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## Rachel Cooper

*Cobina Gillitt*

*As one of the foremost presenters and producers of Asian theatre and performance in the United States, Rachel Cooper's contributions to the field of Asian theatre cannot be overstated. From the founding of the Bay Area-based Gamelan Sekar Jaya to the "In Performance" program of the Festival of Indonesia and as director for Global Performing Arts and Special Cultural Initiatives at the Asia Society in New York City, her work has made a significant impact on not only how Asian theatre and performance are viewed and contextualized in the United States but also in their local communities in Asia.*

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An often overlooked and chronically undervalued cohort in the field of Asian theatre are the presenters who, both within and without the academy, regularly enact miracles to bring Asian performers to our shores. From curating programs, securing budgets, procuring visas, juggling political interests, and translating cross-culturally and across languages, to meeting the production needs particular to each program, presenters spend countless hours on logistics but are also frequently deeply involved in and knowledgeable about the local traditions and performance histories. They often spend years developing



FIGURE 1. Rachel Cooper. (Photo: Courtesy of Rachel Cooper)

relationships with the performers. Local government bureaucracies often need to be convinced of the value of supporting local performing arts groups to perform internationally, at the very least by providing exit visas in those regions that require them. Then there is the contextual and educational framework developed around the performances that include talkbacks, catalogues, conferences, seminars, family programs, online resources, and connections to the local diasporic communities, cultural foundations, museums, and universities. These tireless efforts of the presenters of Asian theatre programs enhance our scholarship, understanding, and access to theatre forms across Asia. One of the outstanding presenters and producers of Asian theatre working today deserves special recognition as one of the founders of the field of Asian theatre: Rachel Cooper (Fig. 1).

Rachel Cooper (b. 1954), unlike most in this series on Founders of the Field of Asian theatre studies, is not an academic in the conventional sense. Yet, over the course of her career she has probably spent more time in Asia studying different performance traditions than any scholar—researching and writing about their historical and cultural contexts; meeting and speaking to theatre artists (spanning the gamut from traditional, to contemporary, to experimental and in-between), and watching performances (in urban centers, rain forests, monasteries, temples, schools, colonial playhouses, state-of-the-art performance venues, on beaches, at markets, and on porches) that may be identifiable as theatre but are just as likely to be thought of as ritual, dance, music, or opera—or defy Western classifications altogether. While she may not have shared this vast store of knowledge in a conventional manner within academe, her tireless efforts and “passion”—a word people often use when describing her (Nazeri 2015)—are a testament to the invaluable contributions she has made to the study and activity of Asian Theatre, broadly speaking, on American shores and in the performers’ local communities in Asia.

As of the writing of this essay, Cooper is the Director for Global Performing Arts and Special Cultural Initiatives at the Asia Society in New York City, where she has worked for the past two decades. While she is currently in the same position the legendary Beate Gordon (1923–2012) once held, there is an important distinction that sets them apart as presenters of Asian theatre. While Gordon originated the models of contextualization still followed by Cooper at the Asia Society today, such as personally introducing to the audience the forms and groups presented, moderating preperformance lectures and talkbacks, creating program notes, and making recordings of performances available to the public, the major difference between the two lies in their curatorial agendas.

During her tenure at the Asia Society, Gordon strove “to communicate the essence of Asian Culture to Americans through first-rate, purely traditional art forms” (quoted in Foley 2014: 7). As Foley explains, Gordon “was working in an American context to share these genres that were often first designated by the Asian cultural establishments as their representative heritage” (p. 8). Ralph Samuelson, the former director of the Asian Cultural Council, explains in an email that her “work was undertaken at a time when there were few other presenters addressing this material, when Asian artists had limited opportunities for international travel, and when American audiences were largely in the dark” (2015). On the other hand, Samuelson goes on to clarify, Cooper is working in a world where “artists travel frequently, numerous presenters engage with Asia, and American audiences have varied

exposure—real and virtual—to the arts of Asia. Perhaps most significantly, in Asia itself a new generation of artists has emerged, sometimes focused on tradition, sometimes focused on innovative creative exploration, sometimes on both” (Samuelson 2015).

