



**Celestial Sorrow
(2018)**

Meg Stuart & Jompert Kuswidananto / Damaged Goods

CELESTIAL SORROW**Premiere: January 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24 2018, Kaaistudios, Brussels (BE)**

"For many years, I've been thinking about ghosts as unfinished business, and the way in which unresolved conflicts affect both our presence and our movements. Our bodies are constantly shuttling between objects, sounds, lights, voices and unprocessed events from the past. This might awaken a dormant presence, whether we like it or not." - Meg Stuart

For *Celestial Sorrow*, Meg Stuart collaborates for the first time with Indonesian visual artist Jompert Kuswidananto. Departing from possession and implanted fictional traumas, they create a vibrant world of light and movement, inhabited by three performers and two musicians. Together the group embarks on an exploratory journey, moving through imaginary and invisible spaces, and the voices that make them resonate.

choreography **Meg Stuart**

installation **Jompert Kuswidananto**

created with and performed by **Jule Flierl, Gaëtan Rusquet, Claire Vivianne Sobottke**

live music **Mieko Suzuki, Ikbal Simamora Lubys**

light design **Jan Maertens**

costume design **Jean-Paul Lespagnard**

dramaturgy **Jeroen Versteele**

sound design **Richard König**

assistant costume design **Coline Firket, Isabelle Lhoas**

rehearsal coach **Joséphine Evrard**

technical direction **Jitske Vandenbussche**

light **Britt De Jonghe**

stage technician **Siemen Van Gaubergen**

dresser **Patty Eggerickx**

tour manager **Delphine Vincent**

production management **Nara Virgens, Delphine Vincent**

production **Damaged Goods** (Brussels)

coproduction **EUROPALIA INDONESIA, Goethe-Institut Indonesien, HAU Hebbel am Ufer** (Berlin), **Kaaitheater** (Brussels), **Künstlerhaus Mousonturm** (Frankfurt am Main), **PACT Zollverein** (Essen), **Tanzquartier Wien** (Vienna)

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www.damagedgoods.be



TOUR DATES

18/01/2018	Brussels (BE)	Kaaistudios
19/01/2018	Brussels (BE)	Kaaistudios
20/01/2018	Brussels (BE)	Kaaistudios
22/01/2018	Brussels (BE)	Kaaistudios
23/01/2018	Brussels (BE)	Kaaistudios
24/01/2018	Brussels (BE)	Kaaistudios
16/11/2018	Frankfurt am Main (DE)	Künstlerhaus Mousonturm
17/11/2018	Frankfurt am Main (DE)	Künstlerhaus Mousonturm
18/11/2018	Frankfurt am Main (DE)	Künstlerhaus Mousonturm
22/11/2018	Essen (DE)	PACT Zollverein
23/11/2018	Essen (DE)	PACT Zollverein
24/11/2018	Essen (DE)	PACT Zollverein
11/04/2019	Minneapolis (US)	Walker Art Centre
12/04/2019	Minneapolis (US)	Walker Art Centre
13/04/2019	Minneapolis (US)	Walker Art Centre
23/05/2019	Ghent (BE)	Kunstencentrum Vooruit
24/05/2019	Ghent (BE)	Kunstencentrum Vooruit
25/05/2019	Ghent (BE)	Kunstencentrum Vooruit
28/11/2019	Vienna (AT)	Tanzquartier Vienna
29/11/2019	Vienna (AT)	Tanzquartier Vienna
30/11/2019	Vienna (AT)	Tanzquartier Vienna
11/12/2019	Berlin (DE)	HAU Hebbel am Ufer
12/12/2019	Berlin (DE)	HAU Hebbel am Ufer
13/12/2019	Berlin (DE)	HAU Hebbel am Ufer
14/12/2019	Berlin (DE)	HAU Hebbel am Ufer
06/02/2020	Zurich (CH)	Gessnerallee
07/02/2020	Zurich (CH)	Gessnerallee
19/03/2020	Toulouse (FR)	Théâtre Garonne
20/03/2020	Toulouse (FR)	Théâtre Garonne
21/03/2020	Toulouse (FR)	Théâtre Garonne
24/06/2020	Brussels (BE)	Kaaitheater
25/06/2020	Brussels (BE)	Kaaitheater
26/06/2020	Brussels (BE)	Kaaitheater
27/06/2020	Brussels (BE)	Kaaitheater

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PRESS

Headaches and Damaged Goods: Celestial Sorrow premieres at the Kaaistudios

BRUZZ, Michaël Bellon, 01.2018

During the years of the dictatorship in Indonesia, the authorities tried to ban people from grieving, but failed. At the Kaaistudios, Indonesian visual artist Jompet Kuswidanto and choreographer Meg Stuart do the opposite, creating a space in which to express our troubles.

For Meg Stuart, who operates out of Berlin and Brussels, 2017 was a good year. She returned briefly to her home country, the US, with *An evening of solo works* and toured with the successful performances *Hunter*, *UNTIL OUR HEARTS STOP* and *Shown and Told*. She also welcomed scenographer and visual artist Jozef Wouters into the Damaged Goods fold, and collaborated with various artists on a number of other projects. The most recent of these is with the established Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto, who is coming to create an installation as part of Europalia Indonesia. Lighting designer Jan Maertens is also collaborating on the project, to which sound artist Mieko Suzuki and musician Ikkal Simamora Lubys add a new dimension. From this, Stuart is creating a performance together with performers Jule Flierl, Gaëtan Rusquet and Claire Vivianne Sobottke.

