

From *Komedie Stambul* to *Toneel*: Theatre Arts Development in Batavia, 1891-1942

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Abstract

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Performing arts became a popular entertainment form among groups in the colonial era. People who enjoy performing arts were always craving for something new, and in turn, performing troupes were trying to create new innovations for their performances. In the late 19th century, a theatre group *Komedie Stamboel* was established in Surabaya. This group soon became popular because their uniqueness: the hybridity of their dramaturgies and stories which combined the West and East aspects. Their popularity resulted in a tour across Java, one of tour destinations was Batavia. When they were in Batavia, many of *Komedie Stamboel*'s performances were influenced by *Indische* culture and Indo people. By implementing the historical method, this article find the role of the Indo people and the influence of the *Indische* culture in Batavia's development of theatre arts. The increasing popularity of *Komedie Stamboel* resulted in imitators, both professional and amateur, with the majority of their performers consisted of *Indo* [hybrid] and *Pribumi* [local; indigenous]. *Komedie Stamboel* also developed into a theatrical genre known as *komedie stambul*. In the 20th century, a theatre form known as *Toneel Melajoe* emerged as a continuity of the *Komedie Stambul* with new additions. Other theatrical genre known as *Indische Toneel*, a colonial theatre created by playwrights of Dutch *totok* and Indo descent that often held in theatres in Batavia. They had *komedie stambul* influences and *Indische* culture references on them.

Keywords: *Komedie Stamboel*; *Indische Toneel*; *Toneel Melajoe*; *Indische* Culture.

Introduction

The existence of the Indo people under the reign of the *Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie* (VOC) in the Dutch East Indies was propelled by intermarriage and the implementation of the *samenleven/samenwonen* (the practice of co-living without a marriage bond, often practiced by Europeans living in the Dutch East Indies and was prevalent from the VOC era until the colonial era) due to VOC's policy, causing its employees within the lower ranks unable to reside with their European wives in the Dutch East Indies. This condition caused the formation of a unique and particular cultural phenomenon in the middle of the 17th century known as the *Indische* culture (der Meer, 2014, p. 24). The *Indische* culture developed with the support of the

children, the Indo people, born from intermarriage between the Asian and European people (Soekiman, 2014, p. 5-6). At the same time, oriental studies were also developing rapidly since the late 18th century and was starting to influence various aspects of European arts. This also followed the development of Europe's theatre arts of the 19th and 20th centuries, which were set in various places in Asia, such as India, Persia, and Japan (Said, 2003, p. 41).

The theatre arts are not uncommon among the European people in Batavia, especially those within the upper-class society. These upper-class Europeans in Batavia were used to enjoy operas such as *Faust* by Gounod, *Il Trovatore & Un Ballo in Maschera* by Verdi, *Barbier de Séville* by Rossini, and other plays, such as *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Othello* by Shakespeare, and *De Sterkste* by van Nouhuys. Non-Europeans, such as the native Indonesians and *Vreemde Oosterlingen* or Asian foreigners, on the other hand, enjoyed the traditional arts, such as the *Teater Bangsawan* with the theme of court-centric affairs or the lives of the aristocrats within the court, traditional dances, as well as the *kroncong* musical shows seen in the streets of Batavia (Cohen, 2016, p. 51).

The development of and the Europeans in Batavia's attraction towards the theatre arts were also influenced by the arrival of a French theatre group known as in Batavia in 23 September 1835 led by Ferdinand Minard and was known as *La Compagnie Française* within the local press (Sugiyama, 2017, p. 99-100). This theatre group then helped connect Batavia with the interlinked cultural phenomenon in the middle of the 19th century: the highest awards bestowed on the French theatre arts and on France's influence within the global transmission and the international circle from Italian operas. The Suez Canal, opened in 1869, was also a factor that helped push the popularity of the theatre arts in Batavia. Steamboats, proof of the advancement of science in the West, became the mode of transportation used by opera groups, *zarzuela*, and European theatre groups to visit the harbors of Southeast Asia, which marked the beginning of a new practice: intercontinental tours carried out by said groups. Other forms of performing arts, such as the Chinese opera and Parsis puppetry, also came into play and were developed since the middle of the 19th century in Southeast Asia (Yamomo, 2018, p. 85-86).

In the late 19th century, the theatre group *Komedie Stamboel* was established in Surabaya. *Komedie Stamboel* brought a breath of fresh air within the theatre arts world of the Dutch East Indies due to their novelty compared to the preexisting theatre shows. They not only did court-centric or aristocrat-centric plays typical to the populace at the time, but also Middle Eastern stories and European operas and plays adapted to fit the societal reality and the prevalent tastes within the urban people at the time (Cohen, 2006, p. 78). Other theatre groups were also established and followed the path set by *Komedie Stamboel* in terms of diversifying their acts within their shows. Some popular groups were *Miss Riboet's Orion* and *Dardanella*. Both groups also contributed to the modernization within the theatre arts of the Dutch East Indies, such as the popularization of *toneel Melajoe* adapted from Dutch for their plays. The emergence of these genres is known as the transitional period of the theatre arts from

the traditional to the modern in Indonesia. Many playwrights of Dutch descent wrote dramas or *tonelen* set in the Dutch East Indies. These *tonelen* were known as *Indische toneel* and were riveting theatre shows to the upper-class Europeans in Batavia. An example of *Indische toneel* is *Pangeran Negoro Joedho* written by Victor Ido and performed in the *Bataviaasche Schouwburg* (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1918).

