

# From Stigma to Stardom: The Rise of Women in Commercial Performing Arts During the Colonial Period in the Dutch East Indies

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## Abstract

This study departs from the strong social stigma attached to women involved in the performing arts during the colonial period in the Dutch East Indies. Within patriarchal and colonial moral constructions, female performers were often associated with deviance, sensuality, and transgressions of domestic norms. Although several studies have examined the careers of female artists or representations of women in colonial performing arts, systematic analyses tracing the historical transformation from stigma to professional legitimacy within the context of modern commercial theater remain limited. Employing the historical method, this study demonstrates how women negotiated their positions from marginalized and denigrated figures to central actors on the theatrical stage. The findings show that the modernization of commercial theater (through managerial, aesthetic, and production innovations) introduced by groups such as Miss Riboet's Orion and Dardanella fostered the emergence of a more professional and competitive performance arena. Business competition and agendas of artistic renewal strengthened women's positions as leading figures in theatrical productions. As modern theater developed, women who had previously been regarded as low-status entertainment workers gained public recognition as stage stars and symbols of prestige. Women's images thus shifted from objects of stigma to respected professional subjects within the colonial performing arts industry.

**Keywords:** Women; Commercial Theater; Stigma; Primadonna; Dutch East Indies; Performing Entertainment; *Toneel*.

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## Introduction

The involvement of women in the performing arts has long been situated within patriarchal moral frameworks that confine their roles to the domestic sphere and problematize their presence in public spaces. Across various societies, female stage performers have frequently been associated with sensuality, moral deviance, and transgressions of social norms. Several studies on gender and performance demonstrate that women's bodies on stage are often positioned as objects of spectacle rather than as creative subjects endowed with artistic agency (Knio, 2016, p. 3; Wurianto, 2017, p. 1). At the same time, the theater industry has historically depended on the presence of women to attract audiences, creating a paradox in which women occupy positions that are simultaneously vulnerable and central to commercial success (Marra,

2009, p. xv).

A similar phenomenon occurred in the Dutch East Indies, both in traditional performances and in commercial theater from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Women who appeared on stage were frequently subjected to negative stigmatization. This stigma stemmed from the perception that their public performances deviated from traditional norms that required women to safeguard family honor by remaining within the domestic sphere rather than pursuing careers in the entertainment world.

Nevertheless, the theatrical entertainment industry continued to develop in a more professional direction and increasingly emphasized artistic value in its performances. This period constituted a crucial phase in the history of the performing arts in the Dutch East Indies, as women simultaneously began to assume significant roles as agents of change within the entertainment industry. Amid various social constraints, women on stage utilized their bodies and expressive capacities to redefine their social roles. Through acting, movement, and the transgression of established gender norms, women negotiated their positions within a patriarchal culture (Parolin, 2012, p. 19).

The dynamics of modern performing arts are captured in Nugroho & Puguh (2022), who show that the professionalization of the theater industry propelled the transformation of Komedi Stamboel into modern toneel characterized by hybridity, Indisch culture, and the involvement of Indo communities, while also positioning Indische Toneel as a political medium of colonial association (Nugroho et al., 2024).

Studies that focus on women have generally highlighted biographical aspects (Hutari, 2017), representations of modern women in Dutch East Indies literature (Elizabeth Chandra, 2011), aristocratic theater (Beng, 1995), cross-dressing traditions (Hansen, 1999), or the female body in dance (Mursih, 2018). While these works make significant contributions, they have not systematically examined how women artists or actresses became subjects of art rather than merely objects, in tandem with the rising quality and professionalization of modern theater companies such as Miss Riboet's Orion and Dardanella.

This research seeks to address a gap in the existing literature by exploring the role of women in the performing arts of the Dutch East Indies. It extends previous discussions by examining how women negotiated the complexities of social stigma and attained prima donna status on the theatrical stage in the colonial context. By focusing on women's agency within the entertainment industry, this study highlights the processes through which female performers transformed marginalized positions into recognized professional prominence.

