as a moving background which frames the one specific voice one does wish to hear. Applied to the *silat* fighter, the repetitive patterns of *langkah* (stepping and posturing) form the complementary set of stimuli from which will arise the unique and critical attack, the recognition of which will test the judgement of the opponent.

The ability to read and prioritise according to this mechanism is assumed in audiences and players that have cultivated their social life in the Minangkabau environment. Social environment within a Randai-making process may be used to provide opportunities to cultivate this awareness at least in players, as it informs the way Randai is performed.

**Circle as social covenant: community, food, magic and and contemporary relevance**

There are superstitions and protocols around Randai and the host/guest/audience relationship which recognise the vulnerability of one party to the others. Goodwill is explicitly solicited, never taken for granted, as the *dendang pembukaan* apology demonstrates. Protection magic (see Kartomi, 1981: p. 5) aims to insure against shamanic interference by random ill-wishers. Food must be offered to demonstrate goodwill. Food offered must be eaten to demonstrate trust. In this way a pact must be established that builds social capital as a foundation for performance. (Of course this aspiration holds true for most community arts practitioners and in best practice context specific models are generally applied or invented in an attempt to achieve it.) In respect of these traditions we endeavoured find corresponding models. Rehearsals were catered for, enacting community through eating together as cast, and providing foodstalls open throughout each performance whereby audiences could enter into this social enclave.
The intent was not to emulate village protocols but to induce an appropriate performance or rehearsal environment that would accord with the kind of performance Randai embodies. Yet even for the community of Minangkabau expatriates that might lay claim to such symbologies, the urban geography and metropolitan culture in Sydney worked against them. Minangkabau values of mutual co-operation, discussion and consensus may have been acted out, but individualism, materialism and competition ultimately shaped their response to the process. It seemed, as ideals, the symbols survive while the meanings change somewhat according to circumstance, so that the expatriate's continued identification as Minangkabau represents less an affirmation of shared values and more a nostalgia for them. Now I wondered if the apparent contrast of cultural symbolism with the West might seem less a matter of order than of degree.

In the Anglo-Australian context these principles of cohesion and unity may not reflect a contemporary reality for many of us, nor the circle refer to a conscious existing social covenant, but as idealised community aspirations. Preached if not practiced, inherited through glyphs and icons from the Round Table to the wedding ring, they may refer concurrently to an ancient lost one and an aspirational utopian one. The Arthurian ideals enshrined in the Round Table as equality of peers in fraternity, survive in enclaves despite a long history of hierarchical staging and vertical social structures. If there is any doubt as to the value of these aspirations for our society, philosopher Douglas Allchin mounts an eloquent defence bemoaning the use of conflict and competition as substitutes for discourse and consensus building, for it splinters society. His calls, for “a consilience model of discourse” that “involves listening more than arguing” where “Reasoning should converge, not conquer” (Allchin, 2000) recalls the central tenet of Minangkabau lore, ‘Saiyo Sakato’, discussion and consensus (literally ‘one yes, one word’).

The circle is still performed spontaneously, in Western settings, by crowds around a shared point of interest. The crowd, without those who comprise it knowing each other, responds as a group momentarily unified by shared experience. The geometry makes each witness also witness to each other's participation. They move on from an event where they were seen seeing, unwittingly conscious of their collectivity.

If we accept that Randai not only depends upon but also contributes to this naturally occurring collective sensibility, it might be possible to imagine Western culture recovering its own symbolic inferences communicated in the circular staging of Randai. For it is not so much a matter that Minangkabau culture nobly embodies collective principles but that, in a manner as two-faced as our own, we have in fact a culture who uses ritual enactments such as Randai
to project and promote an idealistic aspiration which they must reiterate frequently lest the veneer of communitarianism slip and their base competitive nature cause society to fracture.

