Directed by Garin Nugroho

In Indonesian, with subtitles in English

When his wife falls under the spell of a powerful man, a poor pottery maker assembles an army to recover what he has lost

Indonesia │ 2006 │ 120 minutes

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ONE PAGE SUMMARY:
*Opera Jawa*, 2006, Indonesia
Directed by Garin Nugroho
In Indonesian, with subtitles in English, 120 minutes

**SYNOPSIS**

The story told in *Opera Jawa* is based on the abduction of Sinta, from the Indonesian version of the ancient Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Sinta is the wife of Prince Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, and the story recounts his struggle against the forces of evil to gain Sinta’s release. In *Opera Jawa*, Rama becomes Setio, and Sinta is his wife, Siti.

Setio and Siti are former dancers who now make and sell pottery in a poor Indonesian village. Business is not good, and the marketplace is a target for street gangs; this reminds Setio of roles he and Siti once danced. “Ever since our land became barren,” he sings, “We have been like Rama and Sinta . . . All that remains to us is faithfulness, hope and love.” In the epic tale, Sinta is abducted by the evil Rahwana; in Setio’s own home, the beautiful Siti is falling under the spell of the wealthy and powerful butcher, Ludiro.

Siti tries desperately to resist Ludiro’s advances, but he knows her weakness – she gave up dancing to marry Setio, a choice she regrets. Ludiro tries everything to lure her, from invitations to dance, to incense and paths lit with candles, but Siti resists. Finally, he fashions a dancer’s scarf that stretches like a carpet all the way to her door. Once again, she escapes, but Setio believes he has lost Siti’s love. In despair and rage, he raises an army of the poor and oppressed to fight the evil that has destroyed his life.

*Opera Jawa* was one of seven films commissioned by New Crowned Hope Festival Vienna 2006, celebrating the 250th birthday of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The filmmakers were challenged to draw their inspiration from themes in Mozart’s late works: “magic and transformation, truth and reconciliation, and ceremonies for the dead.” Garin Nugroho sets the theme of requiem – ceremonies for the dead – in the uniquely Indonesian context of Javanese dance opera, blending visual arts, music, dance and cinema to tell a modern variation on an old and familiar tale.

**CHARACTERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setio</td>
<td>The main character, a pottery maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siti</td>
<td>Setio’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludiro</td>
<td>The butcher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. After the fighting ends, the camera pans a scorched battlefield, where fires still burn among the corpses. The chorus sings, “Cleverness becomes power / Prayers become threats / Disempowerment becomes anger / Strength becomes force.” What cleverness becomes power in *Opera Jawa?* What prayers become threats?

2. The Hindu epic tale of Prince Rama and Sinta ends happily – the Prince’s army defeats the forces of evil and Sinta is freed. Why do you think the filmmaker changed the ending for *Opera Jawa?* How does the ending affect the story?
ABOUT FILMING OPERA JAWA, AND THE DIRECTOR, GARIN NUGROHO

Excerpts from introduction by Simon Field, Curator of New Crowned Hope Festival Vienna, and co-Executive Producer of Opera Jawa:

“Bearing in mind Peter’s [Sellars, Director of New Crowned Hope Festival Vienna] admonition that cinema is perhaps the most influential art form of our time, Keith Griffiths and I have chosen to commission films for New Crowned Hope from a range of international directors of different generations and from very different countries and cultures, projects that reflect profoundly on aspects of our changing world.

“In the first instance, we chose to contribute substantially to the making of six feature films by directors from different corners of the world: Bahman Ghobadi from Iranian Kurdistan, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun from Chad, Tsai Ming-Liang from Taiwan and Malaysia, Garin Nugroho from Indonesia, Apichatpong Weerasethakul from Thailand and, with her feature debut, Paz Encina from Paraguay. All of them proposed major projects that reflected to varying degrees on, or that continued the spirit of, the Mozartian themes of New Crowned Hope, and which will take these themes in new directions appropriate to our time. And as did Mozart in music, these film-makers are seeking new ways in which to describe the world, ways that explore new possibilities for cinema and for life.”

