

Asia Society
Presents

God Bliss
(In the Name of Semelah)



Saturday, January 14
2:00 P.M.

Asia Society
725 Park Avenue at 70th Street
New York City



World Premiere
God Bliss (In the Name of Semelah)

Commissioned by Asia Society, as part of our ongoing program, *Creative Voices of Muslim Asia*, a multidisciplinary initiative using the arts as a springboard to understand the complexity of the many cultures included in the Muslim world. *Supported by the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art*. With additional support from Carolina Performing Arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Presented in New York as part of The Public Theater's Under the Radar Festival.

Created by **Eko Nugroho**
Gunawan Maryanto, writer and director
Banjar Tri Andaru Cahyo, lighting designer
Ari Wulu, music composer
Catur Kuncoro, puppeteer
M. Arif Wijayanto, actor and puppeteer
Y. Kusworo Bayu Aji, stage manager and puppeteer
Febrianus Anggit Sudibyo, stage crew and puppeteer
Octo Cornelius, stage crew and puppeteer
Eri Kuswanto, stage crew
Ratri Kartika Sari, production manager

Asia Society is pleased to present the world premiere of *God Bliss (In the Name of Semelah)*, Eko Nugroho's newest work for Wayang Bocor, the contemporary theater company from Indonesia. This newly commissioned piece weaves together traditional elements of Indonesian *wayang* (shadow puppets) with live theater and scripts that cast a satiric view on contemporary topics. Nugroho is one of Indonesia's most provocative and original visual artists, known for his comic and incisive wit. His work incorporates elements of popular and traditional culture in a broad array of formats: paintings, murals, animation, zines, sculpture, embroidery and batik constructions, and theater and puppet performance.

"My work is very much informed by my background in street art, and I have always worked a lot in public space and with the local community," Nugroho says. "Many of the figures in my work, for instance, are masked in some way. In Java, the mask is a very symbolic part of traditional culture, and the tradition of shadow theatre has been an important influence for me."

About God Bliss:

God Bliss (In the Name of Semelah) tells the tale of Islam's arrival in Java during a time of turmoil in the fifteenth century, when Islam became absorbed as a part of Javanese culture that also included elements of Hinduism,

Buddhism, and animism. At that time, the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit was slowly crumbling and there was a spiritual void. Hunger and poverty spread throughout the kingdom and society was in chaos. A series of natural calamities including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, an out-of-season monsoon and a lunar eclipse were mystical portents that great change was imminent in Java.

Tonight's tale, imagined by **Eko Nugroho** and **Gunawan Maryanto**, is told through a contemporary lens. It begins in present times with a *selamatan*—a ritual communal meal where cooked foods are set on a mat in the center of the room, incense is lit and a prayer is intoned in which local saints, guardian spirits and Allah may be addressed—focused on mystical communion, spiritual sharing and calm reflection on the core Javanese value of social harmony. During the ritual we are transported to another era: the end of the Hindu Majapahit kingdom and a time of war with the Muslim kingdom of Demak. The wars of power terrorized the people. The nine saints (*wali songo*) come with a more peaceful message of Islam. They are adept at magic and meditation, and have the propensity to make themselves invisible. They spread Islam through peaceful means.

One Javanese man, named Sahid, clothed in black with his face covered, despairs of the inequity he sees in the world. He takes to stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. His father banishes him, ashamed that his son has become a thief. The villagers know him as Maling Aguna, the man who steals from the rich. One day he encounters a Muslim holy man, Sunan Bonang, one of the *wali songo*, the nine saints who brought Islam of peace and harmony to the people in Java. Maling Aguna does not know who he is and decides to rob him. As he tries to grab the golden walking stick from the old man, who disappears in front of him, then manifests himself into two people. He has powers that Maling Aguna has never seen before. The old man takes a handful of soil from the ground and turns it into gold. Maling Aguna understands that this reflects a universal truth that he has been seeking. He prostrates himself before the holy man and becomes his disciple, thereby becoming Sunan Kalijaga, one of the *wali songo*. Transformed, he is told by his master to stay in the forest by the river bank to meditate and guard the golden walking stick.

In his meditation, the mythological story of *Dewa Ruci* appears, in which Bima (one of the five Pandawa brothers from the Hindu *Mahabharata* epic) meets a miniature version of himself. *Dewa Ruci* tells Bima to enter through his ear, and there Bima learns the deeper meanings of life.