Cooper is more interested in framing all Asian theatre as contemporary, even so-called traditional performance “because it’s work of this moment” (Cooper 2015b). As the emphasis shifts away from “purely traditional,” Cooper readily admits that while she supports the idea that heritage and traditions are important, “It’s different than putting a statue in the museum. [The performers] are real people. In the live arts we are always creating a new moment that won’t be the same tomorrow” (2015b). Approached from this angle, the issue of being “pure” is not so relevant in today’s context, especially in our age of globalization (not to mention the notion that authentic is often about artistic intention). Working at an institution like the Asia Society, where the focus is primarily on the corporate sector and in politics (followed by the museum and only then performing arts), has given her an expansive space within which to work. Take, for example, a *kutiyattam* performance from India (on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity) that features the character Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers in *The Mahabharata*. Cooper sees myriad ways to contextualize the work as a traditional form that can and does address contemporary issues, such as the role of women and marriage. Samuelson elaborates on Cooper’s singular and innovative approach by explaining that her “special contribution is that she understands this new world of performing arts in Asia, and the new audience in the United States. She has been able to recognize the value of tradition, the excitement of innovation, and the special energy that comes from the intersection of the two. And she brings this to her audiences with the passion and respect that only someone so deeply immersed in Asia could achieve” (2015).

On her personal website ([www.rachelcooper.net](http://www.rachelcooper.net)), Cooper describes herself as “a cultural arts producer, global arts advocate, performing arts curator, festival director, and cultural diplomat.” She states that she “passionately believes that knowing about culture is critical to understanding the world we share, whether one works in policy, business, diplomacy, social services or creativity” and to that end she “works to further a goal of global competency that includes a literacy and appreciation of the arts, whether in traditional, contemporary or popular media—music, theater, dance, film, literature, poetry.” While Cooper’s profession can be described in terms of producing, presenting, and curating Asian performance programs, her unique skill as a cultural diplomat is what makes her so successful at what she does and

worthy as part of this series celebrating the founders of the field of Asian theatre studies.

### **On the Road to Cultural Diplomacy**

To date, Rachel Cooper has presented and produced well over five hundred programs of Asian theatre and performance in countless venues. Included here are a few representative ones that help illustrate the important contributions she has made to the field along with some biographical information to contextualize how she has become such an important force in promoting performances of Asian theatre in the United States. For every example described below, there are multiple others that space does not allow.

Rachel Cooper's approach to presenting Asian performance is rooted in her undergraduate and graduate studies at UCLA and later as founder of Gamelan Sekar Jaya in 1979. Cooper had begun her undergraduate studies at University of California, Berkeley in philosophy. In her second year, she received a scholarship to join the Semester at Sea program (then called World Campus Afloat), where she was first introduced to Balinese gamelan by ethnomusicologist Philip Sonnichsen as they traveled through Asia and Africa. Upon her return to California, Cooper transferred to UCLA's Ethnic Arts program (the predecessor to the UCLA World Arts and Cultures program developed by Judy Mitoma). The Ethnic Arts program's focus on interdisciplinary and intercultural research along with performance practice (with courses drawn from anthropology, art, dance, folklore and mythology, music, and theatre arts) gave Cooper a multifaceted approach that organized the study of culture through multiple academic lenses along with practical experience. She continued for two years in the graduate program in dance ethnology at UCLA.

This particularly "West Coast" contribution to the study of culture traces its roots back to Mantle Hood (1918–2005), who founded the first university program in ethnomusicology at UCLA in 1960. Hood was a strong, and perhaps the first, proponent of practically engaging with one's object of study. The goal was to become "bi-musical"—in one's own music culture as well as the culture of study. Hood required his ethnomusicology students to actually play the instruments and learn the spoken language of the musical cultures they were studying rather than relying on recordings and written scholarship. The focus on lived, corporeal experience is an essential component of Cooper's skills as a presenter because she understands what it means to be a dancer or musician not only on an intellectual level but also on a practical one. As she explains, "because I've studied so much music, dance, and theatre myself, I have an empathy with other

artists to know what it takes to do this work and to make connections” (Cooper 2015a).

Cooper’s first deep sustained introduction to Indonesian performing arts was during Judy Mitoma’s inaugural Asian Performing Arts Summer Institute at UCLA in 1977, where Cooper studied Balinese *wayang kulit* (with I Nyoman Sumandhi), Balinese and Javanese dance (with I Nyoman Wenten and Romo Sasmita Mardawa), and Balinese and Javanese gamelan (with I Wayan Suweca and Harja Susilo). Two years later, in 1979, Cooper moved into the role of assistant director of the Summer Institute. Working alongside Mitoma as an administrator rather than as a dancer or student, Cooper discovered that she could “transition from performer to producer,” realizing that “it’s not a compromise, that being the catalyst can be just as creative and fulfilling as being an artist. It’s about feeling part of something greater than yourself” (Cooper 2012).

