The Body as a Language of Resistance: Changes in Teater Payung Hitam's Themes and Strategies of Critique from the New Order to Reformasi (1994–2010)

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Abstract

This article examines changes in the themes and strategies of critique of Teater Payung Hitam (TPH), a Bandung-based physical theater group, from the late New Order through the first decade of Reformasi (1994–2010). Using the critical historical method—heuristics, external and internal source criticism, interpretation, and historiography—on scripts and performance documentation, contemporary press clippings (Kompas, Pikiran Rakyat, Tempo, Solopos, Suara Merdeka), and a published interview with TPH founder Rachman Sabur (2015), the study shows that in the New Order era (1994–1998) TPH developed six interrelated artistic strategies amid censorship: shifting from verbal language to the language of the body, using polysemic symbols, appropriating the world dramaturgical canon (Beckett, Handke, Ionesco) as a shield of legitimacy, physical intensity and an aesthetic of pain, collaboration across media, and consistent thematic boldness—as seen in Kaspar (1994), Masbret (1994), and Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam (1996–1997). As controls over expression loosened after 1998, TPH's themes of critique gradually shifted: from disillusionment with the new post-Reformasi elite (1999–2002), to identity and personal existentialism (2002–2005), ecological and national issues (2005–2009), and finally the courage to expose the taboo history of 1965 in Genjer-Genjer (2010). Using Arnold Hauser's sociology of art, the study argues that these changes were not merely a shift in aesthetic preference but a process of dialectical adaptation between artistic form and the surrounding social and political structure: a nonverbal strategy that initially served as a survival tactic under repression became a freely chosen language of critical reflection in the democratic era. The study's novelty lies in systematically mapping continuity beneath change—the body, symbols, and space remained the main media across two different regimes—showing that TPH's cultural resilience rested not on avoiding confrontation, but on its ability to change the terrain and function of confrontation itself according to its historical context.

Keywords: Teater Payung Hitam; physical theater; sociology of art; New Order; Reformasi

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Introduction

Art and power have always stood in a dialectical relationship. Arnold Hauser, in *The Sociology of Art*, argues that art history cannot be separated from the economic and political structures surrounding it. A work of art is therefore not merely an aesthetic object, but a field in which power is established, maintained, and also contested.[1] Under the New Order, the regime used art as an instrument of ideological legitimation: works supporting the narratives of development and order were given space, while works considered critical were censored through a militarized arts bureaucracy.[2]

It was amid these repressive conditions that Teater Payung Hitam (TPH) was founded in Bandung in 1982 by Rachman Sabur with Nandi Rifandi, Sis Triadji, and Budi Sobar.[3] Unlike contemporary realist theater groups, TPH gradually developed an approach later known as "physical theater"—a move away from text-based drama toward physical exploration as the principal language of performance.[4] Michael H. Bodden notes that Bandung theater groups such as TPH developed a disjunctive, fragmented, and highly physical theatrical style to express alienation, the emptiness of official rhetoric, and suffering caused by social repression—an aesthetic strategy that simultaneously served as a survival tactic against state censorship.[5]

The move from Putu Wijaya's realist dramas in the 1980s toward full exploration of the body from the early 1990s did not happen at once. It resulted from a gradual search for form culminating in *Kaspar* (1994), an adaptation of Peter Handke's play regarded by observers as the most decisive turning point in the group's history.[6] The collapse of the New Order in May 1998 then opened a new chapter: the removal of powers to ban the press,[7] the dissolution of the Department of

[1] Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 563–570. Translated by Kenneth J. Northcott.

[2] Michael H. Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 245-248.

[3] Rachman Sabur (ed.), *Teater Payung Hitam, Perspektif Teater Modern Indonesia* (Bandung: Kelir, 2004), p. 15.

[4] Muhammad Komadri, "Kiprah Teater Payung Hitam dan Konsepsi Ketubuhannya," *Titian: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 7, no. 1 (June 2023): 216.

[5] Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage*, p. 246.

[6] Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 443–444.

[7] Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 70.

Information,[8] and Golkar's diminished hegemonic strength in the 1999 election[9] structurally changed the space for producing performing arts in Indonesia. Barbara Hatley notes that in the post-Reformasi climate of free expression, political commentary and criticism could be voiced openly without the shock or dramatic urgency they previously carried—a condition fundamentally different from the climate of repression in which TPH's aesthetic arose.[10]

Several earlier studies have discussed TPH from different angles. Joko Kurnain, in *Dialektika antara Realitas dan Idealitas Teater Payung Hitam* (2009) and his later article "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur" (2017), assembled the most comprehensive chronological documentation of the group's works, including a reading of *Kaspar* as a protest against silencing people's right to speak[11] and *Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam* as a critique of New Order election manipulation, subsequently readapted in the context of the "Black Saturday" events.[12] Muhammad Komadri (2023) analyzes TPH's conception of the body through Arnold Hauser's sociology of art,[13] while Bodden (2010) places TPH in the wider constellation of New Order resistance theater, in which modern Indonesian theater has often taken an antagonistic stance toward the state since its emergence.[14] Yet these studies generally stop at analysis of the New Order repertoire or discuss the Reformasi period separately without systematically connecting it to changing patterns of themes and strategies of critique across 1994–2010. Here lies the *research gap* this study seeks to fill: how did TPH's themes and strategies of critique change when the structural condition that gave rise to them—state repression—was no longer a prerequisite, and to what extent did those changes reflect continuity or discontinuity in the group's critical mission?

