

# DANCE FILMS DEVELOPMENT IN INDONESIA

DENY TRI ARDIANTO

Sebelas Maret University (UNS)

denytherockies@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Dance Film is a film genre which is less recognized by the society. Track record regarding dance film in Indonesia are also difficult to be traced due to its small number, limited documentations, and some perceptions which assume that dance film is the same as dance documentary. Therefore, it is necessary to specify dance film terminology and to review its historical development since the moment of its emergence in early 1900s and up to the present day. Dance film presence is also essential to enrich scientific repertoire in the field of creations, to complement genre development in Indonesian film industry, and to build people's appreciation in response to the existence of a new mean of narration and language of expression in Indonesian film.

## Keywords:

Dance film, dance documentation, Indonesian film

## INTRODUCTION

Dance film, also known as *Dance for the Camera*, *Dance Video*, *Dance Film*, *Dance in Film*, *Choreocinema*, *Screendance*, *Cinedance*, and *Dance Movie*, is cinematic interpretation of dance work which can be viewed through film or video medium. Dance film can also be defined as dance coreography which is created solely for filming or video recording purpose and not for stage performance need (Rousseve, Professor in coreography and performance of UCLA, Februari 12 2012). Thus, dance films is a distinct genre which does not solely belong to either dance or film world. It is a hybrid work which can not be enjoyed only from each point of view, either in terms of its aesthetics or its cinematography only, both merge as a single unity. Douglas Rosenberg, in his paper *Essay on Screen Dance*, in *Dance for the Camera* (2000) symposium in Madison, Wisconsin, USA, preferred to use the term *screen dance* to describe dance coreography construction which only becomes "alive" when it is combined with film or video medium, or digital technology. The combination of dance and the mediums eventually results in a collaboration in creating the form of dance film work. Similar point was also delivered by Evann Siebens in *Choreography for Camera: A Historical Perspective*; that dance film concept is a creative collaboration form between director and coreographer which serves a common purpose, by combining designs elements, music, performance, technical cinematography aspects, and dance, in order to produce a final dance film work. (Siebens, 1998: 1). Dance film is not merely a documentation form of dancing people. Dance film exist to integrate film technology and dance, to be a distinct form of art work. One distinct similarity between dance and film is that both exist and develop within space and time. And when dance is applied in filmic ways, space and time become more flexible variables rather than when it is performed on a stage. In dance film, dance is presented as the main object in delivering the plot or as the language of expression. Dance in film symbiotes to form an art work hybrid as an effort to develop both dance and film art at present and in the future. Considering the number of dance film production in Indonesia, it can be seen that Indonesia is far left behind compared to other countries in producing dance film. While in term of quantity, Indonesia has a rich variety of dance arts in many forms of culture. West Papua province, for instance, consists of more than 250 etchnic tribes. Assuming each etchnic tribe possess a form of dance, the provinve alone has already added up to 250 forms of dance. And taking all 33 Indonesian provinces into account, with all of their varied

cultures and ethnicities, it can be drawn into conclusion that there are massive number of traditional dances in Indonesia. This fact represents the abundant resources for developing dance film in Indonesia. In 2005, for the first time in Asia, *Dance on Screen* festival 2005 was held. This short films competition event took place in Gedung Kesenian Jakarta from March 10-12, 2005. The event consisted of dance films screenings from many countries, Indonesian dance film works competition, and discussion sessions. *Danc(E)motion* which was established by TARI Indonesia, a foundation founded by hendra Effendy Panatan and Mira Tedja (2002) which engage in the performace arts development, was the foundation which initiated *Dance on Screen Festival 2005* in Jakarta. This festival was also enlivened up by discussion sessions. Some of the panelists and key speakers invited in the event were; Rhoda Grauer, a producer, writer, *Emmy Award* winner, and world renowned recipient for awards in dance programs, theatre, and television, Erin Brannigan from Australia, the writer of *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (2011), Naoto Lina (Japan), and Marusya Nainggolan (Indonesia). According to the media coverage, there were not many people who came to watch the festival. This condition showed that there were not many Indonesian people who recognize dance presentation in form of film, especially the ones that were presented in a dance film competition (Utari: *koran.tempo.co*, Wednesday March 16, 2005). Since the *Dance on Screen Festival* took place in 2005, there were not any other similar events held until present day, if there were, they were only some dance film screenings in small groups or communities which are interested in this kind of film *genre*. Thus, the dance film festival in 2005 can be considered as the first and the only festival up to present day. It is indeed not an easy task to attract viewers' interest. According to Grauer, dance film is a new media, which even in America, had just emerged in 1960-1970's. It is a new genre which does not solely belong to either dance art or film art.