This view entertains the possibility that both cultures may be in the market for (re-)enactments of cohesion that will make up, on one hand, for the brittle surfaces of self-conscious harmony, on the other for denial of overt cohesion. However a more pessimistic prognosis for successful transferral arises from a consideration of the distance between the Minangkabau psyche and the Western as appraised by Frederic Errington (1984). Having begun this chapter by suggesting attitudes and values sustained by the participating group shape the convergence of energies that go into making Randai I now present one case for why the Minang attitudes and values engender such different meanings compared to the aspirations of the West.

In Errington's comparison of Minangkabau and Western consciousness,

> “Each entails a different expectation about where meaning can be found, about the relationship of appearance - that is, immediate experience - and reality [and] about what form an adequate explanation would take: for the Minangkabau, explanation is through replication”. (Errington 1984, p.100)

He calls their world a 'translucent world' where meaning rarely needs to be abstracted because appearance and reality are seen to coincide. “Through replication form generates the conviction of truth”. Patterns therefore demonstrate, not rigid uniformity as confinement or suppression of identity, but an affirmation of the natural order and a means to make sense of the world. “By discerning the purpose in the original pattern, and that in the proposed pattern, it may consequently be possible to show congruity between them” (Errington 1984, p.100). Congruity is paramount as a social antidote to dissonance.

For the Westerner, by contrast, explanation is through reduction. “The Western consciousness struggles to reconstitute truth” because in its 'opaque world' “appearance and reality [cannot] safely be assumed to coincide”. Therefore “immediate experience becomes significant only as an allusion to some more substantial yet hidden reality”. (Errington 1984, p. 162-166)

Form and replication are at the core of Randai, yet if we are to follow Errington's appraisal, surface embellishment and reiteration of fast-held patterns can make no claims to reveal hidden esoteric truths in an opaque and shifting Western world. Where the Western high art aspiration for collective performance is for transformation, transgression or insight, ritual performance in the Minangkabau view compels by enacting social form as truth. Like other traditional practices which Errington describes (from the pig-hunt to the ceremonial installation of high office), it “brings together and makes both memorable and more true what the Min-
angkabau already know to be the case.” (Errington 1984, p.161) On this basis I propose Randai is received most aptly as an affirming celebration of the resilience achieved by a high regard for flexibility and continuity, a celebration which thrums with the magical rhythms of replication and which might be seen as a performative rite of community-making in a post post-modern world.
CHAPTER 9 - Findings, Reflections and Conclusion

Reviewing The Research Process.

Due to the real world settings of these trials and the multiple agendas of sample group participants, it is not possible to make claims for my findings beyond speculative theory, and these anchored only in empirical experience. Feedback from audiences, participants and industry, often haphazard or anecdotal, cannot be claimed to take the place of consistent, reliable data. At times my evaluations of the effect or success of various aspects of performance have been highly subjective. However in my belief that theatre is a social dialogue requiring shared language and cultural codes, my theoretical considerations have in good faith responded to feedback from the community in which I operate.

With this research I have mapped several different ways in which Randai might approach an Australian cultural scenario. Practical issues arose concerning skills cultivation, collaboration and creative development, technical logistics and audience expectations and ideological perspectives. Addressing these issues entailed understanding the enculturated assumptions of the target culture and identifying cultural behaviours that resonate with the functions of Randai. Factors associated with the multi-valency of traditional Randai in its more cohesive community of origin were selectively revised to play more successfully in a more fragmented and socially selective urban first world society.

But first I want to take these analyses back to the case studies to show how the progression of ideas was manifested in performances. My intention here is to step back and reflect on the implications of these findings, connecting them to the performances I produced, and considering them in terms of their possible application to a wider terrain of global performance culture.

Case studies as a progression of emerging enquiries

Findings from the case studies seen as a progression of emerging enquiries may in hindsight be characterised as follows.

*The Horned Matriarch* gave me opportunities for exploring the interface between Randai convention and the Australian sensibility as represented by creative participants, audiences, workers in the industry and community members. It was a ground for building the skills and strategies to mount and communicate Randai to others, but which ultimately highlighted the
many difficulties that the new context would afford, and thus it propelled this research and the shows that followed, including those not detailed closely here, *Mr Stupid and His Water-buffalo* (for schools), and the Arthurian Randai (which attempted to mobilise a community-wide, wholistic neo-Randai tradition in a non-Minangkabau village community).

