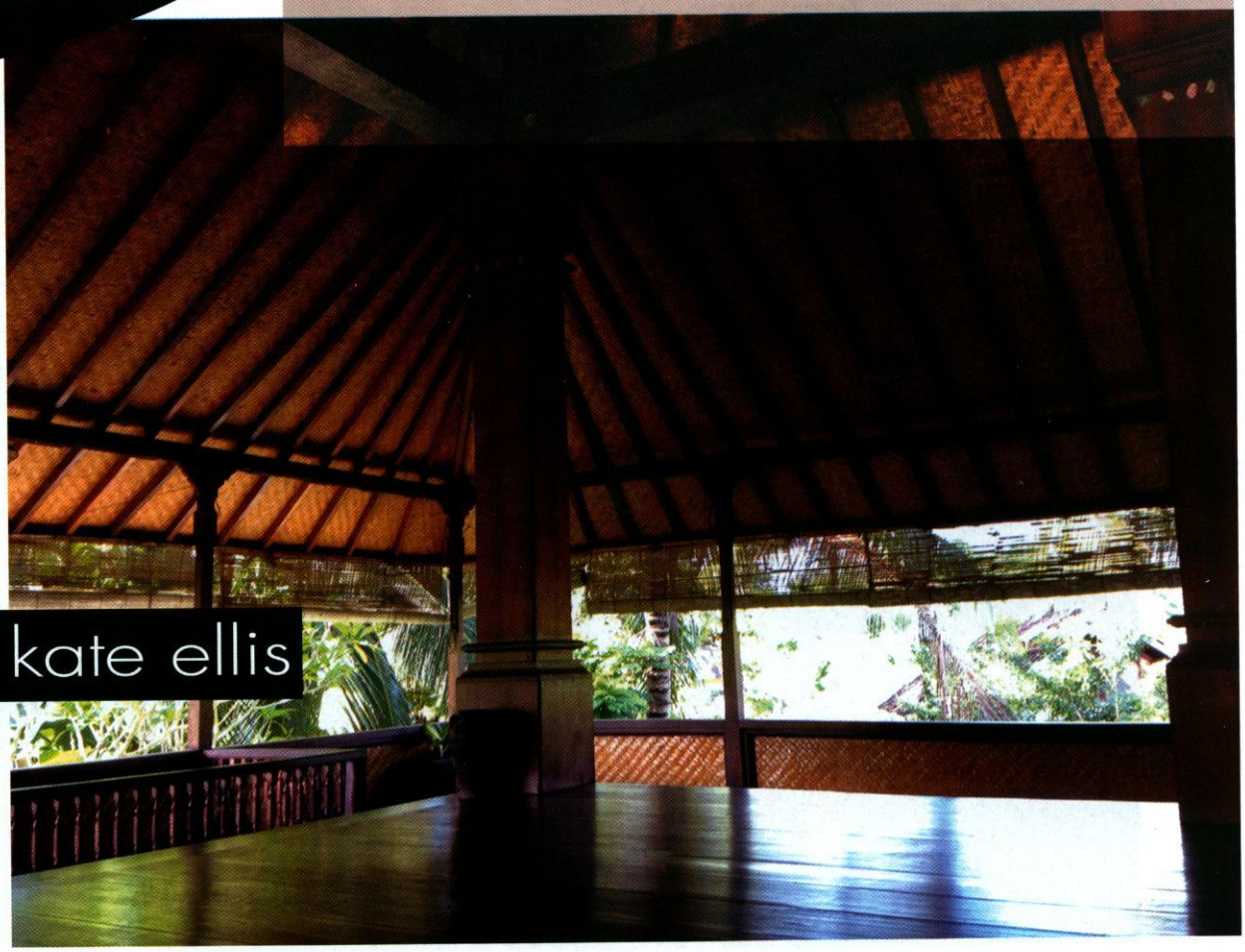
Bali

reverence for art, the artist, and performance

by kate ellis



As a young graduate student, I dreamed of following in Julie Taymor's footsteps and running away to Bali to study mask carving or puppetry. Seventeen years later, I boarded a plane in San Francisco to do just that. I was off to Bali for a month-long intensive study as part of the Dell'Arte Abroad program.