## DISCUSSION

### Dance Documentation

Dance film in Indonesia was firstly recognized as documentations of traditional dance made by foreign researchers. Some footages found are in form of online videos uploaded by institutions, groups, or old documentation film companies. Some examples of these footages are; Balinese dance videos which are parts of documentary film *Bali, The Island Paradise* (1932) and *Bali, Paradise Isle* (1946) produced by Global Image Works and Travel Film Archive, two companies engaging in profile and documentary films. Other examples are *Ronggeng* dance and *Ibingan Pencak Silat* footages, produced by ASTI or STSI Bandung and collected by Deutsches Tanzarchiv Cologne, Germany, an archive of dance film collection from the time of its emergence up to the present day.



Picture 1.

Footage of *Bali, The Island Paradise* film (1932)

Dance films in Indonesia were also firstly produced by foreign directors, only the story material, the dance, and the setting were taken from Indonesian culture like in the film *Bali: The Mask of Rangda* (1974) directed by Elda Hartley, a production of Hartley Film Foundation-USA, and *Bali Beyond The Post card* film (1992), directed by Peggy Stern, production of Filmmakers Library, Coe Film Associates, PennState, University of Minnesota-USA. The film *Bali Beyond The Post Card* tells about the life of *gamelan* maker family and Balinese *Legong* dancer for four generations. This film won *Gold Award* in *Dance on Camera Festival* (1992), *Gold Apple* in National Educational Film and Video Festival (1992), dan *Honorable Mention* appreciation in American Film and Video Festival (1992) (Spain, *Dance on Camera*, 1998: 22).



Picture 2.

Footage of *Bali Beyond The Postcard* film (1992)

### ***Dongeng dari Dirah (The Sorceress of Dirah) (1992)***

In 1992, coreographer Sardono W. Kusumo with Robert Chappell, an American director and cinematographer, created a dance film entitled *Dongeng dari Dirah (The Sorceress of Dirah)*. *Dongeng dari Dirah* is a film derived from Balinese mythology about the existence of *Janda Dirah*, a widow named Dirah, and *Dewi Sri (Mbok Sri)*, a mythology which develops among farmers society in Central Java. *Dongeng dari Dirah* was originally a dance coreography by Sardono W. Kusumo which was firstly performed in *Teater Tertutup* Jakarta on February 2-3 1974. This work was then performed on February 24 until March 24 1974 in Chaillot Theatre National, Paris. The dancers involved in this work were villagers of Teges village, Bali, and supported by famous dance artists such as I Wayan Diya, Sal Murgiyanto, Sentot Sudiharto, Retno Maruti, S. Kardjono, Trisapto, Ni Nyoman Sarwi, I Ketut Rina, Rochmat, I Made Netra, and I Gede Tapa Sudana. At that time, the adaptation of Balinese version of *Calon Arang* folktale, *Dongeng dari Dirah* by Sardono W. Kusumo, was considered as an art work beyond its time. This dance work was conducted by Sardono in an environmental theatrical concept, where he lived among the villagers of Teges in Bali for years. *Dongeng dari Dirah* was a major success and received extraordinary response from the people within the country and overseas. In 1992, Sardono W. Kusumo once again worked on *Dongeng dari Dirah*. However, this time he did not conduct it in form of stage performance art, but he made it in form of film (the big screen). During an interview with the writer, Sardono stated that he and the villagers of Teges, Bali, had a strong emotional bond. Since 1972 to 1980, he had lived and had his creative process in Teges. Thus, post the creation of *Dongeng dari Dirah* and its performances in several countries, there was a feeling in him longing to have the creative process with Teges villagers in Bali once again (Interview with Sardono W. Kusumo, Februari 11, 2012). *Dongeng dari Dirah* Film (1992) took the spirit and tradition of Balinese and Javanese dance and packed them in a contemporary presentation. This adaptation film is divided into four sequences. The first sequence is opened with the depiction of