Nugroho experiments with the methods and symbols of traditional *wayang* in *God Bliss (In the Name of Semelah)*. The play opens as traditional shadow plays in Java do with the “tree of life” (Gunungan) puppet, which symbolizes the creation of the universe. Nugroho also makes use of the beloved Javanese clown figures Bagong, Gareng, and Petruk, who provide levity, while adding his own cast of characters—live actors in elaborate costumes and new, absurdist puppet characters—who interact with each other in front of and behind multiple screens. The new characters include some of Nugroho's signature half-human, half-machine creatures. With their smokestack heads,

arms ending in snarling animals, hands like pliers, and legs with wheels, they symbolize human identity distorted by outside influences. A pre-recorded score by composer **Ishari Sahida** uses various forms of Indonesian percussion including Javanese *gamelan*. At the heart of this art form—as in so many others Nugroho has explored—are the collaborative efforts of a community of talented people: playwrights, musicians, directors, dancers, stage managers, artists, and traditional artisans.

About Wayang Bocor:

Created in 2008, Wayang Bocor literally translates as “leaky shadow,” Wayang Bocor is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the theater company’s ability to bend the rules of traditional *wayang* and use a distinctive blend of high and low art. In their latest work, street art, cartoon characters, folk art, traditional culture, and video game culture collide to create a multimedia meditation on historical and contemporary life.

Traditional *wayang kulit* (shadow play) is a complex Javanese art form that integrates ritual, philosophy, comedy, and social commentary to tell stories through puppetry and music. The *dhalang* (shadow master) serves as the central narrator, drawing on a large repertoire of stories taken mainly from the *Mahabharata*, epics originally derived from India and transmitted orally and in writing in Java and Bali for over a thousand years. The *gamelan* (a traditional instrumental ensemble that typically includes many bronze percussion instruments) sets the scene and provides an effective background for the *dhalang*’s story-telling.

Adapting traditional methods of *wayang* storytelling, Nugroho uses new technologies and a different cast of characters. Digital music replaces the traditional *gamelan*, multiple lighting sources replace the single lamp. Actors and new, comic-inspired puppet characters interact in front of and behind multiple screens; a narrator, working with a script, replaces the traditional puppet master’s monologue. At the heart of this art form is the collaborative efforts of a community of talented people: playwrights, musicians, directors, dancers, stage managers, artists, traditional artisans. This collaborative spirit is at the heart of many of Nugroho’s approach to art, and aims to create a fresh new aesthetic for contemporary *wayang* performance.

About the Artists:

Eko Nugroho is one of Indonesia’s most acclaimed contemporary artists. Born in 1977 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, he is part of the “2000 Generation” that came of age during the period of upheaval and reform that occurred in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the subsequent fall of the Suharto regime, and the transition to democracy in Indonesia.

Nugroho grew up in Java, and lives and works in one of the island’s major art centers, Yogyakarta. His works, which incorporate socio-political commentary, are grounded in both local traditions and global popular culture. In particular, he has cited the influence of traditional batik and embroidery styles, and Javanese shadow-puppet theater (*wayang*). The influence of the latter can be

seen in the strange, hybrid figures that populate his work. In 2008, he created his own style of puppet theater and established the theater company Wayang Bocor. Nugroho's work is also inspired by contemporary street art, graffiti, and comics. In 2000, he founded *Daging Tumbuh*, a collaborative zine that invites participation from non-artists. In addition to drawing and painting, he works in a variety of other media, including murals, sculpture, animation, videos, and tapestry. He often works in public spaces and with the local community.

Gunawan Maryanto, is a director, actor, and writer residing in Jogjakarta. He is the Associate Artistic Director at Teater Garasi/Garasi Performance Institute, where he has directed many works including: *Sri* (adaptation form Yerma by F. Garcia Lorca, 1999); *Repertoar Hujan* (2001 & 2005); *Dicong Bak* (2006); *Gandamayu* (2012) and *Krontjong Mendoet* (2012). He is also the program manager for the Indonesia Dramatic Reading Festival (IDRF). He has published many books including: *Perasaan-perasaan yang Menyusun Sendiri Petualangannya* (poems collection, Omahsore, 2008), *Sejumlah Perkutut Buat Bapak* (Omahsore 2010—the winner of Equator Literature), *The Queen of Pantura* (poems collection, Omahsore, 2013), *Sukra's Eyes and Other Stories* (short stories, Lontar, 2015). He is also an accomplished film actor.

Ishari Sahida a.k.a Ari Wulu, a native of Jogjakarta, Indonesia, has been deeply involved in the music industry since 1998, focusing mainly on electronic music. He performs solo electronic music under the names midiJUNKIE or WVLV. He has managed an electronic music forum called SoundBoutique since 2005. He is currently developing a contemporary gamelan group called Saron Groove. He also performs as part of duo called Rancak Arcade. In 2009, he was involved in managing the Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival. Since 2013 he has been hosting the Yogyakarta Art Fair (Festival Kesenian Yogyakarta) by Cultural Department of Yogyakarta.