"I was approached by Arco Renz (choreographer, former PARTS student, and now creator of Europalia Indonesia's stage programme, *ed.*) to create a production as part of Europalia," Meg Stuart explains. "I had visited Jakarta with *Maybe Forever* in 2010, but that was more or less it. I was given carte blanche, but while we were consulting on how I might create a connection with Indonesia through my work, Arco also introduced me to Jompet. He showed me his work and also arranged a meeting in Berlin. After that, I travelled around with Jan Maertens and Mieko Suzuki for two weeks in the Indonesian region where Jompet lives – Jogjakarta on the island of Java – and to Bali to begin work. Jompet and the musician Ikkal Simamora Lubys are brilliant artists and I am delighted to be working with them."

So what common ground did you find?

MEG STUART: There was first talk of doing something with the ritual and traditional dance from his region of Indonesia, but I was primarily interested in what I could do with Jompet's work. His work is extremely diverse, but his installations are often about memories, about ghosts, about the presence of unfinished business from the past, about traumatic experiences, which are also to do with Indonesia and the history of the dictatorship (general Suharto's military regime from 1966 to 1998, *ed.*), whilst still maintaining a degree of distance from it. These themes were in line with a number of my interests and obsessions and so this became a true meeting of minds. As a result, the performance is not actually about Indonesia, although of course it contains vestiges of our experiences there: the field recordings we made, for example, or traces of the dance that we'd witnessed.

I also wanted to create a relationship between light and voice. To look at how you can use your voice to shed light on something and can make sound and light resonate together. And how you can use the physical aspect of vocal work in a space – vocal parts, imaginary language, sound poetry, mumbling and murmuring – as a starting point for movement and dance material. This all comes together in the installation that Jompet proposed and worked out in collaboration with Jan. It is a huge installation with a

great many lights and other objects that we are still working on, and that will only fully come to fruition in Brussels. Thus *Celestial Sorrow* is a performative installation rather than a performance or an installation. You enter into a separate world and the Kaaistudios, which I know well, are the perfect place for this. It promises to be an intimate occasion.

Can you tell us something about the title *Celestial Sorrow*?

STUART: The 'sorrow' is to do with something that Jompet told us about the time of the dictatorship, namely that certain sorrowful songs were banned in that era. The country was supposedly prospering and, as a result, people were meant to feel good. That story made me muse on how sorrow, and that fact that you express it, could potentially be dangerous. Once you realise that you are missing something, and you embrace that loss and begin to reflect that you are not happy with the situation as it is, then you are not productive and the system in which you are functioning comes under pressure. Grieving is disruptive. Mourning cannot be slotted into a rigid timescale and so you fall outside the patterns of expectation. Therefore this performance is about how we do still try to digest, transform and pass on things that are unspeakable and unpalatable. Sorrow is our birthright. When we are born, the first thing we do is cry. And that continues to be a part of our life, in which things inevitably change and ultimately die. You cannot simply brush your cares aside. The title's heavenly qualification 'celestial' serves to open up this question. Instead of talking about Indonesia, Europe or America, we want to install an infinite, eternal timespan. The title also needed to position a difficult subject within a poetic framework.

Sad Songs to Euphoria: Jompét Kuswidananto on the Making of *Celestial Sorrow*

Walker Reader, Allie Tepper, 08.04.19

Yogyakarta-based visual artist, theater maker, and musician Jompét Kuswidananto creates performative installations that reflect on the ghosts of Indonesia's sociopolitical and colonial history and its cultural transition from dictatorship to democracy in the post-Suharto era. This April 11–13, Kuswidananto visits Minneapolis for the North American premiere of the Walker-co-commissioned performance work *Celestial Sorrow*. A collaboration with the Brussels/Berlin-based choreographer Meg Stuart, it creates a vibrant world of light, movement, and live music by a five-member group of virtuosic dancers and musicians from across Europe, Japan, and Indonesia. Here, in conversation with curator and Walker Interdisciplinary Fellow Allie Tepper, Kuswidananto discusses his collaborative artistic practice and the influences that drove the making of *Celestial Sorrow*, from a government ban on sad songs to traumatic inheritances, a fear of the dark, and euphoria.

ALLIE TEPPER (AT): I wanted to ask you about your current fascination with lights as a material and signifier within your work. You just debuted two new installations, *Keroncong Concordia* at the Sharjah Biennial 14 and *On Paradise* at aA29 Project Room in Milan, both of which incorporate dimly lit, fallen chandeliers. Your collaboration with Meg Stuart, which you're debuting at the Walker this week, also centers around a hanging light installation. What brought you on this path?

JOMPÉT KUSWIDANANTO (JK): I've been exploring the wounds of Indonesia's colonial history and was interested in using lights, particularly in the form of chandeliers, as an image of the colonial dream and identity. At several moments in Indonesian history, during anti-colonial rebellions, chandeliers became a target of iconoclasm. *On Paradise* speaks about religious-indoctrinated, anti-colonial rebellions in the 19th century, while *Keroncong Concordia* presents the story of 20th-century colonial elite social clubs and entertainment spaces that segregated its audiences and performers by race, from Dutch, Indonesian, and Chinese to mixed communities. I'm interested in the social wounds that remain from these previous apartheid regulations.

AT: Can you speak a bit about your installation for *Celestial Sorrow* and where it got its inspiration?

JK: We started this project from many entry points, too many to remember now, from personal memory to social trauma, from a flood of cat pics to banned sad songs, from sound healing to trance dance. In the end the experience felt like being in a long and random dream. I am trying to bring that feeling into the installation: dreaminess, a sense of vertigo, the celestial.

AT: Cat photos? I wasn't expecting that.

JK: Ah, yes, well there was a flood of cat pictures that circulated on Twitter during the 2015 Paris and Brussels terror attacks. We were interested in how the photos were used to divert the consciousness of the people at the time. People starting sharing all of these cute cat photos on the internet as a distraction from what was going on. It came up randomly in the making of this piece and is related to the idea of memory and trauma that we were working through—of how you create your own illusions about what is happening, under difficult conditions.

