

GARIN NUGROHO

(THE PLANET - A LAMENT)

INTERVIEW

'EARTH, WIND, WATER AND FIRE NEED ROOM TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES'

Interview Garin Nugroho
by Charlie Crooijmans



In these uncertain times with climate disasters and virus outbreaks, the Indonesian director Garin Nugroho's piece *The Planet – A Lament* forces us to face some harsh realities: we must reconsider our ways. The interdisciplinary piece with singing, dancing and film tells a redemptive story about surviving in a post-tsunami environment. A conversation with Nugroho about natural disasters in Indonesia, Melanesian culture and traditional laments.

The telephone interview with Nugroho is on 13 March 2020, the day on which the seriousness of the corona virus begins to sink in in The Netherlands. Due to corona, this piece from 2020 can be seen at the 2021 festival. Nugroho is known for having his finger on the pulse of the times. His films break taboos and touch on

current social matters, as in *Leaf on a Pillow* (1998) about street children; *Opera Jawa* (2007) about the decline of Javanese tradition; *Setan Jawa* about Javanese mysticism (this silent film with live music was featured at the Holland Festival in 2017); and *Memories of My Body* (2018) about the Javanese cross-gender dancer Rianto (opening of the digital Holland Festival in 2020). And now again, *The Planet – A Lament* is highly topical.

What is *The Planet – A Lament* about?

'It is about a tsunami ravaging the land in Papua and leaving behind just a single egg as a symbol of energy and nutrition. The only man left has to treat it with great care. Meanwhile, plastic waste turns into monsters that want to plunder the egg because they also need energy and nutrition'.

So a surreal scenario?

'Well, it has more to do with folklore; birds and eggs are a common feature in the fables

of Melanesian culture, performing birds to June 2021
man find his nest to hatch the egg. His dance moves were inspired
bird, a bird of paradise from Papua'.

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Papua, the western part of the island New Guinea, is a province of Indonesia but is ethnologically part of the island group Melanesia. Translated from the Greek, Melanesia means 'black islands', a reference to the dark skin of the indigenous population.

Where exactly is Melanesia?

'Melanesia is rather vast and comprises parts of Australia, the Philippines, Hawaii and Samoa. Next to China, it is an important area because it was part of the Silk Road. The map of Melanesia is often forgotten, though the Second World War was decided by the victory of the allied forces, America and its allies, in the region of Melanesia: Pearl Harbour (Hawaii), the battle for New Guinea (presently Papua and West Papua), the battle for Morotai, etc. This area is of importance both politically and culturally'.

Melanesia's size became clear to Nugroho only when he travelled from Indonesian Papua to Aceh, the northern point of Sumatra. After the 2004 tsunami, Nugroho led an organisation in Aceh devoted to trauma therapy for persons who had been displaced by the disaster. This experience formed the basis of *The Planet – A Lament*.

What has stuck with you most from when you arrived in post-tsunami Aceh?

'I travelled from Papua by motorcycle from the forest, then on a truck to the airport, and then I had to take two airplanes and a helicopter. From the sky, I could see lots of water and uninhabited territory, and I realised that humans are no longer capable of having an understanding with nature. An old man in Aceh told me the nature several minutes before the tsunami was so incredibly beautiful: "The sky was red, and the fish came to the surface and started to flop around on the beach". Of course, I was struck by the bodies floating in the rivers, but what this man told me made the biggest impression. Humankind is no longer capable of reading this world's mysteries'.

How often do natural disasters occur in Indonesia?

'Very often. In 2019 alone, there were over 3,500 natural disasters. You should not forget that there are over a hundred active volcanoes. Indonesia lies in what is known as the Pacific Ring of Fire'.

Are people in Indonesia concerned about the climate problem?

'You can raise public awareness, but Indonesia's industrialisation is enormous as well. The palm oil industry is huge. It is responsible for destroying the diversity of forests in order to make more money. Indonesia's flora and fauna are highly diverse and do not fit in such a uniform environment. Natural disasters are inevitable'.

Does the government take measures to combat climate disasters?

