

Indonesian Sign Language-Based Approach in Creating Dance Theatre for The Deaf Performers

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Abstract

The human body is the main material for manifesting the hidden message into visual codes or signs. Non-verbal signs are presented in a representational, semi-representational, or non-representational (symbolic) way. Using mostly the arms, hands, head, and face, the Deaf delivers the message representationally. When the Deaf dances, however, he can have his own sensitivity related to sign language, in addition to his special features, namely that they are used to seeing and experiencing the inner rhythm. My research is during the process in training dance theatre for the Deaf youth at Yayasan Tunarungu Hellen Wimberty Gorontalo. Along with the offer to make a film located in Gorontalo, we felt the need to prepare the Deaf youth with basic acting competence. The imperative is to attempt the form of dance theatre both for the sake of an immediate filming, and for the learning project in a longer period. Referring to the experiences of Stephanie Lim, Harlan Lane, and Mel Drake in conducting dance and drama performance for the Deaf, I collaborate the dance practice and basic acting techniques with Indonesian Sign Language or Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO). A short movie has pragmatically produced while the main purpose is to contribute to the ideals of inclusive education for Indonesian Deaf students. With the knowledge and skills of art, it is hoped that later the talented Deaf youths themselves can be the agent of humanistic nature of the arts.

Keywords

dance theatre, deaf, Indonesian Sign Language, basic acting

Introduction

The language of dance is presented through the human body (dancer) which moves in and with a specific rhythm, tempo and space. The dance body is the main material for manifesting every hidden message into codes that can be read and captured visually. Most of the body parts that are active in presenting these codes are the arms, hands, torso, legs, head and face. Codes can also be presented in a representational, semi-representational or non-representational (symbolic) way. Representational codes are the most obvious for conveying messages, so they often resemble replicas and imitate significant forms. No matter how high its representational nature is, dance will not convey it as it is, but always presents it in its aesthetic aspect: stylisation, and its dynamic depiction in space, time and energy (dynamic image). I then adhere my intuition

to assume that the most significant form of representational codes is sign language for the Deaf, although its manifestation is very dependent on common verbal language in each place.

Deaf performers can have their own sensitivity regarding sign language which is their main means of communication. Deaf people have a special privilege, namely that they are used to seeing and experiencing the true rhythms of the world, not rhythms resulting from worldly creations. So, they usually excel at dancing and can surpass other people (Younghans, 2022). In dance, although human vocals are also used to strengthen representation, their presence is not to convey complete words or sentences. Vocals in dance are more of an aural component that accompanies movement sentences in sequences or are more often used with musical instruments as part of the musical accompaniment to dance. Therefore, in general, a dance work does not require the presence of vocals. Dance is more "talking" using body language by presenting significant forms, symbols and codes.

I suspect that the power of symbolic language in dance can be maximized by deaf dancers/performers who have experienced sign language from a very young age. This was also a consideration for Ellen Podungge, founder of the Sanggar Belajar Tunarungu Helen Wimberty Gorontalo (2007), to plan movement-based arts training for the children and youth in her care. Ellen Podungge hopes that in the future the talented Deaf in her foundation will be able to perform dramas and dances that have been specially prepared for them. By learning to dance, practicing drama, and finally performing it in front of a wide audience, deaf peoples' self-confidence can increase, as well as introducing the public to the work and creativity of Gorontalo's disabled people. Through this, it is also hoped that motivation will increase for Deaf's parents to participate in developing their children's talent interests in the arts (Ivan, 2021).

