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# The Western Tourist as Exotic Other: Coping with the Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger<sup>1</sup>

By John Emigh

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**Abstract:** In the summer of 2004, I traveled with Prof. Barbara Hatley to see a performance by the *Ludruk Karya Budaya* troupe of Mojokerto in Eastern Java. I carried in my backpack a Balinese *Turis* mask. The *Turis* is a *bondres*, or buffoon mask, that, like the *commedia dell'arte* Dottore, is all nose, brow, and upper lip. It has morphed into the representation of a clueless Western tourist who blunders into the performance of a *topeng* chronicle play.

*Ludruk* performances feature cross-dressed song and dance acts and satiric sketches; the leader of the troupe was the principal comic. When introduced, I put on the *Turis* mask and joked around with him. He laughed and said he wanted me, in character, to interrupt another sketch on stage, oafishly shake hands all around, and ask for decidedly non-halal foods. Eventually, he'd ask for payment, would demand my mask and, once he had it, chase me off the stage. I demurred at first, but his point was clear: The tourist's economic and social power was based on a façade.

Prof. Hatley made a video of the resulting improvised sketch. Besides requesting non-halal food, the hapless *Turis* asks to hook up with one of the beautiful "women" he had seen dancing. Slowly, he takes in the information that these were not women but cross-dressing performers and is schooled in East Javanese non-binary gender representations. The sketch concludes with the excruciating removal of the mask from my all-too-naked face, the company director donning the mask, doing a fine exaggeration of Balinese dance moves, and forcing my exit. The village audience laughed and seemed to appreciate the sometimes-bawdy humor and our implicit commentary on the mixed blessings of tourism.

This paper reflects on the minefield of cultural issues involved in our improvised sketch.

**Keywords:** representation, race and ethnicity, Masks, cross-dressers, gender non-conformity, improvisation (acting), *Ludruk*, Java (Indonesia), tourism and the arts

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<sup>1</sup> *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger* is the title of a book of poems by the wonderful Rosemarie Waldrop (1972). It seemed to provide a fitting frame for the encounter depicted in the sketch.

This wonderful symposium offered up a host of examples of the troubling roles that puppetry and masks have played in the long history of marking and mocking otherness. Less frequently, there were examples given of attempts to reconcile alterity through inclusion and even admiration. My own contribution, at the tail end of the conference, consisted of the presentation of a video of and commentary upon an impromptu improvised sketch that I performed with and at the request of a *ludruk* company in the Surabaya region of East Java in 2004 ([video is available at this link](#)). Showing the video was intended as light entertainment. Dessert after a heavy meal. But, of course, the issues raised at the conference lingered and could not and should not be so easily put to rest. Here is a more complete and, hopefully, more thoughtful description of my encounter with *ludruk* and what I now make of that encounter.

Backing up a bit, in the summer of 2004, I met Barbara Hatley of the University of Tasmania at an international theater conference in Singapore. Barbara is a remarkable scholar of modern Javanese performance; most of my own field research and writing regarding things Indonesian has been focused on Balinese *topeng*—a form of masked dance theater that I was blessed to study with I Nyoman Kakul in 1974–75. Ever since, I have tried with varying degrees of incapability to share adequately the richness that I found in *topeng* through adaptation of its techniques to solo performances for non-Indonesian audiences, in occasional performances with Balinese troupes, and in a range of essays: historical, anthropological, personal, and analytical (see Emigh 1996; 2006; 2010).

What so attracted me to Barbara's work is that she had traced the modern history of many intersecting but contrasting performance genres in Java through colonial and post-colonial turns, the horrific killings of the anti-communist purge of 1965–66, the Suharto regimen's New Order that followed, and the more recent post-Suharto years and had done so with great clarity and admirable attention to evolving cultural and political contexts. The balance she manages to maintain while detailing and assessing aesthetic projects and achievements and describing the social and political contexts that give rise to, sustain, and challenge these projects is exemplary and all too rare (Hatley 1971; 2000). Of particular interest to me was her description of the seldom studied popular forms of *ketoprak* and *ludruk*—genres derived not from the Indic influenced courts of pre-colonial Java but ones that have evolved to suit the needs and tastes of more recent village and, increasingly, urban audiences. In Java, these forms are often discussed as *kasar* (rough or crude) in

contrast to the more *alus* (refined) Central Javanese forms of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) and *wayang orang* (dance drama).