## Method

This study employs historical research methods to examine the representation and reception of women in performance entertainment in the Dutch East Indies. The research begins with the collection of primary sources in the form of colonial-era newspaper archives, including *De Locomotief*, *de Indische Courant*, *Bintang Timoer*, *Pemandangan*. In addition, the study draws on a colonial literary work depicting the lives of women on stage, namely Tan Boen Kim's 1917 publication *Tjerita Si Riboet atawa Boenga Mengandoeng Ratjoen* (The Story of Si Riboet, or The Flower That Contains Poison). Fragments of news reports, performance advertisements, reviews, and readers' opinions published in these newspapers reveal how the public responded to the presence of women on stage. By comparing European-language newspapers with indigenous newspapers, this research traces two distinct perspectives on women's performances and their reception by society. Reports highlighting appreciation, awards, and the popularity of actresses coexist with narratives reflecting social stigma, such as assumptions

that female performers possessed questionable reputations due to their work as entertainment stars.

Following the collection of sources, source criticism was conducted to select and validate relevant data and to compare the viewpoints of European and indigenous newspapers regarding the public image of women artists in commercial theater performances (Madjid & Wahyudhi, 2014, p. 224). The data were then subjected to interpretative analysis to elucidate how social and cultural transformations enabled women to overcome stigma and achieve renown within the sphere of commercial theater. The findings are presented in the form of historiography, outlining women's trajectories in the performing arts of the Dutch East Indies and their impact on broader patterns of social acceptance of them.

### **Women in Art: Colonial Stigma and Cultural Resilience**

During the colonial period, women's lives were shaped by customs that positioned them in subordinate roles relative to men. Prevailing cultures of patriarchy and feudalism contributed to the marginalization of women, who were often perceived primarily as companions to men. Arranged marriages were commonly employed to enhance family status, while women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere. Men, by contrast, were expected to serve as the foundation of the family and to participate actively in the public domain. Educational inequality experienced by women at the time was a direct consequence of patriarchal norms that placed men in dominant positions across social, economic, and cultural fields. Gender analysis demonstrates that men and women are socially and culturally constructed categories through which hierarchies and power relations are produced and maintained within society (Locher-Scholten, 2000, p. 3).

The presence of women in the workforce was not inherently prohibited. On the contrary, many plantation and factory laborers were women, including mothers who sought to cope with difficult economic conditions. The colonial government did not forbid women from working as laborers, as their participation was economically necessary. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as movements for women's emancipation emerged, women began to expand their roles by organizing and working within important institutions. In several sectors, patriarchal constraints gradually weakened. This shift, however, did not apply to women in the performing arts and entertainment industries, where subordination persisted. Women in these fields were frequently regarded as objects of sensuality and amusement, and their work was often undervalued. It was not uncommon for female performers to be associated with prostitution or labeled as "comfort women."

Women working as stage artists (including dancers, vocalists, and performers) frequently encountered strong social stigma. Although their artistic skills were often praised, they were simultaneously demeaned and considered to lack moral respectability. Social and cultural factors played a decisive role in determining the extent to which women were permitted to appear on stage. The entanglement of dance, sexuality, and gender within broader social structures has had a profound influence on the marginalization of women in these professions (Machdalena et al., 2024, p. 29).

To illustrate, *ronggeng* dancers are held in high esteem during traditional ceremonies, yet they are simultaneously perceived as sensual objects by male audiences and are not socially esteemed. The *ronggeng* is an image of women's powerlessness in the face of male dominance, particularly in matters of a sexual nature (Nasution & Lubis, 2019, p. 284). The practice of prostitution is also evident in performing arts such as *wayang Tjokek*, where *tjokek* dancers utilise their physical beauty and abilities as sexual attractions. Some dancers, such as *Bweehoa*

and Botan, even became the mistresses of a wealthy man, Major Tan, which demonstrates the overlap between the art world and sexual exploitation (Prasetyo, 2016, p. 11).