In December 2022, the Sanggar Belajar Tunarungu Helen Wimberty Gorontalo has become the Yayasan Tunarungu Helen Wimberty Gorontalo (HWG), so that its activities can cover a wider area up to the national level. In March 2023, this Foundation facilitated free training of Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) for deaf people (Sako, 2023). In early 2023, the Foundation received an offer to be involved in making a film located in Gorontalo, with the main theme about the hopes and achievements of deaf people. For Ellen, a movie, whatever short it is, at this moment is more promising to HWG's members rather than dance and drama in terms of the efforts to quickly socialise inclusion programs. To answer this challenge, the HWG needs fairly comprehensive training related to acting. Even though there was dance training in 2021, it has not been carried out as a routine, which has resulted in the HWG members not being prepared to convey the skills and competencies in the field of acting.

Acting or what Suyatna Anirun calls the art of act (*seni peran*), capitalises on skills and the channeling of creativity through the human body and soul. To be able to play a role well, a prospective actor must carry out the basic acting training which formally consists of bodily work, vocal work and spiritual (soul) work, which in practice is united by imagination (Anirun, 1998: 4; 151). Therefore, I try to help prepare the young members of the HWG with practical basic acting training. As a consequence, I had to give up the presence of the dance theater aspect in the implementation of this training, which was limited to basic movement training in order to achieve body flexibility and fluidity when playing a role. This research must ultimately solve the problem of how far the movement-based arts training process which relies on non-verbal language in both narration and communication can produce a short film project with a deaf person as the actor. Hypothetically, because vocal is an absent part for deaf actors, body and facial expressions

should be optimised through the intensity of sign language "pronunciation" in dialogues. Acting training can be carried out by collaborating basic dance practice with dramaturgy, which is the preparation stage for the film project being offered.

The semi-documentary short film script was prepared by Budi Sumarno, the Chair of Gerkatina (Gerakan untuk Kesejahteraan Tunarungu Indonesia) Jakarta, entitled "Mimpi Yang Menginspirasi". The actors are deaf teenagers, members of the HWG, and sign language teachers at the HWG, to optimising Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) both as a means of communication with deaf people and as a conveyor for the meaning of the film's narrative. By presenting BISINDO as the only communication media in articulating dialogues, the film "Mimpi Yang Menginspirasi" can contribute to efforts a good inclusive environment in Indonesia, especially in Gorontalo.

Literature Review

I use the notes and writings of Stephanie Lim, Harlan Lane, and Mel Drake for their experiences in conducting dance and drama for the Deaf performers. From them I saw several strategies and approaches that were different but had some general similarities, especially those related to sympathetic but firm ways of dealing with deaf people. What is also very important is how I can motivate them so that their hidden talents can be discovered and used to strengthen their expression.

Based on simple acting techniques, training is carried out based on a dance theater model that optimizes the use of non-verbal language. Dance theater is a modern choreographic concept that was first introduced by Judson Dance Theater in America, as an experimental project by individual dancers - choreographers who dismantle dance traditions. Yvonne Rainer created No Manifesto which is basically the antithesis of the standard classical ballet performance, which says,

No to spectacle, no to virtuosity, no to transformations and magic and make-believe, no to glamour and transcendency of the star image, no to the heroic, no to the anti-heroic, no to trash imagery, no to involvement of performer or spectator, no to style, no to camp, no to seductions of spectator by the wiles of the performer, no to eccentricity, no to moving or being moved.

(Anderson, 2010: 63).

Dance theater basically involves dramaturgical aspects in the creative process so that it contains elements of acting and representational gestures, or theater/drama that minimizes verbal speech and presents more narrative in composition and movement design (choreography). According to Bojana Bauer, 'Important implications for dramaturgical practice are the deeper involvement of dancers in the process of creation; dancers are invited to create material and thus to share part of the conceptual and dramaturgical responsibility within a given creation' (Bauer, 2015:39-40). With dance theater knowledge and skills, deaf people can possess the basic elements of acting, which in turn can also grow their self-confidence as creative people. By mastering the basics of acting, the deaf are able to appreciate the script or narrative of the film they are studying, as well as control their attitude when shooting according to the role they are playing.