*The Ballad of Boldenblee* followed this more consciously exploiting the limitation of a rigid framework as a facilitating factor in community creative development. In it I applied evolving theories, developed through reflection and experience, to the problems of constructing Randai from local material, with an increased commitment to participant input. While highly instructive as a theatre-making strategy, issues arising from this show, presented by extremely novice players, could not however resolve questions about form and delivery. To do this I needed a much more skilled cast who could confidently deliver Randai style performances. As audibility returned as a problem here, aurality and the centrality of text was highlighted in the next.

*The Butterfly Seer* gave me the opportunity to experiment more significantly with reinterpreting the performed frames in light of further reflections on the aurality of the artform, so that a Randai audience experience might be evoked even while departing radically from a conventional spatial format. It was not my intention to depart also from a conventional temporal format, but some bleed between temporal divisions was introduced by the narrativity of the score. The impact of musical choices on audience appeal, narrative clarity, structural ambiguity and focal priority were examined.

**Review of data analysis - chapters 4 to 7**

I chose to analyse these case studies according to discipline-related themes. Through chapters 4 to 8 we have been looking at the impact of an intercultural setting on the production of Randai and considering some of the strategies that might be employed in an attempt to overcome resistances and deliver a Randai experience to Australian audiences. In Chapter 4 I discussed audience reception and the impact of physical and technical infrastructures such as venue, sound, lighting and overall site design on playing style and the audience-player transaction. I found that the typical role that these elements play in Western theatre, that of defining and separating, for example, play-world from real life, player from audience, or song from scene, is in Randai achieved by aspects of the performance itself.

In Chapter 5 I looked at the way physically performed rhythms and patterns in Randai play out a binary flux between empty and potent (the masculine/feminine principles of ‘*jantan*’ and ‘*batino*’), creating a wave-like cycle that is framed on a different scale from the single arc of
aristotelian dramaturgy. I showed how these patterns of repetition and emptiness work to manipulate the focal importance of a given aspect of performance by creating an ephemeral frame, which depends on formal simplicity for its effect. This led to my characterisation of the Randai aesthetic as favouring complexity in content (embellishment) over structural complexity.

Chapters 6 and 7 examined the way that similar cyclic patterns - of repetition, formalism and familiarity - influence the process of creating. I noted the resistance of some Western collaborators in embracing the inversion of values which favours simple structures and complex ornamentation.

Specifically Chapter 6 highlighted the application and the advantages of such patterns in the treatment of text for dialogue, and looked in particular at how they might be used to facilitate collaborative group writing in an unskilled community context.

Chapter 7 then demonstrated how musical elements (such as compositional structure, the balance between instrumentation and voice, and vocal ornamentation) can either reinforce or subvert these same patterns. The modular structure of *dendang gurindam*, as throughout the art form, was shown to be a critical component in the flexibility and responsiveness of Randai in performance situations, principals on which Randai depends for its characteristic relationship with its audience.

Recreating that characteristic relationship with audiences has been my overriding objective, so an understanding of how Randai components support or invoke that relationship is important. In these chapters I have characterised Randai as “a mosaic of parts in a composite pattern” with “clear, if ornate, boundaries between each component” and would contend that this informs the way Randai is and should be created, performed and perceived. It also constitutes its challenge for appeal to contemporary audiences outside its region of origin.

Throughout this discussion I have stressed how the application of complex embellishment within a simple framing structure directs the focus of attention according to slightly different habits of perception than may be commonly assumed of a Western audience. What kept emerging, especially where respondents had enculturated expectations of theatre, was a tendency, arising from confusion or by design, to read the structure of performed frames as more creative content, confusing the similarly ephemeral, embodied medium employed by both components of the dramaturgy. Mainstream theatre seemed to have acclimatised audi-
ence to expect either material distinctions between frame and content (the proscenium arch for instance), on the one hand, or conceptual frames (of reference) which become the game of recognition we play with the author, and depend for their effect on a common history of ideas, on the other. More practical resistance to these ebb moments concerned themselves with marketability, efficiency and saturation of ‘on’ content for a time-poor (perhaps commodity-oriented) audience.

