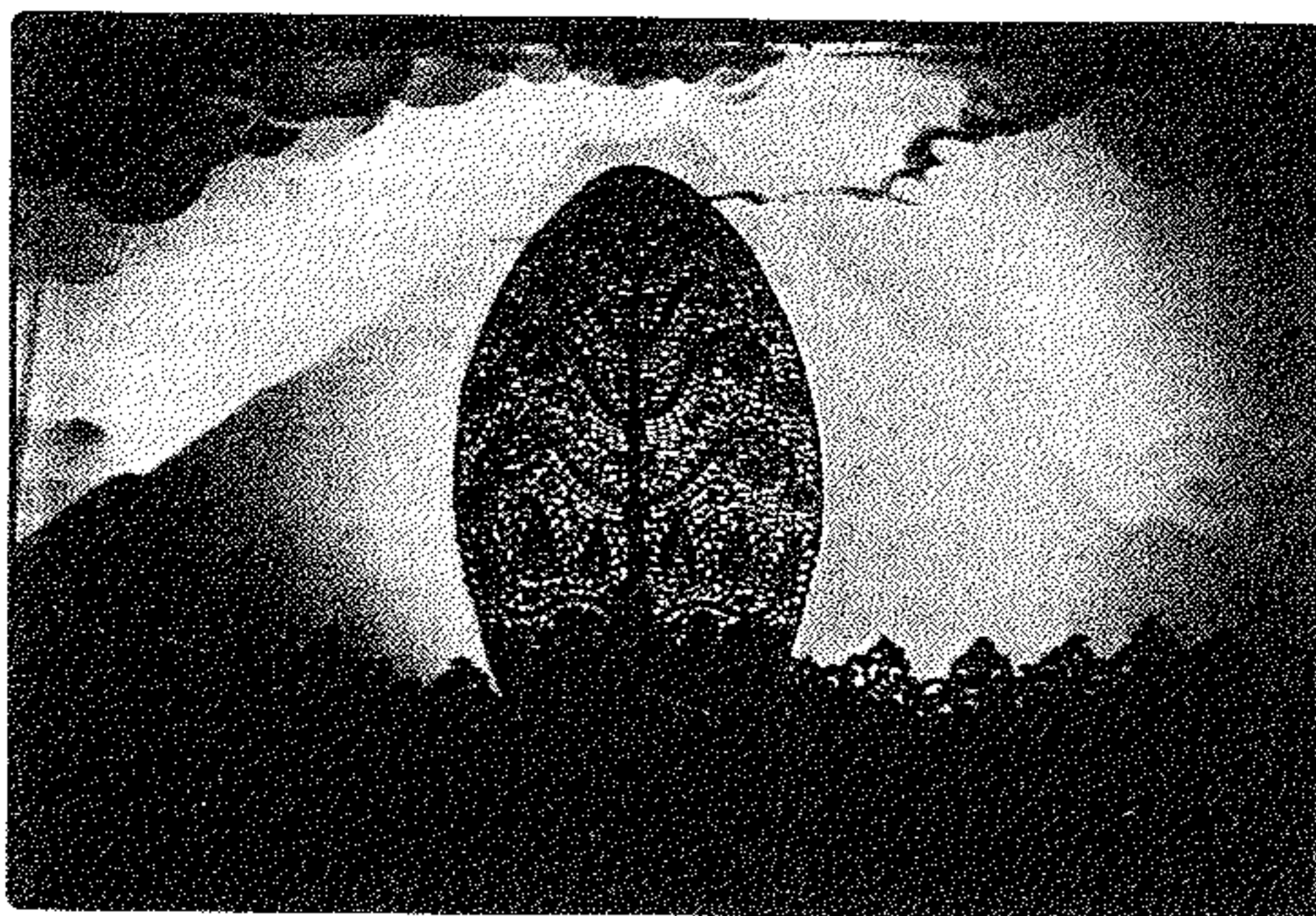


INTERCULTURAL COLLABORATION—

WAYANG LISTRIK

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY REED

BY PAMELA MALKIN



The opening visual in
Wayang Listrik—
the kayon against a
distant mountain

photo: Larry Reed

There is a special joy presenting legends and myths that are unfamiliar to most Western audiences and making those images mean something. Mythology itself is very hard to do in a realistic form and often gets drowned out by commercialism. Shadows, with their unique power and most limitless expression, are better suited to fantasy and myth than they are to realism. The shadow performance provides a link between past and future, between the individual and society—between myth and way to live everyday life. The key to the shadowlight style is the exploration of what the culture has to offer any other and how the performer, designer, director or audience member influences the entirety. It is a sharing of tastes and ideas. When we learn about life from ourselves, from others and the world outside—we learn. We are sitting on a warm July afternoon in the garden patio of the Shadowlight

Productions office, located in San Francisco's Noe Valley. It is home base to founder Larry Reed's latest, ambitious directorial project—*Wayang Listrik* [Electric Shadows]. Our discussion focuses on the complexity of this inter-cultural collaboration between Reed's company and some notable Balinese shadow artists, most importantly I Wayan Wija, *Listrik's* co-director.

One of the few Americans to be trained in traditional *wayang kulit*, Balinese shadow puppetry, Larry has pioneered a contemporary, fusion shadow theatre by integrating traditional elements with Western theatre and film styles.

His award-winning 1994 production of *In Xanadu* melded Larry's Western perspectives with those of Tibetan, Chinese and Indonesian artists. In 1995, Shadowlight and *gamelan* Sekar Jaya combined with four Balinese artists to create *Sidha Karya*,

a massive shadow and masked theatre piece presented in San Francisco.