Dance theater training at Hellen Wimberty optimizes the use of Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO), both as training material and as a communication system between I and training

participants. Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) is a sign language commonly used by deaf people to communicate both with fellow deaf people and with people in the surrounding environment (local level). BISINDO complements the existence of the Indonesian Sign Language System (SIBI), which is the standard language as a communication medium for the wider deaf community (or national level). Compared to SIBI, BISINDO is more local because the codes used are a development of SIBI by adopting general terminology and gestures that have developed in Gorontalo society. BISINDO therefore has rich and varied codes and signs that arise from the use of both hands, ten fingers, both arms, and gestures involving the head and torso, to convey both letters, words, and general terms (Imaduddin, 2022).

Methods

The dance theater training program is planned to be implemented within three effective months, with a total of twelve meetings (once a week). In the process, however, we had to apply additional meetings to adjust the needs for reading film scripts and assistance when shooting scenes. It is estimated that the activities will take place from May to July 2023. The dance theater training material is prioritised on conveying the basics of acting, including bodywork and facial expressions to support the articulation of Indonesian Sign Language. In real, the research took longer than planned, became around 6 (six) months with the numbers of uncountable meetings due to inconsistency of the activity times, which could not be determined on scheduled days and times. The implementation of training activities is truly effective in July 2023 and would have only be completed in mid-September 2023.

As an artistic-based research, data is collected from the facts and phenomena that occur during the training, which is carried out in several stages. The core implementation stages are as follows:

- a. Selecting a short film script written by an inclusive film script writer from Jakarta, Budi Sumarno, with the title "Mimpi Yang Menginspirasi";
- b. Modifying and developing several dialogues and scenes in the film script for the benefit of more and varied involvement of HWG members;
- c. Introductory stage of the activity program for selected participants recommended by the HWG founder with several considerations regarding suitability to the film script;
- d. Determine the main actors, supporting actors, additional actors and extras;
- e. Delivery of basic dance theater movement material for flexibility and flexibility of performance through demonstration and imitation of sign language (BISINDO) part by part according to the dialogue of each role;
- f. Direction to practice memorizing dialogues using BISINDO, as well as instruction in appreciation and imagination techniques to be trained independently at home;
- g. Assistance to participants to understand the substance of the story and message in the film script;
- h. Determination of house production for scene recording and film editing process; and finally
- i. Determining the place of activities described in several locations

Results and Discussion

Dance theater training at Hellen Wimberty, which optimises the use of Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO), is carried out within slightly different goals from the original. Training

preparations that are guided by the creative stages of managing body movements for deaf people must be postponed for another, more appropriate opportunity. The quality of dance theater that is trained does not correspond to the ideal of dance theater theorised by Kurt Joos, Pina Bausch, and Yvonne Reiner. The training also falls short of what Harlan Lane and Stephanie Lim believe is a form of performing arts that will optimize the non-verbal communication abilities of deaf people.

However, the basic elements of dance theater can still be taken, reduced and adapted for more practical purposes in preparing deaf people at Hellen Wimberty to play characters in the short film entitled "Mimpi Yang Menginspirasi" by Budi Sumarno. BISINDO plays a very important role, both as training material and as dialogue media in the films, as well as as a communication system between me and the research participants. The concept of implementing the training is to prepare the participants with basic provisions for acting in short films, and not to push the demand of perfection and idealisation both for the process and the results. The limited time and energy that participants can provide for practicing, naturally caused the training must be implemented to produce emergent (instant) acting skills.

"Mimpi Yang Menginspirasi" is a short film script written as an effort to socialise an inclusive environment. The script had to be developed slightly to accommodate the involvement of more varied HWG members. Therefore, with the approval of the founder of Hellen Wimberty, Ellen Podungge, I added several scenes and characters without changing the substance of the original story. The actors are deaf teenagers, members of the HWG, and its sign language teachers. The involvement of several non-deaf sign language teachers is also crucial to bridge communication in the whole program, as well as to optimise BISINDO's clarity in the movies's dialogues.

