

# IWD Jakarta, 2008: “Women Seize the Night” Theatre

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Several different events were held on March 8 to commemorate International Women’s Day (IWD). Probably the biggest of the street mobilization events was held at the Thamrin-Sudirman roundabout in central Jakarta. At this protest, around 300 people gathered to hear speeches and distribute leaflets to passers by. The protest had been organized by a coalition of left leaning groups. The main ones were the trade union, KASBI; the Indonesian University Students Union (Sarekat Mahasiswa Indonesia – SMI), the Working Peoples association (Perhimpunan Rakyat Pekerja – PRP), and Freedom Women (Perempuan Mahardika). The biggest contingent was from KASBI.

Later in the day both in this location and at other sites, a range of other activist, lobby, religious and political groups held smaller commemorations.

## Women Seize the Night

Probably the biggest event in Jakarta were the two evening performances of *Women Seize the Night*, a play – or series of three short plays, monologues – performed in the Jakarta Arts Centre on the Saturday and Sunday evenings. About 1,400 people watched the performances. They were widely reported on the electronic as well as in the print media. The organizers held public forums of the future of the women’s movement before the event to generate more discussion around the issue of the oppression and discrimination against women and the state of the women’s movement.

*Women Seize The Night* was organized by the Institut Ungu, also known as the Women’s Art and Culture Centre and the Pithaloka Foundation, set up by television personality, writer and actor, Rieke Pithaloka. The scripts were written by Faiza Mardzoeki, from Institut Ungu and Rieke Pithaloka. The performance comprised three short plays, each a monologue featuring a well-known woman actor. These were Ninik el-Karim, Rieke Pithalloka and Ria Irawan.

The three monologues – about two hours all up – richly ranged across a spectrum of issues related to the oppression and discrimination of women in Indonesia.

## Live for yourself

The first, *A plate of fried rice*, was a simple, but accumulating moving story-telling of a woman’s refusal to submit to domestic violence. There has been no first or second wave of feminism in Indonesia and values of male dominance are widespread and deep. Male violence towards women, including wives, is often justified with reactionary religious interpretations. Marriage is still viewed as an institution of patriarchy: the law still entrenches the male as the “head of the family”. A woman either exists as a daughter, wife or mother: any other existence is a form of rebellion.

In *A plate of fried rice* a woman’s decision to live for herself and not her husband and her decision to advocate the same course of action for her daughter, who later when she marries suffers abuse at her husband’s hands also, is depicted as a legitimate act of liberation.

*A plate of fried rice* was carried by the story it told, performed in naturalist or realist style, as the

woman prepared a plate of fried rice (once cooked on order for her husband, now enjoyed by the woman herself as she cooks it for herself)

### **Speaking out**

The second monologue was *A busy morning*, performed by Rieke Pithaloka in one of Indonesia's most popular stage styles, a kind of comic-dramatic, satiric joke and declamation combination. Pithaloka took the role of an outspoken member of parliament (rare in reality), firing off pot shots at those in power while fielding phone calls from journalists and ruminating on the country's affairs as she gets dressed, has breakfast and readies for the day's activities.

She also took up the issue of polygamy. Polygamy appears to be on the increase in Indonesia and is increasingly, openly defended by various "cultural" spokespersons from the elite. Numerous members of parliament are known for having more than one wife. (Women, of course, are banned from having more than one husband.) The woman politician portrayed by Pithaloka rebutted a justification based on religion asking whether it was religion or just the preachers that defended polygamy. She positioned this issue, as with other issues, within the framework of justice.

Over 30 minutes of monologue she ranged through almost all the contemporary examples of violation of the rights of women, and democratic rights generally. Summing up her emotions as the various examples of corruption, abandonment of the poor in the aftermath of development disasters, and moral scandals in parliament, she reflects how the visage of soldiers on the TV screen inevitably brings to mind all those who lost their lives in Aceh, Sulawesi, East Timor, the worker activist Marsinah, who was raped, tortured and murdered, and other areas as well as the still unexplained disappearances of activists during the Suharto period, including the poet Wiji Thukul. "Why," she mused, "when a corruptor dies, so much is made of his death, and they even talk of making him a national hero." "Suharto, Suharto", whispered the audience.

Suddenly, there is banging at the door and she is dragged out by unknown forces.

### **Against hypocrisy**

*Under the street light* was the third monologue performed by Ria Irawan, who played a sex worker. This monologue was in a similar satiric joke and declamation combination as *A busy morning*, although the soliloquy was articulated in night life street style as compared to *A busy morning's* more white collar, professional cultural setting. The jokes are more raucous; and the metaphors more sexually confronting. Both the character and actor are completely at home with their body, liberated from the myriads of hang-ups socialized into (men) and women in most societies.

This segment addressed the hypocrisy of constant, violent raids and "sweepings" against sex workers in Jakarta's semi-proletarian neighborhoods. A client can put on religious head dress and joining a pursuing gang. The processes of discrimination and the use of the mobilization of pseudo-religious gangs for vengeance on women who have annoyed some man is shown as one of the main factors resulting in a woman becoming a sex worker. This monologue also took up the spread of so-called "Islamic law", passed by local councils, which are used to try to impose a curfew on women at night.

### **Freedom**

The play ends with the Member of Parliament returning to the stage, this time bound and blindfolded. She demands to see where she is and when the blindfold is removed, she sees she has been taken to the parliament building and is being laughed at by all the other members of parliament.

What follows is another monologue reaffirming the necessity for defiance if the bondage of women is to end. As she struggles to be free, listing again examples of the elite's injustices against women, pictures flash across panels on the back of the stage showing women from all walks of life, but especially working women, as well as pictures of demonstrations and protests. She frees herself and raises her fist in defiance.

All the performances were enthusiastically received by the audience, with all the humour, criticisms and emotions hitting the right chords.

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**P.S.**

\* From Max Lane website.