The article's novelty lies in a comparative, periodized reading of these changes through Hauser's dialectic of art and society. It does more than record a thematic shift from political repression toward identity, ecology, and historical memory; it shows that the same artistic devices—the body, polysemic symbols, space, and collaboration

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[8] Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 224.

[9] Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia, Hasil Pemilihan Umum Tahun 1999.

[10] Barbara Hatley, "Indonesian Theatre Ten Years after Reformasi," *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 1 (2008): 57–58.

[11] Joko Kurnain, *Dialektika antara Realitas dan Idealitas Teater Payung Hitam*, 1st printing (Bandung: Yayasan Teater Payung Hitam, 2009), p. 152.

[12] Joko Kurnain, *Dialektika antara Realitas dan Idealitas Teater Payung Hitam*, 1st printing (Bandung: Yayasan Teater Payung Hitam, 2009), p. 153.

[13] Muhammad Komadri, "Kiprah Teater Payung Hitam dan Konsepsi Ketubuhannya," *Titian: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 7, no. 1 (June 2023): 216.

[14] Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage*, p. 3.

across media—changed function from mechanisms for evading censorship into a freely chosen language of reflection. Accordingly, this study aims to describe TPH's themes and strategies of critique under the New Order (1994–1998) and analyze their changes in the Reformasi era (1999–2010), placing the findings within the sociology of art to show the dialectical relationship between the group's artistic development and the transformation of Indonesia's social and political structures.

The period 1994–2010 was not chosen arbitrarily. The year 1994 marks the staging of *Kaspar*, widely regarded as the full consolidation of TPH's "physical theater" identity and its work most explicitly representing the mechanisms of New Order indoctrination through the language of power. The year 2010 marks the last performance examined here, Genjer-Genjer, as documented in contemporary press photographs. These sixteen years cover the final phase of New Order repression and the first decade of Reformasi, allowing comparison across the political transition without claiming to cover the group's entire history from its founding in 1982 or subsequent developments.

Method

This research uses the critical historical method in four stages: heuristics, source criticism (external and internal), interpretation, and historiography.[15] The method was chosen because it focuses on systematically reconstructing past events and artistic processes from documentary traces that can be followed and cross-checked.

Heuristics. Sources were collected by examining performance documentation, press clippings, and published interviews. The sources fall into three categories. First are TPH scripts and introductory performance notes, including director Rachman Sabur's notes for *Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam*[16] and the introduction to *Dunia Tony*. Second are contemporary press clippings from national and local print media—*Kompas*, *Pikiran Rakyat*, *Tempo*, *Koran Tempo*, *Solopos*, *Suara Merdeka*, *Suara Pembaruan*, *Republika*, *Bandung Pos*, and *Surya*—which regularly covered and reviewed TPH performances during 1991–2010. Third is a published interview with Rachman Sabur, TPH's founder and principal director, in Tempo on 30 August 2015.[17] Secondary sources include various academic studies on TPH, particularly research and journal

[15] Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah*, ed. 2 (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2013), pp. 89–130.

[16] Rachman Sabur, Catatan Pengantar Pertunjukan Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam, Bandung: Teater Payung Hitam, 1996, cited in Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," p. 446.

[17] Rachman Sabur, "Teater Tubuh Lebih Fleksibel," interview, Tempo, 30 August 2015.

articles authored by Joko Kurnai,[18] and Muhammad Komadri's article[19]—and theoretical literature on Indonesian political theater, particularly Michael H. Bodden's *Resistance on the National Stage* (2010), which has a chapter on TPH titled "The Limits of 'Bahasa Indonesia' and Teater Payung Hitam's 'Theater of Pain'".

Source Criticism. External criticism focuses on the institutional authenticity of news sources: the print media cited were mainstream publications whose existence can be verified, while group documents (the notarial deed of Yayasan Payung Hitam and introductory performance notes) are institutional records preserved and cited in verified academic studies.[20] For published interviews and participants' statements, external criticism takes account of Rachman Sabur's position as both subject and object of study. As the group's director and founder, his account may be retrospective and constructive, so this study prioritizes cross-checking his statements against independent critics' reviews and contemporary press coverage as internal criticism. Internal criticism emphasizes consistency across sources: the chronology of key performances such as *Kaspar* (1994), *Masbret* (1994), and *Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam* (1996–1997) is checked across introductory performance notes, reviews in several newspapers, and Kurnain's study to confirm the consistency of performance dates, venues, and factual details. Where the available sources do not explicitly establish certainty—for example, a symbolic reading of the title *Anak Bapak Kapak* (1997) that is interpretive and lacks direct confirmation from the director—this study explicitly retains that caution rather than asserting a single fact.

