

LOS ANGELES TIMES

DANCE REVIEW

A village awakens, and our eyes open

An island culture comes uniquely alive with the rhythms of daily routine and sparkling gamelan music of 'Odalan Bali.'

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Music and dance from the Southeast Asian island of Bali is no rarity on local stages not with all the distinguished artists-in-residence who have formed excellent performing ensembles at our colleges and universities. But Çudamani offered a new experience in its "Odalan Bali" program at UCLA on Saturday.

This group of 18 musicians and seven dancers from the village of Pengosekan, Ubud, quietly rebels against the formats that traditionally shape folkloric performances.

Instead of offering isolated highlights from several overlapping ancient traditions, artistic director I Dewa Putu Berata staged a cultural overview that depicted Balinese village life beginning with the rhythms of rush brooms sweeping sacred spaces at dawn.

No hint of conventional ethnic vaudeville tainted Act 1, so Royce Hall became a kind of window on a society where art continually enriches daily activities. For instance, a large complement of seated men syncopated their mundane chopping and grating chores, turning them into percussive riffs. At the same moment, women in another area of the stage transformed their work tasks with song, their vibrating fingers providing a glimpse of the intricate dances that would come later.

Before long, the company unveiled its gamelan: a richly carved and gilded array of stands supporting gongs and bells of many sizes. Spread across the stage with the higher-toned instruments on the left, the more deeply reverberant ones on the right and drums in an open space in the middle this gamelan could generate layers of brilliant metallic percussion as well as a powerful undertone that seemed to hang in the auditorium like mist.

Women carrying maypoles hung with ribbons introduced a remarkably mellow version of

the Baris, which is often performed as a fierce warrior-solo but here presented by four men as an abstraction of protective male energy.

Similarly, Act 2 included a benign presentation of the Barong, an enormous lion-like creature most frequently shown in eternal combat with Rangda, a force of evil but not here. Too many fierce warriors have wounded the world recently, and their violence has even shattered Bali's peace. So, "Odalan Bali" avoided showing even mythic combat, emphasizing instead how people can work together in a diverse but supportive community.

Portraying traditional temple ceremonies, Act 2 sustained this vision but sacrificed the unbroken flow of events that had made the first half of the evening so extraordinary by including a series of formal dances on the forestage. In "Legong Gering," a trance ritual involving possession by divine spirits, Ni Wayan Pebri Lestari and Dewa Ayu Eka Putri mirrored one another with spectacular quivering, darting complexity.

"Truna Gandrung" showcased the virtuosity and charisma of Ni Kadek Sudarmanti in a more recent and conspicuously glittering style: tense and even brittle but full of the tiniest, quickest shifts of position and most abundant expressive details. Flexions of the neck, shimmers of the shoulders, balances on one foot, movements of the eyes, flutters of a fan and sudden swirls of the train of her robe all created the sense that she was dancing to every instrument in the gamelan with some part of her body or costume.

Singing, rhythmic chanting, gamelan interludes and moments of prayer supplemented the dances, but the various activities weren't always self-explanatory even if you had read the program notes. Indeed, you could argue that the holistic, contextual view of Balinese culture on view in both halves of "Odalan Bali" might work better in a documentary film with subtitles or spoken commentary supplying needed insights.

Still, there's no doubt that the performance brought us closer to the essence of a culture than most touring or touristic performances ever can, making us question and perhaps reject the ways that non-Western or pre-Western traditions are commonly presented on our stages.

The Saturday performance served as a benefit for the World Festival of Sacred Music, which is scheduled from Sept. 17 to Oct. 2 throughout Southern California. Çudamani also performs Wednesday at UC Santa Barbara.