Studies done on the *Indische* culture typically discuss the architectural style or musical arts. For example, Coté & Westerbeek (2004) and Soekiman (2014) discussed the existence of the *Indische* culture and the lives of the Indo people in the Dutch East Indies. Other studies such as Cohen (2006) and Setyorini & Anwari (2017) have analyzed theatre groups with *Indische* elements, both examine the development of *Komedie Stamboel* and nationalism of *Dardanella* theatre group, respectively. Meddegoda (2020) in his research also included one of the *toneel Melajoe* troupe, *Miss Riboet's Dardanella*, as one example of the troupe that was influenced by the Parsi theatre. The influence can be seen through *Miss Riboet's Orion* recordings, such as *Lagoe Djawa*. In line with this research, Nurradifan (2015) also deciphered the development of *toneel* in Batavia, but the research is only focusing on the performances of *toneel* and did not discuss further about the art scene, especially the theatre arts as an influence and a part of life within the *Indische* culture and the Dutch East Indies people residing in Batavia in late 19th and early 20th century.

Studies on the development of theatre arts as a form of art of the *Indische* culture have not been done extensively, especially on Batavia as the capital city of the Dutch East Indies with its diverse people, making it an interesting subject, coupled with the fact that the development of the theatre arts in the transitional period was a result of acculturation within the Dutch East Indies at the time. Thus, this study aims to analyze the factors causing the establishment of the theatre arts of the *Indische* culture in Batavia, the development of *komedie stambul* and *toneel*, as well as the role of Indo people and the influences of *Indische* culture in the development of colonial theatre arts.

Method

This article uses the historical research method, which comprises of systematic archive compilation in order to support the collection of historical sources effectively, to conclude said sources critically, and to present a synthesis from the results (Garraghan, 1957, p. 33). The historical research method consists of four steps: heuristics, criticism on preexisting sources, interpretation, and historiography.

In heuristics or source compilation, the writer uses primary sources of articles and advertisements from newspapers at the time, as well as pictures obtained from various online sources, such as Delpher.nl, Monash Collections Online, Digital Collection Leiden University Libraries, Geheugen.delpher.nl, and Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. In addition, secondary sources are also used to corroborated the primary sources (Herlina, 2020, p. 26). These secondary sources are journal and magazine articles, along with books relevant to the topic of this research, among others.

Criticism on preexisting sources consists of testing preexisting sources to determine its credibility. The interpretation process involves interpreting historical facts and their compilation process into a historical tale. The final step in the historical research method is historiography, which is the process of retelling the collection of facts into a historical, scientific, and critical paper.

The Lives of the Batavian People in 1891-1941

Batavia was located in the marsh lowlands, which prompted many canal digging projects to dry the marshes and to prevent flooding in its conception. Batavia is then known as *Oud Batavia* (Blackburn, 2011, p. 20). The models for the canals were based on Dutch canals (Graaf, 1949, p. 154). These construction efforts were unable to resolve the flooding problems still prevalent in the 19th and 20th century (H.M., 2013, p. 30-40). Along with the flooding, various wastes and mud also contributed to the unpleasant smell emanating from the canals in Batavia, which in turn quickly became the source for infectious diseases, such as cholera. Governor-general Herman William Daendels then decided to build a new region, Weltevreden, in the suburbs, which was then known as *Nieuw Batavia* and rapidly became an ideal destination for residence for the Batavian people (Hana, 1988, p. 151-191).

The architectural style used in buildings within the new region utilized European styles adapted to the tropical conditions of Batavia. This style is known as the Indies style (der Meer, 2014, p. 61-62). Weltevreden then developed into a benchmark region of the modernization in Batavia and was known as an entertainment center with its Indies style buildings. The expansive fields Waterlooplein and Koningsplein also added to the bustle of public life in Batavia, coupled with the yearly night market in Koningsplein (Ariwibowo, 2019, p. 63).

Many factors were involved in the development of the theatre arts such as *Komedie Stamboel*, *toneel Melajoe*, and *Indische toneel* in Batavia. The social stratification implemented back then caused the European people and the Indo people to receive acknowledgement by their fathers, which were Europeans within the upper layer of society, followed by the *Vreemde Oosterlingen*, or Asian foreigners, such as the Chinese, the Arab, and the Indians. The native Indonesians were placed within the lowest ranks of the society. On the other hand, social mobility for the *Vreemde Oosterlingen* and the native Indonesians below the white people were not possible due to the segregation implemented within the law from around 1850 (Wertheim, 1999, p. 105-107). This was done to maintain status quo and to safeguard public safety. The position below the white people offered only limited access and rights.