Featuring cross-dressing performers (*bedayan*), social and sexual humor (*dagelan*), and melodramatic scenes (*lakon*) often focused on the challenges faced by the recently arrived poor into modern (*maju*) urban life, by the 1950s and early 1960s ludruk had moved from the villages of East Java to the notoriously bustling and bawdy environs of the now clean and green city of Surabaya and became especially associated with the Indonesian communist movement (Hatley 1972; Azali 2012). Thus, having done his research in the early 1960s, anthropologist James Peacock (1968) published the first extended treatment of ludruk under the title of *Rites of Modernization: Symbolic and Social Aspects of Indonesian Proletarian Drama*. Barbara Hatley had followed the later history of this “proletarian” (*rakyat*) form and described the attempts to tame and blunt its humor and social commentary during the Suharto years; she had not yet been able to witness firsthand how the form had evolved in the relative freedom afforded artists after the overthrow of Suharto’s New Order in 1998. Barbara had been alerted that the famed *Ludruk Karya Budaya* troupe of Mojokerto would be performing on their home ground outside of Surabaya shortly after our conference in Singapore ended. She knew of my work and our common interests, and, as we had become friends at the conference, she invited me to come along. Never having seen ludruk, and my curiosity aroused, I jumped at the chance.

Coming from a lecture-demo at the Singapore conference, I carried in my backpack a Balinese *Turis* mask. The topeng *Turis* is one of the comic masks used to bring topicality and laughter to improvised Balinese topeng shows. These performances—given either by groups or by single performers playing multiple roles—reenact mythological and semi-historical tales of Bali’s pre-colonial past at temple festivals and rites of passage. Kings, courtiers, warriors, and demons from these tales of the past—represented by performers wearing expertly carved wooden masks that cover almost the entire face—are summoned into the present to dance and reenact their chronicled deeds. Their histories are given present-day meaning through commentary by actors with whimsical half-masks that allow for speech. At first, these are servants to the main characters. Toward the end of the performance, though, perspectives are added by outlandish *bondres* characters—buffoonish figures who wander in to elicit laughter as they bring the concerns of the present-day social world into collision with the chronicled past (Emigh 1996, 105–206). One such popular mask is now that of the *Turis*: the Western tourist.

All nose, brow, and upper lip, the Turis mask resembles that of the Dottore of *commedia dell'arte*. Though no direct connection between the *commedia* and *topeng* has ever to my knowledge been established, it is useful to think of *topeng* as a chronicle play improvised by *commedia* performers who have taken some very rigorous dance lessons. A prototype for the Turis mask is thought to have been first used by Balinese performers in the early 20th century as a satiric representation of an arrogant Dutch soldier (I Made Bandem, personal communication, 1980s). The *commedia* Capitano comes to mind as a parallel creation from an earlier time—also caricaturing a foreign occupier as a hyper-aggressive, buffoonish other. The Turis has now morphed into a naïve Western tourist who blunders into the historical scene, perhaps asking his way to the temple without knowing he is already there. (There are 10,000 temples on the small island of Bali.) I've seen variations on this character implying French, English, German, and American nationality through exaggerations of their immediately recognizable eccentricities of word, deed, and headwear. (The technique for circular breathing used in playing the *suling* in Bali is handy for the beret-wearing “French tourist,” who circularly inhales his own smoke—out of the mouth, into the nose and back again, provoking gales of laughter.)