Despite such enculturated resistance, I have also pointed to certain natural spectator responses in Western society which do accord more closely to these perceptions than is generally presumed in the theatre setting. I would like to take this point further later in this chapter by describing some comparable non-mainstream performance events which conceptually bridge the playing strategies of Randai with material arising in and of the Western terrain. Ancient and contemporary manifestations of performance, from the Medieval Cornish Rounds (Southern 1975), through public forums as performance, to grass roots Neo-Vaudeville showmanship arising in counter-cultural enclaves, which, like hip-hop, do each embed certain populist values that prevail in Randai, may suggest that the disjuncture between Randai and contemporary theatre audiences could be a matter of constructed social contexts not an unsurmountable cultural divide.

Re-understanding Randai

Specific Insights arising from the case studies

I can now make several observations that describe Randai in terms of its dramaturgical devices.

Randai is not so much physical theatre but aural theatre. Its text is at least as important for its words and language as for the story it tells. It is predicated on a system of performed frames, that distinguishes it from through-composed art forms, and which is integral to the nature of interaction and community performance which it embodies and promotes. It has contributions to make to actors, performers and the arts in this country by positing alternative techniques to counterpoint the realist theatre. It performs community especially in a social domain where a coherence of values and community agendas prevails. It can be grown in new environments from cherished community icons, ideals and skills. It may be useful here if I expand on a few of these insights:

• Not so much physical theatre but aural theatre:

While acknowledging its aim is to be a balanced, composite form (Harun, 1975), the factor
most pertinent to its ‘translatability’ - its ability to play to the urban west - is predicated on the assumption of an involved, listening audience rather than the passive spectator.

- “Its text is important even more for its words and language as for the story it tells.”:

Whilst so privileging the leverage bestowed by language in the form of riddles, metaphors, truisms and ‘spin’ would seem resonant with contemporary information literacy, it puts Randai at odds with a trend favouring non-text based theatre for a globalised touring market, limiting the reach of any given production to its local language regions. In this sense the classic polarised view that identifies the East with body-based forms and the West with a text-based rationalism is turned somewhat on its head.

- A system of performed frames:

This system of frames is integral not only to the context in which Randai developed, but to the nature of audience interaction and community practice which Randai embodies and promotes. Recognition of these devices as frames is learnable while acceptance of such an imposed structure challenges values and perceptions of creative freewill. This seems to me more significant in explaining the differing responses artists and audiences have had to Randai than particularising the deeper symbology of the forms.

Randai has contributions to make to actors, performers and the arts generally by positing alternative techniques to counterpoint the realist theatre. These contributions include the identification of energies and synergies that occur in nature and in our biological beings, such as the ebb and flow, the alarming nature of stillness and the organic stillness in motion.

- As a contribution to actor training and the arts:

On a level of the body performing, my understanding of the power of Randai’s spatial use, corporeality and rhetorical style, based on its balabeh style ‘akting dan dialog’, has enabled me to elicit from experienced and inexperienced performers, and from myself, greater clarity, purposeful gestures and a bold, breath-connected attack on vocal delivery. These have the potential to add to the repertoire of full-bodied techniques, which include Meyerhold’s Bio-Mechanics, Corporeal Mime and Commedia Dell’Arte, with a less pictorial style anchored in the physical devices of silek. As an exercise the galombang component of Randai encompasses a major adjustment of common notions of choral performance – such as timing, leadership, autonomy and synchronicity - and offers performers an alternative approach to achieving organic fluidity in ensemble work.
As a device for theatre-making Randai may be useful in communicating notions of communal-
ity or consensus, where the concrete register is preferred, especially in contexts that seek to
dialogically express the views of a homogenous group. Performance of oral histories, local
community celebration, or theatre in the workplace, all staples of the community theatre
scene in Australia over the last 30 years, provide great opportunities for Randai to draw on
the identification of the audience with the material and players. As a participation-based per-
formance building enterprise Randai provides a useful platform for creative development us-
ing non-professionals, provided there is time to build multiple skills.