fertility and togetherness in the life of Balinese society, represented by the appearance of Dewi Sri as the fertility goddess, the practice of religious ritual, and the local traditional art performance. The second sequence displays the staged performance of the legend of *Janda Dirah*. The third sequence tells about the marriage arrangement that Dirah made for her daughter. And the last scene tells about Dirah's daughter running away from the marriage arrangement and how she found her true love in Suku temple, Karanganyar, Central Java. In this temple, Dirah's daughter is surrounded by mystical symbols in many dimensions of sexuality. This enraged Dirah and made her transform into Rangda, Queen of Leak in Balinese mythology. But eventually, Rangda could be defeated by the local villagers.



Picture 3.  
Rangda in *Dongeng dari Dirah* film (1992)

Sardono explained that the story or narration was only a stimulant in creating the film. Sardono and Chappell tried to create a new approach to communicate with the viewers through body language by using film media. Thus, the visual element of this film is more dominant than other elements, even more than the plot itself (interview with Sardono W. Kusumo, 11 Februari 2012). Sardono used a narrator (*voice over*) in English, he intentionally did not put the dialogue and subtitle so that the viewers would focus solely on the film visual presented. He believed that visual language would give the element of surprise, hypnosis, and even hallucination which would last longer than the verbal language. (<http://arts.monash.edu.au/mai/films/sorceress.php>). Sardono further assumed that a good film only needed a single scene which could deeply leave an impression in the memory of its viewers for the rest of their life. In *Dongeng Dari Dirah*, Robert Chappell camera successfully captured the aesthetic moments of the gestures, expressions, and drama presented by the dancers. Thus, the emotion within the picture can be delivered to and felt by the viewers. A well crafted collaboration which became the basis of dance film creation. Moreover, Sardono and Chappell also succeeded in maintaining the mystical atmosphere of *Calon Arang* mythology which is presented in film.

### **Dance Film and Digital Video**

After the release of *Dongeng dari Dirah* (1992), there were not any dance film works produced by Indonesian dance or film artist until in early 2000s. Along with the development of digital video technology, which leads to a cheaper and more practical means and process, and also with the influence of western film art and dance movement, several young Indonesian film artists and choreographers started to explore video as a part of dance, not only as media of documentation but also as media of expression. Some of the them are choreographers Jecko K. Siompo and Chendra Effendy Panatan, and film directors Agus Yuniarso and Faozan Rizal.

In early 2000s they (coreographers and directors) had tried to create dance film in short durations. Some of their films had even been presented in some of foreign film festivals such as the film *Exodus* (2003) by Chendra Panatan and Sherman Ong which was screened in International Rotterdam Film Festival (2004), Bangkok International Film Festival, Barcelona Film Festival (2004), and Los Angeles Film Festival. *Exodus* is a dance film which portrays a same-sex love story with the setting of urban life in Jakarta. The plot is begun with a scene where a chinese ethnic girl from a lower social class meets a javanese royal dancer, then a spark of affection leads to compassion and obsession between them (<http://atau.atau> [atau www.indieflix.com](http://www.indieflix.com) [atau Films](http://Films) [atau Exodus](http://Exodus)).



