

## MADE SIJA



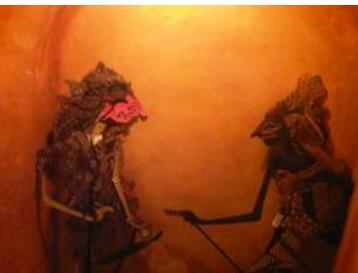
“Learning is a never ending process, even during old age,” says Balinese Dalang (Puppet Master), Made Sija . “My father was a cock fighter and he knew this was not the right profession, so he urged me to learn the arts. From a young age I have always searched out teachers to learn from, those reputed to be the best in their field.”

Made Sija was born in the village of Bona, Blahbatuh, in 1933. He left school at the age of 15, during the Japanese occupation of Bali. His desire to learn about his culture lead him to many teachers in order to train himself in Balinese literature, writing, the oration of poetic forms, dance, drama, music, performance, wood and stone carving and offering making. He has developed mastery in carving and painting masks for the Topeng dance drama, as well as the puppets for the WayangKulit.



Wayang Kulit is a unique form of puppet theatre to Indonesia, which employs light and shadows. Its origins can be traced back to the first Indian traders who arrived in Java in the first century AD. The puppets are crafted from buffalo hide (Kulit means skin, in the Indonesian language), with movable limbs and are mounted on bamboo sticks. When held up behind a piece of white cloth, with an electric bulb or oil lamp used for back lighting, the puppet’s shadows are then cast upon to the screen.

The Wayang Kulit performances are based on romantic tales, especially adaptations of the sacred Indian Hindu epics, the Mahabarata and the Ramayana. These stories have evolved with the times; modern social themes and local secular stories are woven together along with the traditional tales to create entertainment that is endearing to all generations of the Balinese people. It is up to the plays conductor or ‘Tok Dalang’ to decide the tales direction.



The Dalang is considered the genius behind the entire Wayang Kulit performance, however he is not alone. He is accompanied by a traditional orchestra providing the rhythm and melody as well as two assistants sitting beside him, handing him the puppets. The Dalang may choose from up to 50 puppets, each have their own character as well as soul and he modulates his voice to create suspense and drama. Additionally, the Dalang must give his own creative touch to the stories through comedy, playfulness and mysticism. Only then will he receive the reputation as an excellent puppet master.



Nowadays, Wayang is recognized as both the most ancient and popular form of puppet theatre in the world. Invariably, these plays climax with the triumph of good over evil. The Balinese people love to be seduced by these dramatic, humorous and at times bawdy tales and hundreds of people will stay up all night long to watch the performances. The best of the Dalangs may achieve celebrity status.

Sija has been honored with the title of - Empu – from the ISI (Indonesian Institute of Arts), Denpasar. Empu - equivalent of Professor or 'Guru Besar' - the highest of teachers; his role is to teach the teachers that train the student Dalangs. He now performs this duty from his home studio in Bona. He is recognized as an international cultural ambassador; along with this responsibility is the requirement to travel and to participate in exhibitions and performances. Sija has performed throughout Bali, Java and Lombok and his passion has led him abroad to Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Australia, the U.S.A and Europe.

Being recognized as one of Bali's leading 'Alam Guru's' (traditional teachers), he is frequently sought out by artists, students, teachers, officials and foreign visitors. Often he may be double booked for occasions, therefore he must delegate to his students to conduct the necessary ceremonies in his absence.

"I have been gifted with extraordinary energy, therefore I never feel tired when I am serving my community. It is only acceptable if I cannot perform, when I am sick or dead," he states, punctuated with a burst of laughter. "When I perform sacred ceremonies I see this as an opportunity for me to share my skills and knowledge with the younger generations, so that the Balinese culture may be eternal." Sija is a father of 10 children, many whom have followed in his footsteps continuing and expanding Bali's artistic traditions.

In 1990 Sija founded the Paripuna Art Studio, a cultural learning center to engage abandoned children unable to continue their education. "Rather than allowing these children to be without any goals, I brought them here to my studio to learn the Balinese arts," Sija says. His status within his community is also of Mangku Dalang. This honors him as a priest of the Sudra Caste (lowest and largest by number of the four caste Balinese Hindu system). This entitles Sija to perform important temple ceremonies and rituals as well as creating the holy water used for blessings.

"My culture has provided me with a very fulfilling lifestyle and I am happy as well as being proud, of my achievements. I am the most joyous when at home watching my grand children performing or when my students become more creative than I am," says Sija. "My life's philosophy is simple and that is - to share what I have - this brings me the most satisfaction. My role is to keep the Balinese traditions strong and of the highest integrity. I am accepting and encourage people to be open to modernity, however, it is essential that they honor their traditions."

Pak (father) Sija is convinced that one must continue to learn and engage. He can often be found seated on the porch of his studio carving the next puppet or studying the lontars, the sacred Balinese palm leaf manuscripts.