AT: Your work often reflects on the sociopolitical landscape of Indonesia, particularly after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 and recent cultural transition into democracy. Can you explain what, if anything, of this history and region has fed into your work for *Celestial Sorrow*? I remember hearing that the piece was formed in part during a visit Meg had to Yogyakarta, on the island of Java.

JK: In making this work we were exploring memory through brightness and darkness, through the visibility of things, as well through sensory based therapy, like sound healing. There was this discussion about how to make the invisible trauma of political and social events somehow visible, of how to give

shape to its shapelessness. We found that the trauma of dictatorship was an interesting way to start imagining the shape of these ghosts of our history. When we were in Indonesia, I gave a tour of places where specific historical events had happened, and we discussed the memory that exists of these sites. We tried to feel the space and its energy and to translate this into the performance and installation. We worked with materials of the dictatorship like anti-communist propaganda films, and we visited the university where many student movements happened and where some students were killed. Through this material, a fear of the dark emerged as a concept. At the same time there was an obsession with brightness. We tried to make this multiplication of the lights. One light was not enough; we needed hundreds.

AT: There's also a small truck that appears in *Celestial Sorrow*, one that carries a speaker and a load of lights.

JK: Right, we talked a lot about that truck. It's also related to the history of Indonesia. The truck has always been there, in different moments. During the anti-communist campaign in the '60s the truck was used to transport communist people to prisons where they were executed. At other times the truck was used by the army to mobilize people to attack communities. Later in the democratic era the truck has been used to amplify the voice of democracy. The trucks carry speakers and anyone who has the money can mobilize people to amplify their voices. For Indonesians, there is a memory of violence in this kind of truck. We were interested in these stories that came up through it.

The truck we made for *Celestial Sorrow* carried lights and a recording of the song, "Hati yang luka." I think the song is the clearest trace of the Indonesian material in the performance. It was a song that was banned in the '80s during a campaign by the Suharto regime, which prohibited the playing of all sad songs in the country.

AT: Why were sad songs banned?

JK: It happened for a couple years, around 1986 I think, that sad songs were banned. From my research I found that during that time, Indonesia was in good shape economically, but at the same time there was this trend of sad songs that were being produced and played in the country. The government felt offended by the threat of a sad song, like, "I'm making you happy, why are you sad?" Something like that. The government was in this spirit of developmentalism, and the sad songs became really subversive to that.

AT: They banned it from the radio? Or from concerts and performances, too?

JK: Mostly the radio and television, because these were run by the government.

AT: So the ban created this illusion of a happy state.

JK: Yes, and at the same time the government was supporting rock music. [Laughs]

AT: Really? Why?

JK: They wanted to make a switch from a sad feeling to a more energized, positive vibe. I remember it really well because there were a lot of rock competitions during that time that the government supported. One of the conditions they made was that the content of the song must be positive.

AT: Wow. So the truck in *Celestial Sorrow* brings back what was banned...

JK: Yes, exactly. But in the end the work is really open to personal interpretation. The references to Indonesian history in the piece are not necessary to catch. The whole project in the end is not about Indonesian history, everyone who was a part of it brought their own personal narratives to the work. These references were just my own points of departure, which I shared with everyone.

AT: Was the title of *Celestial Sorrow* inspired in part from these sad songs?

JK: It's really difficult to trace. Of course, the sad songs was one of the reasons, but it's also related to the violence and traumatic source material that we discussed. Then there's the celestial part of it. I think of the celestial as a power that you don't understand. You don't know how it operates or how to deal with it. This is how I imagined the dictatorship when I experienced it, when I was young. The power of the regime was too big to understand, so it became mystified. The hanging bulbs in the installation are like stars or constellations; there is a reference to the sky and to dreams. But the bulbs are hung quite low, so you can reach them.

AT: So it's almost like you are trying to break down the myth of the celestial? Or of the regime...

JK: Yes, that's a very good way of putting it.

AT: Your installations such as *After Voices* (2016) often energetically incorporate movement and music through the use of automated objects rather than live performers, drawing attention to the absence of bodies and to ghosts. What has it been like to incorporate dancers, and the movement language generated by Meg, into your work? Has it shifted your artistic process in any way?

JK: Ah, yes, in my initial conversation with Meg, we came up with our first keyword: ghost. It was a challenge for me personally as I have been working with my own idea of a ghost for a while that is different from Meg's. I have been well known for making these bodiless crowd installations, like in *After Voices*. I used these ghost figures to talk about the fluidity of Indonesian history. The country has been governed by many different regimes for different purposes, so the way you see the history and identity of Indonesia is always changing. With Meg we started to approach the idea of the ghost in more direct and personal ways, like through meeting a shaman. While Meg was in Bali she met somebody who became a medium to connect her with other worlds. While we were in Jogja [Yogyakarta] we went to see different cultural rituals like trance dance.

Working with Meg, as well as everyone in this project, I was dragged into different worlds, and I've learned a lot from it. To be honest, my impression of Meg before meeting her was that she was strong figure in the contemporary dance world. I thought: OK, I'm going to meet someone who has a strong formula of making work. But no, I think she really makes a new piece as a new world, one that is different from what came before it. This was a nice surprise for me, as we were able to start the whole artistic process together from the beginning. After Indonesia we came to Berlin and met with other dancers and musicians, who also have their own worlds. Everyone brought their own personal history to the piece, and had the space to test out different ideas. We spent a lot of time experimenting with each others' material.

AT: Is this the first time you have collaborated with a choreographer?

JK: No, but I don't do it that often. I've worked with the Japanese choreographer Hiroshi Koike a couple of times, and in Indonesia I'm a longtime member of a contemporary theater collective, Teater Garasi, in which we've tried, in an amateur way, to cross the borders between theater, dance, and music.

