

## Document Citation

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Author(s)	Leslie Felperin
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VARIETY

FILM REVIEWS ■ 75

## OPERA JAWA

(INDONESIA-AUSTRIA)

A SET Film Workshop (Indonesia)/New Crowned Hope (Austria) production. (International sales: Pyramide Intl., Paris.) Produced by Garin Nugroho. Executive producers, Simon Field, Keith Griffiths.

Directed, written by Garin Nugroho. Camera (color), Teoh Gay Hian; editor, Andy Pulung; music, Rahayu Supanggah; art director, Nanang Rakhmat Hidayat; costume designer, Samuel Wati-mena; sound, Pahlevi Indra C. Santos; line producers, Anastasia Rina Damayanti, Wiwid Setya; creative team co-director, Arturo GP. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Horizons), Sept. 4, 2006. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Mozart's Visionary Cinema.)** Running time: 119 MIN.

With: Artika Sari Devi, Martinus Miroto, Eko Supriyanto, Retno Maruti, Slamet Gundono, Nyoman Sura, Jecko Slompo.

(Javanese lyrics)

By JAY WEISSBERG

A beautifully mounted musical epic combining traditional myths with contemporary meditations on violence and social inequality, "Opera Jawa" is bold and innovative. But it is so chock-a-block with metaphor and over-decorated with artists' installations that it veers into the too-earnest waters of an ethnic fringe "happening" at Lincoln Center. Vet helmer Garin Nugroho gathers an impressive array of performers and artists for the all-singing, all-dancing morality play, charting cinematic waters that may best be appreciated by those already immersed in traditional Indonesian theater. International performance fests and Euro arthouses will give it some mileage, though Stateside prospects are weak.

Pic is billed as "A Cinema Requiem" dedicated to the victims of natural disasters, though it's extended to all those suffering under oppression. Nugroho tells his tale using the traditional stylized Javanese dance-dramas known as "wayang orang," combined with "tembang," a singing declamatory narration. "Opera" is part of the New Crowned Hope tribute to Mozart's anniversary and very much in tune with artistic director Peter Sellars' own visionary productions.

Story's kernel is taken from "The Abduction of Sinta," one of the most popular tales in the Hindu epic "Ramayana." Nugroho updates the legend and sets it

closer to the present day, with Slamet Gundono as a singing storyteller to give background and explain the action.

Before her marriage, Siti (Artika Sari Devi) was a Javanese dancer known for interpreting the role of Sinta, the beautiful wife of Rama seized by a powerful king. Out of respect for hubby Setio (Martinus Miroto), also a former dancer, she gave up performing and works with him in his earthenware business, which has fallen on hard times.

Called away on business, Setio is unaware that local kingpin Ludiro (Eko Supriyanto) is determined to have Siti for his own. Feral and dripping in sexual enticements (Supriyanto is one helluva dancer), Ludiro tries luring her with incense, sparking her inner desires in an extraordinarily erotic scene.

Ludiro isn't the village's favorite son: He terrorizes locals and makes sure that businesses are in thrall to him and his gang of dancing hoodlums. Mom Sukesi (the elegant Retno Maruti) knows her boy is trouble, but helps him woo Siti anyway with an enormous red cloth that Christo would envy.