Picture 4.  
Footage from *Exodus* (2003)

*Exodus* Film is dominated by a intense Javanese cultural background. The story in this film revolves with the aspiration and identification of the two women risking their life for a better life in post Soeharto era. *Exodus* Film tries to explore undecorated realistic spaces. It even leaves the impression that everything is preserved the way it is. This frankness is probably intended as a way to juxtapose dance movement language, which is usually set in such an abstract way, to be more realistic and easier to approach and understand. In the *Dance[E]motion*-Dance On Screen Festival 2005 held by Tari Indonesia in Gedung Kesenian Jakarta, semi-documentary dance film *Tamansari Mongso Rendheng* (2003), directed by Agus Yuniarso, succeeded to achieve The Best Collaboration Award. *Tamansari Mongso Rendheng* Film combines Yogyakarta traditional art with contemporary and foreign cultural nuance. In this work, Tamansari Keraton Yogyakarta (royal garden of Yogyakarta palace) is explored in detail, especially in terms of architecture. As a semi-documentary film which is packed in a combination of dance and historical building architecture, Agus Yuniarso said that his work does not focus on the entertainment aspect but on its form as dance documentation experimentation.



Picture 5.

Footage from *Tamansari Mongso Rendheng* (2003)

Katia Engel and film director Faozan Rizal in 2004 produced a dance film entitled *Of Lilies, How They Grow*. This work was done by using a static camera pattern, in which the camera only capture the moments presented by the dancer. Further, Faozan explained that the basic concept was to liberate (the film object) like the way nature liberated people to live. This means that Engel collaborated with nature and Faozan recorded the nature. This film tells about a growing Lily. To Faozan, dance film is a distinct form of art. He described dance film as film art in which the dance is the starting point. According to him, there is no need for camera movement since it will dominate and give the impression of judging the dancer. Even the cutting and editing should also be minimized. In his point of view, as an Indonesian who is accustomed to watching staged dance performance, dance film should be treated the way people watch dance performance on stage, just the way it is, without intervening the dancers' movement space and emotion.



Picture 6.

Footage from *Of Lilies, How They Grow* (2004)

Filmic approach is assumed to be achieved when a film maker is able to capture different dimensions or point of views presented by the dancers when interacting with their stage. The reflected visualisation of Katia Engel in *Of Lilies, How They Grow* who was dancing on the water is an example of this dimension. This footage of the dancer's reflection on the water is what Faozan thinks as the description of the basic prinsipal of his dance film (<http://ericasono.multiply.com>).



Gambar 7.  
Footage from *Cabdance* film (2009)

Many dance films in form of short videos were also produced by coreographer Jecko Siompo. Some of his film works tend to focus on the playful elements and promote urban issues. Some of his works are; *Cabdance* (2009) and the *Popping-Animal Pop* series (2011) (Utari: *koran.tempo.co*, Wednesday March 16, 2005). His ability in combining Indonesian traditional dance, especially traditional dance from Papua, with *streetdance*, created semi-robotic popping movements which look attractive when shot on camera and visualized through film or television screen. Moreover with such backgrounds as multy-storey buildings, walls filled with murals, narrow alleys and tunnels in Jakarta, or old warehouses with steel construction, it depicts young generation growing up in urban environment and culture. The robotic popping movements without expression also represent the life of the people in a big city which looks similar to a machine, monotonous, without expression, and constantly moving.