AT: Can you speak about your work with the collective and as a musician? Does it directly feed into the work you do as a visual artist?

JK: I started making art in the last years of Suharto's regime through music and theater. I was obsessed with the stage and sound during the period of the dictatorship—maybe there was a relation between these two things, I don't know. I was a student when the regime fell, and I think I was really taken by euphoria. It was like a dinner that everyone was invited to and people came with then-forbidden dishes, then-banned books, then-banned songs, then-hidden history. It became a very new taste of life. This feeling motivated me to utilize art as a way to understand this new reality, and working in a self-supported collective fit our situation well, practically.

In the collective we were very much driven by our concern to rewrite history. We did some pieces based on this idea, but we found out that it really is the work of a lifetime. In the meantime I developed my musical works into a more experimental presentation, combining it with other elements such as videos

and installation, and ended up teaching myself visual art. Maybe I'm still moved by the vibration of the euphoria, in the way it keeps me working on the subject of Indonesian history.

Of oil and water

Mouvement, Sylvia Botella, 30.01.18

The independent American choreographer Meg Stuart (2018 Golden Lion of the Biennale di Venezia / Dance) and Indonesian visual artist Jompet Kuswidananto joined forces to create a work, titled *Celestial Sorrow*, making up their own rules as they went along. In it they celebrate the beauty of turmoil and of contradictions which meet but never mix, like two immiscible liquids.

Spectators should probably rely on their experience to interpret *Celestial Sorrow*, a collaboration between Meg Stuart and Jompet Kuswidananto. But to do this, you need a basic principle: you need to trust the singularity of your emotions and their value rather than ignore them. To be convinced of this principle, all the spectator must do is look at the opening scene-sequence: it is dizzying, causing the spectator to feel vertigo, a trance in a 'happening', that is ritualistic rather than ritualised. Because here dance is part and parcel of an infinite present, because heterogeneities exist, because the body breaks free as a result of a transformation, because the dancer (Jule Flierl, Gaëtan Rusquet or Claire Vivianne Sobottke) mainly seems to be danced, haunted as he or she is, when moving under 'the celestial vault' (the installation that Jompet Kuswidananto created), which is beautiful and fear-inspiring in equal measure.

Often a guttural sound or a gesture pops up where it is least expected, like memories, feelings or traumas that surge to the surface. *Celestial Sorrow's* incomprehensible beauty solidly steers us away from mere narration. Our gaze is always captured by something else. Hence the unresolved turmoil the spectator experiences, when confronted with an individual who wants to express everything at the same time, or that evaporates to make way for a multitude of almost imperceptible small movements

The turmoil in itself is not fascinating but the pleasure that it provokes, linked to excessive emotions, even to a contradiction. Meg Stuart's intelligence is apparent in the association of this pleasure with music (Mieko Suzuki, Ikkal Simamora Lubys), with dreamy light (Jan Maertens), with a sudden dissimulation or exposure of part of the body thanks to the costumes (Jean-Paul Lespagnard). So why do some images make more of an impression on us than others? Those in which the eroticised bodies seem glued to each other only to break away. Those in which the performer, arms raised as if connected with the whole of the universe, undulates in a trance. Whether you like it or not, there is something beautiful about this darkness. The mystery will remain unresolved, until blindness sets in perhaps.

Something inexorably breaks free, rising out above the meeting of these contradictions. Oddly enough it is both one and the other: Meg Stuart and Jompet Kuswidananto, Indonesia and the West, darkness and light, consciousness and the unconscious, nature and art, humanity and the universe. 'A medium told us that *Celestial Sorrow* reminded him of oil and water', says Gaëtan Rusquet. 'And that it was a good thing that the various elements remained separate, that they were never mixed'. In *Celestial Sorrow*, the choreography is inspired by an endless quest. It shocks because of the combination of profound and scandalous deterritorialisation, with a heightened transcendence of identities (with queer nuances) and a community in celebration, that has created a scary form of experimentation, which, however, is never dissociated from the specific realities. The history of Indonesia is suddenly referenced, in a song called *Hanti yang luka* by Betharia Sonata, in the detail of a minor almost operatic form (the parade of a miniature truck). 'In Indonesia the dictatorship banned the song *Hanti yang luka* because it was deemed too sad', Gaëtan Rusquet explains. 'It refers to the violence against women. Under the dictatorship there was no place for sadness or pain. By performing it as part of *Celestial Sorrow*, we have given this song a place to exist, to be free.' Here the lyrics of *Hanti yang luka* break down the last resistance, dragging everyone along in its scintillating wake, in the purest of light, as if drawn in by a very naïve desire for an exalted ideal.

In *Celestial Sorrow* magnetism appears in its most poetic form: in the last scene, a few furtive gestures by a peacock-man makes us forget everything that happened, marking a return to order, before the

confusion begins again perhaps. When the lights of *Celestial Sorrow* are switched on again, in all their harshness, all you can say is: this is exactly what I wanted to see on stage, a work like no other. *Celestial Sorrow* by Meg Stuart and Jompet Kuswidananto is all about the aura of a gesture that connects man with the universe, and finally with himself, in a multitude of ways.

Meg Stuart, Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, tests new waters

La Libre, Guy Duplat, 19.01.18

The American choreographer Meg Stuart, who has been working in Belgium since 1994, received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. Former illustrious winners include Merce Cunningham, Pina Bausch, William Forsythe and Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker. On Thursday evening, she will also present her new production, titled *Celestial Sorrow*, in the Kaaithheater in Brussels.

A work that aptly demonstrated why she merited this award as, in the jury's words, the choreographer has continuously sought to redefine herself in her work, developing a new language and a new method for each creation.

Her most recent work was created for Europalia Indonesia. She was introduced to the Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto, who created an installation for Grand-Hornu. Together, they worked in Yogyakarta around a common theme: how can the past and its ghosts be expressed by bodies, music and light?