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Above, daily offerings left outside a family compound in Ubud. *Right*, presentation of offerings in the temple as part of the Full Moon Ceremony. *Below and previous page*, the *wantilan* on the hotel grounds, Melati Cottages, Penestanan, Bali.

A week after I got home, one of my students asked what my favorite thing about Bali had been, and my answer was simple: in Bali, religion and art are one. I had felt the intermingling of these two cultural elements the whole time I was there.

As a costume designer and technician, and as a puppetry teacher, my desire to study in Bali encompassed not only the ancient shadow puppet theatre known as *wayang kulit* but also the costumes and masks of Balinese dance traditions. Roughly translated, *wayang* means "shadow" and ***kulit*** is "leather" (Dibi and Balinger 2004, 44). With guidance from the Dell'Arte faculty, the generosity of our Balinese teachers, and the patience of the Balinese people, I was given the opportunity to learn about the essence of these Balinese cultural traditions while immersed in the native environment.

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Julie Taymor observed to Paul Solman on *PBS NewsHour* (June 5, 1998), "There's no word for artist in Bali. It's just what you do. What we would call putting on a play, dancing, playing music, that's not your profession: that's part of your act as a human being." She was echoing what the artist and ethnographer Miguel Cavarrubias wrote in 1930: "Everybody in Bali seems to be an artist. . . Every carving, dance or song had a practical purpose," he wrote, "and could not be imagined without that purpose. Their meaning was their function. Dance, music, and song went hand in hand with religious ritual" (Copeland and Murni 2010, 290).

Bali is considered a Hindu island in a Muslim country (Indonesia). It was explained to our Dell'Arte group that religion on Bali could be thought of as "Balinism," unique from Hinduism, because it combines Hindu, Buddhism, and the ancient beliefs native to the island. I have since found it described in this way: "As it is practiced today, the religion of the Balinese combines worship of deities associated with nature, ancestral deities, and gods from the Hindu pantheon. . . .There is no word in Balinese for religion, and the concept of religion as being separate from tradition or culture is a foreign one" (Reichle 2010, 15).

The first morning at our hotel, I saw a woman laying offerings at the entrance to the open-air patio dining area where we had breakfast and then later on a shrine I could see beside one of the paths. These offerings were left all around the property. Later that day, when we walked to the combination tourism center and grocery store called Bintang, I noticed more offerings everywhere: left outside the entry into a compound, at the crossing of sidewalks, even on vehicles. When I asked about this at Bintang, I was told they were given in thanks. Copeland and Murni explain that these offerings are ordinary customs: "An offering is for a religious purpose. . . a means of giving something back to the gods and ancestors, but it is unlikely that the Balinese analyze it. It is what their mothers did, and the grandmothers did before them. . . . There are daily offerings for shrines, wherever they may be, and for the low spirits, on the ground. . . . They are usually presented in the morning . . . a female member of the family, dressed in Balinese costume, presents the offerings. . . .At each place the offerings are put out, a few drops of holy water are poured on the offering and she wafts the essence [incense] of the offering towards the shrine with her right hand" (Copeland and Murni 2010, 172-73). I saw this ritual repeated, rain or shine, every day we were in Bali. I would later recognize that these religious expressions were also outlets for creativity. The intricate handwoven offerings containing a flower, some rice, incense, and often a candy or other small piece of food were miniature versions of the large and ornate offerings presented as part of a temple ceremony.

