

# Masks make the man, and woman, for Didik

YOGYAKARTA (JP): Masks are the trademark of Didik Hadiprayitno, who is better known by his stage name of Didik Nini Thowok.

The dancer-comedian, who is considered the driving force in the recognition of the transvestite dance art form in the country, always wears masks on stage.

And he said masks were present even in his daily life.

"Although I am no philosopher, I have a life philosophy that human life is never free of masks. Man only reveals his original face when facing God later," Didik said.

Masks are integral to his performances. A slight man with thinning hair, Didik uses the masks to support the physical requirements of the roles he plays. "With the mask, I can still visualize myself as a hard and wild tempered figure or, in contrast, as a soft and flirtatious one."

Just as he choreographs his shows and chooses the costumes, Didik takes the utmost care in selecting the right mask for his performances. He has long worked with *Mas Pono*, who makes the *Krantil* brand of masks in Bantul.

"Usually I first talk with him to obtain a really suitable mask design. Sometimes I ask *Mas*

By Ridlo Aryanto

*Pono* to make a sketch according to my facial expression," said Didik.

Didik also collects masks, such as those used for Legong Bali, Pentul Tembem, Kelana and Limbuk Cirebon dances. The masks with serious expressions are normally made from soft and fine wood and paper. He also has collected masks from abroad, such as from the Peking Opera, Indian *Katakali* and European ones made from plastic and fiberglass.

The cost varies; *Mas Pono's* masks cost about Rp 100,000 each, while his masks from overseas vary from US\$3 to \$5. He bought most of the latter before the economic crisis struck the country in 1997.

"Frankly, I still want to complete my collection with the Japanese Kabuki masks, but when I went to Japan last December, their prices already reached millions of rupiah, so I won't force myself to buy them now."

He is already a success on the domestic front, with his *Nakstya Lakshita* dance studio in Yogyakarta and regular performances around the country.

Didik is also interested in going international.

Didik had started his career with a determination to learn dances from *Pak Giarto*, a barber in his village. He also studied with several famous Indonesian dance masters like Bagong Kussudiardja, Ni Ketut Reneng and Sawitri, as well as Belgian female dance wizard Yetty Roels.

He then took the initiative to learn more about the world and dance by paying his own way and traveling abroad.

"If he or she wants to do well, an artist should not fall into the trap of waiting. If you're waiting for sponsorship, well who is prepared to sponsor a solo staging of my work," said Didik.

"The government is more interested in spouting slogans than giving real aid to our artists."

He has toured the world, including Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

Didik said he would have traveled more but for the crisis. His obsession is to bring the transvestite dance and theater art form, which is found in various pockets of Indonesian society such as the *ludruk* of East Java, to the international stage. He has been encouraged in his efforts by the reception for

*Katakali*, the transvestite dance form of India.

His skills have already been recognized by the international dance community. On Feb. 20, he will stage a collaborative work with a Japanese dancer at Bali Art Center. With the assistance of the Japan Foundation, Didik and musician Djaduk Ferianto were able to conduct an in-depth study of Japanese traditional dance.

Although he is well-known at home for his comic dance performances and his occasional performances on TV, his transvestite dance pieces, such as *Dwi Warna* (Two Colors) and *Ngedan, Bok!* (Pretending to be Mad), probably receive a better reception with foreign audiences.

Still, Didik said attitudes were changing among local audiences.

"In the past they used to scoff, 'you are just like a transvestite, a man dancing a female dance'. It turns out that such a dance has given me a living. I just ignored their comments and thought they said those things because they were jealous of my dancing skills.

"And jealousy is a sign of lack of ability," said Didik with a wry smile reminiscent of one of his masks.



JP/Ridlo Aryanto

Dancer-comedian Didik Nini Thowok hams it up with one of his masks. He takes the utmost care in selecting the right mask for his shows.