The Indonesian artist focused on the painful memory of the long Suharto dictatorship, which was overturned by the student movement in 1998, and the horrifying massacre of millions of communists in 1965-66.

The result is compelling and very impressive. The spectators are seated along the walls. More than 1,000 light bulbs hang from the ceiling, forming a starry sky, which at times casts a harsh light on the stage. The Japanese DJ Mieko Suzuki stands behind her turntable on stage, playing obsessive lounge-style music.

Three dancers, singers and performers create overwhelming and at times even bizarre ambiances. The choreography opens with a long, shamanistic meditation, with cries, various sounds, a golden cloak, followed by a mad, rave-like trance, like a rite of spring on ecstasy. Sorrow, the candour of the images of our youth, mysterious Indonesian figures and the heightened kitsch of a saccharine-sweet song from Java all follow.

The sounds formed by plenty of different noises and breathing, the costumes by Jean-Paul Lespagnard (including a cloak with fairy lights) and the lighting design are especially well done.

What you see on stage is all inspired by the situation in Indonesia. The light that flickers on the trucks, the clashing noises. These are all ways of reminding you that the dark Suharto years are really behind us. And the sorrow of the sad songs refers to the fact that this music was banned under the dictatorship.

While the choreography is dark and experimental at times, the audience is swept away on several occasions, by the extraordinary talent of the performers and the vocal acrobatics from Berlin (Jule Flierl and Claire Vivianne Sobottke).

Meg Stuart once again demonstrates her talent for taking risks and exploring new territories.

Ear candles to ward off pain

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Eva-Maria Magel, 19.11.18

Everyone must make up their own mind about what lies beyond and any higher being. But what would such a being see if it observed people on this side? Perhaps creatures like the three rolling around the dancefloor of the Frankfurt Mousonturm. Anyone attempting to help Jule Flierl, Claire Vivianne Sobottke or Gaëtan Rusquet may have come in for some abuse, or perhaps received a marriage proposal. One begs for a little bit of love in ludicrous, red platform shoes and an alien with giant ears and a face mask bedecked with glittering stones chirps strange arias. The third is initially maltreated by the others and then healed – with the help of an ear candle that is set alight as if we were visiting an Indonesian natural healer. Meg Stuart may have imported the idea of the ear torch from Indonesia as this is where inspiration for her most recent performance has been sought. The American choreographer called the evening that rounded off the third Rhein-Main dance festival "Celestial Sorrow". It's an ambivalent title. Could this supernatural sorrow be a being that rules over everyone and everything? Or a misery that besets the heavens and is simply observing human creatures and the idiocy that they perpetuate on Earth. Meg Stuart is anything but someone who regards herself as a god. "Celestial Sorrow" also possesses that combination of seeing the bigger picture and inward perspective that is a trait of much of her work. Stuart always balances the imperfect nature of man – alluded to by the name of her company 'Damaged Goods' – with a curious imagination and a good deal of irony, which straddles the intractable and obsessive when the sorrow gets too much. This is also the case in "Celestial Sorrow", which Stuart created with the Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto. Kuswidananto is responsible for the heavens to a large extent. He nevertheless makes them look earthly using many different-sized light bulbs, some loudspeakers with a retro look and interlinked crystal chandeliers. But like these utensils, which sometimes glow a gentle orange, sometimes a bright glistening white, they possess something other worldly, the commentary on and motivation of what's going on beneath them could be simultaneous. The sound, sometimes culminating in ear-splitting noise, is provided by the live musicians Mieko Suzuki and Ikbal Simamora Lubys, who initially produce such a spherical prelude that the audience fears that the performance will not progress beyond joss sticks, a little bit of hip movement and bizarre garments like a cape crocheted out of golden festive garland. But then Stuart's machine starts to get into full swing in the centre of the stage surrounded on four sides by the audience. The dancing is so arrhythmic that all the turmoil experienced over a human lifetime, from personal failure to the impositions of global politics, flashes through one's mind in the scenes. Memory is explored with little distinction between personal and social aspects while there are sharp borders alongside a conciliatory note, supported and provoked by everything from a hard beat to the Indonesian tearjerker, the latter presented as a procession under a cape of flashing lights. In this respect, "Celestial Sorrow" is ideal for the end of a festival, focusing on the music, on one hand, but also the perception and observation of the body – and also the handicapped body – on the other. The deficiencies of the world, which Stuart's performers convey in a storm of guitar and drums, provided a final, brightly coloured bang.

TO BE AS VISIBLE AS POSSIBLE

Dramaturge Jeroen Versteede in conversation with Meg Stuart and Jompet Kuswidananto

Jeroen Versteede: What brought you together for this production?

Meg Stuart: I was invited to make a project for Europalia Indonesia and considered revisiting the themes of memories and ghosts. Arco Renz, the curator of Europalia, subsequently introduced me to Jompet. We spent a long day together in Berlin, saw two performances, ate dinner, we walked around. That was our beginning.

Jompet Kuswidananto: Later, we met again in my hometown of Yogyakarta which is also known as Jogja, on the island of Java. The musicians Mieko Suzuki and Iqbal Simamora Lubys also came, as did the lighting designer Jan Maertens. We visited historical places together and shared stories about personal and political traumas.

Stuart: Jompet took us on walking tours of the city and we visited the campus of his old college. Here, he re-enacted the demonstrations that took place during the student revolution of '98, when the dictator Suharto was overthrown, and described his memories of the events. Everything in Indonesia – the atmosphere, the mood, the way people live and how they work and create art – is still influenced by the rapidly shifting politics, as well as the various religions and traditions. We also saw exhibitions, concerts and an incredible street performance...

Kuswidananto: *Jatilan*, a traditional magical dance from Java in which the performers enter a trance.