Interpretation is the stage that integrates the collected chronological and thematic data, utilizing Arnold Hauser's sociology of art perspective as the primary theoretical framework guiding this study.[21] Hauser emphasizes that artworks respond not only to internal aesthetic conventions but also to the technological and institutional conditions and social-historical structures surrounding artistic production in their time.[22] The relationship is dialectical: changes in social structures encourage changes in artistic form and orientation, while art continues to perform a critical function toward the society that produces it.[23] This framework reads changes

[18] Joko Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 449–450.

[19] Muhammad Komadri, "Kiprah Teater Payung Hitam dan Konsepsi Ketubuhannya," *Titian: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 7, no. 1 (June 2023): 216.

[20] Helius Sjamsuddin, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2016), pp. 131–132.

[21] Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 563–570. Translated by Kenneth J. Northcott.

[22] Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 4–13.

[23] Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963), vi.

in TPH's themes and strategies of critique not as an independent shift in aesthetic preferences, but as an artistic response to the transformation of Indonesia's power structure from the authoritarian New Order to the climate of procedural democracy after Reformasi.

Historiography. The final stage arranges the collected and interpreted data into an analytical narrative organized by period and theme: from TPH's founding and aesthetic transition toward physical theater (1982–1994), through the mapping of New Order strategies and themes of critique (1994–1998) and structural change after Reformasi, to changes in TPH's themes and strategies of critique during 1999–2010.[24]

Result

Founding and Aesthetic Transition: From Realist Theater to Physical Theater (1982–1994)

Teater Payung Hitam was founded in Bandung in 1982 by four students of the Bandung Indonesian Academy of Dance (ASTI): Sis Triaji, Nandi Riffandi, Budi Sobar, and Rachman Sabur. The name "payung hitam" arose spontaneously, and the group officially used the name "Teater Payung Hitam" from 1998—the year of Reformasi—before acquiring legal status as Yayasan Payung Hitam through Notarial Deed No. 52 on 29 November 2007.[25] The group began with realist productions, including Putu Wijaya's Aduh; Rachman Sabur later directed other text-based works.[26]

In its first phase (1982–1990), TPH staged text-based realist dramas, beginning with an established dramaturgical tradition before moving into experiment. Seeds of change were already visible in *Tuhan dan Kami (1987)* and *Ritus Topeng Ritus* (1989), which began to rely on physical and ritual force rather than merely spoken dialogue.[27] Rachman Sabur's inclination as a lyrical poet who avoided a profusion of words also infused his theater: expressing inner complexity and protest against power without depending on words easily censored by the New Order regime.[28]

The year 1991 marked the second phase, beginning with TPH's first collaboration with visual artists and musicians in *Rupa Gerak Bunyi* and *Meta Teater*

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[24] Louis Gottschalk, *Mengerti Sejarah* (trans. Nugroho Notosusanto; Jakarta: UI Press, 1986), pp. 45–46.

[25] Yayasan Payung Hitam, Akta Notaris No. 52 dated 29 November 2007, cited in Sumbarsatu.com.

[26] Teater Payung Hitam, group profile, Kelola Database Seniman, https://kelola.or.id/database-seniman/teater-payung-hitam/.

[27] Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 445.

[28] Yayasan Kelola, "Teater Payung Hitam," Database Seniman Kelola, https://kelola.or.id/database-seniman/teater-payung-hitam/.

Dunia Tanpa Makna. These works opened theater beyond dramaturgical text into an intersection of movement, sound, and image. That same year TPH staged Samuel Beckett's *Menunggu Godot* after thirteen months of intensive rehearsals, [29] a performance received by critics as a production with "great intimacy." [30] The transition culminated in a third phase with *Kaspar* (September 1994) at the Sunan Ambu Arts Building, STSI Bandung—an adaptation of Peter Handke's play, treated not conventionally but reinterpreted as a rhetoric of the body: words gave way to groans, shrieks, breath, and explosive physical compositions. [31] *Kaspar*'s impact extended to invitations to perform at the Surabaya Arts Festival, the Bandung National Theater Festival (1996), Art Summit III in Jakarta, and the Laokon Festival in Hamburg, Germany. It also brought forward actor Tony Broer, later invited to join the Rin Ko Gun group in Japan in 2000.[32] This development culminated in *Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam* (1996–1997), a work that abandoned words altogether and was subsequently staged repeatedly, as many as six times in cities through 2015, including at Brisbane Powerhouse Art in Australia (2007).[33]

Teater Payung Hitam's Strategies of Critique in the New Order Era (1994–1998)

Analysis of TPH's repertoire and performance documentation during 1994–1998 reveals six interrelated artistic strategies developed in response to the New Order regime's repressive conditions.