I have two such masks that I frequently use: One, with an upturned nose, was made by the late Ida Bagus Amon and is played as a naïve Orientalist Professor, an enthusiast of all things Balinese, who assumes that the Balinese love for and participation in performance means that the “happy natives of Bali” have no material concerns. The other—the one I had in my backpack that day—was made for me by I Made Hartawan. With its prominent pointed nose and white mustache, is a deliberate caricature of my own face. A blundering extrovert, in American performances he sometimes takes out a wallet and offers to buy *gamelan* instruments or involves the audience in taking selfies with Balinese musicians (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. (2009). Author as *Turis* in a *topeng pajegan* performance. Photo by Jay Gidwitz.

Ludruk performances last several hours into the night. No masks are used, but much of the time is taken up with cross-dressed song and dance that involves men elaborately, and often persuasively, dressed as women singing and dancing solo and in groups and playing roles in melodramatic scenes dealing with the stresses of modern Indonesian life. Like that of the masked performer, the dual identity of the *bedayan* is innately unsettled and unsettling. The portrayals of women in ludruk include the deliberately provocative and illicitly sexual: One *bedayan* performer, early on in the ludruk performance we were about to see, danced suggestively while draped with a large and living snake (see Figure 2). They also include groups of *bedayan* singing and moving sedately to popular romantic songs (see Figure 3) as well as portrayals of career women and embattled homemakers guiding their families through domestic turmoil. It is an irony that although women traditionally do not perform on East Javanese stages, the *bedayan* are the guides and spokespersons for all that is modern (*maju*). It has been suggested that, as ludruk developed in East Java, the dual identity of the *bedayan* allowed the performer more scope and freedom to depart

from normative social expectations placed upon women in ways that have perhaps ironically had a socially progressive effect (Hatley 1971, 96–100).



Figure 2. (2004). An alluring bedayan performer draped with a living snake. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.



Figure 3. (2004). *Bedayan* performers sing popular love songs. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.



At the heart of ludruk is its humor. Even the opening *Remo* dance portraying a local hero martyred on the field of battle is subjected to ridicule (see Figure 4), and there are many instances in the presentation that are something akin to sketch comedy. In the performance we witnessed, these included a parody of the romantic songs sung by the *bedayan* (see Figure 5) and a mocking of the oratorical excesses of imams and politicians. This practiced irreverence, coupled with a vibrant history of social critique and melodrama, is important to what follows.



Figure 4. (2004). The heroic posturing of the *remo* performer is mocked. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.





Figure 5. (2004). The lead comic of the troupe mocks a popular sentimental song. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

The clear leader of the troupe was the principal comic, whose name unfortunately is lost to me. Backstage during one of the musical numbers, Prof. Hatley introduced us and encouraged me to show him the Turis mask I had with me. I put it on and joked around with him, vigorously shaking his hand—a gesture that Indonesians take to be an oafishly aggressive form of greeting. He laughed heartily. Taking me by surprise, he said he wanted me to do the same thing on the stage, interrupting when he and a few other comedians were performing a satiric sketch. I should blunder in at a time of my choosing, aggressively shake hands all around, and ask for decidedly non-halal food and drink—whiskey, steak, maybe a hamburger. After gathering information about the ways of Mojokerto, I would then be asked for payment and should try to pay in dollars, or perhaps a credit card. Since this was still not a viable mode of payment in Indonesian villages, he would then demand my mask as payment. Once he had it, he would chase me off the stage.

I laughed and demurred. His instant framing of this sketch was impressive. The jokes showing the tourist to be a naïve and crude fool were fine—that’s his character—but, I protested, perhaps a bit too professorially, the mask is an intrinsic part of that character. I could never remove it. He smiled and said, “In Indonesia, politicians put masks on and take them off all the time.” I

began to grasp the point of his proposed sketch: that the cultural and economic empowerment of the tourist was largely based on a façade, and so, perhaps was the civility and deference of those satisfying touristic appetites. Through laughter this power might be exposed and contained. Or, at least, some fun could be had at the tourist's expense. Without further discussion, we agreed to do the bit. The video of the results was recorded by Barbara Hatley; all images of the performance offered here are screenshots from that video.