Randai as community

Randai ‘performs community’ especially in a social domain where a coherence of values and
community agendas prevails. While assumptions about individual human behaviour contained
within popular Randai scripts are increasingly universal, in its overarching structure and sym-
bolism a certain level of homogeneity is presumed. While this seems to predispose it toward
closed, isolated or intentional communities as against a more diverse cosmopolitan populace,
nevertheless, by ‘performing’ collectivity it may also serve as a tool to promote social unity
where fragmentation prevails.

This collectivity informs more than the performed production. The circle as a social covenant
entails mutual communitarian protocols which we endeavoured to retain even in our contem-
porary Western settings.

Randai can be grown in new environments from cherished community icons, ideals and skills.
In this manner, it can speak in different ways to diverse audiences and readily invites the par-
ticipation of those not served by leading-edge arthouse trends. This suggests not only an art
form useful in community development, but also further evidence that its embedded struc-
ture is not fundamentally alienating.

From the outset my process was informed by cross-referencing to other comparable forms
perhaps more familiar to those with whom I needed to communicate. From marketing and re-
cruiting, through training, creative decisionmaking and directing, the use of non-randai West-
ern forms as reference points assisted the cultural border crossing. I began by leaning more
heavily on the Elizabethan comparison which influenced Catherine Fargher’s first script for
*The Horned Matriarch*. The physical representational aspects of Commedia dell’Arte informed
the Arthurian Project, and hip-hop’s rhyme- and rhythm-orientation provided a starting point
for *Boldenblee*. As importantly, in reflecting and interpreting my findings for this exegesis, I
sifted through a wide array of comparable studies in my search for ways to articulate, inter-
pret and characterise Randai from outside of its traditional assumptions.

Randai and Western Counterparts – pre-modern and new grassroots movements

I have throughout this study, opposed Randai to what I have termed Western theatre aware that the term conjures up a false binary. In debunking the false dichotomies of East versus West in theatre history, Steve Tillis critiques what he calls "the third assumption of the East-West Approach ...that all Eastern theatre forms are, in certain essential traits, of a kind" having traits which he quotes from Pronko (1967) as "participative" in its expectations of its audience, "total" in its "integration" of theatrical resources, and "stylized" in its performance techniques..." which are commonly counterposed to a “…Western spirit of theatre (which) would seem to be "intellectual" and "reason-based" in its demands on audience, selective in its deployment of resources, and "realistic" in its performance techniques" (Tillis 2003). Unpacking these generalisations he points to stylized, but not Eastern, opera and ballet; intellectual but not Western No theatre; participative yet Western passion plays and Javanese forms that, while Eastern, nevertheless 'selectively deploy' their resources.

If as a result of this examination of Randai I have demonstrated that Randai is both participative and intellectual or reason-based, stylized yet selective in deploying its resources, then it may be possible to reopen the question of its accessibility to a global audience. What might we now say about Randai's similarities with Brechtian, Elizabethan, Commedia Dell'Arte, Medieval or Greek theatre? How does Randai differ from Peking Opera, No, Kabuki, Butoh or Suzuki's theatre? Are there perhaps more intersections with Indian dramaturgy or Morrocan Al-Halqua (Amine 2001)? How might literary theory and post colonialism comment on this enterprise? While such comparisons are both raised by, and have propelled, my research choices, space forbids me to add any deep analysis on these topics here. Nevertheless the questions may prompt further consideration of where Randai might engage with existing currents in theatre exploration and find allies and audiences not necessarily where one might expect them. I present the following examples as comparisons suggested by this project (and worthy of further investigation) that contextualise my claims for the translatability of Randai. They are three performance approaches that have emerged from the need to communicate with one's own community where shared values prevail. They employ respectively the formulaic of oral epic in a circular configuration, the language of rhetoric and representational dialogue and the enactment of a tournament of physical prowess re-encoded as entertainment to stimulate a heightened sense of pack bonding and audience identification.
The Cornish Rounds