Some of the participants had previous dancing experience, namely new dance creations from the Gorontalo area, which were mastered in order to take part in competitions and festivals. Some of them have never received practical dance material from Arts and Culture subjects. Both those who have studied dance and those who have never had any, do not know any specific knowledge or training regarding dance theater or movement for acting. Therefore, the participants' ability to grasp technical material and text structure was very slow. On the other hand, time constraints resulting from school hours and other routine agendas are reinforced by the limited access for deaf people to attend training according to schedule without coordinating first with their parents or tutors. Considering this, I decided to involve two active BISINDO trainers at the foundation to help me in communicating to the Deaf, Abd. Kadir Umar (deaf and works at Kominfo) and Ainun Utina (non-deaf and works as a translator at TVRI).

Even though the gestures and movements are not significant enough, there is a logical structure in the film script which can be manifested through non-verbal language, sign language, and body and facial expressions. The basic acting materials that are trained are reading, self-control or cultivating awareness, returning to oneself (constructive thinking), cultivating motivation in attitude and movement, carrying a role, and performing a role (in front of the camera) (Anirun, 1998:179-180). Dialogue is articulated through Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO), and this must be presented as flexibly as possible by training participants, so that the intent and message in each dialogue is well achieved. As a result of dance theater construction is the basic material for acting, namely reading, self-control or processing awareness, returning to oneself (constructive thinking), processing motivation in attitude and movement, carrying a role, and performing a role. At the 7th and 8th meetings, shooting or recording of scenes was carried out. The movie was then edited

by my young colleague from prodi Ilmu Komunikasi Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, Wira Pratama Rumambie.

The manifestation of emergent basic acting training for the Deaf does not significantly show the form of an ideal movie. It is not surprising, though, since I am aware of any consequences to deal with such “new world” – new for me as a non deaf researcher, and new for them as the Deaf to learn acting. According to Suyatna Anirun, filmmaking itself is more of a technical work process by taking pictures piece by piece or shoot by shoot with a camera where the main control is not the acting technique but the director and editing work. In shooting, actors have to deliver dialogue and behavior in pieces, and are often repeated if the angle or lighting is considered less than optimal, or there are things that are not in accordance with the director's wishes. The director detailed every step, gesture, business act and actor's response. An actor's play is not contained in a complete staging production, in which a dramatic progression of behavior is developed in his delivery of a script (Anirun, 1998: 5-6). Various problems that arise during the training process are challenges that are worth discussing.

The first problem actually came from me, who - because of my inability to sign language – had created a communication gap with deaf people. This communication gap was really felt when I started having to direct their expression and appreciation of the role they were playing. My very limited sign language is unable to explain abstract things related to imagination and techniques for providing content. Fortunately, I immediately realised this weakness and reflected on it, by first following the rhythm of the social interactions of these deaf people. The aim is for my presence to gradually become familiar to all members of HWG. The next thing is to give up your time and energy to continue preparing yourself to study BISINDO. Therefore, this training activity actually gave me new experience and knowledge that can be developed into areas of further research work.

The second challenge is the thinking paradigm of deaf people themselves, which in fact is still influenced by cultural stereotypes in Gorontalo, which position them as "a lonely" people who must be helped instantly, not to have their desires and aspirations understood. Of course, the goal of an inclusive environment is not to force deaf people to do whatever non-deaf people do. Therefore, anyone who is associated with deafness should shift their comfortable position as a "normal" human being into a more active approach in embracing the "silent world" of deaf people. Following Harlan Lane's notes (Lane et al., 1996:),

The rapidly growing body of linguistic and cultural knowledge about Deaf people has lacked a coherent and comprehensive presentation to the many interested parties: professionals in diverse fields (including audiology; speech-language pathology; medicine; education; school, rehabilitation and mental health counseling; psychology; interpreting; American Sign Language and Deaf studies), as well as concerned lay people, such as parents of Deaf children, and Deaf people themselves. A Journey into the DEAF–WORLD seeks to fill this need and, in so doing, to contribute to reducing the gap between professional perceptions of Deaf people and Deaf people's perception of themselves.