The following year Larry collaborated with two preeminent Balinese artists, I Wayan Wija and Dewa Puta Berata on a shadow extravaganza, *Mayadanawa*. Created for Balinese audiences, it extensively toured the island. Larry had known both artists for over twenty years and studied with Wija in the early 1970's. I Wayan Wija, one of Bali's most popular *dalangs* for the past thirty-five years, is internationally renowned for his highly skilled puppet manipulation, vocal quality and characterization. Berata has distinguished himself as a noted musician and scenic designer; he has worked extensively in American universities as well as Bali.

While *Wayang Listrik* marks another collaboration between Shadowlight and Balinese artists, there are substantial differences between this venture and earlier

productions. Wija and Berata will travel to the U.S. with choreographer I Nyoman Catra and four highly skilled Balinese shadowcasters. These seven Indonesian performers will join forces with seven Western artists to present the piece solely for American audiences.

Asked about the genesis of *Wayang Listrik*, Larry replied, "Actually, it was the Henson Foundation's idea. I had presented

tour to other venues on both coasts through October.

The source material for *Listrik* is "an exceptionally complex Balinese legend chosen by I Wayan Wija." The story of "the Elixir of Eternal Life," is a profoundly evocative Hindu creation myth and a story of the gods' coming of age. Larry explained that "Wayan Wija was drawn to this piece because he was quite interested in

relying on techniques that were originated in other productions, but are developed and refined for this show. A cinema-size screen, 30 feet wide by 15 feet high, will again be used. Multiple electrical sources will replace the traditional single coconut oil flame. Three xenon lights with interior motorized discs and up to five halogen instruments with dimmers will supply most of the cinematic effects, particularly scale



Figures moving a mountain up a hill

photo: Larry Reed

In Xanadu at the 1994 Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre. Wayan Wija had performed his own show for Cheryl Henson. The Foundation thought it would be interesting to see us collaborate on a new production to be seen in the U.S."