There is a large and responsive crowd gathered around the improvised stage and sitting on the hills close by. A banner proudly proclaims the company as “LUDRUK KARYA BUDAYA.” *Karya budaya*, the group's chosen name, translates roughly as “cultural work.” The impressively alluring and dangerous snake woman dances, the martial dancer is mocked, and the romantic songs of the more modest *bedayan* are parodied. And, just as planned, in the midst of a comic sketch, the hapless Turis wanders onto the stage, blithely interrupting whatever was being said and aggressively seeking to vigorously shake everyone's hands (see Figure 6). The comedians try to escape his—my—enthusiastic but clueless grasp and the audience laughs in recognition. Eventually, introductions are exchanged, the comedians making up fanciful names for themselves and I, the Turis, good-naturedly, but still quite cluelessly, mangle these names in increasingly bizarre ways. More laughter.



Figure 6. (2004). The clueless Turis aggressively shakes hands. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

Searching my pocket edition of *Practical Indonesian: A Communication Guide*, but finding it of little practical help, I ask, as planned, if there is whiskey for sale. Feigned shock and dismay. That would be *haram*. What about pork or at least a good beefsteak? Certainly not. Only halal food sold here. A hamburger? One of the supporting players grabs the diminutive chief comic, holds him close his body, and states, “Here’s your hamburger” (see Figure 7). The laughter grows.



Figure 7. (2004). "Here's your hamburger." Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

And then the improvised scene takes a darker turn, something akin to what Marvin Carlson in his keynote talk for this symposium called "the racial reckoning." On the cover of my *Communication Guide* is a drawing of Petruk (see Figure 8), one of a quartet of clowns who provide context and humorous commentary in the *waying kulit* (shadow theater) tradition. He has a grotesquely long nose. And so, to Indonesian eyes, do I: mask makers in Bali often humorously complain about all the wood they have to dig out in order to accommodate it. As noted earlier, the Turis mask I am wearing is a fine caricature my own face made by a friend and superb craftsman. The chief comic points to my nose, to the book cover, and back again, while others chime in: "your nose. It's so long. So ugly [this last in English]. Just like Petruk." (see Figure 9). Scattered laughs, perhaps now with some dis-ease.

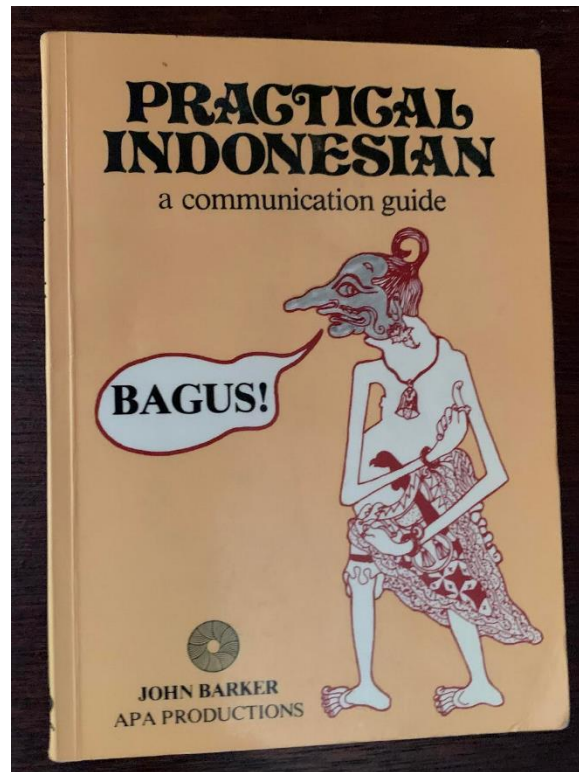


Figure 8. (2004). Petruk graces the cover of the phrase book carried by the Turis. “Bagus!” means “Fine!”.



Figure 9. (2004). “Your nose. It’s so long!” Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.