'Government intervention is limited. There are some internationally financed movements to deal with things like the waste problem at tourist places, such as Bali. It is a dilemma and rather ironic, actually: people invest more in things that are 'dead', like plastic, buildings, roads and cars, than that they cherish living things. We allow such dead objects to grow and cover the living things. Earth, water, fire and wind are given less and less room to play, to express themselves. When the tsunami hit Papua, people wondered why the waves could reach the mainland. Perhaps they understand that the waves have no room to play, as there are hotels, boulevards, houses... When people close off everything, this causes many problems. Of course, a good example of this is Jakarta, the sinking capital of Indonesia. The city is below sea level, and as a result of modernisation and

urbanised from the international performing arts - june 2021

flooding

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Indonesia is a country with a large Muslim population. The islands that are part of the Melanesian culture, on the other hand, are for the most part Christian. Nugroho himself was born a Muslim but had a Catholic education. He immersed himself in the lament tradition that goes back to Hellenic Greece, the Indian Vedas and the Old Testament.

Where does your interest in the lamento (songs of lament) come from?

'In 1984 or 1985, I was in Larantuka on Flores around Easter. From the 16th century, Semana Santa is celebrated in grand fashion there. The local king selects the singers for the Good Friday procession in honour of Jesus Christ. At each of the eight stops, the lament singer sings one song. I encountered this same tradition on the Italian island Procida near Naples. I returned to Larantuka three or four times afterwards. I became obsessed with the lamento because it is humankind's deepest song. The songs are about life, death, war and misfortune. The oral tradition runs through families who preserve the songs and compose new laments to tell the life stories of the recently deceased.

Septina Rosalina Layan, a musicologist, singer and composer comes from such a family and was my gateway to this tradition. She is the solo singer in *The Planet - A Lament*. I met her in Solo two years ago. She had done research on laments about environmental issues in various Papuan villages. I asked her to select local songs of lament and arrange these for choir. Because of her, these songs are now passed on in written form as well, which means a new generation can once more lament and sing about the planet in a modern way'.

What is characteristic about the songs from Melanesia?

'There are many outside influences, mainly from missionaries from the Netherlands, Portugal and Germany throughout the centuries. The church generally only uses songs that are diatonic (7 notes in an octave), never pentatonic (5 notes in an octave) like those from the villages. This is why we have focussed in particular on the pentatonic songs that are passed on orally in the villages and that have nothing to do with the church or the Indonesian state'.

How did the casting for *The Planet - A Lament* come about?

'I selected the 15-voice Mazmur Chorale choir myself. They come from Kupang on Timor (East Nusa Tenggara). Singers with a feeling for the Melanesian soul. For the rest, the cast comes from different islands. The dancers and performers are from Papua, New-Guinea and Java. Because of the distance between them, making and rehearsing had to be done separately. This was not easy. We only got together six times to put everything together'.

Besides Septina, who selected and arranged the laments, two more composers are connected: Taufik Adam and Nursalim Yadi Anugerah. In 2017, Taufik Adam was one of six young composers to compose for the German Ensemble Modern. He wrote the piece *Balayia*, which means 'go out to sea' in the Minangkabau language. It was featured at the Holland Festival in 2017. Nursalim Yadi Anugerah is also the composer for *Ine Aya*, that will also be part of Holland Festival this year.

'I met Taufik Adam at the Holland Festival and his music appealed to me very much. Taufik is from West Sumatra and Yadi is originally from Kalimantan. Both live in Jakarta. I asked them to compose music without musical instruments, only sounds and vocals.'

Here in the West, we hear little about Papua and Nusa Tenggara, and its people and

Cultural expressions internationally performing arts June 2021

The national and foreign press usually show a negative side: protest, poverty.

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Why is it so important to get more attention for Melanesian culture?

'The typical cultural expressions like song and dance from Papua and Nusa Tenggara are rarely seen. With *The Planet – A Lament*, we are giving the voice of Melanesians an international stage. I feel it is extremely important that Papua can tell a new story in a modern form of expression'.

Is there still hope for our planet?

'A lament invites you to mourn and process trauma by singing together and thinking collectively about our current problems. It is not meant to find (political) solutions but to have a dialogue with nature with our feelings, from our soul, through fables and songs.'

A great many mysteries will unfold in today's world, including those caused by climate change and the rise in epidemics like the current corona virus. This requires us to reflect on the way we communicate with the macrocosm. The pain is not just afflicting our bodies. It is making nature sick as well. There is always new hope in the laments, as we are able to pass on our capacity for survival to new people. This is why laments are so fascinating to me. There are always two sides: death and enlightenment. But they also always contain a message about how humankind can live on.'

The Planet - A Lament

21 - 22 June live in ITA

22 June, stream

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