During the colonial period, *ronggeng* performances were associated with several socially problematic practices, including alcohol consumption, gambling, and prostitution. The term '*ronggeng*' has undergone a shift in meaning, becoming increasingly negative in the context of colonialism. This is particularly evident in the legalisation of immorality and prostitution (Meiliana, 2023, p. 5). European observers and local literature have documented instances of lewd behaviour in these performances, where men have been known to offer money or coins to the dancers, and even engage in indecent acts. In 1817, Raffles observed that *ronggeng* were perceived to possess lax morals and were frequently likened to prostitutes (Foley, 2015, pp. 370–371). In broader society, the lives of *ronggeng* were often identified with prostitution, where dancers often sold themselves to men who desired them (Yulianeta, 2017, p. 797).

Raffles observed that *ronggeng* dancers frequently married the village head, but after a few years, they divorced and returned to dancing. The practice of serial monogamy became a common occurrence in the lives of *ronggeng*. In the early 20th century, dancers who had married musicians were permitted to resume their dancing careers, whereas those who had not divorced could not. Some dancers have asserted that they have had up to 19 husbands throughout their careers. The *ronggeng* is known by several names, including *taledek*, *tandak*, *gambyong* and others. These names exhibit similar variations in different parts of Indonesia, including Makassar and Bali. While Europeans associated the *ronggeng* with indigenous art and viewed it in sexualised terms, local people viewed the *ronggeng* as part of Islamic culture, associated with fertility, entertainment, martial arts and anti-colonial resistance (Foley, 2015, p. 372).

*Sinden*, traditional singers in *wayang kulit* and *gamelan* performances, are esteemed for their vocal abilities. However, they are frequently subjected to harassment from male audience members. Despite being lauded as artists, their role as stagehands renders them susceptible to sexual exploitation. In patriarchal cultures, women who perform on stage are perceived as transgressing the established moral norms. In her 1996 study, Susan Pratt Walton examines Javanese gender identity through the lens of *pesinden*, female singers in Kiejawen culture who perform in palaces and *wayang* ceremonies. She recorded the life stories of three renowned *pesinden* from disparate generations. Despite their departure from the palace milieu, these *pesinden* continued to be esteemed as adept artists and occasionally regarded as "heavenly angels." *Pesinden* are regarded as emblems of Javanese women's strength and sexuality, which are occasionally undervalued and perceived as a menace to domestic tranquility (van Bemmelen & Grijns, 2005, p. 11).

In theatrical performance arts, female performers experienced similar dynamics. Particularly in the early twentieth century, as social transformations gave rise to modern theatrical entertainment, work as *anak panggung* (actresses) emerged as a new and relatively attractive occupation for women. Whereas in the traditions of *ronggeng* and *sinden* women's bodies were closely associated with ritual, sensuality, and local patronage relations, urban commercial performance arts positioned women within more organized, scheduled, and market-oriented formats. The theatrical stage introduced systems of performance management, newspaper-based promotion, and the construction of star personas that differed significantly from earlier traditional patterns. This landscape also produced complex forms of stigmatization of women within urban commercial entertainment.

### ***Gila Anak Komedi: Female Performers Loved and Loathed***

Because of modernization, public preferences in performance entertainment shifted from predominantly traditional forms toward a wide variety of modern spectacles, particularly in urban settings shaped by new social rhythms and consumer cultures. Urban audiences encountered commercial theater (*toneel*), which evolved from *bangsawan* and *Komedi Stamboel*, alongside night-market circuses and imported performances from Europe, the United States, and India. The spread of photography, the gramophone, and motion pictures further enriched the landscape of modern entertainment (Ruppin, 2016, p. 105). This expanding entertainment culture was sustained by colonial infrastructure (railways, trams, hotels, post offices, schools, theaters, cinemas, markets, and major roads) which facilitated the circulation of performers, audiences, and cultural commodities (Doris Jedamski, 1998, p. 168).

