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MOANALANI JEFFREY

A scene from Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation*, with Rudy Guerrero and Margo Hall.

Edgy Comedy about Class Opens at Lorraine Hansberry

by Jean Schiffman

As Americans, we are constantly reinventing ourselves, declares Ellen Sebastian Chang. So, too, is the title character Lynn Nottage's 2005 Obie Award-winning play *Fabulation; or the Re-education of Undine*. "Undine isn't denying her race, she's denying her class background," says Chang, who is directing the play at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater.

In *Fabulation,* an edgy comedy that Nottage wrote simultaneously with the popular and poignant drama *Intimate Apparel*—the latter set a century earlier—we follow the rapid descent of Undine Barnes Calles (neé Sharona Watkins), a 37-year-old, up-by-her-bootstraps African-American, the first in her family to graduate from college (Dartmouth). She owns a New York PR firm catering to a black nouveau riche clientele, as she describes it in one of many asides to the audience. When the play opens, her Argentinian husband has just absconded with all her money—and, it turns out, she's pregnant. Bereft and soon penniless, she consults a Yoruba priest, who tells her she has angered an important *orisha,* or deity, and must return to her parents, brother and grandma in the Walt Whitman projects of Brooklyn. Undine didn't exactly sell her soul to the devil, but she's harboring a guilty secret from long ago that's revealed late in the play.

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Hope Mohr Dances Dancing the Unsayable

by Jean Schiffman

Tegan Schwab, Cameron Growden and Derek Harris in *The Unsayable*, a new work by Hope Mohr.

MARGO MORTIZ

"We are a country at war," says local choreographer Hope Mohr, "[yet] I felt the isolation of artists and dancers from war and its human costs and wanted to bridge that gap." Hope Mohr Dance's five professional dancers plus four military veterans perform her latest premiere, the hour-long *The Unsayable*, a mix of ethnicities, ages and body types. "I think the two populations have a lot to teach each other," says Mohr. The piece explores the American military experience through movement, text generated by veterans and dancers and an original sound score. "It's been an emotionally intense journey for everyone, including me," says Mohr.

The Unsayable is on a double bill with *she dreams in code*, a new work by guest troupe The Liz Gerring Dance Company.

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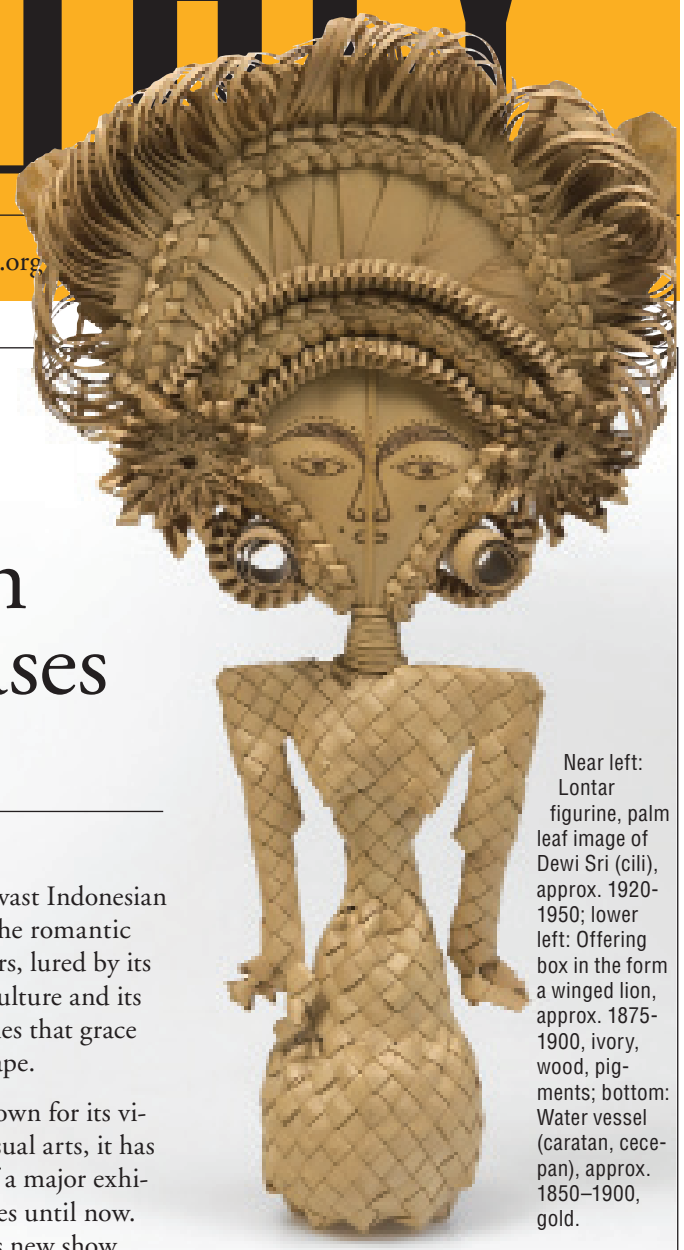
New Exhibit at Asian Showcases Bali