The stratification influenced the lifestyle of each social groups within Batavia, especially on the form of entertainment. Technological advancement, such as the invention of the steamboat and the telegraph helped bring entertainment enjoyed in Europe to Batavia (Taylor, 2009, p. 228). Many amateur groups performed in meeting buildings (*sociëteit*) or *soos*, such as the amateur groups in the *Concordia sociëteit*, which had limited memberships on the *sociëteit* itself (*Het nieuws van den dag*, 1929). Visitations from international theatre and opera groups, such as ones from Russia,

Italy, and France, also added to the entertainment in the *sociëteit* and theatre buildings (*schouwburg*) in Batavia, even when the plays were typically dominated by the dilettante (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1886).

Performing arts popular within the Europeans in Batavia at the time were not performed for the native Indonesians, but to strengthen the European identity in the colonies. Plays, musicals, concerts, and dance parties were some of the ways to combat boredom and fatigue for the European people, as well as to show the more 'civilized' way of life and to differentiate the 'real' Dutch from the Indo people, especially the Indo-paupers, which were the Indo people commonly living in poverty (Cohen, 2016, p. 32). The forms of entertainment for non-European citizens in Batavia were usually found in week-long festivals, or *kermis*, and night markets of Batavia. One of these was Pasar Gambir, which was first held in 1906. Pasar Gambir was held in Koningsplein and showcased many performances for the native Indonesians and the Chinese, such as traditional dancers performing the *tari ronggeng* or *tari topeng*, *gamelan* and *angklung* players, as well as moving pictures or movies. Aside from the shows in the night markets, the native Indonesians and the Chinese also enjoyed the plays held in the theatre buildings commonly owned by Chinese entrepreneurs (Ruppin, 2015, p. 17; der Meer, 2014, p. 226-228).

Religion and education held an important role in enjoying the performing arts. The religion embraced by the Dutch people at the time was the Calvinist Protestantism. Calvinism had strict rules for art, in which art is a blessing from God, but art was not needed to glorify religion like what happened before the Protestant Reformation. This created a generalization where art, especially the ones enjoyed with sight like paintings and performance arts, as well as music were not approved within Calvinism (Moore, 2009, p. 80). Performing arts in Batavia, such as operas, dramas, plays, concerts, and musical performances showcased throughout the 19th and 20th centuries were considered part of the popular culture, or pop culture. This culture was active and tied with the ruling class. On the other hand, the colonial government, though controlling of the politics and ideologies spread throughout the colonies, had to make room for art groups to develop their independence practice, which sometimes did not fit the existing system, such as art performances contradicting with Calvinism (Canclini, 1995, p. 198).

Batavia, or *Indisch* (Indies), with its mixture of European elements with the local culture, turned it into a city with a distinct cultural ethos than other cities within the parent country. Calvinism influence on the performance arts, which was strongly felt on their development in the Netherlands, did not have similar influence of those in Batavia, such as the theatre (Wertheim, 1999, p. 136-138). On the other hand, performance arts for the native Indonesians and the *Vreemde Oosterlingen*, who were not followers of Calvinism, had a strong religious function in their showings. To them, religion and art, especially performance arts, were tied strongly with one another. For the native Indonesians, art shows such as *wayang* were done to prevent natural disasters and to ensure the prosperity of the people, with the *dalang* (puppeteer) acting as an entertainer as well as a shaman. For the Chinese, or those of its descent, in

Batavia, Javanese and Sundanese art shows were combined with and used within Chinese celebrations (Cohen, 2016, p. 27).

Through education, the Dutch colonial government applied a curriculum suited for children of European, Indo, Chinese, and native Indonesian descent. Along with primary materials like arithmetic, reading, and writing, other materials were also offered in schools of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as vocal arts or singing, as well as dance arts. Both arts were seen as 'civilized,' not unlike European classical music or theatre and dance arts like ballet and Shakespearean dramas (Andita, 2018, p. 15). Art appreciation, which was taught early on in schools, caused the Batavian people, especially those who have gone through education, to hold performing arts like the opera and musical concerts, along with its next development in the form of *komedie stambul*, *Indische toneel*, and *toneel Melajoe*, in high regard.

The Birth of Trans-Ethnic Theatre Groups and Their Development in Batavia

The development of the modern theatre arts in Indonesia can be traced back to the establishment of *Komedie Stamboel* in Surabaya in 1891. Auguste Mahieu, an Indo of French descent as well as an actor in and manager of *Komedie Stamboel*, was commended as someone who raised the popularity of the theatre group. Mahieu, as a talented composer and a *toneelschrijver* (a creative playwright), managed to draw in crowds with various popular shows, such as adaptations from the *One Thousand and One Nights* like *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (*Ali Baba en de Veertig Rovers*), *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* (*Aladdin en de Wonderlamp*), and *The Fisherman and the Genie* (*De Visscher en de Geest*) (Faber, 1931, p. 370).