After the 1979 Summer Institute ended, Cooper traveled with I Wayan Suweca to Bali for the first time, where they met Michael Tenzer, who was studying gamelan in Peliatan. Upon their return to California, the three of them founded Gamelan Sekar Jaya (GSJ), one of the first serious nonacademically affiliated gamelan groups in the US (along with West Java Arts) made up of primarily non-Indonesians. GSJ was originally conceived as an ensemble of Balinese gamelan students who wanted to move beyond a beginner’s level. Lessons were taught by Suweca on a small Balinese *kebyar* gamelan Michael Tenzer had purchased while in Bali that was kept in Cooper’s and Suweca’s living room in Oakland while Tenzer pursued a PhD in music composition at UC Berkeley. Today, GSJ is not only a leading world music ensemble in the Bay area and internationally, it is also held in high regard in Bali. At the invitation of Bali’s governor, in 1985 GSJ became the first foreign Balinese gamelan group to play at the Annual Bali Arts Festival. In 2000, GSJ received the Dharma Kusuma Award for Cultural Service from the Balinese government, the highest award of its kind.

Several of the founding GSJ members had taken beginning Balinese gamelan classes with Suweca the previous year in Berkeley at the Center for World Music, founded and directed by the ethnomusicologist Robert E. “Bob” Brown (1927–2005). Brown had been Mantle Hood’s first ethnomusicology graduate teaching assistant at UCLA. Under Brown’s direction, the Center for World Music championed Hood’s pedagogical legacy, prioritizing context and cultural immersion in the study of world music. This in turn shaped GSJ’s development as not just a student gamelan group, but as a community of like-minded artists focused on engaging with the cultural experience of being a member of a Balinese gamelan ensemble. The Ford

Foundation's Mary Zurbuchen<sup>1</sup> attributes Gamelan Sekar Jaya's "Balinese *banjar*<sup>2</sup> model of civic association" to Cooper's "vision for how arts could cross cultures and build community" (Zurbuchen 2015). It is this vision that has continued to shape Cooper's encounters with Asian performing artists.

Zurbuchen, along with Ralph Samuelson of the Asian Cultural Council, were instrumental in bringing Cooper aboard as the coordinator of the "In Performance" program of the Festival of Indonesia (1990–1991; Fig. 2). According to Ted Tanen, the director of the Indo-US Subcommittee on Education and Culture, the "idea was to build around [four central museum] exhibitions as many presentations of the country's culture as possible" as a type of "coming out party" (Segal 1990). Besides introducing the American public to the arts and culture of the next largest populous nation after the United States, the eighteen-month Festival of Indonesia was designed to coincide with the official "Visit Indonesia Year, 1991" to promote tourism to the country and encourage business investments. This major, large-scale international Indonesia-US venture brought 320 Indonesian artists in "twelve different performing arts tours, reaching fifty different communities in twenty-four states and Washington, DC . . . [with] . . . some 153 public performances and 75 cultural exchange and academic activities, attended by over 90,000 people" (Cooper 1992). Cooper, who was living in Jakarta when the Festival was in its early stages of development, was approached because the connections she had formed with local artists while living in Jakarta during the 1980s (learning Indonesian, studying gamelan, and teaching ESL) were essential as discussions moved forward to determine the criteria with which performances would be selected. Cooper worked closely with advisory boards made up of artists and scholars both in Indonesia and in the United States to develop guidelines for choosing which groups to present.<sup>3</sup> It was important for Cooper and those on the advisory boards to account for both philosophical and practical concerns in their selection. The guidelines devised by the advisory boards consisted of five criteria:

1. A commitment to bringing artists who represented the vigor and soul of Indonesia's performing arts in work of the finest artistry.
2. A commitment to authenticity: to present work by its leading practitioners, fully produced; to avoid pastiche ("greatest hits") programs linking disparate forms.
3. A commitment to maintaining the integrity of each form in individual programs while presenting work from as many different cultures and ethnic backgrounds as possible.
4. A commitment to bringing both traditional and contemporary



work, including work that reflected the influences from courts, villages, and urban centers.