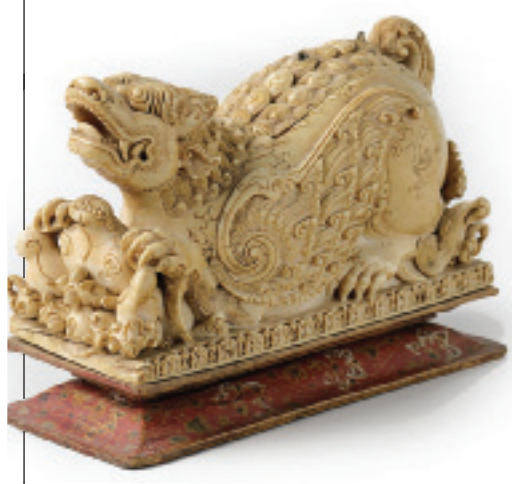
by Sura Wood

Bali, a tiny island in the vast Indonesian archipelago, captivates the romantic imagination of Westerners, lured by its exoticism, its wealth of culture and its network of 20,000 temples that grace the mountainous landscape.

Although Bali is well known for its vibrant performing and visual arts, it has never been the subject of a major exhibition in the United States until now. The Asian Art Museum's new show, *Bali: Art, Ritual, Performance*, explores the role of performance and ritual in Balinese daily life and offers visitors in-depth exposure to the aesthetic beauty of the island's art and ritual practices.



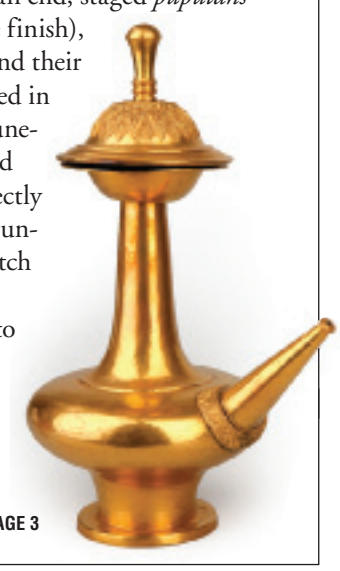
Near left: Lontar figurine, palm leaf image of Dewi Sri (cili), approx. 1920-1950; lower left: Offering box in the form a winged lion, approx. 1875-1900, ivory, wood, pigments; bottom: Water vessel (caratan, cecepan), approx. 1850–1900, gold.



The exhibition's 130 diverse artworks, dating primarily from 1700 to the 1930s, include sculpture, paintings, architectural elements, furnishings, archival photographs, drawings, decorative objects, musical instruments and shadow puppets borrowed from the collection of anthropologist Margaret Mead, as well as fearsome painted masks and diamond-encrusted ceremonial daggers thought by the Balinese to possess supernatural powers.

"We really want to show the ways that art lives in Bali," says associate curator of Southeast Asian Art Natasha Reichle. "It's amazing to see a society in which people who are not rich monetarily invest so much time and energy making and doing spectacularly beautiful things for their ceremonial life. These fabulous objects are deeply ingrained in the lives of people."

Many of the works on view, adds Reichle, have intriguing stories to tell. Take, for example, the pair of ornately carved wooden doors measuring over four meters tall that were rescued from the palace of Denpasar. In the early 20th century, the Dutch, who maintained a colonial presence in Indonesia for over 300 years, were in the midst of their final conquest of Bali. W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp, a Dutch artist visiting the region at the time, witnessed the siege of the palace and intervened when he saw soldiers using the doors to make a bridge across a creek; he somehow salvaged the artifacts and conveyed them to a museum in The Netherlands. During this period, rajas of the remaining Balinese kingdoms, realizing their reign was at an end, staged *puputans* (fights to the finish), where they and their retinue dressed in traditional funereal white and marched directly into Dutch gunfire. The Dutch burned their compounds to the ground.



Years later, Nieuwenkamp

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Hope Mohr

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Mohr originally studied at the San Francisco Ballet School, later danced with Trisha Brown and describes her lineage as "ballet, Cunningham, Judson Church." After teaching creative movement to breast cancer patients, she had a chance to do the same at the Palo Alto Veteran's Administration. From there, she was inspired to create *The Unsayable*.