#### ***Opera Jawa* (2006) and *Generasi Biru* (2008)**

Beside Sardono W. Kusuma and the young artists mentioned above, the name Garin Nugroho can not be disregarded in the Indonesian dance film development. Through his musical films such as *Opera Jawa* (2006) and *Generasi Biru* (2008), Garin Nugroho had explored dance into an opera form presented through film media. *Opera Jawa* Film was inspired by Ramayana story which was then adapted by Garin Nugroho to fit into the reality of the modern society. While *Generasi Biru* is a semi documentary musical film which narrate Indonesian history from the perspective of Slank, an Indonesian famous rock and blues band. In *Opera Jawa* film, the narration revolves around Setio (Miroto), a man with his traditional pottery business in the village, his wife Siti (Artika Sari Devi), a former *wayang wong* dancer, and Ludiro (Eko Supriyanto), a man who owns a cattle slaughterhouse in the neighboring village. Their love story is pararel to those of Rama, Sinta, and Rahwana characters in Ramayana's episode *Sinta Obong*. There are also the supporting characters such as Lesmana (I Nyoman Sura), Hanoman (Jecko Siompo), and Sukesi (Retno Maruti).



Picture 8.

Footage from Garin Nugroho's musical film, *Opera Jawa* (2006)

*Sinta Obong* episode from the Ramayana's *wayang wong* stage performance was chosen by Garin since this story is very popular among Indonesian people. Ramayana is one of the stories which are frequently performed in both *wayang kulit* and *wayang wong* performances in Java. Ramayana story was also considered suitable to represent some paradoxes which give birth to mature human being anxieties such as devotion and betrayal. Through this *Opera Jawa* film, Garin Nugroho brings out the world society's awareness on how the world has been tainted by violent extremity. This phenomenon of violence in the world and in Indonesia will continue to exist as long as the civilians do not have the courage to prevent it by promoting tolerance, unity, and peace enforcement (Novianto, 2008: 84). In such perspective, *Opera Jawa* film was created. The character of Ludiro in *Opera Jawa* is the depiction of an extreme authority, and Setio is the representation of powerless presence who amasses and takes over power in an extreme way as well, while Siti is the manifestation of the commoner who is usually contested for and at the same time, eliminated. Ludiro, with all of his power, tries to take Siti, while Setio, with all of his limitation, tries to keep her by his side. The ruling party, with all of his authority, forces his will in a violent way. While the powerless party tried to defend him self in the similar way. Both become ruthless and rally their masses. Both the authority and the powerless party become extreme. And both had no room for a counsel, rallying masses and enforcing violence. Both claim to speak for the truth with no room for conscience (Novianto, 2008: 84). Garin Nugroho in *Opera Jawa* film combined realistic, stylistic, and symbolic style. The plot in the film begins with daily life events which then shift into dance coreography, followed by establishments of visual arts elements, which represent symbolism of the events narrated, in order to amplify them to be more dramatic and meaningful. Garin provided freedom of expression for the actors and artists involved in the film according to their preference of their language of expression. In this aspect, Garin positioned himself as a gallery which provided rooms for the coreographers, dancers, and visual artist to perform their works. Dance coreography in the film is fully supported by Indonesian renowned coreographers such as Eko Supriyanto, Jecko Siempo, Martinus Miroto, Retno Maruti, and Nyoman Sura. Each artist presented dance movement from their own cultural and social background such as Yogyakarta style of Javanese dance by Miroto, Surakarta style of Javanese dance by Eko Supriyanto Retno Maruti, contemporary dance in combination with Balinese dance by I Nyoman Sura, and *hip hop* movement combined with Papua traditional dance by Jecko Siempo. The variety of cultural backgrounds made *Opera Jawa* film multicultural. The camera concept proposed by Garin Nugroho in this *Opera Jawa* film is stage or objective camera, thus the characteristic of the camera is shooting on the events happening in front of it. The camera shoots as if it is recording a theatre performance on stage. As a stage, it creates distance between the viewers and the events happening. The viewers are only witnesses so that they are not drawn to the events happening (Novianto, 2008: 200). This style of camera is also frequently



used by Akira Kurosawa in his films such as *Rashomon* (1950), *Ran* (1985), and etc. Inspired by Slank's songs for 25 years (1983-2008), in 2009, Garin Nugroho produced a musical film, *Generasi Biru*. Collaborating with two young directors; John De Rantau and Dosy Omar, Garin proposed Slank to be center of the film since they have been campaigning for patriotism in a different dimension. According to Garin, reading Slank and Slankers, Slank's fanatics, is like reading Indonesia.