Stuart: The *jatilan* blew me away. In one sense, it felt like a sacred ritual, but on the other hand, it also seemed very chaotic. Some of the opening movements were quite minimal but then, and totally unexpectedly, the dancers entered into a trance. Sometimes they imploded in a formal manner, at other times in a very expressive, dramatic way. They were visited by animals and deities and their ritual costumes were altered by their everyday clothes. It was impossible to tell what was real and what was fake. I couldn't identify who was a shaman and who was helping, who was being healed, who was sick and who was cured, or if they even wanted to get to their feet again... Nothing was explained. I don't think the performers themselves knew exactly what was going to happen. It seemed endless. And then, after two hours or so, they would loop back to the beginning and start all over again, guided by the music, which went on and on and on. The many layers of the performance, its radical physicality, and the disorientation I felt while watching it, were all extremely compelling.

Kuswidananto: We also went to a public square where traders rent out hundreds of bicycles and pedal cars decorated with blinking lights. It's a huge attraction. The square becomes a sort of dreamland, a wonderland.

Stuart: It was a place for escape and fantasy. One of the cars had bright flashing neon lights that read: 'I LOVE JOGJA' 'I LOVE JOGJA'. Which made you think: is this a statement of fact, or is it their way of cheering up the nocturnal visitors? People seemed really happy there, surrounded by bright, flashing, colourful lights. It was impressive.

Kuswidananto: There used to be 'sound competitions' in the east of Java: trucks laden with sound blasters would cruise the streets, music blaring. It was banned because of safety issues, so people started to make miniature versions of the trucks, on which they would install loudspeakers. Their main intention, with regard to playing the music, is to showcase the range of their sound system, from the deepest basses to the highest frequencies.

Versteede: How can you explain this fascination for the chaotic use of noise and bright lights?

Kuswidananto: During the dictatorship, not everybody was allowed to speak. People were forced to

express themselves through alternative channels, just to be noticed. The tendency you describe is therefore part of a tradition. When Suharto's regime was toppled in 1998, the people were euphoric: they could finally use their voices to express themselves. Nowadays, people are still taking to the streets and speaking out in public. Every day, they bring crates to stand on, or drive trucks full of speakers in front of the president's palace. They want to perform. It's what I would call a performative democracy. This has long been an important topic in my work. How do people use their voices? How do Indonesians make themselves heard? How is it possible to be louder than everyone else? How can I be as visible as possible? Metaphorically speaking, the abundance of light reflects the hope of enlightenment, the desire to emerge from the shadows. At the same time, people are obsessed with darkness. They are afraid of disappearing, of being invisible. I'm very interested in this kind of tension.

Stuart: I think that this process of articulation, of speaking up, of excavating what's been hidden and bringing it into the light, is a movement of transformation. You burn it up. For many years, I've been thinking about ghosts as unfinished business, and the way in which unresolved conflicts affect both our presence and our movements. Our bodies are constantly shuttling between objects, sounds, lights, voices and unprocessed events from the past. This might awaken a dormant presence, whether we like it or not. I've always wanted to make a choreography about light and sound moving through the space, triggered by voices, as though part of a secret network. The voice is not something that you can hold, it's a part of you and yet it's not. During rehearsals, we experimented with fragments of songs, with the emotional depth of sound, with breathing, with proto-linguistic utterances, with whispering and distortion, with rhythm. Not only to create a sound concert, but to research what it might release in the body. How does it affect your emotions, and what memories does it evoke?

Versteele: Do any lingering traces of the dictatorship still move you as an artist, Jompet?

Kuswidananto: My memories of the dictatorship are very strong. As children, for example, we'd all be taken to see an anti-communist film. Every year, the teachers would take us to the cinema to see it, like shepherds herding their flock. The film shows how the communists of the 30 September Movement kidnapped and murdered six Indonesian generals during a coup in 1965. It was an early 1980s propaganda film that was trying to legitimize the events of 1965-66, when the dictator's troops executed millions of acclaimed communist sympathizers. The images of the ruthless, merciless communists that we saw in the film are etched into our memories. Even today, the majority of Indonesians believe that the mass killings of the so-called communists and leftists was a good and just thing. The propaganda still represents the truth for many contemporary Indonesians.

Versteele: You once wrote that you hear the movie's soundtrack in your head when you wake up too early.

Kuswidananto: Yes! Because the kidnappings and killings happened at dawn, I hear the eerie soundtrack of that scene whenever I lie awake in bed at five or six o'clock in the morning. Many of my friends, people of the same generation, have similar experiences. The national trauma is implanted in our brains.

Versteele: Suharto's regime is not only associated with trauma but also with a ban, at one point, on sad songs. This inspired our research into melancholic music and sorrow in general.

Kuswidananto: During the economically prosperous years of the dictatorship, around 1986-87, the regime wanted to promote development. As a result, they banned sad songs. It was only permissible to play happy music. Broadcasting a sad song was an act of subversion. I was very young at the time and didn't want to hear sad songs either. It was only after the dictatorship that I understood the absurdity of the diktat.

Versteele: Why did they consider sad songs to be a threat to prosperity?

Stuart: It's funny, but sad songs seem so innocent and comforting, how could they possibly be

dangerous? But in reality, they are the warning sign of dissatisfaction. Sad songs fuel longing, they suggest nostalgia, or a desire for an unknown future. You can't build a city on sadness.

Versteete: Perhaps sadness can be a motivating factor? It might inspire you to change something. Can't it be also constructive?

Stuart: If you're sad because of a situation that you know you cannot change, or if you long for something you can't have, at the precise moment when you dive into that feeling, sadness isn't constructive. There's no construction in disappointment. It doesn't make things better. Of course, for the human soul, sadness creates a connection, it's a step towards compassion and understanding and sympathy. Sadness is unproductive but essential. And it's always around the corner.