With vigorous outreach to VA hospitals and residences, she interviewed about 30 Bay Area veterans of various wars to choose among them a handful to work with her company dancers in developing the project. That the vets participate fully as performers, not just as sources, and get the same hourly pay as the dancers, was integral to Mohr's conception. "As a choreographer, to see dancer and 'non-dancer' bodies sharing space is an interesting choreographic challenge and compelling for audiences," she explains.

Mohr collaborated with Bart Schneider, an oral historian at the San Francisco VA, to structure text-generating workshops. "I didn't come in with an agenda that people must share x or y, but there are common threads with everybody nevertheless," says Mohr. Each day she and Schneider designated a theme (homecoming was an especially potent one), and the participants, vets and dancers alike, responded by drawing pictures, engaging in dialogue, creating movement or gesture. "If a vet held up an image and I asked a dancer to dance to it, it was revelatory for the vet to see the physical interpretation of that personal experience," says Mohr.

Mohr and Schneider whittled down and shaped the material. An impressionistic text emerged, to be layered over an emotionally rich commissioned score by composer Paul Haas. "In editing it I felt a big responsibility to honor the stories of the participants," says Mohr, "but also to craft a work of art that is poetic and efficient and articulate—text that got the heart of people's stories, images that seemed to contain the kernel, the core of people's experiences. Evocative details or striking images—those are the things we selected."

The verbatim words of the war veterans, read in their own voices, are at times intensely personal. From soldier Carol Roye: "When I was in the military academy, we were constantly tested. Three hundred cadets started. Halfway through our training, only three women (including me) were left and 15 men. I could take all the punishment. My future seemed very promising. … during Desert Storm, I was raped by a fellow soldier." Roye will play out that scene explicitly in the piece, says Mohr. Midway through the rehearsal process, the two were trying to decide how much detail to include.

"One of the challenges [of working on *The Unsayable*] is definitely the emotional content of the pieces," says Cameron Growden, who has been with Hope Mohr Dance since its inception four years ago. "They're very charged." One of Growden's duets is with vet Paul Ramirez; each examines his feelings about Old Glory. "I was raised to love the flag. Nobody was more proud than me to join the Navy," intones Ramirez in voiceover. "But it's hard for me to respect something that did so much wrong to me and my people…. I saw the way they treated somebody who admitted he was gay. I got blackmailed. I tried to kill myself. I was in a coma for two weeks. I was brain dead."

Growden's take on the flag, heard in voiceover: "I don't feel like it means what I want it to mean, what I think it should mean, what it meant when I was a child."

In one section, the vets instruct the dancers in basic training. "It was very hard for the dancers," says Mohr. "I generated a lot of material based on that experience—the resistance of the body to be contained. To be told what to do. In fact some of the dancers said, 'It was like my first ballet class.'"

At other times, it was challenging to integrate the two culturally disparate groups. "The dancers—if they generate a phrase, they glean a handful of gestures from the phrase that are pedestrian or accessible, so dancers and vets develop a common gestural vocabulary," explains Mohr. "I looked for simple, spatial choices, a simple, spatial pattern—ways they could participate in a form without having to do a pirouette—while dancers are doing something more complicated."

In one section of the text, dancer Tegan Schwab says, "I don't know their language. Even though they taught us 'at ease' 'parade rest,'…if we taught them plié, tendu, degagé, and we said ok, plié! tendu! degagé! that quickly they wouldn't be able to do it."

As painful as some of the vets' confessions are—David Fish expresses a post-war "desire to be happy, and an inability to enjoy life" —they are not entirely negative. Itemizing the souvenirs he brought back from war, Fish names "a fossilized clam, completely intact, thousands of years old" and "a ring given to me by an Iraqi soldier." Three of the four vets have said they'd reenlist if given the chance.

"When you interact with vets," says Mohr, "you see the human costs of war, what they've sacrificed… a physical injury, the life sacrifices they make to serve in the military. Whether or not you agree that war is necessary to ensure freedom … you see the human sacrifices."

She adds, "It's important to me to do more than simply repeat or reenact trauma and suffering. I feel a part of the importance of this project is to demonstrate one of the roles of the artist: To bear witness to suffering … it's important to me to illuminate the past through healing and transformation. How do you open the door within yourself after experiencing trauma? For me, the intelligence of the dancing body is key … a unique resource in dealing with trauma. That deep connection to sensation is what makes a dancer great and what enables a person to heal."