Within this context, one prominent form of performance entertainment was *toneel* (itinerant theater or popular drama). A notable development was that each *toneel* troupe typically featured a leading *primadonna*, often bearing the title “Miss”—an actress who functioned as both the group’s icon and its principal attraction. This “star” phenomenon became widely popular and a common designation for prominent theater actresses as well as well-known *keroncong* singers. Among these figures were Miss Roekiah, a professional dramatist and *keroncong* singer with Opera Palestina (Imanjaya, 2006, p. 110), as well as Miss Jacoba, Miss Tjitjih, Miss Riboet, and Miss Dja (Sakrie, 2015, p. 4). The prominence of these “Miss” figures underscores how central women were (and how crucial their roles were) in enhancing the popularity and commercial success of theatrical performances.

Tracing this phenomenon further back to the origins of modern commercial entertainment, its roots can be found in Parsi Theatre from Bombay, which toured as far as the Malay Peninsula in the early nineteenth century. In its initial phase, women did not appear publicly on stage; female roles were instead performed by men who impersonated women. One notable example is Khurshed Batliwala (1852–1913), one of the most renowned figures in Parsi Theatre, who performed female roles at the age of eighteen in *Rustam and Sohrab* (Hansen, 1999, p. 132). In a subsequent phase, as Parsi Theatre gave rise to derivative forms such as *Komedi Bangsawan* and *Komedi Stamboel*, women began to appear as important and central performers. One of the earliest female performers to join was Cik Tot, who later became the troupe’s *primadonna* (Sumarjo, 1992, p. 103).

*Komedi Stamboel*, which developed in the late nineteenth century, emerged as a new option and source of employment for women seeking to earn an income. This form of popular theater provided women with alternative livelihood opportunities and a means to challenge the patriarchal culture that constrained their lives. The first women to join *Komedi Stamboel* were predominantly poor Eurasian women. Acting offered an option that was perceived as preferable to prostitution in urban settings, allowing women to pursue work that carried a different form of social legitimacy (Krisnawati, 1993, p. 160) (Krisnawati, 1993, p. 160).

By entering the world of theater, women were able to attain a degree of financial independence and receive wages commensurate with their status as performers. In this regard, Elizabeth Chandra, drawing on Virginia Woolf’s ideas, argues that access to paid employment constitutes a crucial first step in the process of women’s emancipation. Financial independence enabled women to distance themselves from the authority of fathers or husbands and to pursue their own aspirations (Elizabeth Chandra, 2011, p. 168).

Socially, *Komedi Stamboel* also had the potential to liberate women from various social constraints. Tan Sooi Beng observes that commercial theater created a social space in which women (both unmarried and married) could attend performances freely. Because the primary

objective of commercial theater was to generate profit and attract large audiences, gender restrictions were often relaxed. This relative tolerance was closely linked to the growing presence and visibility of actresses on the commercial theater stage (Elizabeth Chandra, 2011, p. 167).

By the late nineteenth century, Mahieu had successfully established an early prototype of modern theater that became one of the most popular forms of entertainment of its time, giving rise to numerous amateur theater groups within society. However, by the early twentieth century, *Komedie Stamboel* appeared to undergo what was perceived as a moral decline. This shift is evident in various news reports and sharp commentaries that increasingly attached negative stigmas to *Komedie Stamboel*. Its performances were often described as disorderly and as sources of public disturbance. Audiences were frequently reported to be intoxicated, unruly, and even engaged in gambling rather than watching the performances attentively. *Komedie Stamboel* thus acquired a poor reputation and was repeatedly criticized for being inferior to *Komedie Bangsawan*, which was considered more refined in its use of language. In contrast, actors and actresses in *Komedie Stamboel* were often accused of using coarse and inappropriate speech. Moreover, criminal incidents, unruly interactions between performers and audiences, and the consumption of alcohol were commonly reported, necessitating police intervention to maintain order during performances (Cohen, 2009, p. 281).

This theatrical environment also had significant implications for women. A form of social stigmatization emerged toward female performers in commercial theater. This phenomenon is illustrated by the behavior of men and women described as *gila anak komedie* (obsessive fans of stage actresses), who spent substantial sums of money on their idols who performed impressively on stage. The term *gila anak komedie* referred to individuals of various ages who were intensely fascinated by comedy actresses, often to the extent of throwing money onto the stage when their favorite performers appeared (Abdullah et al., 1993, p. 32). Female performers were not infrequently subjected to sexually humiliating or violent treatment by their admirers. In addition, it was not uncommon for actresses to become romantically or sexually involved with members of their audience. These circumstances contributed to the unfavorable stigma attached to the title of “primadonna” (*bintang panggung*) in the eyes of society.