Finally understanding the object of their mirth, I—the Turis—manage to change the subject. The conversation shifts to something not in the plan. Rescuing my *Practical Indonesian* and mangling the language nonetheless, he—I—asks his—my—new friends if they could please introduce me to one of those gorgeous women who had been dancing and singing earlier in the evening. With very limited help from *Practical Indonesian* or my own rusty *bahasa Indonesia*, he—I—goes on at some length described their intoxicating beauty (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. (2004). "Such beautiful women!" Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

This, of course, makes explicit what everyone in the audience already knows, what many jokes seem to hint at, but what has not been stated: that the *bedayan* are cross-dressed performers portraying women. I was fairly certain, given the bawdy and physical nature of much of the humor, the well-earned reputation of Surabaya for its huge red-light district, and the audience's evident delight with that very dangerous *bedayan* and her giant snake that this might press up against but not offend taboos. What I—and the hapless Turis—were utterly unprepared for was what came next. After an excessive amount of hip thrusting to illustrate the desires of the linguistically impoverished Turis (a crude and desperate gesture that somehow became a contest), the chief comic intervenes to reel off a long catalogue of terms, some in Indonesian, most in the local East Javanese dialect, and some no doubt more polite than others, used locally for people who in one

way or another have a non-binary gender identity. Term follows term in dizzying succession. It is a stupefying linguistic and cultural tour de force (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. (2004). The Turis gets schooled in the complexities of gender in Eastern Java. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

Further acknowledging what Hatley (1971) has termed the “illicit sexual appeal” embedded in the homoerotic aspect of ludruk (100), the dumbfounded Turis gathers his wits, shrugs, and says, “*coba*,” which the audience would understand to mean essentially, “I could give it a try.” That statement elicits a moment of “shock” (see Figure 12) followed by an explosion of laughter. As Freud (1905) long ago pointed out, the jokes that elicit the most laughter are those that find a surprising way to skirt social taboos that have weakened just to the point that they allow for the breach.





Figure 12. (2004). Saying “*Coba*” elicits a strong reaction. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

It remained to wrap up the sketch, which had by then covered cultural ground that none of us could have fully anticipated. I—the Turis—offer up payment for all the cultural knowledge gained by offering first a dollar bill (see Figure 13) and then a credit card (“*bisa Visa?*”—“Can you take Visa?”—the Turis asks, overly proud of his rudimentary bilingual play on words). Neither dollars nor Visa cards are acceptable tender. Neither is hat or shoe. As planned, the chief comic next points to my mask and demands that it, and nothing else, would be just payment for services rendered. I discover to my surprise that I—the Turis—do indeed have a mask. Without any recourse, slowly, painfully, in agony, the Turis peels the mask from his—my—face (see Figure 14). My unmasked face is revealed as embarrassingly naked (see Figure 15). Thus denuded, I regard the mask that has served as the guarantor of personal entitlement and economic power for the Turis with horror (see Figure 16). The chief comic then takes the mask, fits it to his own face, and, in a final triumphant gesture, gives an excellent Javanese parody of the vigorous moves associated with dance in Bali—not coincidentally, the area in Indonesia most successfully reliant on tourism for its economy (see Figure 17). Slipping into a feigned Balinese “trance,” he then chases the Turis—me—from the stage to resounding applause.



Figure 13. (2004). "Give us your mask." Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.



