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## Legends told with the mask dances of Java



Laurie Ross, who has made a commitment to perpetuate the mask dances of Java, assumes the character of Djauk as she dons the mask. White dancing, Djauk becomes her alter-ego.

By LORAIN McCLISH

Laurie Ross might well one day be the only living person who knows the full repertoire of Sundanese dances, stemming from the western section of Java.

The Farmington Hills resident spent a year in that country studying under Ibu Darshih, a 90-year-old dance master who carried that repertoire in her head, learning the ancient and traditional movements of the country's five classic mask dances.

"We think Ibu Darshih is about 90, because there were no birth certificates there when she was born, no written history for that matter," she said, "and my sponsors were afraid she would be gone before her art was passed down."

The artist of mime and mask improvisation explained that her mentor was without children, a particular misfortune since arts and crafts in the Java villages are traditionally passed down

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from one generation to the next.

"One family will specialize in masks, another in bead work, another in leather puppets, maybe, but always through the children," Ms. Ross said. "So it is rather sad that I am a Westerner and will be passing it on here."

Ms. Ross has all of Ibu Darshih's movements of the five main characters in the folk dances documented in photographs now, complete with the legends she is now teaching to students in Detroit's International Institute.

SHE PASSES along what she learned

one step further with mask and mime, sound and motion theater games for the mentally handicapped in Birmingham's FAR Conservatory.

"I think it is important for these youngsters to get outside of themselves for awhile. They can take on another character with the mask, improvising with who-you-are, who-do-you-want-to-be games, losing identity behind the mask," she said of the new therapy classes.

Ms. Ross returned from the Indonesian island fluent in the language of the

section where she stayed, and well-versed in all facets of its culture.

"All of the traditional dances stem from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, two Indian epic poems," she said. "Movements come out of the folk stories integrated into these poems."

"So it is important that you understand the character types behind the mask very well before you can go on to improvisation," she said.

This would mean, she explained, knowing how these people lived, their philosophy of life, and their religion.

"They are about 90 percent Moslem, but when you study their culture you will realize there is a strong impact of the Hindu there," she said.

WHEN THE five traditional dances, stemming from the five characters, are mastered, then the dancer goes on to improvise with his character, solo. Then he or she can interplay with one or two more characters. The ultimate would be performing an entire play.

These dances are performed at selamtons (celebrations) with a full gamelon (Indonesian orchestra).

Ms. Ross performed at one selamton, a ritual of circumcision, which was an invitation she accepted "as a very big honor because it is a very important event." Second to that would be the selamton of blessing the six-month pregnant woman for a strong and healthy child.

But the ritual which meant most to Ms. Ross was the shower bath of perfume, holy water and flowers that was given her by Ibu Darshih after she was accepted as a student and before the two began their lessons.

"It signified the total commitment between teacher and student," she said. "A beautiful thing for her to do and a nice welcome for me."

"It wasn't until much later that I realized that the places on my body where she took much trouble rubbing palm leaves were the exact spots where she wanted my muscles to develop."

WHEN SHE left Ibu Darshih she was given a gift of a highly decorated beaded girdle that is not only an intrinsic part of her dancing costume, but also her amulet.

Each piece of her many-pieced costume has a special significance, "even the four extra inches of batik wrapped around my stomach to make my stomach stick out four extra inches," she said.

Her makeup, her earrings, whether her hair is covered, or braided, pulled into a bun or left long and loose, is all significant within the dance.

When she puts on one of her wooden masks, held in place by grasping a leather piece in her teeth, then her eyes play yet another part of the intricate movement of the dance.

Ms. Ross, who grew up in Birmingham, began her formal education at New York University, "but it wasn't long before I knew I was going to have to map out my own personal education," she said.

A love of mime and theater brought her to Leonard Pitt's School of Mask and Mime Theatre in California where she witnessed her first performance of the mask dances of Java.

Teachers there who had studied in Bali put her in touch with her sponsors, the Pak Enoch Atmadibrata family, with whom she lived for her stay in Java.

FOR A WHILE after that she was the only Westerner in the Ramayana Dancers, a company in New York City.

(Continued on page 5C)



The Old Man is one of Laurie Ross' favorite mask characters. It is the only mask accompanying one of the five Sundanese dances with cut-out eyes and mouth which allows the dancer more room for improvisation within the dance.



The mask of Temben represents a female servant. She is humorous, sometimes silly, and is often used as intermission entertainment between the acts of a very serious play. Or, her character would be suitable to amusing very young children.



The pink wooden mask of Rumiang is held by Laurie Ross in full costume, comprised of about a dozen different pieces. Her delicate and extravagantly headed girdle is a gift from her teacher,

though most of the outfit was hand-sewn by herself. The base of her headpiece is fashioned from human hair.

Staff photos by Dick Kelley