Young women who aspired to gain fame through stage performances often encountered resistance from their families or parents when considering a career as actresses. As a result, work as a stage performer was widely regarded as an occupation lacking respectability. The profession of women performers in *Komedie Stamboel* was frequently subjected to public criticism. Many journalists argued that a theatrical career constituted a degrading pursuit for women. Attitudes toward actresses were marked by a striking ambivalence. On the one hand, they were praised as “*Dewi Panggung*” or “*Bintang Panggung*” (stage goddesses/ stage stars), yet on the other hand, this admiration was accompanied by humiliation. To be an actress meant becoming an object of spectacle, a role perceived as contradicting traditional expectations that confined women to the domestic sphere. Women on stage were often equated with female dependents who received substantial financial and material benefits from admirers, a perception that further reinforced social prejudice (Elizabeth Chandra, 2011, p. 173).

The novel *Tjerita Si Riboet atawa Boenga Mengandoeng Ratjoen* provides an illustrative account of the negative stereotyping of women in the Stambul theatrical world in the early twentieth century. Tan Boen Kim’s story was adapted from a real-life tragedy involving a stage star named Riboet, who was killed amid a scandal after being shot by her lover, a Dutch police

officer, in mid-1916. In the narrative of *Si Riboet*, Tan recounts Riboet's desire to watch a *Stamboel* performance in Glodok, not far from her home in Kemayoran. However, she was unable to attend because her parents did not allow her to go alone. Like many Javanese women of her time, Riboet could not freely visit public spaces without being accompanied by an adult relative (Kim, 1917, p. 15). The allure of stage life ultimately motivated her to become part of the theatrical world. She later joined a performance troupe as an actress, despite her father's disapproval.

Work on stage offered women opportunities to earn a livelihood, gain autonomy, and establish themselves as celebrities (Elizabeth Chandra, 2011, p. 170). The transient nature of the *Komedie Stamboel* stage world provided women with an alternative to the domestic responsibilities that dominated their lives. By the mid-1920s, modernity brought significant socio-economic changes to society, and this transformation also enabled women to emerge as stage artists who were increasingly recognized by the public as respectable and legitimate cultural figures.

### **Primadonna on Stage: The Rise of Women in Modern Theater**

There was a crucial phase that marked a shift in perceptions of women as stage workers—from figures previously viewed negatively to individuals who were increasingly valued and respected. As discussed earlier, the poor reputation of *Komedie Stamboel* frequently gave rise to scandals involving women and reinforced negative stereotypes about them. In the subsequent phase, around the mid-1920s, several reformers emerged who sought to restructure *Komedie Stamboel* by introducing performances that were more orderly, innovative, and oriented toward professionalism. This reformed theatrical form later became known as *toneel*.

This turning point occurred when *Komedie Stamboel* underwent significant transformation through the initiatives of pioneering theater groups such as Miss Riboet's Orion (1925) and Dardanella (1926). Why did this moment constitute such an important watershed? Through the reforms introduced by these two groups, *Komedie Stamboel* was transformed into a genuinely modern and professional form of *toneel*. At the same time, a new awareness emerged regarding the roles and positions of women on stage, who were no longer regarded merely as objects of spectacle. In this modern *toneel*, one particularly striking development was the emergence of trained women performers as professional figures rather than sensational attractions. On stage, women became increasingly active in studying roles, songs, and dances (Beng, 1995, p. 607). They were cultivated as actresses with skill, discipline, and artistic reputation, resulting in greater public appreciation of their artistic contributions.

Women gained broader opportunities to develop their capacities as actresses, and society gradually ceased to underestimate their roles and abilities. Although gender inequality on stage persisted (manifested primarily in the double burden women carried as both domestic workers and income earners) women increasingly emerged as prominent figures who assumed central roles and acted as key driving forces in commercial theatrical productions.