Versteete: Do you have any rituals?

Stuart: I can embrace rituals, but I don't keep them for very long. I sometimes write three pages in the morning, just after waking. Or I meditate. When I go into a new theatre, or if I feel as though I want to reinvigorate my home, I smudge the space with ashes of sage. Saging is when you burn a sort of incense to clear and cleanse the space. It gets rid of old energies. And then you need to open the windows. *(laughs)*

Kuswidananto: I do something similar. Like most Javanese people, when I enter a new space, I mentally greet the spirits who live there. I can't translate the exact greeting that crosses my mind then, it's something like "excuse me, pardon".

Versteete: Did your parents teach you that habit?

Kuswidananto: No, it's something that was passed on by my childhood friends. If we were playing outside and needed to pee against a tree, we'd always excuse ourselves beforehand. We thought there might be a spirit hiding in the branches. Somehow, it has become an unconscious tradition that whenever I deal with a new space, I feel as though I'm interfering with new and invisible entities. So you have to politely knock on their door. This tradition is rooted in animism, like all religious beliefs in Indonesia. If you were to remove all the religions, the animist traditions would still remain.

Stuart: When we were in Indonesia, we performed a beautiful ritual together. According to the Javanese calendar, we were there on New Year's Eve. But it's not a moment for parties or celebrations. Instead, people go for a walk outside and reflect, silently. We met at around midnight and, without speaking, walked through the city together, through the streets that were, as usual, full of traffic. We encountered other people doing the same thing.

Kuswidananto: Literally translated, the name of this ritual is 'muted walk'.

Versteete: To return to the *jatilan* performance you witnessed in Yogyakarta: we deal with trance and possession during rehearsals. Possession, both voluntary and involuntary, is a universal phenomenon. You find it, in different forms, in every part of the world and in all religions. What does possession mean for you?

Kuswidananto: I've never been possessed myself, and I'm not totally convinced that it actually happens. But I can connect to the idea of it. Becoming somebody or something else can be a very good exercise in terms of empathy.

Stuart: I see possession as a fiction, as well. It's a state that we, as dancers, strive towards when we improvise. Even if we don't know exactly what that means, it's something we can imagine. And for me, what we can imagine, we can dance. Possession compels you to let go of everything that holds you in its grip: your history, your expectations, your sadness. Perhaps possession can only take place if you're ready to share your mental space, your unconscious mind, with unknown forces.

BIOGRAPHIES

Meg Stuart (US) – choreography

Meg Stuart is an American choreographer and dancer, born in New Orleans, living and working in Berlin (D) and Brussels (B). Stuart decided to move to New York in 1983 and studied dance at New York University. She continued her training at Movement Research where she explored numerous release techniques and was actively involved in the downtown New York dance scene.

Invited to perform at Klapstuk festival in Leuven (B) in 1991, she created her first evening-length piece, *Disfigure Study*, which launched her artistic career in Europe. In this choreography, Stuart approaches the body as a vulnerable physical entity that can be deconstructed, distorted or displaced but still resonates and has meaning. Interested in devising her own structure through which to develop artistic projects, Stuart founded Damaged Goods in Brussels in 1994. Together they have worked on over thirty productions, ranging from solos such as *XXX for Arlene and Colleagues* (1995), *Soft Wear* (2000) and the evening-length solo *Hunter* (2014) to large-scale choreographies such as *Visitors Only* (2003), *Built to Last* (2012) and *UNTIL OUR HEARTS STOP* (2015). Other projects include video works, installations and site-specific creations such as *Projecting [Space]* at Ruhrtriennale 2017.

Improvisation is an important part of Meg Stuart's practice. She has initiated several improvisation projects such as *Crash Landing* and *Auf den Tisch!*. In 2016 Stuart hosted *City Lights – a continuous gathering* in the Berlin HAU Hebbel am Ufer, in collaboration with an all female group of local artists.

Stuart strives to develop a new language for every piece in collaboration with artists from different creative disciplines and navigates the tension between dance and theatre. Previous collaborations include works developed with visual artists Gary Hill and Ann Hamilton (among others) and composers such as Hahn Rowe and Brendan Dougherty. The use of theatrical devices, in addition to the dialogue between movement and narrative, are recurrent themes in her choreographies. Stuart's choreographic work revolves around the idea of an uncertain body, one that is vulnerable and self-reflexive. Through improvisation, she explores physical and emotional states or the memories of them. Her artistic work is analogous to a constantly shifting identity. It constantly redefines itself while searching for new presentation contexts and territories for dance.

Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods has an ongoing collaboration with Kaaitheater (Brussels) and HAU Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin).

Jompet Kuswidananto (ID) – installation

Jompet Kuswidananto is a versatile Indonesian artist whose work ranges from installations and sound pieces to performances and theatre productions. He studied Communications at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta. Originally trained as a musician, Kuswidananto turned to the visual arts and went on to work within the local Yogyakarta art community. Since 1998, he has been actively collaborating with Teater Garasi, a multidisciplinary collective of artists making works that reflect Indonesian life after the fall of the Suharto regime.

Kuswidananto's practice focuses on the issues of politics, colonialism, power and mass mobilization in post-reformation Indonesia, while also exploring the country's history and the complexities of contemporary life in a globalized world. In 2014, his installation work won the Prudential Eye Award, a major prize for emerging Asian artists.

Kuswidananto has participated in significant national and international exhibitions, including the Yokohama Triennale (2008), the 10th Lyon Biennale (2009) and *Phantoms of Asia* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (2012). Solo shows include *Java's Machine: Phantasmagoria* at the Osage Gallery, Singapore and Hong Kong (2009 and 2010), *Grand Parade* at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (2014) and *On Paradise* at MAC's Grand-Hornu, Belgium (2017).