Komedie Stamboel's name came from the *One Thousand and One Nights* shows, which originated from the Middle East and were often part of their repertoire. Mahieu and the other actors were also famed for their red fez hats with black tassels, which helped their identity as an oriental theatre group (Nieuwenhuys, 1978, p. 303). In the beginning, Mahieu faced financial difficulties, until a Chinese entrepreneur, Yap Gwan Thay, offered financial help so that Mahieu could afford the props needed to support the shows. In 1892, Yap Gwan Thay was explicitly known as the owner (*eigenaar*) of *Komedie Stamboel* (Faber, 1931, p. 370).

The popularity of Parsis puppetry and theatre had been previously known in Batavia, even before *Komedie Stamboel*, and had propelled *Komedie Stamboel's* reputation in Batavia as well. Parsis puppetry used the same dramaturgy as the ones used in Europe and combined it with tales adapted from Shakespeare's works, *One Thousand and One Nights* tales, and Hindustan music as well as dances. *Komedie Stamboel*, using a similar dramaturgy as Parsis puppetry, soon became popular through their showings in various cities, including Batavia (Cohen, 2006, p. 42)

In 1892, *Komedie Stamboel* held a tour in Batavia with a ticket priced equally as European operas in Batavia at the time: about 4 *gulden* for a box or loge seat (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1892). This equal pricing showed that *Komedie Stamboel* did not only find success in Batavia, but had comparable prestige with the European opera groups. Many local newspapers praised shows held by *Komedie Stamboel*, including the *Java*

Bode's 1 October 1892 edition, expressing admiration for the actors and scenography used by *Komedie Stamboel* (Java Bode, 1892). After the tour, *Komedie Stamboel* held multiple shows in Batavia throughout 1893 to 1894. When *Komedie Stamboel* held another show in Batavia on 9 July 1894, the enthusiasm from the crowd was no longer what it once was for the last three years when *Komedie Stamboel* performed in Batavia (Cohen, 2006, p. 214). Nevertheless, it was certain that *Komedie Stamboel* was one of the intergral entertainment available in Batavia.



Figure 1. Postcard with *Komedie Stamboel* Pictured, Published by Tio Tek Hong 1905
From: Olivier Johannes Raap, *Soeka Doeka di Jawa Tempo Doeloe*, 2015.

Not long after the group's formation, the name *Komedie Stamboel* itself became a term for a genre of theatre, in which other theatre groups surfaced with a similar style and repertoire as *Komedie Stamboel*. This genre was then known as the *komedie stambul* genre, and, along with its rise in popularity, various groups were also established, such as *Indo's Komedie Vereeniging "De Eendracht," Komedie Spanjool, Eendracht Maakt Macht,* and *Opera en toneelgezelschap Wilhelmina* (Nieuwenhuys, 1978, p. 304).

Indo's Komedie Vereeniging "De Eendracht," established by Marie Oord, managed to become one of the successful *stambul* theatre groups in the Dutch East Indies. Its popularity in Subaraya motivated the group to spread its wings to other regions, such as Batavia. *De Eendracht* was also the first theatre group to perform at the *Thalia Schouwburg* in 9 February 1909, and also held shows outside the Java Island, such as in Medan (Ruppin, 2015, p. 215; *De Sumatra Post*, 1909). *De Eendracht* also benefitted from popularity, though it slowly faded, until, in 1917, Marie Oord was forced to sell her troupe's properties (Cohen, 2006, p. 213).

During its active years, *Komedie Stamboel* brought many changes and new perspectives to the world of the theatre arts in the Dutch East Indies. The group adapted many international tales, especially those originating from the Middle East and Europe, which were then tailored to suit the tastes of its crowd to expand its market. Members of the group, consisting of the Indo-paupers, the Chinese and the Peranakans, and the native Indonesians, distinguished the group from other theatre

groups at the time, which prioritized on identical ethnicities, such as the amateur theatre group in the *sociëteit* and traditional Javanese theatre groups. A multi-region tour, part of the *komedie stamboel* genre, made it something not uniquely from a specific region, but a part of the Indische culture as a whole. The genre was also known as a part of the marginalized culture born from the people within the borders of two worlds: Asia and Europe (Cohen, 2006, p. 2; Nieuwenhuys, 1978, p. 302).

Aspects of *Komedie Stamboel*'s shows, which were heavily inspired from Western dramaturgy, made the group as the first local theatre group in the Dutch East Indies to use props often used in Europe, such as a proscenium, stage lights, as well as drop curtains and draperies. Other Western aspects were also seen in the use of understudies, program booklets, and a tableau vivant often shown at the end of the shows. The hybridization of these aspects made *Komedie Stamboel* and other groups within this genre as trans-ethnic groups enjoyed by many without any ethnic or social status limitation (Cohen, 2006, p. 376).