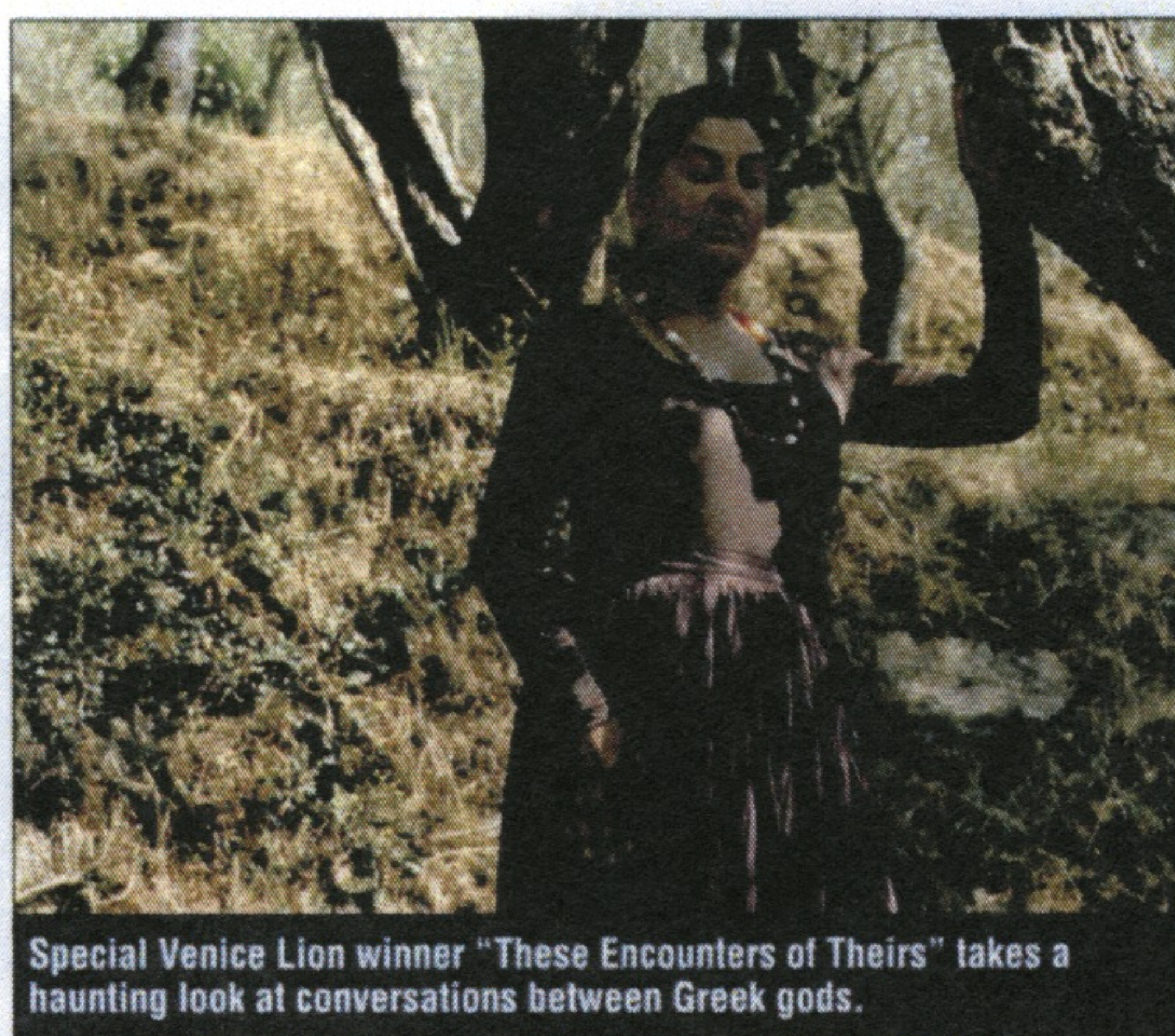
Wanting to be true to her husband but undeniably attracted to Ludiro's forceful charms, Siti winds up a pawn between the two and their escalating conflicts.

All this is fleshed out by multiple dance troupes, 400 extras, and a bewildering array of props made by some of Indonesia's foremost conceptual artists. Conical rice scoops become masks to terrorize; an extraordinary maze made of coconut shells (by Nindityo Adipurnomo) acts as a trap; and everywhere, white corpses and red wax heads are meant to remind auds of the human toll behind all acts of violence.

No doubt there's more that a keen-eyed student of Javanese theater would catch, but even as it stands the identifiable symbolism winds up burying the characters, who have enough to say — or rather, sing and dance — without the need for such distractions.

Demonstrators with banners proclaiming "Down with exploitation!" are much too unsubtle a form of social commentary and just don't integrate into the rest of the story.

Rahayu Supanggah's specially composed score, accompanied by a gamelan orchestra, plays within traditional forms while creating a work that feels equally contemporary. Lyrics that may have a certain poetry and flow in Javanese, how-



Special Venice Lion winner "These Encounters of Theirs" takes a haunting look at conversations between Greek gods.

ever, often get lost in translation.

Nugroho is careful to represent the full range of Indonesia's multicultural rainbow, and performers are all top-notch representatives of their particular art forms. Choreography is often mesmerizing, especially when set within the precincts of a gorgeous seaside palace rising above the flat landscape.

## VENICE IN BRIEF

### THE SESSION IS OPEN

(DOCU — ITALY)

An 01 Distribuzione release (in Italy) of a Vincenzo Marra production, in association with Rai Cinema. Produced, directed, written by Vincenzo Marra. Camera (color, mini-DV), Mario Amura; editor, Cristina Flamini. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Venice Days), Aug. 30, 2006. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Real to Reel.)** Original title: *L'udienza è aperta*. Running time: 77 MIN.

With: Pietro Vignola, Elena Giordano, Alfonso Martucci.

Despite the standard courtroom sign proclaiming "justice is equal for all," the phrase is emptier than a campaign promise in Vincenzo Marra's chilling "The Session Is Open." Revealing the peculiarly Italian way that metaphor and reality become indistinguishably combined, docu simply follows two judges and a lawyer into a Naples courtroom and allows them to matter-of-factly reveal a systemic, lackadaisical apathy toward due process. Disturbing look at Italy's legal system may find fest takers, but local auds are its main target.