Deaf people unconsciously fall into the circle of cared for stereotypes, suppressing non-material aspects and prioritising to fulfill more practical physical and material needs. Dance theater training does not promise to fulfill material (also financial) needs directly and instantaneously, so that the

absence is considered not to harm anyone. So together with Ellen Podungge, I set the final goal of the training by turning it into a short film entitled "Inspiring Dreams". At least, with a goal that offers deaf people the opportunity to become actors, there is motivation that can be built more concretely.

Conclusion

In conclusion, dance theater using BISINDO has not been successfully created. It is likely that this work will be deferred to future research, but with additional non-deaf participant research subjects involved. Meanwhile, the unpreparedness of this research participant to apply BISINDO for dialogues in scenes, the difficulty of memorising and understanding the contents of the script, coupled with the rushed duration of attendance, prompted me to maneuver using emergency methods. The training method that is applied directly during scene recording is the "drilling" method where the BISINDO trainer (Arif) trains the actors to "say" the dialogue over and over again (Figure 1). When the Deaf's ability to concentrate started to become less supportive, while second by second the time continued to shrink, the "mirroring" method was used with Arif standing facing the actor to guide him through the dialogues in BISINDO during the camera *action* (Figure 2).



Figure 1. The "drilling" method in pre-rehearsal for the BISINDO dialog preparation (Doc. Sitharesmi, Gorontalo, 2023)



Figure 2. The "mirroring" method was providing during the camera action (Doc. Sitharesmi, Gorontalo, 2023)

At least, a short film has been successfully made, and can be used as compensation for a dance theater that failed to be created. Moreover, after following the artistic research process, both training in basic aspects of acting in the studio and the process of recording scenes in several outdoor locations, my research participants gained an increase in the skills (hard skills) and knowledge (cognitive/soft skills) aspects of communicating with BISINDO, and basics of acting at a general level. The appearance of deaf people in the short film "Mimpi Yang Menginspirasi" creates joy and pride in them, as well as an increased sense of self-confidence.

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Biography



Riana Diah Sitharesmi (1973), is a lecturer in the Department of Pendidikan Seni Drama, Tari dan Musik, Faculty of Letters and Culture, Universitas Negeri Gorontalo. Dancing since the age of 7, he studied academic dance at the Yogyakarta Indonesian Arts Institute (1991 – 1998), then became a freelance singer in some reputable hotels in Yogyakarta, Lombok, Kalimantan and Bintan. In 2009, Riana was fortunate to receive an IIEF/IFP scholarship from America as a Fellow Ellect of Cohort 7, and continued studying contemporary choreography at Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom. Became a Master of Art in Choreography in 2011 and continued teaching on campus while exploring the potential for developing dance art in Gorontalo. Seven years later (2018), his dissertation on the *Bedoyo-Legong Calonarang* by Retno Maruti and Bulantrisna Djelantik for the UGM Faculty of Philosophy brought his search for dance science closer to philosophical and creative aspects. Currently, she teaches dance in both theory and practice at Gorontalo State University, while continuing to explore grounded research in the field of dance and philosophy of Art at the Huntu Art District Arts Community (HartDisk) and the Riden Baruadi Gallery in Gorontalo. His choreographic works that have been published include *Soliloquies* (2010), *Statuettes of Otanaha* (2012), *Srimpen Topeng Kusumojati Pitaloka* (2015), *Story Line, So I Tell* (2019), and *KsitiShri* (2022). Preference for Research Themes: philosophy of art, aesthetics, hermeneutics, semiotics, dance/choreography, performing arts, and anthropology of dance. Some articles and research results can be visited at:

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