First, the shift from verbal language to the language of the body. This was more than an aesthetic choice; it was a survival tactic. Actors' bodies spoke through groans, moans, explosive movement, and dramatic immobility—a performance vocabulary not easily censored.[34] F.X. Widaryanto notes that this process emerged organically from the discipline of daily rehearsal, forming the body as a political instrument ready to "speak" when the mouth could not.[35]

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[29] Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 447–448.

[30] Tornado, Anggiat. Menunggu yang Tak Kunjung Tiba. Harian Umum "Bandung Pos", Bandung, 26 July 1991, hlm. VIV.

[31] Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 443–444.

[32] Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 445.

[33] Kelola, "Teater Payung Hitam," Database Seniman, https://kelola.or.id/database-seniman/teater-payung-hitam/.

[34] 40 Tahun Teater Payung Hitam, "Dari Kata Menuju Tanpa Kata", Inspira TV, 7 Desember 2022.

[35] Halim H.D., performance review Kaspar, cited in Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 447.

Second, polysemic symbolism. TPH consistently used symbols open to several readings—stones, a perforated bucket, rusted metal, the color red—which appeared to censors as ordinary stage objects but became metaphors of violence and injustice for critical audiences. In his study of TPH, Muhammad Komadri explicitly applies Arnold Hauser's sociology of art to understand this approach, emphasizing that TPH's work responded directly to the institutional and social-historical conditions of Indonesia under the New Order.[36]

Third, appropriation of the world dramaturgical canon as both shield and weapon of critique. TPH used canonical plays—Beckett, Handke, Ionesco—whose recognized status could lend legitimacy to the performances, while choosing texts that resonated with Indonesian conditions.[37] *Menunggu Godot* (1991) was read as a metaphor for uncertain waiting under authoritarianism.[38] *Kaspar* (1994) offered an almost explicit parallel to the New Order's P4 indoctrination program: Handke presents language not as a means of self-expression but as an instrument of indoctrination, a mechanism depicting how Pancasila's Single Principle shaped obedient political subjects.[39] The adaptation of Eugène Ionesco's Macbett into Masbret (1994), meanwhile, raised themes of ambition and corruption in power that, in Indonesia after 1965, needed no further explanation for audiences to grasp their meaning.[40]

Fourth, physical intensity and an aesthetic of pain. In *Merah Bolong*, actors literally "tortured" their bodies on stage—striking stones against each other, repeatedly falling onto a bed of sharp rocks—suffering audiences could feel physically through empathy.[41] Rachman Sabur affirmed this principle in an interview with *Suara Merdeka* (1997): "the audience must be made to hurt so that they feel the pain of others."[42]

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[36] Muhammad Komadri, "Kiprah Teater Payung Hitam dan Konsepsi Ketubuhannya," *Titian: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 7, no. 1 (June 2023): 215–224.

[37] Joko Kurnain, *Teater Payung Hitam: Dialektika Antara Realitas dan Identitas* (Bandung: STSI Press, 2009).

[38] "Godot Tanpa Kata-Kata," Tempo, 3 Desember 2019; "Teater Payung Hitam Pentaskan Ulang Godot Menunggu di YouTube," Tempo, 12 November 2020.

[39] Liliane Gallet-Blanchard Knapp, "Peter Handke's Kaspar: The Mechanics of Language — A Fractionating Schizophrenic Theatrical Event," Semantics Scholar, 1990.

[40] Michael H. Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 3–4.

[41] Viriya Singgih, "Ada Sisifus dalam Merah Bolong," 17 August 2015, https://www.viriyasinggih.com/ada-sisifus-dalam-merah-bolong/.

[42] "Rachman Sabur: Penonton Teater Harus 'Disakiti'," Suara Merdeka, Sunday, 10 August 1997.

Fifth, collaboration across media with musicians, visual artists, and dancers. Besides enriching the language of performance, the involvement of artists from different fields also broadened the performance's expressive possibilities.