One of the aspects of the *Indische* culture seen in *komedie stambul* shows was the use of the Malay language mixed with Dutch as the main language used throughout the shows. This was influenced by members of *Komedie Stamboel*, which were mainly Indo-paupers and did not go through higher education, with Malay as their mother tongue and non-fluent Dutch. Even so, this caused the non-European crowd in Batavia, such as the Chinese and even the native Indonesians, to be able to enjoy the shows without any language barriers, as Malay was a language commonly used in trade and in the daily lives of the Batavian people (Brandon, 1974, p. 51).

Other *komedie stambul* groups also held shows adapted from popular romances at the time, such as *Tjerita Njai Dasima* and *Si Tjonat*, which had similar plots. Both had *nyai* characters with important roles in moving the plot. Both were also seen as a view of the societal realities at the time, such as the concubinage and the *nyai* (a term for concubine) system commonly practiced in the colonial era and deeply tied to the *Indische* culture (Bosch, 1994, p. 46).

In their shows, *komedie stambul* groups commonly held a musical interval signifying act changes. These *stambul* musical shows were tailored to suit the tastes of the urban people, from which many elements of the *stambul* music were similar to the *kroncong* music, a genre tightly knitted with the Indo people in Batavia (Jedamski, 2008, p. 488). Both musical genres were very similar, and *kroncong* players, the majority of which were Indo, adapted easily into the melodies of *stambul*, such as *Stambul I* and *Stambul II*, and applied them into *kroncong*. It did not take long for *stambul* songs to be played in the streets of Batavia and, in 1893, many singers and *kroncong* players joined in serenading *Komedie Stamboel*'s shows (Cohen, 2006, p. 170). The use of *kroncong* in every performance exhibited a clear trace of the *Indische* culture within the *komedie stambul* genre.



Figure 2. Interlude by the *Stambul Group Indo's Komedie Vereeniging "De Eendracht"*, 1910, with Marie Oord (standing) and (sitting from left to right) Sneallers, Theo MacLennon, and Nellie Houtzangers

Source: KITLV Collection No. 503401.

In 1900, several years after *Komedie Stamboel* disbanded, Auguste Mahieu, who was part of the *komedie stambul* group *Sinar India*, joined the *Indische Bond* organization. *Indische Bond* aimed to achieve the common goals of its members and to provide moral and material support for the Indo people needing them throughout the Dutch East Indies. With other theatre group members, Mahieu often held charity and propaganda shows within *Indische Bond's* agenda (Cohen, 2006, p. 304).

As a member of *Indische Bond*, Mahieu left a deep impression on Hans van de Wall, an Indo writer fairly known in the early 20th century, as well as a fan of *komedie stambul* theatre groups. Some of Van de Wall's works, from the romances to the dramas set in the Dutch East Indies, also had the themes of lives within theatre groups. In this case, the *komedie stambul* genre influenced the *Indische toneel* (Winet, 2010, p. 47; Cohen, 2006, p. 307). *Komedie stambul* kept developing, and, entering the 20th century, a theatre form known as *toneel Melajoe* emerged as a continuity of the *komedie stambul* with new additions.

The Development of *Indische toneel* and *toneel Melajoe* in Batavia

Moving into the 20th century, a new genre of theatre known as *Indische toneel* emerged and progressed in Batavia. *Indische toneel* was a colonial theatre using Dutch as its primary show language and was often held in *schouwburg* and *sociëteit*. Some known playwrights or *toneelschrijvers* of this genre were Hans van de Wall, Jan Fabricius, and Henry van Wermeskerken (Nieuwenhuys, 1978, p. 292). Among the three playwrights, Van de Wall was the only one of Indo descent, and was also an Indo author and critic known in the early 20th century. Van de Wall was also known under his *nom de plume* Victor Ido, a name he often used when writing newspaper pieces and plays. After studying in the Netherlands, Ido returned to the Dutch East Indies to realize his

dream of elevating the arts world of Batavia, an effort highly appreciated by Batavians (Dijck, 1901).



Figure 3. Advertisement of Victor Ido's *Mevrouw van Hassen's* Premiere Showing in the *Bataviasche Schouwburg*, 14 March 1901.

Source: *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 14 March 1901.

A fan of *stambul* and a person of Indo descent himself, Ido admired Auguste Mahieu, the Indo founder of *Komedie Stamboel*. Mahieu left a strong impression on Ido, especially when Mahieu joined the *Indische Bond*. Many of Ido's works were inspired by Mahieu, especially ones with the themes of the lives of theatre group members and the lives of the Indo people. Ido's novel, titled *De Paupers*, and his play, titled *De Paria van Glodok*, derived elements from such themes (Winet, 2010, p. 48).

Aside from Victor Ido, Jan Fabricius was also a known playwright in the Dutch East Indies. Some of his plays, such as *Met den Handschoen Getrouwd* (1906), *Eenzaam* (1907), *De Rechte Lijn* (1910), *Totok en Indo* (1915), *Nonnie* (1916), and *Sonna* (1916), were set in the Dutch East Indies and was highly popular in the Netherlands. Henri van Wermeskerken, an author and journalist from Rotterdam, was also a playwright in the scene of Batavia's theatre arts world. *Tropenadel* was a comedy play by van Wermeskerken marking his debut within Batavia's theatre arts world and received high praise as something 'new and fresh' (Ido, 1916).