Figure 14. (2004). Unmasking is difficult. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

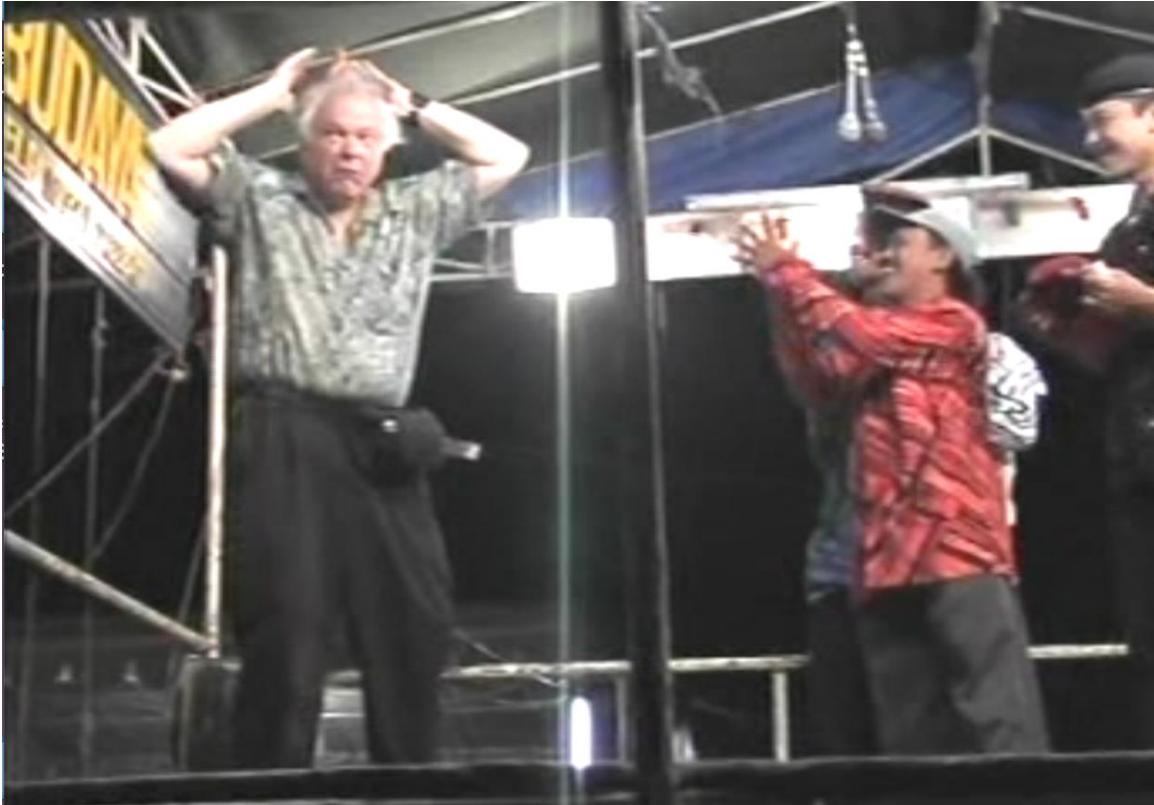


Figure 15. (2004). The Turis unmasked. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.



Figure 16. (2004). The horror of self-recognition. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.





Figure 17. (2004). Exaggerating Balinese dance moves. Screenshot from a video by Barbara Hatley.

What, finally, to make of the dynamics of this improvised and often crude sketch? After the symposium presentation I was asked, quite politely, if I had any second thoughts concerning my actions during the sketch. I replied, correctly but pedantically—even citing the ancient Greek *Tractatus Coisilianus* (see Frye 1957)—that I had knowingly taken on the role of the comedic *alazon*: the false pretender to authority and power that must symbolically or literally be driven from the stage at the end of a comedy—whether one written by Menander, or Shakespeare, or one improvised on a stage in 16th-century Venice or in modern-day East Java. While some of the actions in the sketch by myself as Turis and by my fellow comedians were undoubtedly crude and excessive—even more so than I and probably they had anticipated—the sketch was embedded in contexts that supported broad physical and sexual comedy. And it was precisely the blundering and ill-considered initiation of these actions by my character that made that character’s expulsion from the stage so necessary.

