

PIT STOP

A new art form takes root in Bali. BY CYNTHIA ROSENFELD

“THROW TO THE GROUND” IS THE rough translation of Bali’s latest cultural attraction, Mepantigan. Yet this lively spectacle is as much a performance art as it is a martial art, with participants attired in traditional Balinese sarongs and loincloths accessorized with headdresses, spears, and the occasional python or fighting cock. Every full moon, island residents and tourists flock to watch former tae kwon do champion Putu Witsen Widjaya and his young troupe of about two dozen men and women perform in the purpose-built mud pit at the Green School, a 15-minute drive from Ubud in central Bali. Not even rainy weather deters the fans. Instead, they say it brings them closer to the action, since Putu Witsen’s crew get quite wet themselves during this remarkable integration of mud wrestling, tae kwon do, Afro-Brazilian *capoeira*, *pencak silat* (an Indonesian martial art), Balinese folk drama, gamelan music, and shadow puppetry.

The idea for an entirely new cultural attraction on an island already rich in artistic expression came to Putu Witsen in 2003. He wanted to blend his martial arts background with a desire to teach “people about the earth and Dewi Sri, the goddess of rice who is so important to Balinese people. Respect for the three harmonies—man and man, man and god, man and nature—inspired me.” His initial stagings of Mepantigan took place on the beach, with dancers lathered in coconut oil. But “we were too slippery to grapple one another. Mud works much better,” he recalls. The pit at the Green School,



ON WITH THE SHOW **Clockwise from top left:** The full-moon performances of Mepantigan at Bali’s Green School include spectacular fire-eating displays; a muddy melee; shadow dancing; getting in costume.

where performers quickly get covered in loamy volcanic mire, also allows a much closer connection—quite literally—to the earth. Such nuances are perfectly aligned with the environmental philosophy of the school itself, which is constructed entirely of bamboo and where primary and secondary students study sustainability, write on recycled paper, and grow their own tapioca and eggplant.

The gamelan orchestra gets louder as wrestlers move out of the mud pit and begin a series of fire-eating routines perilously close to the Heart of School.

This is an amazing structure comprised of 2,630 bamboo poles in two spirals linked by a central double helix. Soon to house the campus’s library, it reaches 18 meters at its highest point, making it one of the world’s largest all-bamboo buildings. Behind a nearby scrim, dancers jerk themselves about like shadow puppets before jumping back in the mud to turn each other upside down while simultaneously acting out a classic Balinese love story.

It’s a spirited performance that Putu Witsen believes “cultivates compassion.” Judging from the enraptured faces of both his troupe and their audience, Mepantigan has achieved that and more. ©

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