On the other hand, *Komedie Stamboel's* emergence in the late 19th century prompted the rise of other theatre groups following its style and dramaturgy, even when the shows within their repertoire were not as varied. In 1925, a Chinese alumnus of *Handelsschool Batavia*, Tio Tek Djin, founded the theatre group *Orion*. Tio Tek Djin was the first formally educated person to join the commercial world of *toneel Melajoe*. When first established, the first plays shown by *Orion* were comprised of standard *komedie stambul* shows. Improvement on the plays were only started when Njoo Cheong Sheng, an editor of *Interocean* from Surabaya, joined as a playwright for *Orion* (You, 1939).

Orion made improvements for their shows, such as the removal of *ladon-diladon* or an introduction through songs and dances, as well as the removal of musical interludes; shortened act separation or *bedrijf* for time efficiency so plays can be thoroughly shown in one night; and using original works for their repertoire, not adaptations of international tales, such as ones from the Middle East or Europe (Sumardjo, 1992, p. 114-115). The prima donna of the group, Miss Riboet, an actress of native Indonesian descent and the wife of Tio Tek Djin, gained high popularity due to her acting skills and beauty. This popularity caused the group to change its name from *Orion* to *Miss Riboet's Orion* to strengthen the association between Miss Riboet and *Orion* (Jedamski, 2008, p. 494).

Miss Riboet's Orion was not the only *toneel Melajoe* theatre group known in the early 20th century. On 21 June 1926, Willy Klimanoff, a Russian man born in Penang, founded the theatre group *Dardanella* in Sidoarjo, East Java. Klimanoff, also known as his stage name Adolf Piedro or A. Piedro, was a talented artistic stylist. Piedro wrote many dramas and plays adapted from popular Hollywood movies (Jedamski, 2008, p. 494-495). With Tan Tjeng Bok, a formerly *stambul* actor of Chinese descent often playing male main roles, *Dardanella* showed many plays adapted from Hollywood action films, such as *Don Q*, *The Thief of Bagdad*, *The Mark of Zorro*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *The Three Musketeers* (You, 1939). Other members, such as Soetidjah, known as her stage name Dewi Dja, as well as Abisin Abbas, known as his pen name Andjar Asmara, also helped raise *Dardanella's* popularity through Dewi Dja's acting skills and Asmara's plays. The plays were then called as modern Indies romances, or *modern Indische roman*, in advertisements (Biran, 2009, p. 23).



Figure 4. A Shot from *Annie van Mendoet* of *Dardanella* in Batavia, 1930
Source: Koninklijke Bibliotheek Collection.

Both theatre groups expanded and quickly became a prestigious entertainment option. Even so, competition emerged between the two, which exacerbated when *Dardanella* held its premier show in Batavia. Many means were taken to maintain *Miss Riboet's Orion's* popularity in the eyes of the Batavians, such as investing in newspaper advertisements and billboards. Each group also showed their respective prime plays; *Miss Orion Riboet* with *Gagak Solo* and *Dardanella* with *Dr. Samsi*. In the end, *Dardanella* managed to upstage *Miss Riboet's Orion* due to Piedro's method of inputting shows with heavier and more serious themes to cater to the tastes of non-European intellectuals, which were pervading the crowds at the time (Jedamski, 2008, p. 507).

In 1932, Njoo Cheong Seng and his wife Tan Kiem Njo, a person of Chinese and Indo descent, left *Miss Riboet's Orion* and joined *Dardanella* in 1934. With talented playwrights such as A. Piedro, Andjar Asmara, and Njoo Cheong Seng, as well as three actresses famed for their acting skills such as Dewi Dja, Ratna Asmara, and Tan Kiem Njo, or Fifi Young, catapulted *Dardanella's* into the stratospheres, even surpassing *Miss Riboet's Orion*. In 1935, *Dardanella* held *Tour d'Orient* in Singapore, China, Siam, Burma, Ceylon, India, and Tibet showcasing traditional dances (You, 1939). Even so, the troupe's situation became more strenuous due to financial difficulties, which caused half of *Dardanella's* members, including Andjar Asmara and his wife Ratna Asmara, Njoo Cheong Seng and his wife Fifi Young, as well as Henry L. Duarte, decided to return to the Dutch East Indies. Throughout October 1939, the group continued their tour in Asia and even to Europe, and also entered the United States under the name *Dewi Dja's Bali-Java Dancers* in early 1940 (Cohen, 2016, p. 146-147).

