

Veteran dancers still radiate charm

I Made Jagra, Contributor, Ubud

Ni Jero Puspawati was once the dance queen of the Balinese stage. For more than 50 years, Jero Puspawati has shown her outstanding dancing skills, incomparable in her time. Now, she is already 72 years old with lots of wrinkles on her once beautiful face. But on hearing the sounds of the gamelan, her old body still swayed with exceptional grace and her eyes flashed like twinkling stars.

The day was Saraswati, which fell on Dec. 25 this year, a time that Balinese Hindus worship their Goddess of Knowledge and Wisdom. The venue was the *jaba* (front courtyard) of the Pura Dalem temple at Ubud.

Jero Puspawati, from Puri (Palace) Satria in Denpasar, performed the *Candra Metu* dance as part of the ritual for the Goddess. Watching her performing was like seeing the queen of the dance in her heyday. She is still energetic and full of *taksu* (spiritual charm), an important requirement for a Balinese dance master, who previously performed their dances for purely religious purposes.

Jero Puspawati was one of many veteran dancers who staged performances on Saraswati Day. There were a number of other veteran dancers taking part in the event including Ni Made Anis, 79, from Singaraja, Ni Gusti Ayu Raka Rasmi, 62, from Peliatan, Ubud, I. Komang Urip Tribuana, 51, from Bangli, and Ni Ketut Arini Alit, 61 from Banjar Lebah, Denpasar.

Another primadona who performed in Ubud was Ni Ketut Cenik, 81. The elderly dancer was mesmerizing, with no less than 350 local and foreign spectators witnessing her classical dance performance of *Bapang Gede*, a kind of traditional dance rarely performed now.

The event also featured a distinguished guest, a veteran artist from Malaysia, Ramli Ibrahim.

It was interesting to note that the performances of rare dances attracted a lot of attention from young artists and in fact the entire arts community in Bali. Time is running out for Balinese artists to both preserve and revitalize their old-age cultural heritage. Only a few young dancers are now interested in learning and performing intricate and complicated classical dances like *Candra Metu*, *Palawakya* and *Bapang Gede*, popular between the 1940s and 1950s.

The Sanggar Semara Ratih organization is tirelessly and actively promoting and reintroducing Balinese classical dances to younger artists and audiences.

A.A. Anom Putra, chairman of Sanggar Semara Ratih, expects that this effort will encourage Balinese people to protect and preserve their own culture.

According to Anom, his organization is now trying to document numerous classical dances such as *Kebyar Duduk*, *Bayan Nginte*, *Puspa Warna*, *Demang Miring* and many others.

"We are also trying to invite old dance masters spread across the island to perform their

remarkable dancing skills to present audiences and artists," he explained.

There were so many lessons that could be drawn from the performances of dance masters.

"Their movements are so genuine and filled with emotional and spiritual prowess, which are important elements of traditional Balinese dances," he pointed out

Anom said that contemporary dance creations emphasized innovative movements rather than the content and philosophical ideas of each dance. There was no harmonious connection between dance movements and the sound of gamelan music.

"There is always lack of emotion. Moreover, the dancers rarely capture the spiritual core of the dances," he said.

Renowned dancer IB Oka Wirjana, popularly known as the island's most prominent *Kebyar* dancer, said that in the past, dancers presented their artistic talents for the sake of religious purposes.

"Before we performed any dance, we usually held a special prayer accompanied by special offerings called *banten peras santun* to seek *taksu* and divine blessing," said Wirjana, who learned his dancing skills from I. Mario, the pioneer *Kebyar Duduk* dancer of the early 1930s.

Most dances, he added, were performed in temples or palaces. Nowadays, he said, dance performances are more often held in hotels and other entertainment centers to cater to the needs of hotel guests and tourists.

"These young dancers have been ignoring spiritual and religious matters when doing artistic things. They put so much effort into their physical appearance. There is no soul in most of their performances because they do not care about achieving a high level of art," he said.

The influence of materialistic culture has been tremendous. "Its impact on young artists has been great. They perform dances and other artistic creations only for money and fame," said Wirjana, who is very concerned about this development.

In the past, dancers passed on their skills to their students out of their love for the arts. Rarely would they ask for payment.

"If we had foreign students, it was because of our close relationships with them, and as a cross-cultural exchange," he added.

Jero Puspawati, who has been dancing since she was 10 years old, expressed her happiness to have this rare opportunity to perform before the public. "I used to dance in front of the late President Soekarno, Indonesia's first president, in the State Palace," she said.

As an outstanding Balinese dancer, Jero Puspawati has been performing around the world to promote Balinese culture on the international dance stages.

She said it would be a good idea to hold a dance competition of Balinese classical dances to encourage young people to learn them.

"I hope young dancers will continue to stage Balinese classic dances in an effort to enliven the tradition," said the mother of Denpasar's mayor A.A. Puspayoga.