The Unsayable *and* she dreams in code, *Mar. 3-6, Theater Artaud, 450 Florida St. 800/838-3006. www.brownpapertickets.com/www.hopemohr.org.* ★

Hansberry

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"It's apparently against the law to be a poor black woman in New York City," says Undine. "I've returned to my original Negro state…. a lifetime of hard work, and here I am on the verge of becoming a statistic." After a series of new challenges and misfortunes, she must confront the life choices she's made.

Nottage calls them "ugly choices." In an interview at York College in New York, the multi-award-winning playwright said that although *Fabulation* is not based on her own life, she knows a lot of Undines. The script, she said, poured out of her "like an exhale." Structured as a series of scenes that unfurl fluidly, the play veers from satire (initially reminiscent of the film *The Devil Wears Prada*) to almost Kafkaesque comedy (bureaucratic insanity at a social welfare office) to gritty drama (drug-dealing on the mean streets of Brooklyn). It's a whirlwind anti-heroine's journey toward redemption.

Since writing *Fabulation,* published by Theatre Communications Group, Nottage has won a Pulitzer Prize for *Ruined* (currently onstage at Berkeley Repertory Theatre), an intense and violent contemporary drama about the plight of women in Congo. She is currently adapting it for a screenplay.

The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, San Francisco's flagship African-American theater since 1981, has been trying to stage *Fabulation* for the past two years. Along the way, the company lost its longtime downtown space. Then its two founder/leaders, the partners Stanley Williams (artistic director) and Quentin Easter (executive director), fell ill and died only months apart, a tragedy that shocked the theater community. Recently the board hired American Conservatory Theater actor Steven Anthony Jones as new artistic director, along with executive director Shirley Howard-Johnson, and the theater seems poised for a rebirth.

Margo Hall, who plays Undine, has worked previously with the Lorraine Hansberry; she and Chang are longtime, highly respected theater artists on the local scene. Chang's extensive work as a director, designer, producer and experimental writer dates back to the days of the fabled Blake Street Hawkeyes and Life On the Water and includes collaborations with playwright/performer Anne Galjour and others, as well as projects at the Magic Theatre and elsewhere. Actor and sometime director Hall has worked at such theaters as ACT, Campo Santo and Word for Word. The two have codirected, and Chang has directed Hall in other plays as well.

Of her first response to reading the *Fabulation* script, over a year ago, Chang says, "We were just starting to see the mortgage meltdown and the economy imploding. This is so timely in terms of its dark humor around who's being most affected by the [failure of the] American Dream, which is of course African-Americans and Latinos. Undine's story is not about that, but indirectly it spoke to me about some of these economic issues, and about reinventing yourself. To actually live in a [new] class and at the same time become disconnected from your class of origin to the point where, when you're thrown back [as Undine is], you've lost all the skills it takes to negotiate in that class. It's a witty morality play about what happens when people forget certain skills."

Hall and Chang have examined the multiple levels of the character Undine. Chang has an intuitive understanding of what it feels like to move upward in society: Raised working-class in Eastern Washington with her father's African-American parents, as a teen, she was suddenly thrust into her white mother's middle-class, academic surroundings in Berkeley. Unlike Undine, Chang never denied her class background, but she understands the dynamic. "Undine is definitely a character that when you first meet her, she's not sympathetic," she says. "But she does change."

There are two sides to Undine's story, avows Hall. The reinvented Undine, seen at the beginning of the play, is creative, smart, powerful, ruthless. Hall herself has known people like this, who have changed the way they speak, cut themselves off from their families. "It's a choice," she says. "I'm sure Undine thinks she did everything she was supposed to do—she saw another way to live and decided, 'That's what I want.'"

Hall herself comes from a lower- to middle-class family in Detroit. Her stepfather was a Motown musician (Aretha Franklin sang at Hall's mother's funeral), and there were periods of feast and famine. Hall had the privileges of dance classes and music lessons, but she also visited family members who lived in the projects, so she's not unfamiliar with the fictional Undine's background. But, "How do you allow audiences to like her and understand why she did what she did?" wonders Hall, early in the rehearsal process. Undine has to be her true self—a tough woman—but with a vulnerability that can melt the heart.

Fabulation, the story of one woman's inverted societal struggle, is smart, biting and very political, declares Chang, precisely because it explores the issue we continue to struggle with in our society: our ability to talk about class. "There needs to be a way to honor our roots as we navigate through these landscapes of class and culture."

Fabulation, *Mar. 3-27, Southside Theatre, Bldg. D, Fort Mason. 345-3980, www.lhtsf.org* ★