5. A commitment to providing programs beyond the formal stage presentation of performances; to develop educational programs and opportunities for Indonesians and Americans to meet and exchange ideas and experiences. (Cooper 1992)

These guidelines were designed to support a thematic approach rather than a geographical one. While the thematic approach mirrored the four centerpiece museum exhibitions: “Sculpture of Indonesia,” “The Court Arts of Java,” “Beyond the Java Sea,” and “Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change, 1945–1990,” the themes and criteria devised by the advisory boards for the “In Performance” program were significant because they marked a distinct break from the New Order government (1965–1998) policy designating certain performing arts as *puncak-puncak kebudayaan* (the pinnacles of culture) that focused primarily on the center (Java/Bali/Sumatra axis) as representative of Indonesia as a whole. The themes—court, urban, children, Islam, contemporary dance, contemporary theatre, new music, and Bali—were adopted to make sure that the routinely marginalized performing art forms from beyond the geographical and

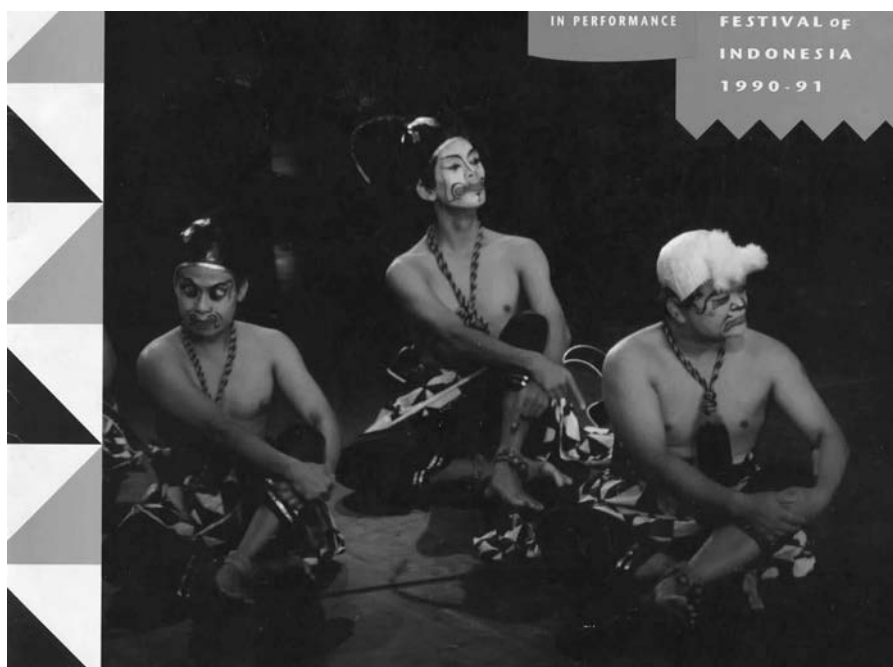


FIGURE 2. Festival of Indonesia “In Performance” program brochure.

political center would be embraced, including contemporary forms of theatre and dance that, from a cultural currency point of view, had less selling power than the better-known traditional forms. Despite the move away from taking a geographical approach, a special dispensation was given to the Cak/Legong Bali as the only specific region/island/culture to get a theme because it could be performed outdoors, while the “Children of Bali” program was a way to focus on and reach other kids in the United States. It was also recognized that having a Balinese theme would help with fundraising and publicity for the festival as a whole. The significance of these themes, Cooper explains, is that it created “an Indonesia-structured festival. It wasn’t a group of American presenters going over and choosing what they thought their audience wanted” (Cooper 2015). Instead, they were designed to highlight throughlines that would help American audiences better understand and experience Indonesian culture rather than catering to what American presenters believed their American audiences would find most palatable.

### **Performing Cultural Diplomacy**

“So when I say cultural diplomacy, I actually do mean diplomacy. A lot of people disparage that word. They say cultural diplomacy? You really mean cultural exchange. But in my experience, a lot of it has been actual diplomacy” (Cooper 2015a). It was producing the Festival of Indonesia’s “In Performance” where Cooper honed her cultural diplomacy skills. To her, cultural diplomacy means “not to make assumptions about what people want to do, what their needs are and what they are talking about” (2015a). Rarely does exchange happen without some kind of diplomacy given the various contesting agencies and unequal power structures involved.