Sixth, consistent thematic boldness. In Kaspar, Masbret, and Merah Bolong, TPH addressed indoctrination, elite ambition, and structural suffering. The later work Dunia Tony (2004) illustrates how bodily exploration could also turn toward personal existential struggle: an artist searching for identity through his body and lived experience, depicted as "crawling, stumbling, staggering, walking, running… chasing the shadow of his own body." This sequence of movement was not merely physical activity but a metaphor for an unfinished search for self—a critique less direct than *Kaspar*, but present through reflection on modern humanity's alienation from itself amid changing social conditions.[43]

In the early Reformasi period, Etalase Tubuh yang Sakit (2002) built its critique entirely through the body, space, and visual symbols, without relying on an adaptation of a world play. Four actors sat holding empty frames like display windows while large human faces were projected in the background—a composition evoking individuals under constant surveillance and deprived of the freedom to define themselves.[44] Rachman Sabur said the performance arose because "this nation's people are suffering an acute illness," making the body more than the actor's biological entity: it became a metaphor for the Indonesian nation's social body amid a continuing multidimensional crisis. Earlier, Harian Solopos had called Kata Kita Mati (1998)[45] a "reconstruction of the political situation in the country," a work consciously representing the national political crisis artistically. Its title itself symbolized the death of the authority of New Order language during the political transition. Together with Dunia Tony, these works show that TPH's physical strategy developed into an independent artistic language[46] able to address both personal existential questions and a political and humanitarian crisis on a national scale, while retaining the body as its principal medium.

This thematic boldness continued across the political transition: TPH addressed elite corruption in Masbret, repression and indoctrination in Kaspar, and the people's structural suffering in Merah Bolong; its later DOM (2000) addressed military violence.According to Michael H. Bodden, this practice was a key feature of New

[43] Joko Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur," *Katarsis: Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Teater* 4, no. 1 (2017): 443–452.

[44] "Visualisasikan Bangsa yang Sakit," *Surya*, 26 October 2002.

[45] Michael H. Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 3–7.

[46] Solopos, "Katakitamati, Rekonstruksi Situasi Politik di Tanah Air," *Solopos*, 4 November 1998.

Order alternative theater: using artistic language as a means of critique while maintaining room for expression amid strict political constraints.[47]

Table 1 summarizes five representative TPH works from the late New Order and 1998 transition, with their strategies and targets of critique.

Table 1. Representative Works of Teater Payung Hitam in the Late New Order and 1998 Transition (1994–1998)

Work (Year)	Source/Canon	Target of Critique	Main Strategy
Kaspar (1994)	Peter Handke	State language as a tool of indoctrination (P4, Single Principle)	Appropriation of the canon; nonverbal physical theater
Masbret (1994)	Eugène Ionesco (after Shakespeare)	Ambition and corruption among ruling elites	Appropriation of the canon; absurdism
Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam (1996–1997)	Original work (without a script)	Structural violence and the people's suffering	Physical intensity; polysemic symbolism
Anak Bapak Kapak (1997)	Peter Handke adaptation	Paternalistic structures of power relations	Domestic symbolism; repetitive gestures
Kata Kita Mati (1998)	Original work	Delegitimation of the language of power during the 1998 political transition	Spatial composition; failure of language

As a concrete illustration of physical intensity and the aesthetic of pain, Figure 1 presents documentation of a *Merah Bolong* performance. It shows the composition of actors' bodies and bamboo props framing them like a cage—read here as a visualization of structural pressure at the heart of the work's critique.

[47] Michael H. Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 4–8, 174–182.



Figure 1. Documentation of Teater Payung Hitam's Merah Bolong performance, showing the actors' physical intensity within bamboo props interpreted here as structural pressure. Source: TPH performance documentation, cited in Kurnain, "Teater Payung Hitam Bandung & Rachman Sabur."

Structural Change after Reformasi and the Space for Freedom of Expression

Soeharto's fall on 21 May 1998 was followed by structural changes that directly affected the production of art. Information Minister Yunus Yosfiah revoked Information Minister Regulation No. 01/1984, which had authorized unilateral revocation of press publishing licenses (SIUPP), replacing it with a mechanism that sent licensing disputes to the courts,[48] later affirmed by Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press.[49] The Department of Information—the New Order's principal instrument of information control—was dissolved in the early Reformasi transition.[50] In electoral

[48] Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 70.

[49] Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 40 Tahun 1999 tentang Pers, Article 2.

[50] Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 224.

politics, Golkar fell sharply in the 1999 election, winning only 22.44 percent of the vote and dropping to second place behind PDI Perjuangan.[51]

Nevertheless, these changes did not immediately produce substantive democratization. Robison and Hadiz argue that the central dynamic of post-Soeharto politics was the reorganization of predatory power relations inherited from the New Order within the new party, parliamentary, and electoral systems—not the wholesale replacement of ruling elites.[52] This critical qualification matters to the study's framework: post-Reformasi freedom of expression was procedural and formal, and did not in itself guarantee that the power structures targeted by TPH's New Order critique had vanished completely.