Statement by Garin Nugroho about Opera Jawa:

“Opera Jawa is a musical film adaptation from the wayang story known as the Ramayana, a classical epic that is very popular in Asia and as popular as the Mahabharata, particularly in countries influenced by Hinduism. This film presents Javanese gamelan and choreography, in both contemporary and classical forms. It is a film explicitly combining a Javanese opera with art installations based on the definition of the word of "sita" as cultivated soil, and on blood as a motif of this epic's main character, Ravana [also spelled Rahwana].

“This is a requiem resulting from a new interpretation of the most famous character in Ramayana, Sita [also spelled Sinta, Siti], who dies in a self-immolation rite at the end of the story. Sita is the wife of Rama, the handsomest and most just king. His enemy is a giant king called Ravana. Ravana always wants to obtain Sita's love. Sita has herself burned to prove her fidelity and sanctity to Rama. So, the story is a requiem for the significance of love and fidelity which ends in death.

“This is a story describing classical / modern dilemmas lived on a daily basis. It is about life in a community that exists, in a state of vulnerability, and yet is also a society full of greed. Two different sets of values are in common conflicts today, namely the must-be-defended right of free will, and questions about virtuousness, fidelity, God, and freedom which relate to a variety of forms of violence in themselves, from prohibitions to assassinations.”

Source: New Crowned Hope Festival Vienna, Film. URL: http://www.newcrownedhope.org/index.php?id=96&L=2
Excerpts from Tom Redwood’s interview of Garin Nugroho for *RealTime*:

“Art is a medium for open dialogue. It is a public space for the meeting of different perspectives. Art can break barriers between people and make them more human again. It can bring about a rebirth of human feeling. That is art’s role.

“In Asia we have a more symbolic relationship with narrative than you do in the West . . . The character of Rahwana is like a big rich country. He assumes he can just take what he wants. Rama, on the other hand, is more of a traditional, religious type. He is at odds with economic forces. He doesn’t know how to develop and becomes angry and possessive, which leads him to violence. The two males’ struggle over the female character Sinta is also a struggle over earth. That’s what Sinta means in Javanese: ‘earth’.”

*Source: Interview with Tom Redwood for RealTime, Issue #80, Aug-Sept 2008, pg. 29.*

**BIOGRAPHY**

Garin Nugroho was born into an artistic family in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1961. He studied filmmaking at the Institut Kesenian Jakarta. He has taught filmmaking at the Institut, made numerous documentaries and two short dramas, and also worked as a film critic for Indonesian newspapers before making his first feature film, *Leaf on a Pillow* (1999). Nugroho is a leading filmmaker in Indonesia, known for the uniqueness of each of his films, which include *Birdman Tale* (2002), *And the Moon Dances* (1995), *Tokyo* (1998), and *Of Love and Eggs* (2004). *Opera Jawa* is his ninth feature film.
Film is unique as an art form in its synthesis of visual arts, writing, drama, movement, and sound. The following notes about film aesthetics and technique suggest some things to watch and listen for in viewing Opera Jawa.

Music and Sound
Music can be used to intensify the action or dialogue in a scene. At its best, music combines with images to create an experience beyond what either could create alone.

Natural sounds can add a dimension of reality – or heighten the unreality of a scene. Off-screen sounds, such as traffic noise or gunshots – can heighten the drama, or suggest an off-screen space.

Composition of the Image
Color and line; size and distance (long shot, medium shot, close-up). The director frames an image using the elements of setting, costume, colors, lighting and sound. The position and behavior of the actors are crucial to the composition, as is the choice of cameras and lenses, where they are placed and how they move during the shot.

Narrative Structure
The narrative structure of the film establishes the major themes in the story, answering the question, “what is this story about?” The narrative structure in world cinema may highlight events of everyday life, or the focus may be on several characters rather than an individual. The structure may be episodic, or circular rather than linear, and there may be a lack of resolution at the end of the film.