Cooper’s focus on listening, rather than moving forward on assumption, proved indispensable. While putting together the “Batak of North Sumatra” tour for Festival of Indonesia, Cooper’s discussions with the assistant to the governor of North Sumatra were not all that different from some of the exchanges Beate Gordon had dealt with decades earlier when the emphasis was on how to best represent a tradition in the most palatable and approachable way to foreign audiences. The assistant to the governor objected to the inclusion of Ibu Zulkaidah boro Harahap (1947–2013), a Batak opera singer who had been a big star in the 1950s. He did not want to include her because, as he explained to Cooper, “[Ibu Harahap]’s not beautiful, she’s old and kind of ugly. And we have beautiful women.’ To which [Cooper] replied, ‘Everyone has beautiful women because when they are 18 they tend to be quite beautiful. That doesn’t mean they’re talented. Every-

one has beautiful women but nobody else has Ibu Harahap. No one has the talent that is your culture” (Cooper 2015a).

Still the governor’s assistant went on insisting that they would only send the younger, more beautiful Batak singers to tour with the Festival of Indonesia. So Cooper finally said to him “You’re welcome to send your group of beautiful girls but they don’t have any bookings. I have booked Ibu Harahap [at several venues] but please go ahead. I don’t want to tell you what to do. I understand what you are saying. Now I’ll wait to hear from you” (2015a).

After a day or two the governor’s assistant called back and agreed to send Ibu Harahap. During the Festival when Ibu Harahap performed in California, the governor of North Sumatra flew over because he wanted to see what would happen with her in front of an American audience. According to Cooper, “He was blown away. He came to the performance at Berkeley and she got a standing ovation. People were going crazy. And, for at least a short amount of time, he gave support to traditional music. A move away from a Las Vegas idea that [audiences] want entertainment” (Cooper 2015a). For Cooper, that type of diplomacy has been central to her presenting practice and her identification as an advocate for the artists she presents. It is not just about the American audience getting the opportunity to experience an authentic performance by an artist of a high caliber, but, as she explains, “If you can get people [who are making the decisions] in front of the artist and in front of an audience that loves what is going on, they have a new perspective” (Cooper 2015a). In this case, she is not only providing opportunities to American audiences to experience performances they might not otherwise have but also helping some local communities to recognize and celebrate their own cultural achievements. While Beate Gordon and other cultural producers have also pushed back against the perception that there exists a palatable aesthetic bar that needs to be achieved before American audiences will be accepting of and entertained by a theatrical or dance form with which they are not acquainted, Cooper has gone even further by seeking out and advocating on behalf of performers that challenge the notions of palatability even within their own native, modernizing cultures. She was working closely and making decisions with the Indonesian committee, not just on her own, but as the foreign representative she often had access to official channels the local Indonesian committee did not (Fig. 3).

Another aspect of Cooper’s cultural diplomacy work is creating long-term reciprocal relationships with the groups she presents and their local officials and representatives. While some of her programming may coincide with an exhibition or policy initiative at the Asia Society, often the realities of getting visas, local travel permits, book-



FIGURE 3. A *Gondong Hasapi* ensemble performing in Philadelphia as part of the “In Performance” program of The Festival of Indonesia, 1990–1991. (Photo: Courtesy of Rachel Cooper)

ings, and so on mean that programs may take years to come to fruition and take on several iterations. For example, Cooper has long been interested in the arts of Myanmar. She first presented a program of traditional Burmese music and dance in 2003 to coincide with an exhibition on lacquerware. Cooper applied for and received an NEA grant, but the museum canceled the exhibition. The director of the Asia Society at the time, Nick Platt, urged her to continue with the plans for the performance. In late 2002, Cooper traveled to Burma to speak with the minister of culture to help facilitate the release of the performers’ passports so they could travel to the United States. The minister was enthusiastic about Cooper’s plans, saying “that’s a beautiful idea. That’s great. Cultural exchange is great.” But then he warned, “Please don’t ever tell anyone I said that. Not right now. I can’t be quoted as saying that” (Cooper 2015a). Despite his position as minister of culture, Burma’s military regime gave him very little power to act on any cultural initiatives without state backing. At that time, it was clear that cultural exchange was not on the military’s agenda.

