



CENTER FOR WORLD MUSIC AND RELATED ARTS



Dalang Oemartopo

Dalang Oemartopo taught and performed Javanese gamelan music for the Center for World Music from 1993 to 1995. From Wonogiri, Java, and affectionally known as “Pak Oemar,” he was the first professional Javanese shadow-puppet master (*dalang*) to live and teach in the United States. He was invited by the distinguished ethnomusicologist Robert E. Brown to teach in the world music program at Wesleyan University in the late 1960s and later at the American Society for Eastern Arts (ASEA) in San Francisco, the Center for World Music in San Diego, and several universities in California. For several years he collaborated with Dr. Brown for Center for World Music summer programs in Bali, Indonesia, and also taught in Hungary.

As a master puppeteer, Pak Oemar was accomplished at expertly weaving his tales with a deft understanding of the philosophical, social, and artist components that created the dramatic tension in any play. As *dalang*, he presented his audiences with both sides of any issue, offering no conclusions about the rightness or wrongness of the decisions of the puppet characters themselves. Each audience member, Javanese or American, was left to decide what he or she would do, ethical or morally, in a similar situation. For Pak Oemar the ultimate purpose of his shadow-puppet plays (*wayang kulit*) was to inspire viewers to search deeply into their souls to discover the true essences of being human.

Whenever Pak Oemar would finally and firmly plant the last puppet (*kayon*, “the tree of life”) into the banana log used as a stage, signaling the end of the play, the evening performance would draw to a close. As the audience members would depart, they would continue to be mesmerized by the lingering existential spell of Pak Oemar’s rendering of this enigmatic, timeless theatrical form in which the mysterious puppet characters, the hypnotic gamelan music, and the aroma of incense and smells of cooking food all came together to contextualize the total experience and transport the entire audience into a virtual mirror universe.