It has been a relatively quick process. Funding was secured from a variety of sources. "This past May we were sponsored by one of these sources, Arts International/Inroads, to begin work on design and structural elements. Construction of original masks, sets, costumes and puppets, designed by Berata and Wayan Wija, were begun in Bali. All of the Balinese performers will arrive in the U.S. on August 10. We will then have three weeks to put the entire production together here in San Francisco; it's a little scary!" After its September 2nd premiere in Oregon, it will be showcased at the Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre in New York and

choosing a story from the early episodes of the Mahabharata, which he rarely gets to perform." His phantasmagorical puppet creations would be difficult to realize in Balinese venues due to their size and the technical complexity of manipulation. "However, the epic scale of the story becomes eminently possible on the big screen I employ. So, for Wija, it is an opportunity to explore something he wouldn't get a chance to otherwise."

Shadowlight Productions is noted for using projected shadows, multiple actors/puppeteers and original music to create, essentially, a new form; a synthesis between the simple majesty of the traditional one-man shadow show, with the power and scale of film. When asked if the *Wayang Listrik* text would give him a chance to stretch technologically, Larry felt that "this might not be a 'breakthrough show' because of our rehearsal time constraints: we are

and perspective. The ability to provide such things as "close ups" and "wide shots" are greatly enhanced with projected shadows which, Larry said, "are not at all possible if the performer is working directly against a screen." "In fact," Larry continued, "one of our tricks during the rehearsal period will be to learn how to work in three-dimensional space with two-dimensional figures. There will be tremendous experimentation and collaboration in this area."

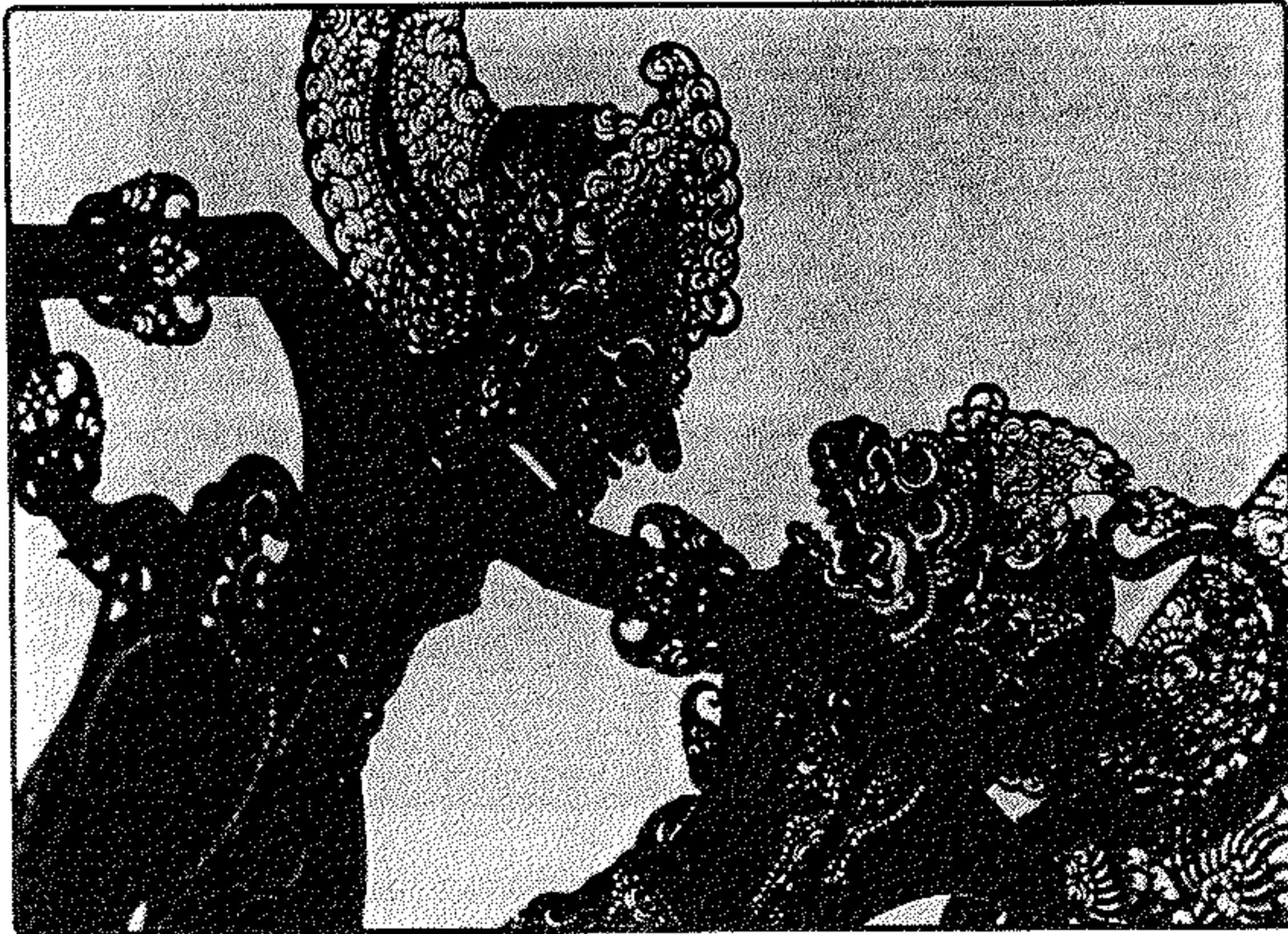
The original music by Miguel Frasconi and Sarah Willner will also blend traditional and more technological elements. While in Bali during pre-production, Miguel electronically sampled each *gamelan* instrument so that they can, if necessary, be tweaked a bit when played back on an electronic keyboard. Larry elaborated: "As we will only be using a