The theatre arts were an integral part of the lives of Batavians in the early 20th century, which was proven with the myriad of theatre groups visiting Batavia as part of their tour. The increasing number of intellectuals also began to set their eyes on the development of the theatre arts. This also influenced the direction of the development of plays shown in Batavia, including *Indische toneel* and *toneel Melajoe*. *Indische toneel* itself was expanding in the early 20th century, from 1900 to 1925, and was a niche enjoyed only by a particular group: those interested in or connected to the Dutch East Indies (Baay, 1998, p. 52). As a result of the playwrights pouring their individual experiences into their works, *Indische toneel* plays' popularity were shaped by the experiences of their playwrights. It was not without reason that Victor Ido's works were more successful when compared to other *Indische toneel*.

Ido, a fan of *stambul* as well as a person of Indo descent, managed to bring the social reality, especially that of the Indo people, onto the theatre stages of Batavia. Even so, his appearance, dialect, and background, which were considered a cut above the rest of the Indo people, made him a '*rara avis*,' or someone considered uncommon in his environment, which, in turn, gave him a unique position among the people of the Dutch East Indies at the time (Nieuwenhuys, 1978, p. 298). The realistic depiction of the Indo people's condition and local setting, while still maintaining an air of romanticism in its characters, was one of the main selling point for the Batavians

looking for entertainment similar to the European ones while still using themes relating to their lives.



Figure 5. A Shot from *Karina Adinda* by Victor Ido, 1913
Source: KITLV No. 9060 Collection.

Unlike *komedie stambul*, which developed under the direction and innovation of Indo people like Auguste Mahieu, the role of the Indo people in the development of *toneel Melajoe* was seen in how they, as actors and actresses, popularized shows packed with a modern air and with a tendency to refer to Western dramaturgy when compared to *komedie stambul* groups. The development of *toneel Melajoe* was in fact supported by those of Chinese and native Indonesian descent, such as in the cases of *Miss Riboet's Orion* and *Dardanella*. The activities of Tio Tek Djin and Njoo Cheong Seng, who were directly involved within *Miss Riboet's Orion's* shows, signified a change of the roles of the Chinese people or the Peranakans in theatre groups; they were no longer acted as only the impresarios or financiers, but they were also active within the management of various aspects of the shows, such as creating and using written manuscript (You, 1939).

Both of shows performed by *Miss Riboet's Orion* and *Dardanella* emphasized on psychological realism, with *komedie stambul* songs playing alongside the dialogue and alternating in act changes (Cohen, 2006, p. 338). International movies, especially Western ones, also influenced the repertoire and style of their shows. One of the movies was *The Thief of Baghdad*, which was loosely adapted from a *One Thousand and One Night's* tale. *The Thief of Baghdad* was a swashbuckler movie, a subgenre of the action genre displaying swordfights and heroic characters within its stories. This caused action scenes, such as swordfights, to be shown in *Dardanella's* version of *The Thief of Baghdad*.

To display their association with European theatre and to separate themselves from *stambul* and aristocratic theatre, press used the term *toneel* (drama) from the Dutch language to describe their shows. Viewers and the members of the theatre groups themselves came from various backgrounds, such as those of the *komedie stambul* viewers, and publicity from the press was also carried out to increase their popularity (Cohen, 2006, p. 338). When many tales of the Dutch East Indies, or *Indische roman*, began to receive high popularity and attention entering the early 20th century, many transformations were applied to the shows, turning them from mere adaptations of popular stories and movies in the West since 1925 to more realistic and heavier stories set on the lives of the Dutch East Indies people in the 1930s as a reaction to the public attention, especially the intellectuals, which were interested in *toneel Melajoe*. The success of *Indische toneel*, which told stories set in the Dutch East Indies, turned the tastes of the Batavians, so modifications were done to fulfill the public need for quality good shows (You, 1939).

An Indo actress popular at the time was Tan Kiem Nio, who used the stage name Fifi Young. Born from a French father and a Chinese Peranakan mother, Young had the charm of Indo girls, which made her popular. Young, who was also a member of *Crystall Follies* and *Dardanella*, was famed as a talented *toneel* actress and was also the face of both theatre groups. After *Dardanella*, Young, with Njoo Cheong Seng and Henry L. Duarte, founded the theatre group *Fifi Young's Pagoda* in 1937 with Young as the prima donna and continued touring the Dutch East Indies (You, 1939).

Function Transition and 'Modernization' of the Theatre Arts Under the Japanese Military Government Occupation

The Japanese military government occupied the Dutch East Indies after the signing of the Kalijati Agreement on 8 March 1942. The agreement forbade any presence of the Netherlands in various aspects of life, including the use of the word '*toneel*' to describe the theatre arts. In return, the noun 'play' (*sandiwara*) was used. The word was chosen by the Japanese government to support their propaganda and to erase any trace of the previous occupation by the Netherlands (Faber, 1948). The Japanese military government realized that the theatre arts were effective propaganda tools, so they established *Sendenbu* or the Propaganda Department to enact propagandas, which, in return, will improve the image of the Japanese military government, as well as to take responsibility for information regarding the civil government (Khasanah, 2015, p. 20).