Picture 9.

Footage from musical film *Generasi Biru* (2009)

*Generasi Biru* tells about Slank's meeting with some figures who had trauma with violence, politics, drugs, and love. In the film, Bimbim, the drummer, meets a child who always hides under the table since he saw his parents abducted when he was playing under the table. Kaka, the vocalist, meets Nadine, a young girl who turns out to be a prostitute. Ivan, the 1<sup>st</sup> guitarist, and Ridho, the bassist, meet with a figure who behaves like an animal since he had ever been beaten like an animal. And Abdi, the 2<sup>nd</sup> guitarist, meets with a mother whose children were abducted during the reformation. Slank try to fight various forms of violence and sabotages causing the trauma. In the end of the film, they succeed to get away together to Pulau Biru, a peaceful island without violence and threat. In *Generasi Biru* film, beside music and dance, the three directors also combined documentary, drama, and animation. Through their totality in their experiments, they expected to produce an innovation so that there is no tedium in Indonesian film. ([http: atau atau kcbforum.7forum.net](http://atau.atau.kcbforum.7forum.net) atau [t69-film-generasi-biru-slank](http://t69-film-generasi-biru-slank)). Almost similarly to *Opera Jawa* film, in this collaboration Garin once again presented verbal language in form of dance and music. The only difference is that in *Opera Jawa*, the songs are traditional songs in Javanese language while in *Generasi Biru* film, the songs and music are Slank's *rock n blues* songs with modern coreography approach. Dance correography in *Generasi Biru* film (2009) was entrusted to Eko Supriyanto and Jecko Siompo. Both of them have their own different styles. Eko, with his intense traditional Javanese dance background combined with modern dance, and Jecko Siampo, with his Papua traditional dance combined with street dance movements. Their collaboration created rich and colorful correography forms. The cinematic approaches used in *Opera Jawa* and *Generasi Biru* films are also different. In *Generasi Biru* film, the camera moves more flexibly and mobile with a more attractive picture, funky, and humorous with some animated additions in it.

## CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing film creations by Sardono W.Kusumo, Garin Nugroho, Chendra E. Panatan, and other young artists mentioned above, the limitation whether the films above classified as dance film, documentation film, or musical film, should no longer become a matter of debate because

difference in interpretations has never been a new thing. In fact, classification has always been classic problem in identifying dance film in the world. This encouraged American and European dance film pioneers like Katrina McPherson (*video Dance*), Douglas Rosenberg (*screendance*), and Harmony Bench (*dance on screen*), to come up with some terminologies to identify their style, media, dan work concepts. Nonetheless, essentially they agree that dance film, *dance for the camera*, *video dance*, *dance in film*, *choreocinema*, *screendance*, *cinedance*, *dance on screen* and *dance movie*, are forms of cinematic interpretations of dance work, which can be viewed through film or video media. Further, dance film can also be seen as dance choreography made solely for film or video production. The absence of a clear definition, regarding dance film understanding, basically gives the advantage for the development of dance film as a new media which requires space for exploration, similar with the video art which is recently included as a member of visual art. Dance film is a new media which emerges as a postmodern phenomenon which breaks the limitation. Thus, it should not necessarily be restricted in such narrow categorizations, since its pluralism may result in crossovers, combinations, or fusions in terms of space and media. There is no absolutism because everything develops, including dance film. Dance film production is also of essence to be carried out as a mean to enrich the scientific repertoire in the work of creations, to complement the genre development in Indonesian film industry, and to grow people's appreciation in responding to the emergence of the new mean of narration or the language of expression in Indonesian film.

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