The Asia Society went ahead and publicized the performance, but the information needed to process their passports and visas was never sent and the event was canceled. Finally, after some time, the

requisite passport information was sent so visas could be processed and the performance was rescheduled. But when an Asia Society colleague publicized a concurrent policy program titled “Should the US Help with Regime Change in Burma?” Cooper immediately received a fax from Burma explaining that now was not a good time to be thinking about cultural exchange when such a policy discussion about Burma was happening at the Asia Society. And furthermore, the fax explained, all of their artists were going to be busy for the next two years performing in China.

Cooper drew on her cultural diplomacy skills as she had with the Batak program. She wrote back to the Burmese minister of culture and said, “You’re right. We absolutely can’t do this program. It’s totally understandable and we will cancel it” (2015a). She then convinced her colleague to change the name of his program from “Should the US Help with Regime Change in Burma” to simply “Burma Today.” A week later, Cooper wrote again to the minister of culture and said, “I want you to know I have a new program I would like to present. I would like to bring thirteen artists from Burma to perform at the Asia Society and here’s the program” (2015a). It was exactly the same as before, same artists, same performances. Within a day or two, the minister wrote back and said, “That’s wonderful, that’s great. We totally support that” (Cooper 2015a). By acknowledging they had the right and the power to cancel the program, Cooper allowed Burma to save face and move on to present the same program but with a different name: Cooper-style cultural diplomacy. The program was finally presented in December 2003 with a company of eleven artists from Burma.

Twelve years later, in April 2015, Cooper presented a *zat pwe* from Myanmar (formerly Burma) at the Asia Society. It was an outstanding program that perfectly illustrates Cooper’s view that traditional performance is contemporary. At first, officials in Myanmar did not want to send *zat pwe*, an all-night popular village variety show of music, song, dance, drama, and comedy with a male and a female star supported by an ensemble of clowns. Instead they wanted to send a hip-hop group to show how Burmese culture was modern and contemporary. Cooper’s reply was “everyone has hip hop. No one else has the traditional performance you have. It’s cool” (2015a). And it was cool for the New York audience judging by its response the night I attended the performance. Besides, the clowns managed to get hip-hop into the performance as well, so everyone’s priorities were addressed.

An important part of Cooper’s initiatives at the Asia Society has been to expand its digital archives and make them available to the public. An excellent example of the detail and usefulness of these archives

for scholars, researchers, students, and interested audiences documents the 2015 *zat pwe* performance by the Shwe Man Thabin troupe with photos, commissioned articles, and videos of the performers. There's also footage from a Burmese troupe Beate Gordon presented in the 1970s as well as highlights and unedited footage from the 2003 and 2015 performances presented by Cooper.<sup>4</sup>

Cooper's current position as Director of Global Performing Arts and Special Cultural Initiatives at the Asia Society encompasses more than just presenting Asian performance in their 250-seat theatre. She also does joint programming with larger venues, such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Lincoln Center, and Carnegie Hall. She is actively involved in several national and international artistic producing and presenter networks, including the International Society for the Performing Arts, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, the Asian Producers Network, the Contemporary Arts Centers Group, Walker Art Space, Mass Moca, Red Cat, and Yeuba Buena. Because the Asia Society is culturally specific, Cooper feels she has a special role to advocate for Asian contemporary theatre among contemporary performance networks.

For close to a decade, Cooper has been pouring her energies into developing an ambitious project called *The Creative Voices of Muslim Asia*, a multifaceted initiative that includes performance and film programming, talkbacks, interviews, symposiums (including one on the Shiraz Persepolis Festival of Arts, which was held annually from 1967 to 1977 in Shiraz and Persepolis in central Iran), and publications that have been catalogued in a vast archive of online materials. It has so far highlighted dozens of Asian, Asian American, and American Muslim artists; commissioned a dozen eight-hundred-word essays by scholars and experts written with the press, general reader, and student in mind; posted more than three dozen videos of performances held at the Asia Society; and made available information about the Islamic-themed exhibitions held at the Asia Society.