Many westerners who travel to Indonesia to study the Balinese arts stay in western-style air-conditioned hotels, and the teachers come to them. Dell'Arte has arranged its programs in the opposite way: students go out to the teachers, living and studying in their home compounds. The exception was the dance teachers, who came to our hotel and held classes in the open-air *wantilan*, gathering place. The benefit, and the challenge, of having classes in a Balinese home is that instruction was done in the traditional way. The mask carvers sat on the floor with blocks of wood held between their feet, chiseling away with their tools. The puppet group sat on a tiled floor in a raised open-air workspace near the entrance to the family compound. There was one ceiling fan to keep the air moving, and the tables upon which we worked were about ten to twelve inches off the ground. Wayan Mardika, our puppet master, or *dalang*, and his son sat with perfect posture while he worked on a puppet, or just sat with us in absolute comfort while we struggled with sore backs and extremities falling asleep. They brought us cushions and small stools to sit on, but I'm not sure any of us were ever truly comfortable.

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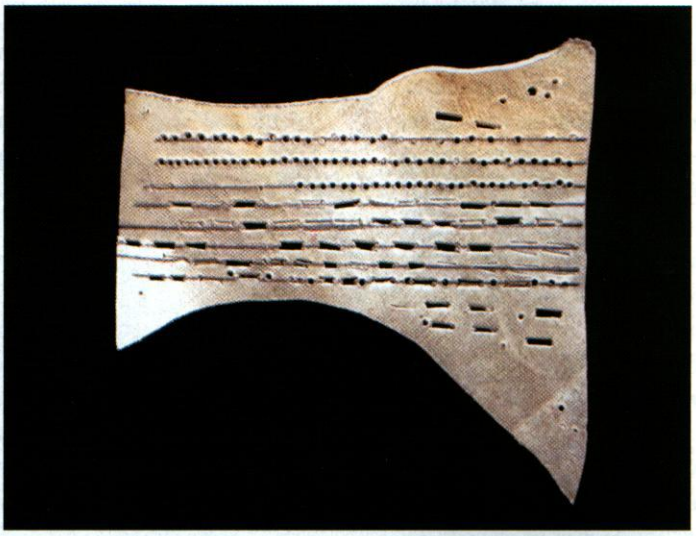
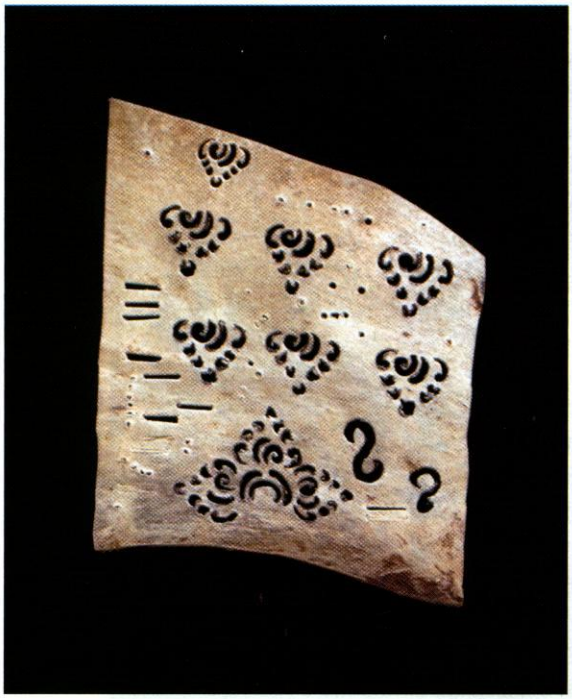
However, the experience of being in that environment, with the comings and goings of the family, and of Mardika's friends and colleagues, was priceless. We were able to get a sense of the daily life of a busy Balinese family and, to a certain degree, the energy and generosity of a village and temple community. We got to see Mardika in a variety of attire, depending on his activities: dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, in his formal uniform, coming home from the Ministry of Art, in traditional dress for a shadow play he performed for our group, and in full temple gear for a day of ceremonies.