Opera Jawa is set as a Javanese dance opera, an entirely musical form in which singing and choreography are interwoven to advance the action and express the characters’ feelings. The soundtrack is performed by a Javanese gamelan orchestra, combining gongs, drums, reeds and strings with xylophone and metallophone instruments. More than sixty songs and dance routines were composed for the film by Indonesian artists. Some songs are structured with verse and chorus, as in a song sung by the women following Setio’s wagon to market; some are more like dialogue between characters, with choreography to illustrate or emphasize their feelings. Some dances are performed with gamelan orchestra only, in traditional Javanese form.

Art installations were created by Indonesian artists as stage sets for Opera Jawa. Color and symbols in the designs heighten the impact of scenes as they unfold in these dramatic sets. One is Ludiro’s butcher shop, where bloody carcasses hang above a stone floor set with models of human heads, some in bronze and some in red wax candles. Another is a spiral wall in a clearing, made of halved coconut shells. Siti is lured to the clearing by fragrant incense; once in the center of the spiral, she is trapped by dancers under swirling life-size straw cones. In another forest clearing, the bright red dancer’s scarf – “as long as the road of life” – becomes a streamer woven among the trees, falling into curtains that hide Ludiro, and an elegant dancers’ studio.

Javanese dance operas tell stories from ancient Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which are widely known throughout Southeast Asia. Each culture adapts the stories to its own world view; as the storyteller sings in the opening scene of Opera Jawa, “Everyone wants to know what really happened / But no two people ever agree on the whole truth.” With this introduction, the filmmaker leads us to expect the unfamiliar from a very familiar tale.

The storyteller provides the narration in some Javanese dance opera, but in Opera Jawa, the storyteller becomes an actor in the tale, collaborating with Ludiro as he tries to capture Siti’s heart.
NARRATIVE THEMES IN THE FILM Opera Jawa

“What’s it like to be Indonesian?” asks filmmaker Garin Nugroho. “Film can let us discover what it’s really like.”

Watch for scenes or events that correspond to a particular theme, making mental or written notes as to how the theme unfolds in the film. Note whether the film developed the theme as expected, and if not, what happened instead. Questions for each theme are designed to encourage discussion.

Temptation and Betrayal

1. Siti is pursued by three men in the guise of a serpent. At either end of the serpent are pointed straw hats to hide the identities of the men beneath the cloth. She resists the serpent by pushing at the straw hat – which she keeps. Why doesn’t she scream or run away? Why does she keep the straw hat?

2. After her husband leaves for the market, Siti dances with the straw hat, while the guardian locks the doors and windows, singing in his awkward voice, “The more secure you feel the more care you must take.” How would you describe Siti’s dance? What does the guardian mean by “the more secure you feel the more care you must take”?

3. Siti wakes one rainy night feeling amorous. She caresses her husband, but he covers his face with his shirt and dances awkwardly out into the rain. Why doesn’t Setio avoid his wife’s affection? When Ludiro comes into the room, why doesn’t Siti force him to leave – or call for help?

4. One of the gamelan musicians explains that he needs Ludiro’s money and gifts, and he begs Siti to accept Ludiro’s offer to dance. A few moments later, a dancer wafts the fragrance of incense through the front door, enticing Siti to follow him into a trap. Why doesn’t Siti tell the musician “no”? Why does she follow the dancer?

5. Drawn into the spiral in the forest, Siti at last realizes she is in danger. “I am undone,” she sings, “Unable to tell right from wrong.” Why doesn’t Siti cry for help? Why does she think she is unable to tell right from wrong?

The Uses of Power

6. The butcher sings of his power as he dances across the stone floor of his shop. A bloody carcass hangs from the ceiling and molded human heads form a pattern on the floor. Why are there heads on the floor? What are the heads made of? Why?

7. For all his power, Ludiro cannot win Siti’s heart. His mother tells him to “learn what pleases her / know her mind.” How does Ludiro react to this advice? Why does his mother encourage him to seduce a married woman?

8. Again Ludiro asks his mother for advice. “My heart desires only one woman,” he sings. “Am I being punished? That I can possess her but cannot win her heart?” His mother sings, “Take advantage of others / Focus your thoughts on yourself! / And soon – there will be nothing in your mind / Except the will to dominate.” How would you explain his mother’s advice? How would focusing on himself win Siti’s heart?