One of “three different kinds of temporary theatre” of pre-Shakespearean medieval England (Hosley) was the Cornish epic theatre of the fourteenth century that was performed on a fully circular open space surrounded by scaffold platforms and a circular mound, an arena they call the Plen an Gwary, literally playing place, field or plain (Southern, 1975). It demonstrates closer correspondence than my earlier comparison of Randai to Elizabethan dramaturgy whose move towards interior character psychologies, mimetic naturalism and the high symbolic locus of the platform stage distorts any true comparison with Randai. By contrast the Cornish Rounds were still firmly planted on ‘the green’, predominantly playing on the same level ground as its fully surrounding audience and drawing on a rhymed and rhythmic epic oratory for its dialogue.

The first similarity that struck me was the venue. Richard Southern describes a basin shaped earthworks, 50 meters (126 ft) in diameter with a flat central playing space (Place or Platea) surrounded by a ring-shaped mound thrown up by the diggings of a ditch round its perimeter. Vertically reinforced on the outside, the mound’s interior sloped toward the platea surmounted by timber seating. Audience were accommodated both on the hill and on the level ground where proximity to the arena of play required crowd control by ushers, stytelers, who occupied a liminal, extra-diegetical role in separating audience from player (compare Randai’s lingkaran). (Southern, 1958). The Plen an Gwary differs from Randai’s Medan Nan Bapaneh in scale, and in that it featured several scaffold towers which Southern places at various points on the perimeter ridge and in some plays at centre, as symbolic sites of featured action (Hosley, 1971). Approaching these required wide aisles dividing into sectors such audience as was accommodated on the platea where, as in Randai, they generally faced inward toward each other and the centre of the arena.

Both forms depend on the natural response to surround, and employ what Colin Counsell calls the ‘Concrete register’ associated with the unlocalised playing area of the platea which retains a close identification with the audience and their familiar daily world by strategies like direct address that do not seek to mask the actor behind the role played, and a preference for telling the narrative in the ‘here and now’, rather than using an ‘Abstract register’ (Counsell 1996) to conjure an illusion of “an other-place/time” as on a symbolically defined stage (locus) separate and remote from the reality of the audience. Using the ‘concrete register’ the storytelling of Randai and the Cornish Rounds remains conscious of its own artifices just as the community’s sense of itself is endorsed through mutual visibility and proximity.

The comparison with Randai is not absolute. Fundamental differences are discernible as sta-
ging on the Plen-an-Gwary already included a more symbolic fixed notion of space in the scaffold platforms, which provide performance zones that are locked into meanings such as Heaven, Hell or Purgatory. Even so these symbolic loci remain distinct from the medium of the platea and confined to the schematic, episodic patterns that predominate in a ‘concrete register’.

Like the Minangkabau *pidato*, a preliminary announcement and preamble, the ‘banns’, read by a pair of herald/orators suggest common pre-literate techniques of production and publicity. With scant evidence little has been written regarding the acting style but it seems clear from the texts, (which included lives of saints and tracts on morality in narratives aimed typically at affirming prevailing values), that rhythm and rhyme of a distinctly oral diction feature strongly.

How the ‘plen-an-gwary’ performer may have physically communicated his dialogue to such a large crowd without losing an audience’s attention is not discussed nor (judging by video documentation) was it brilliantly achieved other than by sheer vocal force, in the landmark production of the *Ordinalia* remounted at St Just in 2004/5 (Kent, 2005). Southern only conjectured as to broader spatial movements such as approaches to and from scaffolds, and interestingly, a circumambulating movement on the plain devised to share the action with a fully surrounding audience, adding to my speculations on the possibly Randai-like conditions of
Randai as a Contemporary Dramaturgy

performance. Much more could be said or investigated here for environmental and textual parallels suggest similar rhetorical mannerism and gesture might serve to amplify the reach of dialogue in 360 degree rotation. Like this example of Western medieval drama, Randai also “develops out of certain existing communal desires, expectations, and beliefs and represents those beliefs in order to reinforce the community's faith in self and society (Agan, 1997). Clearly there are both social and technological, if not symbolic resonances between the structure of Randai and the performances on the Cornish Rounds that would suggest the alterity of Randai is as much a product of socio-historical development as of cultural perceptions.