The sketch, of course, had social relevance; it depended upon the mixed feelings experienced by those in the audience facing the both hoped for and dreaded emergence a more tourist-based economy, an aspect of what one symposium member called “the onslaught of global

culture.” It played with and upon the positions occupied by Western (and Eastern) tourists and those who must deal with their often ill-considered demands. The arc of events within the sketch clearly gave pleasure to many in the audience. And, to use a term that emerged in the symposium, in the social and political contexts of East Java, the company was certainly “punching up.” Still, a troubling thought emerges. In exposing tensions in the roles played by both tourist and host—and the façades that sustain these roles—did our impromptu sketch also serve to exacerbate the tensions between peoples based on physical appearance and place of origin? As the symposium made all too clear, performances making use of the innate essentializing and caricaturing tendencies of masks and puppetry can and do play this role.

I can take some comfort in the warm acceptance given me as a person by audience members and the company after the sketch, as well as the hearty laughter during it. In the process of dealing with the ways of this particular casual stranger through a combination of inclusion and confrontation, the Karaya Budaya Ludruk Company seems to have simultaneously both troubled and celebrated a collision of peoples and societies. It certainly did not and could not put the brakes on the advance of tourism, nor would many of those laughing in the audience wish for this to happen. But the question remains: What is the “cultural work,” the *karya budaya*, of ludruk? And how did our sketch contribute to or impede this work?

I believe, all in all, that Barbara Hatley, writing before this event and not to the particular questions raised by it, is correct in her assessment of the of the “cultural work” of clowning in ludruk performances. Its function is not so much “to undermine new values and ways but to allow people to laugh away the tensions arising from these changes.... *Ludruk* assists in the adjustment to social change, turning the accompanying fictions into sources of amusement rather than resentment” (Hatley 1971, 100–1). I would like to think that our little impromptu sketch made a small contribution to that important work.

Finally, a confession. In preparation for my talk at the virtual conference, I had planned to give my commentary wearing the mask of the Orientalist Professor, the other variant of the Balinese Turis mask that I frequently use. The Professor would explain that he had a long and complicated relationship with John Emigh. In his decidedly mid-Atlantic mode of address, zig-zagging between forced jocularly and bluster, he would note, quite correctly, that he was a far more fluent and engaging speaker than I. He would call out moments of hubris and of oafish and ill-considered behavior exhibited by me during my sketch with the ludruk company. While doing this,

he would give ample evidence of his own pedantry and lack of humor. Double-edged, this would serve to simultaneously provide both an element of self-critique and a satiric portrayal of academia, leaving the virtual audience members to sort through the words and images for their own footing on this slippery ground. Since the viewer's relation of the mask to the wearer of the mask is innately unsettled and unsettling, the hope was to build upon this in an entertaining way.

I abandoned this plan the day before the presentation. I realized that the Professor might well be heard as parodying the precise and fluid Oxbridge cadences of some of our British and British-educated colleagues, one of whose presentations could immediately precede my own. This was not at all the intent; any resemblance to British speech of any kind in the Professor's palaver is purely aspirational. I tried to get the Professor to change his mode of speaking, but masks can be stubborn. The Professor resides firmly and proudly in the mid-Atlantic. I'm not certain I made the most productive decision. There are times, as Hamlet reminds us, when conscience can make cowards of us all. There might well have been a way to rescue the intent of the abandoned plan without betraying its more inclusive spirit. What I am certain of, though, is that the kind of questioning that led to my decision is necessary.

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### About the Author

**John Emigh** is Professor Emeritus at Brown University, where he taught and directed from 1967 to 2009; from 2009 to 2018 he taught in the Brown/Trinity MFA program. He has served on the board of Performance Studies International (PSi) and was founding chairperson of the Association for Asian Performance. He authored *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre* and has published pioneering articles linking the fields of Neuroscience and Performance Studies. He has directed over 80 plays and, with Ullie Emigh, created the documentary *Hajari Bhand of Rajasthan: Jester without Court*. After studying with I Nyoman Kakul in 1974-75, he has performed with Balinese *topeng* (masked theater) troupes in the US and Bali and presented solo shows based on *topeng* at diverse venues throughout the US and Asia. In 2009, he received the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's Career Achievement Award for Educational Theatre.