9. With his mother’s help, Ludiro creates a bright red dancer’s scarf that extends from his mother’s house, through fields and woods, to Siti’s front door. When she sees it, Siti rushes outside, pushing aside the guardian and jumping on her bicycle to follow the path of the scarf. What does the scarf mean to Siti? To Ludiro? To Ludiro’s mother?
10. Ludiro prepares his troops for attack with a celebration of dancing and acrobatics. Meanwhile, the protesters gather around Setio, who sings, “Our prayer will crush the evil one.” **How would you compare the two armies? Why are they fighting?**

11. As the war ends, the camera pans the scorched battlefield, where fires still burn among the corpses. The chorus sings, “Cleverness becomes power / Prayers become threats / Disempowerment becomes anger / Strength becomes force.” **What cleverness becomes power in Opera Jawa? Which prayers become threats?**

**Love and Control**

12. One night, Ludiro lures Siti by setting out a path of lotus candles on the floor in her house, into the street, across a small brook and into his bedroom. She follows all the way to his bed, where she sits down as if frozen. “I cannot move,” she sing, “The whisperings of my heart entrap me.” **Why do you think Ludiro used lotus candles to make the path? What are “the whisperings” of Siti’s heart?**

13. Setio pours clay over Siti, singing, “My love for you is like my love for the earth.” Covered all over with clay, Siti replies, “I’m not mere earth . . . I’m made as a human who can think!” **Why does Setio pour clay over his wife? Why does Siti allow him to do it?**

14. “I miss the kiss of your lips which opens to your heart,” sings Setio, before he kills Siti and pulls her heart out of her body. Holding it in his hands, Setio sings to the heart, “Scream! Speak!” **Why do you think Setio kills Siti? Why does he tell her heart to “scream! speak!”?**
PROFILE OF INDONESIA

SIZE: 17,508 islands totaling 741,100 square miles, the largest archipelago (chain of islands) on earth

POPULATION: 234.7 million (CIA, July 2007 estimate), living on 6,000 islands

ETHNICITY: Javanese, 45%, Sundanese, 14%, Madurese, 7.5%, coastal Malays, 7.5%, other, 26%

LANGUAGES: Bahasa Indonesia (official, modified form of Malay), English, Dutch, local dialects, of which the most widely-spoken is Javanese

RELIGIONS: Muslim, 88%, Protestant, 5%, Roman Catholic, 3%, Hindu, 2%, Buddhist, 1%, other, 1% (CIA, 1998)

CLIMATE: Indonesia straddles the equator; the climate is tropical – hot and humid – except in the highlands, where temperatures are more moderate.

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 9.7% (2007 CIA estimate, with “employment” based on working more than 2 hours per week). Underemployment affects nearly a third of working Indonesians and more than half the population lives in poverty.

NATURAL HAZARDS: There are more than 400 volcanoes of which some are active; severe drought; flooding from seasonal typhoons; earthquakes and tsunamis. Aceh Province on the island of Sumatra was hardest hit by the December 2004 tsunami.
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: Forest fires in Indonesia are an annual environmental emergency for the entire region. Often fires are intentionally set, to burn away forest land for cultivation of cash crops such as palm oil. They quickly burn out of control, raging for months until the rainy season finally puts them out. In 2006, rains expected in October did not arrive until November; besides threatening endangered wildlife and plant species and burning tens of thousands of square miles of forest, these fires generate dense clouds of choking haze and smog that overspread the entire region of Southeast Asia.

BACKGROUND: INDONESIA

Indonesia consists of more than 17,000 islands in the south Pacific, stretching 3,000 miles from Banda Aceh, at the northwestern tip of Sumatra, to Jayapura, on Irian Jaya, the Indonesian portion of the island of New Guinea. The history of these islands is a history of trade: in the rare spices nutmeg, mace, cloves and cinnamon; in gold, and more recently, in oil and petroleum products.