Naples' version of the Mafia, the Camorra, is responsible for more murders than any other criminal organization in Europe. Helmer Marra turns his camera onto three players in the Appellate Court as they half-heartedly examine the legality of wiretapped evidence against a Camorra associate convicted of murdering a stoolie. In the opening scenes, the jury is locked out — an apt metaphor. Mob mouthpiece Alfonso Martucci does everything to prolong the case, while Judge Pietro Vignola casually spouts racist, sexist and anti-Semitic garbage that will leave mouths agape. The wheels of justice don't move slowly here — they're permanently frozen. Shot on mini-DV, tech credits are perfectly adequate.

— Jay Weissberg

### THESE ENCOUNTERS OF THEIRS

(ITALY)

A Straub-Huillet Pierre Grise Prods. production. (International sales: Pierre Grise Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Martine Marignac.

Directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Daniele Huillet. Screenplay, Straub, adapted from a book by Cesare Pavese. Camera (color), Renato Berta, Jean-Paul Toraille, Marion Belfe; editors, Straub, Huillet; costume designer, Huillet. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (competing), Sept. 6, 2006. Original title: *Quel loro incontri*.** Running time: 108 MIN.

With: Angela Nigara, Vittorio Vigneri, Grazia Orsi, Romano Guelfi, Angela Durantini, Enrico Achilli, Giovanna Daddi, Dario Marroncini, Andrea Bacci, Andrea Balducci.

These Encounters of Theirs," the latest by veteran helming partners Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet, deservedly reaped a special Lion in Venice for "innovation in the language of cinema." Pic is unlike anything else showing on the Lido or anywhere else this year. Austere, strangely haunting but patience-testing pic features ordinary Italians reciting dialogues among Greek gods written by 20th century Communist writer Cesare Pavese, and descends from its filmmakers' lifelong preoccupation with landscape, left-wing politics, and the avant-garde. Future encounters on the fest circuit seem likely, but sales offshore will be the stuff of myth.

Action, such as it is, features five separate conversations between non-pro thespians, all of them fairly

aged, which unfurl in leafy glades or sunny hillsides. Written in mock classical prose, the dialogues about the nature of deity's relationship with man and related topics purport to be between such demi-gods and goddesses as Iacchus, Gaia, and the like, while the muse Metate (Giovanna Daddi) raps with historic mortal poet Hesiod (Dario Marroncini) about creation. Camera movement is minimal, and the pace very stately, creating a contemplative effect.

— Leslie Felperin

## HYENA

(POLAND)

A Skorpion Art, Polish Film Institute production. (International sales: Skorpion, Warsaw.) Produced by Pawel Rakowski.

Directed, written by Grzegorz Lewandowski. Camera (color/B&W, widescreen), Arkadiusz Tomiak; editor, Andrzej Tomczak; music, Grzegorz Kamierczak; production designers, Marek Zawierucha, Sebastian Gomułka, Rafał Waltenberger; costume designer, Maria Duffek. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Critics Week), Sept. 6, 2006. Original title: *Hiena*.** Running time: 88 MIN.

With: Jakub Romanowski, Borys Szye, Magdalena Kumorek, Krzysztof Dracz.

Programmers looking for an unusual but perfect double-bill companion for Terry Gilliam's recent "Tideland" are advised to check out "Hyena." Creepy thriller about — but definitely not for — children follows a little boy who befriends a murderer on the run who starts snuffing out the kid's enemies. Adventurously shot and fluidly directed, pic won't travel far beyond fests and specialist outfits, but it does rep an intriguing feature debut for helmer Grzegorz Lewandowski.

A pre-pubescent lad (Jakub Romanowski) — called Shorty in subtitles at projection caught ("Maly" in Polish dialogue) — lives in a small Polish township. When Shorty's dad is killed in a mining accident, both mother (Magdalena Kumorek) and son try to carry on as if everything is normal, but Shorty's fascination with the horror stories he and his friends tell each other on the way to school each day grows as the tales become more lurid. Wandering in the nearby woods, Shorty meets a man (Borys Szye) with terrible burn scars, who presses Shorty into bringing him food. Title refers to an imaginary hyena Shorty believes the man turns into at night for murderous forays. Pic's fetid atmosphere consistently compels.

— Leslie Felperin



Artika Sari Devi is a Javanese dancer whose husband's business has fallen on hard times in "Opera Jawa," an all-singing, all-dancing epic.



Borys Szye is a disfigured killer befriended by a fatherless boy, played by Jakub Romanowski, in Grzegorz Lewandowski's "Hyena."