The Philosophy Nights

A series of philosophy nights produced since the late nineties by Edward Spence a philosophy professor based at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst NSW combines a panel debate on an aspect of philosophical enquiry by speakers representing different schools of thought, and illustrated by selected scenes from Ancient Greek dramatists (Taffel, J. 2002). Performed in restaurants and wineries over a set meal, often packed to the rafters, the environment was more agora than amphitheatre designed unselfconsciously to stimulate ideas (an open forum for questions followed) not to edify with the artifice of art and image. It has had a huge following appealing notably to a non theatre-going public, evidence there is an audience interested less in fiction and ritual preferring to focus unabashed at the issues head on. They are less interested in how compellingly the actors transform than in how tellingly they convince. It is in a similar vein, this focus on rhetorical debate and dramatic illustration, that Randai, too, can be said to be a discursive rather than a ritual theatre (albeit as yet retaining its narrative disguise and poetic lubrication). This reflects the Minangkabau value system but it is also in keeping with the rationalism claimed by the West. Mainstream taste amongst television viewers for docu-dramas, courtroom dramas and Oprah Winfrey/Donovan-type TV forums and the success of Spence's unadorned philosophy nights might suggest that grooming Randai for the theatre sector may have been the wrong strategy for Randai.
The Bohemian Mock Cockfight

The Bohemian Love Theatre, an alternative vaudeville cabaret project created by a subcultural utopianist community production company and artists’ collective based in Newcastle, featured at one point a mock cock-fight which better captured the Randai mood and modes than any of the above mentioned studies. It occurred well into the variety-format show when the audience energy was high. Asked to break from their end stage viewing positions and clear a circular space in their midst, spectators established a dense full circle surround, front rows on hastily rearranged benches, back rows standing, with light in their eyes, straining for a view. A spruiker in the deep baptist tones of an arcane evangelism bellowed his monologue of introduction, revving up the crowd to call for blood. Two pre-prepared volunteers in huge padded chicken suits were paraded around the ring by their minders. The bloodsport tournament context pushed audience energies to a frenzy and the crush of humanity forced a collective response. An individual in the back who couldn’t see and didn’t know what was going on nevertheless picked up the temperament of the event as the barracking and cheering propelled them. The Chickens used their feet to try to undo the velcroed belly of their opponent at which moment stuffed cloth gizzards tumbled gruesomely onto the floor and the loser was carted bodily off the arena. I think the winning chicken signed autographs at the bar during the ensuing interval. In this brief but cathartic example, one can see a very rudimentary narrative beginning to be built up on a fighting ring format, held together by an MC. The audience responded organically to the reconfiguration of space, sprung on them as it was so unexpectedly. There were complaints about sightlines, however and light in the eyes, but from my perspective the imperfections brought this event extraordinarily close in concept to the experience of village adaik events. The competition here was real and suggests the oldstyle boxing ring sideshow might be more appropriate for Randai than the arts houses.

Clearly these formats have found their niche audiences. But if you find it hard to imagine a harmonious blend of these three diverse performance modes then you will appreciate the challenges for this project. All of these, the pre-modern, populist epic, the philosophical discourse and the raw, physical competition, are evident in Randai, and diminishing one or other to appeal to a narrower audience typifies the dilemma of presenting in the Australian urban context where communities seem to selectively group themselves according to more specialised interests and demographics.

Despite from the outset applying careful consideration of the Western psyche in our adapta-
tions, critical feedback (generally representative of the professional not the public) has frequently worried at Randai’s potential to appeal to Western audience taste. When I began I thought similarity would be the main point of access due to many features of Randai resonating with Western counterparts in theatre history as I have shown. But through my experience of teaching and collaborating with Western artists I now see more clearly how Randai also inverts many fundamental values that we in the West mostly now take as givens in ‘theatre’. While each project became more about the differences, my research beyond the mainstream paradigms of Western theatre continued to uncover analogous performance forms.