During Roman times, the author Pliny wrote of cinnamon that arrived on rafts that had no sails, oars or rudders – rafts pushed by strong winds across the south Pacific to the eastern coast of Africa. By the Middle Ages, seafaring traders sailed to the tiny islands where cinnamon grew, along with even rarer treasures – cloves, mace and especially nutmeg, which was prized not only as a spice for cooking, but for medicinal properties it was thought to have. For centuries, nutmeg was the most valuable commodity on earth after silver and gold, and it grew in only one place: the Spice Islands, now known as the Moluccas, a group of 9 islands about 1,000 miles east of Java, in the island chain of Indonesia.

Traders from China, India and the Middle East, as well as Portugal, England and The Netherlands found their way to these remote tropical islands, bringing unique cultural, ethnic and religious influences. Indonesia’s more than 230 million people speak more than 300 languages, and there are significant Hindu, Buddhist and Christian populations, living alongside the nearly 88% of Indonesians who are Muslim. Most Indonesians live on the largest islands, of Sumatra, Borneo (the Indonesian portion is Kalimantan), Java and Irian Jaya, but distinct cultural groups live on Timor, Flores, Bali and other smaller islands as well.

From the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in the 16th century, the islands fell under the control of colonial governments, predominantly the Dutch. In 1945, Indonesia declared its independence, and its first leader, Sukarno, tried to centralize the government by establishing a common identity across the sprawling island nation. He promoted a common language, Bahasa Indonesia, and five governing principles (Pancasila): faith in God, representative democracy, national unity, humanitarianism and social justice. In 1967, Sukarno was forced out of power by one of his generals, Suharto, who ruled by military authority for the next 30 years.

The Asian Crisis of 1997-1998 Under Suharto, Indonesia’s economy gained strength rapidly, behind its leading exports of oil, coffee, tea, tobacco and rubber. He opened Indonesia to aid and investment from the United States and other Western countries, in part by linking the currency to the dollar. Indonesians called him the Father of Development for massive infrastructure projects, such as building thousands of schools and training and hiring teachers. Suharto’s government improved the lives of rural Indonesians by investing in small farms to expand production of rice, and he oversaw construction of a satellite telecommunications network to provide a phone and television network across the islands.

By the 1990s, Indonesia was thought to be part of an Asian economic miracle, one of several countries that were attractive to foreign lenders and investors who predicted prosperous years for the region. But with the unexpected collapse of the Thai currency in 1997, economies of neighboring countries, including Indonesia, saw their currencies fail amid rising prices, food and other product shortages, massive unemployment and spreading poverty.
In Indonesia, unemployment increased by five times, from 4.5 million people in 1996 to 20 million in 1998, as businesses failed and construction projects shut down. As much as half the population fell into poverty; newspapers reported that some people were so desperate that they planted crops on golf courses. Shortages in food and such basic supplies as fertilizer led to street violence, which escalated into riots. Suharto fell from power amid widespread protests by the poor and students, who charged his government with corruption, human rights abuses, and amassing huge fortunes at public expense.

**A Time of Unrest: the political setting for Opera Jawa** The filmmaker hints that *Opera Jawa* could have been set in the unrest of the 1960s that brought Suharto to power, or in 1998, amid the protests that led to his overthrow. Both were periods “of extreme paradox,” he says, “this is what I tried to depict in this film... civil unrest happens when the powerful oppress the powerless and this has happened many times in our history.” (Source: Sawf News, “Musical Reveals Indonesia’s Heart of Darkness,” December 19, 2006. URL: http://news.sawf.org/Entertainment/30619.aspx)

Since 1998, a series of elected leaders have tried to restore stability to a country where more than 60% of the population lives on less than $2 per day (according to the United Nations Development Program, December 2005). In recent years Indonesia has suffered terrorist bombings in Bali; the tsunami in December 2004 that killed hundreds of thousands of people and devastated northwestern Sumatra; frequent earthquakes, and severe drought. Forest fires intended to clear land for farming have become an environmental disaster for Southeast Asia, threatening precious forest, plant and animal species on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra, and creating severe air pollution that affects the entire region.