five-person live *gamelan* orchestra instead of the normal thirty, we can use the recorded samplings very effectively to augment the sound. We will also record group reactions and possibly various pieces of dialogue that don't necessarily have to be live."

Despite the complexity of the technology, Larry emphasized that *Listrik* will not

We will use some structured improvisation during the rehearsal process and then specify how, when and where limited improvisation will occur during the actual production. Where traditional shows have no set time limit, we are trying to create a very concise and exciting piece—no more than one and a half hours—which is a very Western concept."

traditional director, but to get to the finished product we are going through a complex give and take process. I want to guide and steer the Balinese artists as much as I can to do a show that communicates with Western culture. I want to learn from them. I have been dealing with wayang characters—the gods and various figures—for over twenty years. I know how I have tried to help



A scene from
Wayang Listrik

simply be a technical tour de force: "All of the Balinese performers are some of the most experienced artists in the world—expert shadowmasters as well as dancers. This production will be heavily dependent on the high quality of both the puppetry and acting. In shows such as *In Xanadu*, for instance, actors played a supporting role to the puppets and technology; in this production, the puppets and technology will play a supporting role to the actors."

I asked Larry to elaborate on additional differences he envisioned between the traditional *wayang kulit* and the *Wayang Listrik* collaboration. "Traditional shows are completely improvised," Larry noted. "Since we have very sophisticated technical elements occurring backstage, however, we will have to set parameters.

The scenic elements designed by I Dewa Puta Berata will also blend Balinese and Western sensibilities. "All the visuals—sets, costumes, masks, figures—will have a Balinese flair appropriate to both the traditional and original styles of puppets we are using. The sets that are being designed, however, are truly one of the most important aspects of projected shadow theatre. Traditional *wayang kulit* productions do not give a defined sense of place; by adding this element, we create a certain Western 'cinematic reality' that is really quite new to the form."

Because of the special intercultural nature of *Wayang Listrik*, Larry eloquently discussed the unique working relationship he has developed with his Balinese collaborators. "Ultimately, I will function as a

Western audiences understand perhaps unfamiliar legends and stories. I am immensely curious, however, as to how the Balinese artists explain their own traditional myths. Their points of view will then be filtered through my aesthetic sensibility."