Shifts in Teater Payung Hitam's Themes of Critique after Reformasi (1999–2010)

Disillusionment with Reformasi's Outcomes and Critique of New Elites (1999–2002). In the first years after Reformasi, TPH occupied a paradoxical position: the regime it had criticized had fallen, yet social reality did not immediately change. State violence assumed new forms, while corruption changed faces without changing substance. *Bersama Tengkorak (2001) was among TPH's early post-Soeharto works,* with the skull signifying death and a collective memory that the New Order's victims were still demanding justice.[53] DOM: Dan Orang Mati (2000) also developed the theme through a homophonic play: "DOM" referred to Aceh's Military Operations Area, associated with civilian suffering, while also signifying death in certain local traditions.[54] Koran Tempo described *Bersama Tengkorak* as a work that "broke through verbalism." TPH remained faithful to its nonverbal aesthetic, as a sustained artistic choice in a less restrictive political setting.[55]

Identity, the Body, and Personal Existentialism (2002–2005). After a decade of shaping social and political critique in a collective frame, TPH moved toward personal and existential dimensions—broadening the field of critique from the social body (people oppressed by structures) to the individual body (a person who loses the self amid the disorder of post-Reformasi modernity). *Blackmoon (2005)* marked this shift, moving from "who is the oppressive ruler?" to "where does the human being belong

[51] Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia, Hasil Pemilihan Umum Tahun 1999.

[52] Richard Robison and Vedi R. Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 223-224.

[53] Fathul A. Husein, "Kaspar Menjadi Orgi," Pikiran Rakyat, Lembaran Khusus Seni dan Budaya, Tuesday, 3 Desember 1996.

[54] Kompas, "DOM dan Orang Mati," Thursday, 31 August 2000 (performance documentation photograph in "Gedung Kesenian Jakarta International Festival 2000").

[55] "Mendobrak Verbalisme: Pentas Bersama Tengkorak Teater Payung Hitam," Koran Tempo, Monday, 16 July 2001.

in a collapsed order?"[56] Rachman Sabur said in an interview with *Tempo* (2015): "We used stones before… and now the human body is what rolls. That is what we seek… a body truly alive, a body truly present."[57]

Ecology and the Nation (2005–2009). TPH then turned toward ecosystem destruction, beginning with *Putih Bolong* (2005), which "began from concern and an idea about environmental theater"—an expression appearing explicitly for the first time in press reports on TPH.[58] *Batu, Tanah, Air* (2006) became its most comprehensive ecological manifesto: Rachman Sabur collected stage materials from the Cikapundung River over four months, an artistic labor that was also ecological documentation.[59] *Tubuh Tanah Air* (2009) synthesized this period, carrying three meanings at once: the body as theatrical medium, the homeland as an ecological entity, and the homeland as a synonym for the nation—a statement that the condition of Indonesian bodies cannot be separated from the condition of their land.

The Courage to Expose Historical Taboos. Of all its post-Reformasi works, *Genjer-Genjer (2010)* is the most historically and politically significant—a work engaging a subject heavily stigmatized under the New Order. The New Order had banned Muhammad Arief's song "Genjer-Genjer" for more than three decades because of its association with the events of 1965 and the stigmatization of Gerwani. At the Bandung Theater Meeting (2010), audiences were greeted by repeated playback of the song—a provocation of memory directly awakening historical associations forced into silence under the New Order.[60] On stage, the image of a five-meter-tall headless figure in military uniform dragging a bundle of bones left little interpretive room beyond state violence and impunity. The staging can be read as an invitation to confront a history of violence and impunity.[61] Figure 2 documents a scene from this performance.

[56] "Black Moon, Ritual Kebersamaan di Bawah Kuasa Semesta Raya," Kompas, Sunday, 10 April 2005, p. 18.

[57] Rachman Sabur, "Teater Tubuh Lebih Fleksibel" interview, Tempo, 30 August 2015.

[58] "Putih Bolong Rachman Sabur," Bandung, Saturday (Manis), 10 Desember 2005, p. 26.

[59] "Kekuatan Tubuh Media Ekspresi Ide dan Gagasan," Kompas, Friday, 26 March 2010.

[60] "Sebuah adegan dalam lakon 'Genjer-Genjer' produksi Teater Payung Hitam," Pikiran Rakyat, Sunday (Wage), 25 July 2010 (performance photograph caption in Pertemuan Teater Bandung, GK Sunan Ambu STSI, 15–17 July 2010).

[61] Photograph by ANTARA/Agus Bebeng, "Gendjer-Gendjer: Kelompok Teater Payung Hitam, Pertemuan Teater Bandung, STSI Bandung," Antara Photo, 16 July 2010.



Figure 2. Scene from Teater Payung Hitam's Genjer-Genjer performance, Bandung Theater Meeting, Sunan Ambu Arts Building, STSI Bandung, 15–17 July 2010. Source: ANTARA/Agus Bebeng photograph, cited in Pikiran Rakyat, 25 July 2010.