Banjar Tri Andaru Cahyo is a lighting designer and videographer. After graduating from Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, he joined Teater Garasi in 1996, where he studied stage lighting. As a lighting designer, he has been active in the Indonesian theater scene, lighting many theater productions, as well as dance and music performance working with companies such as Teater Garasi, Gardanalla Theater, The Migrating Troop (dance), Papermoon Puppet Theatre and Wayang Bocor.

Kusworo Bayu Aji is an arts manager living in Yogyakarta. He was one of the founders of the Teater Garasi Company. He served as Executive Director from 1999 – 2013, and then became Enterprise Director until 2014. In 2014 he joined ARS Management, a creative event management company as the Co- Managing Director. He is also the Operational Director of Sahabat Bambu (Bamboo Company) in Yogyakarta.

Ratri Kartika Sari has been an arts manager for ten years. She was involved in Teater Garasi until March 2014. In 2014 she decided to found ARS Management, a creative event management company. She has arranged various performances such as “Kera Sakti” by Ryuzanji Company Japan in 2016; and a

Classic Dance Show by Padneçwara in Indonesia 2015. She has been the production manager of Wayang Bocor since 2014. She is currently working on a Masters of Management at Gadjah Mada University Indonesia.

Catur Kuncoro has been an artist since 1991. In 2010, he created a puppet community known as Wayang Hip Hop. He has been involved with Wayang Bocor as puppeteer since 2008. He is also involved with other multidisciplinary arts communities. He has performed in many cities in Indonesia and abroad such as Medan, Jakarta, Bandung, Brisbane, and Lima.

Eri Kuswanto has been working with Eko Nugroho's studio since 2013, as sculpture technician. He has traveled with Eko Nugroho to several cities such as Jakarta, Shanghai and New York. He began working with Wayang Bocor in 2016.

Febrianus Anggit Sudibyo, has been working in the performing art for the past 7 years, first as an actor, then as a lighting designer and stage manager. He has worked in productions such as “Semangkuk Sup Makan Siang atau Cultuurstelser” 2016, “Bertiga Bukan Dara” 2015, and “Festival of Asia Tri Indonesia-Japan 2015.” He has also worked as part of the technical team for several visual art exhibitions including “Sotheby dan Christie 2016” in Hong Kong, “Art Basel 2016” in Hong Kong, and “Art Space 2016” in Singapore.

Octo Cornelius Tri Andrianto is a graduate of the Indonesia Institute of the Arts. He has an interest in a wide variety of materials as a way to create a new visual art, such as wood, iron, metal and other materials, and created an installation for the Yogyakarta Biennale Neo Nation in 2007, launching his visual arts career. His latest solo commissioned work was for Esplanade, Singapore. He also has an interest in theater, and joined Papermoon Puppet Theater in 2008, where he was an artistic engineer and also a puppeteer. He joined Wayang Bocor in 2016.

M. Arif Wijayanto began acting in high school in his hometown of Demak, Central Java, Indonesia. He continued his studies at the Art Academy of Drama and Film Indonesia and the Indonesia Art Institute. He is well-known by his stage name Broto Wijayanto, for his work as a pantomime. He works as a teacher in Taman Budaya Yogyakarta, and the Vocational School of Art in Studio of Kita Kita. He also works with the Deaf Art Community. He is an actor with Teater Gandrik, and an actor and puppeteer in Wayang Bocor.

About Performing Arts at Asia Society

Asia Society's Performing Arts Program is an intrinsic component of Asia Society's commitment to sharing vital aspects of Asian culture by placing creative expression at the center of a more comprehensive understanding of culture. Whether it is experimental artists exploring new territory or traditional artists bringing to life the voices of a great legacy, the Performing Arts Program has created a powerful platform for connecting and engaging with Asian culture within a deeper cultural context. We have presented extraordinary artists from renowned names such as Lang Lang, Tan Dun, Abida Parveen, Shen Wei, David Henry Hwang, Sardono and Malavika Sarukkai, to the latest emerging voices. Beginning in 1957, with New York's first performance by Indian maestro Ravi Shankar, the Performing Arts Program has since presented over a thousand performances, including original commissioned work from Asian and Asian-American artists, as well as American artists influenced by Asia, such as Phillip Glass, DJ Spooky and Vijay Iyer. From Indonesian hip-hop to electronica from Shanghai; experimental dance to the deeply moving traditions of India's *Kuttiyatam*, Burmese *Zat Pwe*, we foster artistic exchange and provide creative opportunities for artists. For more information, please visit AsiaSociety.org

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Rachel Rosado, Assistant Director, Cultural Programs

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Elaine Merguerian, Director, Communications

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