According to Dibia and Ballinger, "the most difficult thing to learn of all the Balinese arts is puppetry" (44). I quickly understood how well deserved that reputation is. We spent the first couple of days working on samplers. On a small scrap of the treated hide from which the puppets are made, Mardika had drawn several lines, and we had to practice cutting small round holes evenly into the hide on those lines. We were learning how to make the decorative cutout elements in Balinese shadow puppets. Then we learned to make small rectangular shapes (which I never learned to do well) and then decorative ones. These samplers took us between two and two and a half days to complete (eight hours or so) and were one of the most challenging skills I have ever tried to learn. One afternoon, while I was cutting holes in my dragon puppet, I noticed that Mardika, who was sitting at the same table with us, talking on his cell phone, answering ques-

Cutting the design into a dragon puppet, two samplers for learning to use cutting tools, and practicing with puppets during an evening class.





tions when we asked, and playing with his children, seemed frustrated by something. Underneath his obvious contentment I sensed the same feeling I have watching students in a costume technology class trying to learn to do a whip stitch, attempting to create even stitches the same length and distance apart with only a tiny, ideally invisible, prick on the right side of the fabric. Watching my students struggle to do something I can do without thinking can be challenging. I sensed that energy coming from him, and I said, "This must be driving you crazy, watching us try to do this." He just smiled. I asked, "How long would it take you to cut the design for this puppet?" pointing at the dragon I'd been working on for a couple of weeks—about

a forty-hour time investment. "A day. Eight hours maybe," he answered. I was not done cutting the designs for the puppet and had yet to start painting it. He could cut the puppet in a day. This is why he is the master, the *dalang*.

Although the treated hide from which the puppets are made is translucent, when they are painted they are opaque. The paint, which is obviously needed to help the puppets cast a clean shadow, is ornate and colorful, with highly detailed designs that cannot be seen by the audience. One day I asked Mardika why they were painted with such care, when that detail could not be seen and only the cut design was visible in shadow. He said they were painted for the *wayang lemah* (*lemah* means day), or the day performance in the temple. These performances are for the gods and rarely have a human audience. The beautiful painting on the puppets, while visually stunning, is not for us, but to make the puppets pleasing to the gods (Dibia and Ballinger 2004, 47).

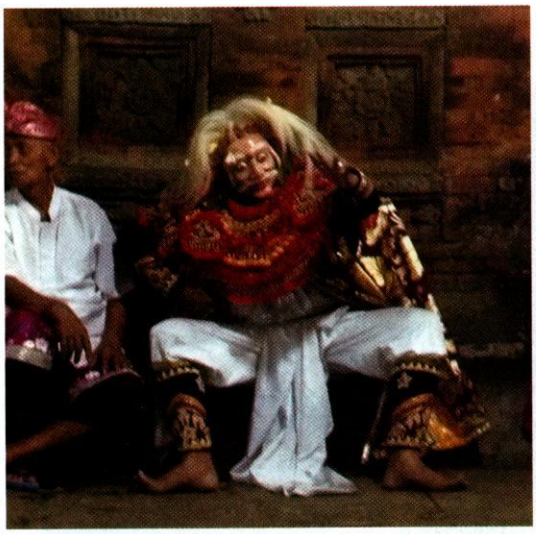
Once a week, because of Mardika's work schedule and with the goal of giving us the opportunity to learn puppet manipulation when the shadows could be seen, we went to class in the evening. Cutting holes in the hide was hard, but learning to manipulate the puppets was even more difficult. I was able to develop an understanding of the basic techniques used in Balinese shadow plays, how the puppets are held against the screen, how to tell if they are standing or walking on the base of the screen rather than floating above it, how to bring the puppets into and out of a scene. I was even able to gain a beginning student's understanding of these tasks. But I soon realized that, like the cutting of the designs into the puppets, artful manipulation of the puppets required years of practice. One evening, I watched Mardika's young son, who was already a skillful puppet maker and puppeteer, manipulate the puppets with an ease I could only dream of having. I was later reminded, by one of the Dell'Arte instructors that the children in Mardika's house had grown up watching their father work. And, from what I saw, they had been encouraged to practice the skills we were learning since they were very young. In addition, the Balinese way of teaching the arts is through observation. The student watches the master and over time learns. When I had the opportunity, I would just watch Mardika or his son cut holes in a puppet, or manipulate puppets against a screen, to try to see if I could discern that special quality of what they were doing, or how they were doing it. It eluded me.