Broadly, TPH's post-Reformasi themes moved from one main focus—New Order repression—to several concurrent issues: disappointment with Reformasi's outcomes, identity and personal existence, the environment, and the courage to reopen long-suppressed history. These new issues did not replace TPH's earlier critical commitment, but widened its scope. What changed were the targets of critique and how openly they could be addressed, while the principal media—the body, symbolic objects such as stones and water, and an audience invited into critical dialogue—remained.

Changes in Strategies of Critique (1994–2010)

Where thematic change appears in the issues raised, change in TPH's strategies of critique appears in how the group communicates ideas to audiences. Under the New Order, its strategies were shaped by the need to conceal messages from censors: the language of performance relied on symbols, metaphors, and bodily gestures to convey criticism indirectly. After Reformasi, political openness did not automatically lead TPH to explicit dialogue. The group retained visual language as its artistic identity, but symbols and the body developed from tools of concealment into media

for reflecting on more complex human problems. This strategic change is therefore better understood as a reinterpretation of devices already central to the group's identity than as a wholesale shift in aesthetic paradigm.

Discussion

The findings in the Result section show a pattern that at first glance seems an ordinary change in aesthetic preference: from concealed allegory to more open themes, and from a single focus on state repression to a plurality of issues involving identity, ecology, and historical memory. Placed within Arnold Hauser's sociology of art, however, this change can be understood more precisely as a consequence of the dialectical relationship between artistic form and the surrounding social structure.[62] Hauser maintains that art does not arise as a self-contained individual expression but belongs to the totality of social life, so changes in artistic form cannot be separated from changes in the historical realities of the society producing it.[63] From this perspective, TPH's nonverbal New Order strategies—the body, polysemic symbols, and appropriation of the canon—can be read partly as artistic responses to repressive conditions that constrained direct verbal expression.

The first analytical point is that changes in TPH's themes and strategies cannot be reduced to a single cause. They resulted from the interaction of four factors: changes to political structures and the space for expression after 1998; emerging post-Reformasi social problems (identity conflict, environmental damage, challenges of globalization) displacing the dominance of state repression; the development of Rachman Sabur's own artistic thinking as a director continuing to explore the possibilities of bodily language;[64] and wider dynamics in contemporary Indonesian theater, which was also moving toward post-realist experimentation at the same time.[65] These four factors worked together, placing TPH not as a group passively responding to regime change, but as an artistic agent actively negotiating its position in a changing social field.

The second point, and this article's main analytical contribution, is a reading of continuity beneath those changes. Although the targets and directness of TPH's critique changed significantly between the two eras, its basic artistic devices—the body as the center of meaning-making, material symbols such as stones and water,

[62] Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963), vi.

[63] Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History*, 253-276.

[64] Rahman Sabur, Berbagi Rasa Perih, Tempo, 2002.

[65] Muhammad Febriansyah, "Performing Arts and Politics in New Order Indonesia: Compromise and Resistance," SOAS Working Papers, pp. 21–28.

and stage space as a field of visual composition—were never abandoned.[66] Their function changed: under the New Order, the body and symbols could convey critique indirectly under censorship; under Reformasi, the same devices remained media of reflection in a less restrictive setting. This shift in function without a change in form, in Hauser's terms, reflects the way art "absorbs" social structural change into established artistic forms rather than creating a new form from scratch whenever the context changes.[67]

A comparison between Kaspar (1994) and *Genjer-Genjer* (2010) provides a strong illustration of that argument. Both criticize structural violence by state power, and both use the body as the principal medium. But *Kaspar* still concealed its critique behind Peter Handke's canonical play—a canonical frame that could offer a measure of legitimacy—[68]whereas *Genjer-Genjer* could evoke the stigmatized memory of 1965 more openly.[69] This difference in directness accords with Indonesia's own change from an authoritarian state toward a democracy that, as Robison and Hadiz remind us, has not entirely escaped the New Order's predatory power relations.[70] *Genjer-Genjer*'s significance therefore lies not only in its courage to name the taboo, but in how it separates art from an imposed political stigma. The act can be read as a deconstruction of cultural memory that aesthetically inherits TPH's tradition of making art a space for exposing what is hidden, but now operates without a cloak of allegory.

The place of these findings in Indonesian theater historiography also needs to be emphasized. Bodden situates TPH within a body of New Order alternative theater that deliberately developed a nonverbal artistic language in response to political restrictions, a "theater of pain" whose force lay precisely in indirectness.[71] This study extends Bodden's framework by showing that such "indirectness" was not a permanent attribute of TPH, but a condition specific to 1994–1998, and that subsequent changes did not erase TPH's artistic identity but affirmed its functional flexibility. The study thus also adds nuance to literature that tends to read New Order

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[66] George R. Kernodle, *Invitation to the Theatre* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 35–38.

[67] Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 4–13.

[68] Michael H. Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 3–4.