This particular initiative developed under Cooper has given the Asia Society an expansive reach beyond their physical building on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. For example, a clip from a performance by Pakistan's Arif Lohar and ensemble, presented at the Asia Society as part of the *Creative Voices* initiative, had had in May 2016 over 3.6 million views on YouTube since it was posted in 2012.<sup>5</sup> Also as part of the *Creative Voices* initiative, Cooper coordinated and co-authored a ninety-five-page special report for the Asia Society, *Making a Difference through the Arts: Strengthening America's Links with Asian Muslim Communities* (Levin and Cooper 2010). A copy of the report made its way to the State Department and, as a result, the President's Committee on

the Arts and Humanities chose to present an award to Kampung Halaman, an Indonesian youth arts organization detailed in one of the report's case studies. Kampung Halaman, "a non-profit organization that fosters the use of popular audio-visual media in community-based programs, particularly targeting youth ages 17–25, to pursue transformation towards a better society" (p. 59), sent co-founder Muhammad Zamzam Fauzanafi from Indonesia to Washington, DC, to accept the award. Kampung Halaman was the only international recipient out of twelve awards given in 2011. The following year, Cooper was asked by the State Department to facilitate bringing in that year's award recipients, the 100 Dong Songs Program, an initiative from Western China "dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of the Dong people of China by teaching hundreds of youth to express themselves through traditional Dong music" ("National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Awards: The 100 Dong Songs Program" 2012).

### **Cultural Diplomacy and the Power of the Arts**

Of all of the opportunities that being the director of global performing arts and special cultural initiatives at the Asia Society brings, perhaps the ones that Cooper holds most dear are the commissions she has solicited from scholars and artists. Her scholarly commissions best exemplify her tireless efforts to bring the vision of artists to audiences and her ongoing advocacy for deeper engagement and contextualization with the works. They can be seen in large-scale projects from the past two decades, such as *Dance the Spirit of Cambodia* (2001)—for which Cooper commissioned articles from scholars not only about performance but also on Cambodian history, culture, and art history<sup>6</sup> and *Muslim Voices: Arts and Ideas Festival* (2009; <http://muslimvoicesfestival.org>), which was New York City's first Muslim arts festival.

Cooper has also used commissions to broaden the scope and reach of intercultural and international collaborations through the sharing of knowledge and performance that have offered a glimpse (of hope?) into how the power of the arts can be used to heal and broker peace in our fractured world. In 2000, *Forgiveness*, commissioned and produced by Cooper and conceived, performed, and directed by Chen Shi-Zheng, brought together artists from Japan, China, Korea, and the United States.<sup>7</sup> It was based on traditional Asian ghost stories, but the ghosts were from the World War II era, such as comfort women and victims of the Nanjing massacres (Plate 4). Chen Shi-Zheng thought these ghosts were causing a rift in and between the East Asian countries and believed that the idea of a ghost could begin addressing their shared ghosts of history. Along with Chen, the performers working in four different languages included *nō* master Akira Matsui, contemporary

Korean dancer Song Hee Lee, Chinese *jingju* performer Zhou Long, and Korean vocalist Kang Kwon Soon. The music, composed by American Eve Beglarian, “rang[ed] from Korean vocals and Japanese shakuhachi, to a driving hip hop rant,” and was played by Chinese, Korean, and Japanese American musicians (Reardon 1999). *Forgiveness* was staged in New York, the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, Indiana, Paris, Berlin, and Seattle. While the production was ultimately cathartic for those involved, it was not an easy process. As Chen describes, “Our first workshop was very respectful. . . . But in the second one we had to face up to the horrible past between our countries. It was like tapping into a volcano” (Reardon 1999). For Cooper, this is what makes the arts so powerful: “*Forgiveness* brought together people from a dozen different ethnically specific organizations, groups that hadn’t even been in the same room together before. . . . It uncovered buried issues, issues that haven’t been shared before, and the audience was affected very powerfully. It was so much more than a performance” (quoted in Reardon 1999).

This international roster of highly skilled and respected performers was able to negotiate through the arts a long shared history of contention and of commonalities. Through a traditional vocabulary,



FIGURE 4. *18 Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Wenji*, a bilingual opera by Bun-Ching Lam and Xu Ying, Asia Society, 2002. (Photo: Courtesy of the Asia Society)



these Asian artists tackled and communicated contemporary themes both pertinent and provocative in Asia and for American audiences. As Cooper has explained with regards to *Forgiveness*: “It is tied to an urgent need to bear witness to history in the past century in order to release the rage of the present generation. A rage so fierce it threatens the hope of their finding connections that will allow for an amicable future” (quoted in Fish 2015).