To secure the plan, the Japanese government held two main principles when spreading propagandas: how to swell the hearts of the people (*minshin ha'aku*) and how to tame the people (*senbu kosaku*) (Yuliati, 2012, p. 1). Other than using the theatre arts, the Japanese government also used other arts to spread their propaganda, such as movies, the radio, paintings, music, as well as puppetry shows to gain widespread support from the people (Kurasawa, 1987, p. 61).

For the theatre arts, *Sendenbu* established the Tonil School in Jakarta to educate playwrights, actors, and other staff, as well as to support the emergence of new theatre groups under *Jawa Engeki Kyōkai* or *Perserikatan Oesaha Sandiwara Djawa* (POSD) under

the leadership of Hinatsu Eitaro, who used the alias Dr. Huyung (Kurasawa, 1987, p. 82-83). The plays showcased by the theatre groups at the time carried the message of wartime propaganda as a form of indoctrination for the people. Every theatre group which previously did not use written manuscripts for their shows were then obligated to showcase plays with pre-approved manuscripts which have passed censorships (Yoesoef, 2010, p. 12).

One of the plays used as an allegory by the Japanese military government was *Pandu Pertiwi*, which was laden with Japanese propaganda. *Pandu Pertiwi* was written in 1942 by Merayu Sukma, the pen name of A. H. M. Sulaiman. *Pandu Pertiwi* told the story of Dainip Jaya, who was constantly protecting Partiwī and Pandu Setiawan, from Nadarlan, a criminal who has killed Priyayiwati. Each character was the personification of the Netherlands, Japan, and several aspects of Indonesia itself: Dainip Jaya represented *Dai Nippon* as the savior, Pandu Setiawan and Pratiwi as Indonesian youngsters, and Nadarlan as the Netherlands who have killed Priayiwati, the symbol of the *Priayi* (Yoesoef, 2010, p. 12).

Several *toneel Melajoe* groups already operational since the Dutch colonial era were still performing, though under a different name. *Bintang Soerabaja* was one of the theatre groups popular under the Japanese occupation. The group was established in Malang in August 1942 by Fred Young. Most of its members were former members of *Dardanella*, such as Njoo Cheong Seng, Fifi Young, Henry L. Duarte, Astaman, and Tan Tjeng Bok (Sumardjo, 1992, p. 129).

Even though the function of the theatre arts transitioned from entertainment to propaganda with limited creative freedom, the theatre arts at the time went through an unseen development. This was caused by many policies, such as the ban on everything connected to the Netherlands, the support to improve Pan-Asian arts, and the establishment of organizational structures adapted from Japan, which opened new ways for the theatre arts in Indonesia to modernize with stronger local aspects compared to previous iterations (Cohen, 2016, p. 178).

The development of Indonesian theatre was seen in the emergence of the amateur theatre troupe *Maya*, established by Usmar Ismail, one of the figures who was, at one point in time, member of the Cultural Center (*Keimin Bunka Shidosoi*). This group constantly used manuscripts for its shows, from original works written by its members to those adapted from Western dramas. This was seen in the use of manuscripts which created dramas packed with dialogs and capable of delivering problems within the stories in better ways, such as *Intelek Istimewa*, *Dewi Rani*, *Liburan Seniman*, and *Jeritan Hidup Baru*. Through intellectuals studying the ins and outs of modern shows based on Western literature, a form of professionalism in obtaining fine qualities was the primary goal of fans of Maya plays, something which influenced Indonesian theatre groups orientation after the Japanese occupation, especially in the 1950s (Sumardjo, 1992, p. 141-142).

Conclusions

Performance arts are an important part of human life. Through performance arts, humans express themselves. *Komedie Stamboel* which acculturated with Indische culture during their tour in Batavia successfully cemented their place as one of the most sought entertainment in Batavia and resulted in many imitators, as well as its own theatrical genre. The role of Indo people such as Auguste Mahieu in developing alterations in *Komedie Stamboel's* performances has been attributed as one of many factors that made *Komedie Stamboel* popular. In the 20th century, the theatrical genre of *komedie stambul* developed into *toneel Melajoe*, with the role of innovator had shifted into the Chinese and the Peranakans, who used to acted as only the impresarios or financiers of the troupe. The Indo then focused on the performing aspect and became the face of the troupe, such as Fifi Young, who still acted during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies. The influence of *komedie stambul* also can be seen in *Indische toneel*, Dutch-language realist drama set in the Indies. Often written by playwrights of Dutch *totok* and Indo descent, *Indische toneel* were popular and appealed to the upper-class Europeans.

The long development of the theatre arts in Batavia showed variety and progress; from the influence of Western dramaturgies in *Komedie Stamboel* to, under the Japanese occupation, the rise of theatre arts with local elements, which were inseparable from the Indo people. Efforts to input new elements in the performance of the theatre arts done by *Komedie Stamboel*, continued with the *Indische toneel* playwrights of Indo descent, such as Victor Ido, and *toneel Melajoe* groups, such as *Miss Riboet's Orion* and *Dardanella* cemented the role of the Indo people in Batavia's theatre arts world.

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