[69] "Sebuah adegan dalam lakon 'Genjer-Genjer' produksi Teater Payung Hitam," Pikiran Rakyat, Sunday (Wage), 25 July 2010 (performance photograph caption in Pertemuan Teater Bandung, GK Sunan Ambu STSI, 15–17 July 2010).

[70] Richard Robison and Vedi R. Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 223-224.

[71] Michael H. Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 22–54, 273–309.

alternative theater solely as a phenomenon of repression and resistance ending with the regime that produced it. TPH shows that artistic strategies born of repression can become an independent aesthetic language relevant under an entirely different political regime.

The study's novelty lies in a systematic, periodized mapping of continuity beneath change: a summary of New Order themes (state repression, the Armed Forces' dual function, language as a disciplinary instrument) that later differentiated into four post-Reformasi thematic currents (disillusionment with new elites in 1999–2002; identity and personal existentialism in 2002–2005; ecology and the nation in 2005–2009; and the courage to expose historical taboos). Such a map has not been explicitly available in earlier studies, which tend to treat TPH's repertoire episodically without linking it to the logic of structural periodization. As noted in discussion of *Kaspar*'s reception, the work "remains open and relevant to Indonesia's social and political situation" before and after Reformasi.[72] In light of this study's findings, that statement is not simply a claim that the work is universal, but empirical evidence of the endurance of TPH's artistic structure across different regimes.

The causal relationships among the four factors described above require clarification rather than being read as a list of causes of equal standing. Political structural change was the precondition that opened possibilities for the other three factors to operate. The loosening of state media controls and centralized censorship expanded the space in which new social problems, Rachman Sabur's artistic exploration, and wider developments in contemporary Indonesian theater could appear openly. Yet this structural precondition was not deterministic: it opened space without deciding what critique would occupy it. Here the internal factor, the development of Rachman Sabur's artistic thinking, played a decisive role. TPH's decision to retain the body as its principal medium rather than turn to verbal dialogue now free from censorship shows that its aesthetic choices were not simply reactions to structural change, but products of an artistic vision consistently built since *Kaspar*. In other words, political openness after 1998 explains why TPH could address more diverse and explicit themes, but not why the body remained its principal language. That second question can be answered only by attending to the continuity of the group's internal artistic vision, consistent with Hauser's view that social structures open or close possibilities of expression but never fully determine the forms artists choose within them.[73]

[72] Primastuti Handayani, "Kaspar a Satire on Current Affairs," *The Jakarta Post*, 9 January 2001.

[73] Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 4–13.

Conclusion

This study shows that changes in Teater Payung Hitam's themes and strategies of critique during 1994–2010 formed a process of dialectical adaptation between the group's artistic development and the transformation of Indonesia's social and political structures, not a self-contained shift in aesthetic preference. Under the New Order (1994–1998), TPH developed six interrelated artistic strategies—the shift to bodily language, polysemic symbolism, appropriation of the world dramaturgical canon, physical intensity and the aesthetic of pain, collaboration across media, and consistent thematic boldness—to convey criticism under censorship, as seen in *Kaspar*, *Masbret*, and *Merah Bolong Putih Doblong Hitam*. As controls over expression loosened after 1998, its themes differentiated into four concurrent currents: disillusionment with new post-Reformasi elites, identity and personal existentialism, ecology and the nation, and the courage to expose the taboo history of 1965 in *Genjer-Genjer*.

Through Arnold Hauser's sociology of art, the study argues that these changes reflect a dialectical relationship between artistic form and social structure. The nonverbal strategies that served as mechanisms for evading censorship under the New Order became freely chosen languages of critical reflection in the Reformasi era, while their basic artistic devices (body, material symbols, spatial composition) were never abandoned. The article's principal contributions are twofold: a systematic periodized account of post-Reformasi changes in TPH's themes, not explicitly available in previous studies, and a reading of structural continuity beneath thematic change. TPH's cultural resilience rested not on avoiding confrontation with power, but on its ability to change the terrain and function of that confrontation according to historical context. The study's novelty lies in finding that the fundamental difference between the two eras' critical strategies was not the artistic devices employed, but their function: from defensive concealment to an autonomous language of reflection. This change in function explains why TPH remained recognizable as a consistent "physical theater" group even as its themes and the directness of its critique changed markedly over sixteen years.

This study has limitations that should be stated candidly. Some symbolic readings of particular works, such as interpreting the title *Anak Bapak Kapak (1997) as a critique of paternal ideology*, are interpretive and have not been explicitly confirmed by their director or playwright. They therefore require further verification through additional interviews or fuller examination of production archives. Future studies should examine TPH video archives and scripts from the 2010s that are poorly documented in press clippings, and extend comparison to other physical theater groups in Indonesia to test whether the pattern found here—a shift in function without a change in form—is common to post-authoritarian Indonesian alternative

theater or specific to the artistic trajectory of Rachman Sabur and Teater Payung Hitam.

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