Other intercultural commissions include *Empty Tradition/City of Peonies* with Chinese choreographer Yin Mei, Indonesian composer Tony Prabowo, and Chinese artist Xu Bing, who did the scenic design (1998); *The Floating Box: A Story of Chinatown*, a chamber opera by Jason Hwang with libretto by Catherine Filloux (2001); *18 Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Wenji*, a bilingual opera by Bun-Ching Lam and Xu Ying (2002) (Fig. 4); *In What Language, A Song Cycle of Lives in Transit*, a theatrical work for music and spoken word by composer Vijay Iyer and poet Mike Ladd (2003) (Plate 5); and *Five Streams*, a cross-media performance/installation, directed by Ibrahim Quraishi and featuring composers Norscq, Paul Miller aka DJ Spooky, dancer Parul Shah, and performers Rajika Puri and Fawzia Afzal-Khan (2006). These commissioned works are central to the cultural diplomatic mission for which she’s received numerous awards and recognition, including 2011 commendation from the Borough of Manhattan in recognition of her efforts in creating understanding between the United States and Muslims in Asia through the arts and the various performing arts programs she has presented at the Asia Society, the 2006 Dawson Award for Sustained Achievement in Performing Arts Programmatic Excellence from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, an “Izzy” (Isadora Duncan) award for the Festival of Indonesia, a Rockefeller grant for choreography of *Prembon Turis Modern* (Modern Tourist *Prembon*) (a Balinese female dance genre) in 1993 (performed in California and Bali) (Fig. 5), and a Clifton F. Webb award for film.

Rachel Cooper’s contributions to the field of Asian theatre as a cultural diplomat between Asia and America and for Asian theatre in general have benefited us all. Ratan Thiyam, an Indian director-playwright and chairman of the National School of Drama, New Delhi, lauds Cooper as “one of the most instrumental personalities of The Asia Society who has successfully established a bridge of communication between Occidental and Oriental art forms” (Thiyam 2015). Ratan Thiyam’s Chorus Repertory Theatre of Manipur’s US premiere was co-produced and co-presented by the Asia Society in 2000 with the production of *Uttar Priyadarshi*. The 2006 production of *Nine Hills One Valley* was co-presented by Cooper (the Asia Society) and the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s *Next Wave Festival*. He writes that Cooper’s experience



FIGURE 5. *Prembon Turis*, choreographed by Rachel Cooper (female dancer on r.), performed by Gamelan Sekar Jaya. Denpasar, Bali, 1993. (Photo: Courtesy of Rachel Cooper)

as a performer and researcher, along with her deep understanding of performance aesthetics and passion “has made her a rare personality as an art predicator and promoter” (2015). Hafez Nazeri, an Iranian composer of Kurdish descent whom Cooper first presented in 1999 with his renowned father Shahram Nazeri, presented him two more times at Asia Society (in *In the Path of Rumi*), and then co-presented with Carne-

gie Hall in a program entitled *Iranian Sounds of Peace* in 2009, succinctly states what many believe: “[Rachel Cooper] puts herself through a lot of challenges. I would love for her to be recognized for the passion and love behind her creation of new avenues for artists and their voices in America. It’s powerful” (Nazeri 2015).

#### NOTES

1. Mary Zurbuchen served as a program officer for culture in Indonesia (1984–1987) and India (1988–1991), as a Ford Foundation representative based in Jakarta (1992–2000), and as director for Asia and Russia programs (2003–2013).

2. *Banjar* in Bali designates a local “community council” with a representative from each family in the village. It oversees the cultural and ceremonial responsibilities of the village’s temples as well as administrative issues pertaining to land use and sale and local adjudication of disputes.

3. The Indonesian advisory board for the Festival of Indonesia was overseen by Amna Kusumo and Sardono W. Kusumo and included I Made Bandem, Sri Hastanto, Irvati Sudiarso, and N. Riantiamo. The US working committee, under Rachel Cooper, consisted of Alan Feinstein, Kathy Foley, Judith Mitoma, Sal Murgiyanto, Ralph Samuelson, Endo Suanda, R. Anderson, Sutton and Philip Yampolsky.

4. <http://asiasociety.org/myanmars-shwe-man-thabin>, accessed 28 May 2016.

5. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzHe4K\\_3j08](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzHe4K_3j08), accessed 28 May 2016.

6. <http://sites.asiasociety.org/dancecambodia/sguide1.htm>, accessed 28 May 2016.

7. Chen Shi-Zheng was also the director of the nineteen-hour *kunqu* performance *Peony Pavilion*, which eventually was staged in 1999 at Lincoln Center, a year after it had been banned by the Chinese government (see Leiter 1999).

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