The ability to captivate and entertain us so casually, and also be truly enthralling in a formal performance, is what I understand is meant by the Balinese concept of *taksu*.

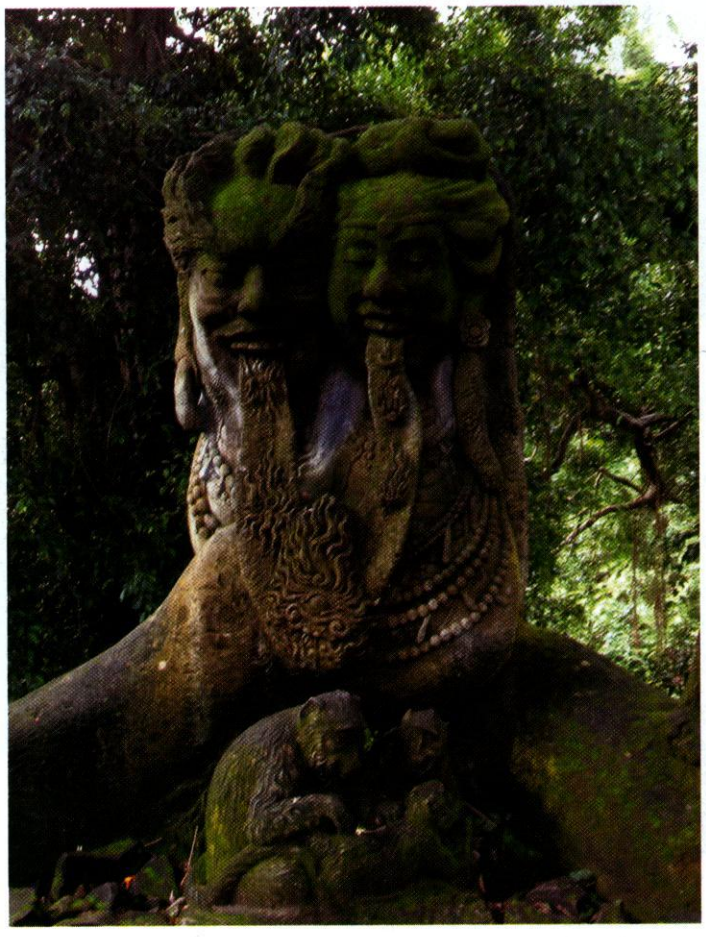
One evening, Mardika invited our group to his compound so he could perform a *wayang kulit* for us. We were invited to watch from both sides of the screen, as seeing how the show is created is at least as interesting as watching it from the front. "A talented *dalang* must have many skills. He must know more than 100 stories. . . he must possess enormous stamina to sit and declaim for three to six hours without a break. . . In addition to having a thorough knowledge of the ancient Javanese Kawi, the language in which the plays and all the other important Hindu-Balinese texts are written, the *dalang* must be fluent and literate in high, middle, and low Balinese" (Eiseman 1990, 323). Gods speak in high Balinese, royalty in middle, and the lower class or servant characters will speak in low dialects. The servants serve as comic relief and also explain what is happening so the audience can understand the story being told in Javanese Kawi, or high Balinese (Eiseman 1990, 323). Mardika speaks excellent English and, for us, the servants spoke in English instead of the low (or common) Balinese for a native audience. It was like watching a performance of Shakespeare in which the servants speak in prose, the upper classes in poetry. And much like a skilled Shakespearean actor, Mardika's inflection and energy were so skillful, his manipulation of the puppets so lively, that even when we couldn't understand the language, we were able to understand the intent and follow the story.

While watching Mardika perform that night, I first came to understand a Balinese concept called *taksu*. "We would call it a kind of talent or charismatic gift, which can be passed from generation to generation. . . I often heard it said that to perform well it is necessary to give one's self to the performance" (Lansing 1995, 59). Many times over the course of the four weeks I was in Bali I had the opportunity to see Mardika perform both formally and informally. I was particularly amazed by the skill with which he was able to take on a role and perform a section of a dance or improvise a brief shadow puppet scene while we were in class. "Great performances, and great performers, are said to 'have taksu'" (Lansing 1995, 57). Mardika's ability to captivate and entertain us so casually, and also be truly enthralling in a formal performance, is what I understand is meant by the Balinese concept of taksu.