Jule Flierl (DE) – creation & performance

Jule Flierl is a Berlin-based dancer, choreographer and vocal-acrobat. She studied contemporary dance at the Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance (SEAD) and, as part of the EXERCE programme, obtained a master's degree in choreography from the National Choreographic Centre in Montpellier. Her work aims to make space tangible through breath, voice and dance. Flierl has collaborated with, amongst others, Anna Nowicka, Christine Borch, Sergiu Matis, Gintersdorfer/Klassen, Martin Nachbar and Tino Sehgal. In her most recent project, the lecture/performance entitled *I INTEND TO SING*, she shares her insights into the use of voice in dance – as a form of political empowerment, a tool for transhistorical interaction, and as a way of expanding dance into the realms of the invisible.

Gaëtan Rusquet (BE) – creation & performance

Gaëtan Rusquet is a Brussels-based artist and performer working in the field of performance, dance, theatre and the visual arts. After studying applied arts at the Higher National School of Applied Arts and Crafts (ENSAAMA) in Paris, Rusquet obtained a master's degree in stage design and performance from La Cambre, Brussels. His artistic proposals typically explore the relationship between the body and the space, and often focus on a specific medium and the necessity of a related movement. Through his creations, Rusquet aims to share a visual and performative experience with his audience. His work has been presented at various venues and festivals across Europe.

Claire Vivianne Sobottke (DE/FR) – creation & performance

Claire Vivianne Sobottke is a Berlin-based dancer, performer and choreographer. She defines her work as a site of resistance, and as a place for changing and challenging the norms of thinking and seeing. She has created several solo performances in which voice, sound and language drive the choreography and content. Collaborations include the works developed with Tino Sehgal, Tian Rotteveel, Christoph Winkler, Sheena McGrandles and Theo Solink. In 2017, she initiated *Amazonas*, an interdisciplinary platform that aims to support and connect young female artists in Berlin. Sobottke has previously collaborated with Meg Stuart on *UNTIL OUR HEARTS STOP* (2015) and the improvisation project *City Lights – a continuous gathering* (2016).

Mieko Suzuki (DE/JP) – live music

Mieko Suzuki is a DJ, sound artist and music curator based in Berlin. In her experimental DJ sets she creates unique sonic textures that mix drones and compressed beats with field recordings and spoken word. Suzuki has also been involved in many cross-disciplinary collaborations and has worked, amongst others, with Meg Stuart (*City Lights – a continuous gathering*, 2016), fashion designer Tatsuro Horikawa (JULIUS) and artist Barbara Raes. Since 2009, Suzuki has been running her own bi-monthly, multidisciplinary event KOOKOO, together with Arno Raffener (Spex), at the OHM gallery in Berlin.

Ikbal Simamora Lubys (ID) – live music

Ikbal Simamora Lubys is a musician, experimental guitarist, improviser and sound artist who is based in the Special Region of Yogyakarta in Indonesia. In addition to his academic study of classical music and classical guitar, he is also active in a number of avant-garde art and music communities. His work frequently explores how the guitar can be played and developed, both visually and in terms of sound. Acclaimed for his live performances, Lubys collaborates with a wide range of artists in both Asia and Europe. He is also known for his music for dance and film.

Jan Maertens (BE) – light design

Jan Maertens works predominantly as a lighting designer in the international world of contemporary dance and performance. He has lit productions for, amongst others, Meg Stuart (*VIOLET, Do Animals Cry, BLESSED, Maybe Forever, Hunter*), Philipp Gehmacher, Padmini Chettur, Arco Renz, Claire Croizé and Trajal Harrell. In addition to working on formally staged performances, Maertens often participates in site-specific projects. Notable examples of the latter include An Kaler's series *On Orientations*, various installations by Lawrence Malstaf, and a number of works by Meg Stuart, including *All Together Now, Auf den Tisch!* and *the fault lines*, a project by Meg Stuart, Philipp Gehmacher and Vladimir Miller.

Jean-Paul Lespagnard (BE) – costume design

Jean-Paul Lespagnard is a Belgian fashion designer and visual artist. He combines his unique eye for fashion with a fascination for high and low art, and for popular culture in all its shapes and forms. While developing art installations and happenings, he also works as a stylist on fashion and advertising shoots. He creates his own collections and has also designed costumes for, amongst others, Liesbeth Gruwez/Voetvolk, Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, Damien Jalet and Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods (*Atelier I, Atelier II, Auf den Tisch!, All Together Now, BLESSED*).

Jeroen Versteede (BE) – dramaturgy

Jeroen Versteede is a dramaturge who currently lives and works in Berlin. After studying Germanic languages and transmedia in Brussels, Versteede worked as a dramaturge for the National Theatre in Ghent from 2005 until 2010. In 2010, he moved to the Münchner Kammerspiele in Germany, where he collaborated with directors such as Alvis Hermanis, Susanne Kennedy, Johan Simons, Luk Perceval and Kristian Smeds. A dramaturge for the Ruhrtriennale from 2015 until 2017, he joined the Berliner Festspiele in 2017. Previous collaborations with Meg Stuart include *Built to Last* (2012) and *UNTIL OUR HEARTS STOP* (2015).

PHOTOS



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CONTACT**Meg Stuart / Damaged Goods**

Saintelettesquare 19, B-1000 Brussel
Tel: +32-2-513 25 40 / Fax: +32-2-513 22 48
info@damagedgoods.be / www.damagedgoods.be

Artistic director: Meg Stuart
General manager: John Zwaenepoel - john@damagedgoods.be
Administrator: Bieke Vanlerberghe - bieke@damagedgoods.be
Communication manager: Ewoud Vermote- ewoud@damagedgoods.be
Technical direction: Jitske Vandenbussche - jitske@damagedgoods.be
Tour manager: Delphine Vincent - delphine@damagedgoods.be