**The Island and Culture of Java: the physical setting for Opera Jawa** Java is about the size of the state of New York. Its population of 124 million people makes it one of the most densely populated places on earth. Its name in Indonesian, *Jawa*, might have come from a Sanskrit word for “barley”, which was a popular crop on the island when Indians first arrived more than 1,500 years ago, or from an even earlier word meaning “home”. The island was formed by volcanic eruptions; 38 of its mountains are or have been active volcanoes. The capital city of Jakarta, on the northern coast, was settled by explorers for the Dutch East India Company, who first landed there in 1602.

Sailors from India reached the island of Java in the sixth century, introducing Hindu beliefs and traditions that have had a profound impact on Javanese culture. Among their important contributions is the epic poem *Ramayana*, a sacred text that conveys the teachings of Hindu sages through episodes in the life of Prince Rama, the heroic ideal. Although Islam spread through Java in the 13th century, and Indian kingdoms were supplanted by sultanates as early as 1475, the stories of Prince Rama have been told and retold throughout Indonesia, and indeed Southeast Asia, down to the present day. The sultanates, who continue to rule the fertile farmlands of central Java, have nurtured the rich cultural traditions that have grown in their courts for more than 400 years. These traditions include Javanese dance drama and gamelan, two forms interwoven in the film, *Opera Jawa*.

**Javanese Dance Drama** The Javanese tradition of dance drama is more than a thousand years old, first appearing in the courts of Indian rulers in the 11th and 12th centuries. Performers often wore masks, and dances were based on historical events. By the 18th century, dance drama was intertwined with the much older *wayang*, shadow play, a performance by puppets who were thought to be filled with the spirits of ancestors. In the new form, *wayang wong*, puppet roles were played by human dancers, enacting a story from a sacred Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*. 
Dance dramas were performed at court for ceremonies, holidays and special events, and over the years the form became highly stylized. The familiar stories were told not only through dialogue, but in the gestures and costumes of the dancers. Costume colors and designs varied for heroes and villains, with heroes wearing blue or black, and villains wearing red. Even dance movements varied, with heroic figures using smaller, more fluid movements while villains lifted their arms and legs high in harsh, threatening gestures.

In dance drama, the body is kept low, with hand and foot positions equally important, the movements of fingers and toes highly articulated. The dance opera form adapted for Opera Jawa is entirely sung, a fusion of music, dance, drama and design.

**Gamelan** The music of Javanese courts is performed by an orchestra called gamelan, led by gongs and chimes, the rhythmic melody of xylophone and metallophone, flute, strings including violin and lute, bells and drums. Gamelan instruments are carefully tuned to a particular sonic signature, giving the ensemble a unique character. Gamelans perform at court ceremonies and special events, setting the musical tone and context for the occasion. Gamelans are inherited from one ruler to the next, as part of the pageantry of the court; this sense of heritage invests gamelan musicians with a strong connection to their ancestors.

Except for the taller drums and gongs, the instruments are set on the floor, and the musicians sit on the floor to play them. The tones of the gamelan vary from the deep resonance of the large gongs to the percussive pop of the hammer against a muted bronze metallophone key.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BBC News / Country Profiles, Indonesia:  http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1260544.stm

Maps of Indonesia:  http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/indonesia.html#country.html
http://worldatlas.com/webimage/countries/asia/id.htm


The Economist, Indonesia:  http://www.economist.com/countries/Indonesia/

Background, Indonesia:  http://www.thingsasian.com/goto_article/article.697.html
http://www.duyfken.com/original/spice-islands.html

Websites:

Introduction to Indonesia, Geographica.com.  URL:  http://www.geographia.com/indonesia/


Jakarta News.  URL:  http://www.jakartanews.com/

Sendratari Ramayana.  URL:  http://epic-ramayana.tripod.com/

The Ramayana.  URL:  http://www.hindunet.org/ramayana/discouse.htm

New Crowned Hope Festival Vienna, Film.  URL:  http://www.newcrownedhope.org/index.php?id=96&L=2#

About Garin Nugroho and Opera Jawa:


About Indonesia:


About Gamelan Music, Javanese Dance and *Ramayana*:


