



The Role of Sawung Dance Festival in Introducing Contemporary Dance to the Surabaya Community

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Abstract

This study aims to determine and describe: the forms of activities held at the Sawung Dance Festival in an effort to introduce Contemporary dance. This study uses qualitative research methods. The data collection process includes observation techniques, documentation techniques, and interview techniques. The data validity technique used by researchers is triangulation techniques. In analyzing research data, researchers use three stages of data analysis, namely data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions / verification. The results of the study regarding the forms of activities held at the Sawung Dance Festival in an effort to introduce Contemporary dance are the registration of contemporary dance works then the selection and selection process of works, after the works are selected then the performance of the works. In addition to presenting selected works from contemporary choreography, the Sawung Dance Festival also displays the results of Sawung Dance production works. The Sawung Dance Festival also holds workshops for contemporary choreographers who want to develop the potential for creating contemporary dance works, of course with international standard speakers and trainers. The Sawung Dance Festival is presented at the Cak Durasim Building, East Java Cultural Park, Surabaya.

INTRODUCTION

Dance is an artistic endeavor aimed at creating beauty through movements and rhythms that are arranged into a unified form to convey meaning and messages. It may also be understood as an expression of the human soul that embodies aesthetic, symbolic, and entertaining elements (Jazuli, 2011).

Traditional and creative dance forms hold a strong presence in Surabaya and its surrounding regions. According to Abidin Zaenal (2007), *existence* refers to a state of being, a dynamic process, or something that comes into being. Within the arts, the existence of artistic traditions functions as an identity marker that reflects a community's cultural civilization.

As times progress, the public's artistic preferences also evolve. Dance is no longer used solely for traditional ceremonies and religious rituals; it also functions as entertainment and as a form of aesthetic expression. This development has contributed to the emergence of contemporary dance (Asiati, 2016). Contemporary dance is characterized by deliberate and systematic movements created for artistic purposes. These movements are derived from the dancer's experiences, including observations of daily human activities and animal movements; such observations are then adapted into dance movements (Grove, 2005).

The word *contemporary* comes from the English term *contemporary*. Contemporary dance can therefore be defined as a human artistic creation that expresses deep emotional and spiritual impulses, visualized and actualized through distinctive and aesthetically pleasing movements that reflect the spirit of the present era.

Contemporary or postmodern dance is a new artistic form rich in aesthetic value, often surpassing the artistic level of other newly created works. It is an art form that transcends existing boundaries, allowing unlimited creative processes. Contemporary choreography reinterprets existing dance works and transforms them based on the artist's conceptual and aesthetic ideas,

resulting in new works with unique characteristics (Kusumastuti, 2016).

However, it is undeniable that the people of Surabaya and East Java remain largely unfamiliar with contemporary art particularly contemporary dance. Due to its free-form nature and lack of rigid rules, contemporary dance is still perceived as unconventional or even taboo. This situation is concerning, as only those within the arts community tend to appreciate contemporary dance, while the general public remains unfamiliar with it and unable to fully appreciate or enjoy it.

One factor that inhibits the development of contemporary dance in Surabaya and East Java is the limited availability of platforms that facilitate the articulation of contemporary choreographers' creative ideas. Most regional festivals and annual events, including the Cipta Karya Tari Festival and the National Student Festival, predominantly present traditional and creative dance forms. Furthermore, the strong influence of local customs that prioritize traditional dance further constrains public exposure to contemporary works. Consequently, when contemporary dance is presented, it generally receives minimal public interest and appreciation.

Traditional, creative, modern, and contemporary dance forms cannot be equated or compared, as each has its own historical background and practical framework. Each type of dance plays a significant role in shaping the cultural identity of the region in which it emerges. The diverse identities and characteristics of these dance forms contribute to cultural prestige and can elevate the popularity of the cultural heritage from which they originate (Cerita, 2020).

This situation motivated Sekar Alit, a prominent artist and founder of Sawung Dance Studio, to educate the people of Surabaya and East Java so that they may better understand and appreciate contemporary dance. She observed that audiences often compared contemporary dance to traditional or creative dance, a mindset she considers outdated. Such comparisons should no longer occur, as

traditional/creative dance and contemporary dance clearly possess different identities and artistic foundations.

Artistic appreciation is an essential competence for every individual. It refers to the capacity to understand and value a work of art, a process that emerges through direct engagement with the artwork. Thus, the cultivation of artistic appreciation requires frequent interaction with artistic expressions, such as by attending performances or art events (Fathayatul, 2016).

With comprehensive preparation, organization, and management, the Sawung Dance Festival was established as a platform to introduce contemporary dance to the people of Surabaya. Implementing such an event requires meticulous planning to ensure smooth execution and to minimize potential challenges. The festival serves a significant role in broadening public knowledge and fostering new experiences related to contemporary dance within Surabaya and its surrounding communities.

Festivals function as platforms for promoting cultural diversity and as educational spaces for the public. They also serve as tourist attractions and as arenas for negotiating cultural identity. According to Waterman (1998), arts festivals operate as cultural commodities that embody contested cultural meanings. In a country characterized by extensive cultural diversity, arts festivals in Indonesia act as venues for celebrating cultural identity through various rituals and traditions, including religious ceremonies, harvest festivals, maritime celebrations, and carnivals.

Based on the explanation above, the author's interest in examining the Sawung Dance Festival stems from its role and its influence on both the people of Surabaya and the audiences who attend the festival.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study entitled "The Role of the Sawung Dance Festival in Introducing Contemporary Dance to the Surabaya Community" is a descriptive research that presents data in the form of written and verbal descriptions rather than numerical values or formulas. Therefore, this study employs a qualitative research method.

Qualitative research generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observable behaviors (Moleong, 2012).

The qualitative approach seeks to understand phenomena by describing research objects through accounts of particular conditions or circumstances, such as perceptions, behaviors, motivations, and actions. Qualitative research is inherently exploratory, with the researcher serving as the principal instrument of inquiry. The data are analyzed qualitatively, and data collection is carried out through triangulation, which incorporates multiple complementary techniques.

In this study, the researcher employs three types of data sources, namely persons, places, and documents, as outlined by Arikunto (2013). The person or individual serves as the primary data source, in which the researcher prepares interview questions for informants to obtain the necessary information supporting the research. The data collected in this study are derived from interviews, observations, and direct field notes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Sawung Dance Festival is an annual event designed to educate the Surabaya community about contemporary dance by providing a platform for contemporary choreographers to present their works, as well as by organizing various programs led by highly qualified instructors. Through the numerous initiatives developed by Sawung Dance, the festival plays a significant role in shaping and strengthening the contemporary choreography environment in Surabaya and its surrounding regions.

History of the Sawung Dance Festival

The festival was initiated by the artist Sekar Alit, who sought to educate the people of Surabaya so they could develop a deeper understanding of contemporary art, particularly contemporary dance, and refrain from comparing it with traditional forms. According to Sekar Alit, traditional dance and contemporary dance are fundamentally distinct and therefore should not be

evaluated in relation to one another. As stated by M. Jazuli (2008), traditional dance is born, developed, and inherited across generations. In contrast, contemporary dance, according to Grove (2005), consists of intentional and systematic movements derived from observing daily human activities and animal behaviors.

Motivated by her concerns and experiences, Sekar Alit felt the need to create an annual event dedicated to contemporary dance. Thus, the Sawung Dance Festival was established and has been held since 2015.

Definition of the Sawung Dance Festival

The Sawung Dance Festival represents a form of artistic contribution within the field of choreography, aimed at cultivating an ecosystem for contemporary dance performance, particularly in Surabaya and East Java. Its main objective is to educate the public especially those in Surabaya and East Java about contemporary dance, enabling both artists and non-artists to appreciate and enjoy contemporary works without comparing them to traditional or creative dance forms. The festival also seeks to broaden the public's understanding of dance as a whole.

In addition, the Sawung Dance Festival was established as a platform for contemporary choreographers to express and present their works. This initiative stems from Sekar Alit's own experience, as she previously lacked opportunities to showcase her contemporary creations due to the absence of annual events or festivals in Surabaya and East Java that supported contemporary choreographers. Therefore, she aims to ensure that contemporary choreographers do not lose the opportunity to express and present their artistic visions to the public.

Role of the Sawung Dance Festival

According to Dougherty and Pritchard (1985), role theory is a conceptual framework used in the study of behavior within organizational settings. They state that a role involves patterns of product creation rather than merely patterns of behavior or actions. This theory is relevant to the purpose behind the establishment of the

Sawung Dance Festival, which is to educate the Surabaya community who are still relatively unfamiliar and unaccustomed to contemporary arts by presenting contemporary dance works and generating new contemporary pieces through the festival's various activities.

Sawung Dance Festival Activities

Consistent with the structure of many arts festivals, the Sawung Dance Festival presents a series of performances, specifically contemporary dance works. These works are selected through an open-call submission process with the following requirements:

- a. Applicants must be choreographers who were either born in or currently reside in East Java.
- b. Applicants must be between 18–35 years old.
- c. Submissions must comprise contemporary dance works, whether complete pieces or works in progress.
- d. Duration of the work must be 15–20 minutes.
- e. Works may be presented as solo, duo, or group pieces, with a maximum of five dancers.
- f. Choreographers must be willing to participate in an intensive monitoring process throughout the creation period

After the open-call registration and the curatorial process conducted by the festival team and guest curators, several contemporary works were selected, including

Sri Cicik Handayani from Sumenep with the work "Nandhang".



Figure 1. Nandhang Dance Work.
(Source: Sawung Dance Festival, 2025)

This work attempts to uncover and reinterpret the profound meaning embedded in the activity of Nandhang a form of dancing performed by tandhak women in the Tayub Madura tradition of Sumenep. In this context, both the dancer and the act of dancing become central elements that sustain a cultural tradition within the community. The various phenomena and events occurring within the spaces inhabited by tandhak women, due to their complex roles within social structures, form interconnected processes that generate deep impressions and messages both for the tandhak women themselves and for those outside their community.

Putri Amelia, from Surabaya with the work *"Fomo on Tiktok"*



Figure 2. Fomo on Tiktok dance work.
(Source: Sawung Dance Festival, 2025)

In contemporary society, trends have become a focal point, leading many individuals to go to great lengths to avoid being perceived as outdated—*zaman é zaman edan, sing ora edan ora keduman*. This work narrates the fear experienced by individuals today who feel anxious about missing out on trends or viral phenomena.

The title FOMO, an acronym for Fear of Missing Out, reflects this anxiety particularly in the context of the TikTok platform and social media culture, where people believe that failing to follow trends equates to being left behind. Through this work, the dancer portrays various ways in which individuals attempt to keep up with trends in order to remain relevant in the eyes of society.

In addition to the works selected through the Open Call, the Sawung Dance Festival also presented production works created by Sawung Dance itself,

choreographed by Hari Ghulur. Two additional performances were included, one of which was:

"SILO" Choreographed by Hari Ghulur, Madurakarya Hari Ghulur, Madura



Figure 3. "SILO" work dance
(Source: Sawung Dance Festival, 2025)

The work SILO draws inspiration from the cultural practice of *tahlil*, a religious ritual that has been deeply rooted in the choreographer's life since childhood. This ritual becomes the central motoric reference for the movement of the torso. The choreography serves as a vertical dialogue between the dancer and the Divine, expressed through repetitive and deeply personal movements.

SILO is an extension of the earlier work SILA, which was created during Hari Ghulur's residency at the American Dance Festival. He views SILO as both a space for bodily exploration and a form of ritualistic practice. The choreography embodies an effort to reach emotional and spiritual transcendence through movements performed in grounded and limited bodily positions close to the earth, embodying humility and rootedness. *"Japvanese"* Hari Ghulur, Madura and Reisha Simojima, Japan



Figure 4. Karya tari *Japvanese*
(Source: Sawung Dance Festival, 2025)

The creation of Japvanese began with an encounter between the two choreographers during an international residency program that brought various choreographers together in Singapore. This work represents an acculturation or fusion of Japanese and Javanese cultures. The choreography incorporates numerous movements that reflect the cultural characteristics of both traditions, including gestures inspired by wayang as well as Japanese dance forms. Japvanese has been performed twice, with its premiere presented at the Contact Contemporary Dance Festival in Singapore.

Workshops and Choreographic Residencies

The Sawung Dance Festival not only presents works by contemporary choreographers but also implements programs that support its educational mission for the communities of Surabaya and East Java, including workshops and choreographic residencies. These programs are facilitated by instructors from Indonesia as well as from various other countries. Such involvement provides considerable benefits for both the participants and the festival, particularly in strengthening artistic networks. Through direct engagement with experienced practitioners, participants acquire substantive knowledge that contributes meaningfully to the advancement and deeper understanding of contemporary dance in Surabaya and East Java.

Functions of the Sawung Dance Festival

In addition to its role as a form of entertainment, the Sawung Dance Festival was established to advance the objectives envisioned by Sekar Alit. The festival serves as a platform through which contemporary choreographers may develop and present their works to the public. Through this function, the festival operates as an educational space for the people of Surabaya, thereby deepening their understanding of contemporary art, particularly contemporary dance.

CONCLUSION

The impact and role of the Sawung Dance Festival on contemporary art are highly significant. The festival functions as an event that integrates entertainment, education, and the introduction of contemporary dance to the Surabaya community. It also serves as a platform for contemporary choreographers to learn and develop their skills through guidance from highly qualified instructors. Moreover, the festival provides a space for choreographers to express and present their contemporary works. Through these efforts, the Sawung Dance Festival contributes to transforming public perceptions that previously regarded contemporary art as unfamiliar or unconventional. At the same time, it strengthens the artistic identity and branding of Sawung Dance itself.

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