

On June 17, 2017, an intensely compelling conversation took place on stage at the Helatari Dance Festival at Salihara Theater in Jakarta, Indonesia, without a word being spoken.

This silent conversation created by German dancer, choreographer and documentary filmmaker Katia Engel unfolded fluidly in the darkened theater space occupied only by a darker figure shrouded interchangeably in shadow and backlighting as white letters appeared on the backdrop transporting all present to the workshop of a traditional Javanese mask maker.

Commencing “from starting to cut the wood”, the solo dancer, Ari Ersandi, of West Sumatra, merged into the rhythm of the preparatory saw, initiating a creative process that was interspersed only with occasional methodic and purposeful appearances on stage by the mask maker Enoush Mujiran . The result would be the creation of a visage of the Javanese deity, Indrajit, and a thickly layered intellectual and emotional experience spanning ancient eons and contemporary times.

For the next 60 minutes, random quotes and thoughts and occasional questions would emerge starkly white – like a shared multifaceted internal monologue interspersed with inquiries – into the midst of the shifting audios of workshop sounds and semi-melodic concoctions as the intuitive movements of the dancer and the purposeful actions of the mask maker emoted the intensity of creativity.

“... work is the first fundamental condition of human life ...”; ... new rhythm created ...”; “contemporary shift to machines”; “What is efficiency?”; “What is the rhythm of the digital era?”

No answers.

Only the never-ending left brain/right brain waltz (critical thinking versus intuitive creative flow) of varying tempos left to play out in the minds of those attending and participating.

Experiment? A hodge-podge of dance, audio, performance art, philosophical debate, word play, etc.? Art?

Maybe some or even all of these things. Yet, perhaps – most profoundly – a confrontation with the juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary human behaviors, actions, rhythms and the questions that emerge about us all as human beings within the twin contexts of where we have come from and where we are going.

An evening of silent conversation and ensuing hours of a great many ideas to reflect upon.

- Margaret Agusta: Journalist, writer, visual artist and commentator on the arts since the early 1980s. Currently also senior editor and trainer of journalists for The Jakarta Post in Jakarta, Indonesia.