Since both Larry and Wayan Wija are co-directors, I asked what separate visions each of them would bring to the production. Larry reiterated that his technological innovations would primarily contribute to the form of the piece. In addition to establishing a defined environment, scale and perspective, "this work will develop sequencing and continuous flow of action." "When you are doing a traditional one-man show, the shadow screen is blank for considerable periods of time while the *dalang* is preparing for the next action.

"This production utilizes multiple performers; when one shadowmaster finishes, the lights change and another puppeteer can begin immediately."

"I will also be adding some of my sensibility to the Balinese legend, looking for ways to help Western audiences connect with the myth. For instance, I will reduce the number of characters who are named. I might also introduce characters—a clown, for instance—who would add some humor accessible to American tastes. Most importantly, however, I am bringing a respect for the tradition, but I will not be bound by it. We will use what is appropriate to create a potentially new tradition."

Larry noted that "Wayan Wija's voice as co-director will be enormously important. Wija, of course, brought the story to the project. He has provided both the content and the specific puppetry sequences. Both he and the choreographer,

I Nyoman Catra, are incredible performers who will add invaluable insight."

He continued, "In working with Wija, there will be a tremendous amount of collaboration. He is an amazingly intuitive performer; he can come to a rehearsal and by manipulating the figures, arrive at seemingly spontaneous solutions."

After August 10, mornings will be spent constructing visuals that were not finished in Bali. Afternoons and evenings will be devoted to rehearsals. "The first week of rehearsal will primarily be talking—identifying what has to occur at each moment, making it both concise and theatrically exciting. The rehearsal process itself will be tricky coordination. The puppets' moves will be intricately blocked and choreographed."

Larry noted that the entire company would then refine and polish the production. "We are going to videotape every rehearsal to help in this process. All the performers will review the prior days' work, giving us a common reference. It will not be solely my decision to say what did or didn't work; it becomes quite evident when everyone sees the product together. All the artists involved are so

experienced that even though the rehearsal period is very limited, we can make this time really count. The final responsibility will, however, be mine."

In closing, Larry reflected on the remarkable benefits that can be derived from this unique intercultural collaboration. "In one sense," Larry remarked, "The Balinese tradition is a culmination of centuries of development and is perfect in its way. All traditional materials are used beautifully. The flame is the best light; rawhide is the best material. An electric light, by contrast, is dead. It doesn't move. It is cold, hard light. However, you can do powerful things with electricity—you can project, you can add the sense of place and fluidity. We're at the beginning of our search for perfection."







"My Balinese collaborators are incredibly inventive in the traditional context and are reaching out towards what I

can offer. I am going in the other direction. It is a wonderful blend. None of us have the ego investment of 'my way or no way.' Our investment is purely in making it the best production possible."

"What is most exciting is the chance to work on a common project with people who have been my teachers; people I have both admired and learned from. I now have the possibility to help them do something in this country which has the potential for being very special."

"This production will hopefully be 'Food for the soul.' In Balinese tradition, that is the ultimate theatrical goal. In the Western sense, that is not always the case but, in the best productions, it certainly can be."

Pamela Malkin is Associate Department Head of the Department of Theatre and Dance at CalPoly at San Luis Obispo.

THIS PUBLICATION AVAILABLE FROM UMI

This publication is available from UMI in one or more of the following formats:

- In Microform—from our collection of over 8,000 periodicals and 7,000 newspapers
- In Paper—by the article or five issues through UMI Article Clearinghouse
- Electronically, on CD-ROM, online, and/or magnetic tape—a broad range of ProQuest databases available, including abstract-and-index, ASCII full-text, and innovative full-image format

Call toll-free 800-521-0600, ext. 2888, for more information, or fill out the coupon below:

Name _____

Title _____

Company/Institution _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone (____) _____

I'm interested in the following title(s): _____

UMI 800-521-0600 toll-free
 A Bell & Howell Company 313-761-1203 fax
 Box 49
 300 North Zeeb Road
 P.O. Box 1346
 Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346