The next day at the end of our class, as we were cleaning up, several of the children and Mardika started playing the gamelan (the set of instruments that make up an ensemble of metallophones, drums, and pipes) that was right next to our work area. It was impromptu and indicative of life in the compound. While the music was being played, a little boy—I would guess about three years old—sat in our workspace and played with the puppets we practiced with and used as models and which Mardika had used in the performance. The young boy was working them against a screen. He'd watched the play from behind the screen the night before and clearly had the concept of how to bring characters into and out of focus, the basic idea of how to hold them against the screen, and even how to work the arms. He was encouraged to work with the puppets



Above, Wayan Mardika dancing the *topeng* as part of the Full Moon Ceremony. *Right,* Mardika, his family, and a Dell'Arte student, playing the gamelan at the end of class. *Below,* a statue in the sacred Monkey Forest, Ubud, Bali.



Mardika had used. The "adult things" were not taken away, and he was not given children's toys with which to play. That being said, I knew the puppets used in the temple were blessed, and I'm certain the puppets we'd been using and the child was manipulating were not ones Mardika used for a temple ceremony.

While I observed the daily ritual of presenting offerings, and our group went to see a performance of ***kecak*** (monkey chant) that accompanied a performance of *The Abduction of Sita* from the *Ramayana* as well as trance dance (which was astonishing), we all wanted to attend a ceremony in a temple. Although we were not in Bali at a time with many ceremonies, several in our group, either alone or in groups of two or at most three, were able to attend a range of smaller or family ceremonies. Even though we enjoyed seeing the various performances available in Ubud most any evening of the week, the opportunity to see a dance performed as part of a ceremony in a temple allowed us to experience a genuine mingling of religion and art. "Community troupes still produce dramatic performances of high quality for tourists. It continues to be true, as Margaret Mead noted decades ago, that a Balinese ceremony financed by outsiders is not necessarily deprived of religious content. . . although there is concern about the consequences of endlessly repeating dramatic performances removed from their traditional village settings" (Pringle 2004, 213).

The full moon is a sacred time in Bali. Mardika invited us to attend the evening ceremony and watch him and his brother dance the *topeng* as part of their temple's celebration of the full moon. The experience was unlike anything I'd imagined. We were told to be there between 6:00 and 6:30 p.m. and the performance didn't start until about 7:30 p.m.. That time inside the temple, watching community members come in, present offerings, and socialize, was irreplaceable. I was able to surreptitiously watch Mardika and his brother getting into costume, a complex process that included many parts and several layers. I also saw them preparing the wigs and masks they would

wear to differentiate the various characters in the *topeng*, as well as sitting in prayer before they began. The performance was also highly engaging for us because the men's dance being taught to our group was the prime minister's dance, which begins the *topeng*. We had been told that the musicians follow the dancer, a difficult concept to comprehend for a westerner, but which was clear in performance. While they were highly engaging dancers, it was equally appealing to watch the members of the temple. Offerings were being presented during the performance, and even though people were watching the dancers, this was clearly also a social event. After the *topeng* was done, everyone shifted to sit facing what appeared to be the inner temple for a series of prayers. We were all sitting with Mardika's wife, and she and one of her nieces explained and helped us through the sequence of prayers. At each time of prayer, she would tell us to pray to our God, not to theirs. All I could think of was the Balinese tradition of presenting offerings in thanks and how grateful I was to be there in that moment.

Bali was complex and extraordinary, as distinctive as the island's culture and all that word encompasses for the people. I didn't go with the expectation of having a transformative experience that would renew my creativity as a theatre artist. I'm still not sure that's what happened. But I gained a perspective on the potential reverence for art, the artist, and performance that was unique and which I wanted to bring to my students. I will be sharing that understanding for the rest of my life. ❖

Kate Ellis *is an associate professor of costume design and technology at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.*

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