In the end there are signs that the preponderance of support for (or identification with, even acquiescence to) a post-modern aesthetics of fragmentation throughout the developed world has also been silently countered by an often underground utopianist longing for a more primal social model closer to the collectivity inherent in Randai’s symbolism. With this consciousness gaining ground and becoming more overt in the discourse of social design (alternative approaches now being applied from health therapies to corporate management and town planning, especially in response to the 2009 financial crisis and climate change momentum) it may not be just the grass roots sector that will eventually recognise their aspirations in the symbolism of Randai.

General Conclusion

In this exegesis I have teased out issues that arose when a series of Randai productions were developed and performed in environments unfamiliar to Randai, for and by people enculturated to hold different perceptions of theatre and its social role. In each chapter I have made observations about structural and cultural patterns that inform Randai’s performance and creative strategies. At the start of this chapter I have related the findings, arrived at by considering several separate aspects of Randai, to common threads running throughout my experience of Randai in practice, in an attempt to articulate Randai as a dramaturgy with accessible conceptual precepts. I have then attempted to place this understanding of Randai within a broader spectrum of theatre performance.

In doing so I hope I have demonstrated that, despite its particularity to the Minangkabau psyche and social setting, Randai’s underlying philosophy is accessible and can be meaningful in certain contexts in a global domain. While acknowledging that its philosophy alienates it from much leading Western taste, I think it is also important to acknowledge that performance is not just the domain of a theatre elite following the leading thinkers in a Western his-
Diversity in the community is still a lot more diverse than diversity amongst mainhouse theatre audiences.

I believe underlying the exotic surface lies a structural framework and ethos whose alterity may derive more from factors of community, lifestyle and historical differences than from simple matters of ethnicity. Along with reference, above, to at least three popular performance forms that could be argued share a comparable platform with Randai, I have suggested there is some rationale for Randai to contribute considerable value as a performance approach beyond the folkloric.

**As a contribution to a contemporary aesthetic?**

Understanding that fundamental perceptive preferences distinguish the Minangkabau from the Western (or Australian) audience, such as listening vs spectacle, as well as defining the kind of community context that supports this kind of theatre, has been illuminating in determining how Randai principles may be best applied on a creative plane. One might suggest targeting a well defined niche community such as an isolated rural or closed institutional community (e.g. prison) for a carefully pitched conventional Randai combined with locally relevant skills and story building. Evidence from this research confirms the possibility of group authorship as an empowering mode of storytelling in community contexts.

On a personal level however (positioning myself closer to the West) I detected limits to Randai's capacity to fulfil my creative need for original poetic interplays between the structural and the expressionistic (compare Sussman 1997). Despite its carnival energy, Randai is less a manifestation of chaos than of order. Formality counter-weighs against its apparent flexibility and, while emotional expressivity finds voice in Randai's *dendang* vocal music, a subjective expressionism cannot be truly supported by the form without departing from its fundamental precepts.

I had hoped Randai as a historically hybrid art form would help me express my hybridity to a hybrid audience. However despite its composite form and heterogeneous influences, Randai was contrived to express the aspirations of a homogenous community. In the Minangkabau context Randai is one of many strategies constantly reinforcing this ideal to counter forces for fragmentation (perhaps a significant factor in its evolution unifying Minangkabau identity during the decades leading up to revolution). Inherent in the form which relies on reinforcing the prevailing values of its audience, the notion of being 'in between' or an 'outsider' is problematic. Although my personal connections to the Minangkabau culture are at the root of my 'outsider' status in my own country, my 'in-between-ness' is *played out* rather than adequately ex-
pressed by my engagement, as an urban individualist, with a form which hinges on consensus and community identification. Although contemporary Randai content can include narratives that critique society or investigate the individual human condition, staged as Randai they must always reinforce the strengths of community cohesion rather than remind us, as post-modern staging devices might, how far adrift we really are.


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