A closer analysis of the trajectories of Miss Riboet's Orion and Dardanella in elevating the quality of Malay theater also reveals an important layer beneath the visible artistic dynamics, the presence of women as empowered subjects who shone and played active roles as agents of change. Within these modern theatrical practices, women appeared as creative and organizational figures, as well as symbols of renewal who helped shape both the aesthetic direction and the professional standards of performances. This process demonstrates a shift in meaning and a reconfiguration of women's positions, whereby through the modernization of

theater, women repositioned themselves from figures long burdened by stigma into cultural agents endowed with authority and social visibility.

### *Miss Riboet's Orion*

*Miss Riboet adalah jiwa dari pertunjukan-setidaknya sejauh sesuatu yang halus seperti itu dapat dikatakan. Ia mengenal penontonnya lebih baik daripada banyak direktur teater di Belanda, dan itulah yang paling penting. Segala hormat baginya! [Miss Riboet is the soul of the performance—at least insofar as something so subtle can be expressed in such terms. She understands her audience better than many theatre directors in the Netherlands, and that is what matters most. All respect to her!]* (*Miss Riboet's Tooneelgezelschap*, 1929).

Miss Riboet's Orion was an itinerant *toneel* troupe established in mid-1925. The troupe originated from Orion Park (1923), an amusement park founded by Tio Tek Djien, an educated Chinese entrepreneur. From its inception, the company marked a phase of renewal within the *Komedie Stamboel* tradition by undertaking comprehensive improvements across artistic, managerial, and technical aspects of performance. These efforts resulted in productions that were more structured, modern, and broadly acceptable to diverse social audiences, ranging from European publics to indigenous spectators.

One of the most prominent cultural strategies employed by the troupe was naming the company after its leading *primadonna*. Initially, the group was known as the *Maleisch Operette Gezelschap Orion*. However, as Miss Riboet's popularity rapidly rose as the principal stage star. Miss Riboet (1925) of the Orion troupe was a different actress from Riboet (1916), who was portrayed in Tan Boen Kim's novel *Tjerita Si Riboet atawa Boenga Mengandoeng Ratjoen* (1917). Tio Tek Djien (who was also her husband) repositioned the troupe's identity by adopting the name of its *primadonna*. The change to *Miss Riboet's Orion* symbolized the centrality of a female figure in constructing both the commercial appeal and the artistic identity of the troupe.

Prior to this shift, leading performers in *bangsawan* and *Stamboel* theatre did not use the title "Miss"; artists were typically identified by family names or, in the case of Malay opera actresses, by the honorific *Sri Panggoeng* (goddess of the stage). In the 1920s, female stars could choose Malay, Javanese, or Dutch titles, but Miss Riboet's adoption of "Miss" proved especially influential. As noted by Keppy (2019, p. 189), her popularity triggered a widespread trend in the use of the title, prompting even admirers to remark enthusiastically, "Miss, Miss, now there are so many Misses!"

From the time of its establishment, Miss Riboet served as the primary attraction of the performances. Alongside her, several other performers contributed to the troupe's artistic composition, including Miss Cora, known for her Hawaiian dances, as well as Miss Netti, Miss Salpiah and Miss Atoen (*Advertentie*, 1926; *Maleisch Operette Gezelschap Orion*, 1926). Nevertheless, symbolic and performative dominance remained firmly with Miss Riboet, who stood out as the most prominent stage icon.

Tracing her career, Miss Riboet can be positioned as a driving force who made a significant contribution to the improvement of *toneel* quality during the colonial period. Both European and indigenous audiences voiced similar praise for the *primadonna*, particularly for her stage persona and artistic talent. Her representation in various newspaper reports reveals the construction of an image of womanhood that was bold yet graceful—a combination that was considered progressive for its time.

An indigenous journalist, Saeroen of the newspaper *Pemandangan* (1935), even referred to her as a "He-Woman" actress. The term "He" alluded to her stage actions, which were

perceived as masculine-bold, vigorous, and courageous. Whereas in earlier periods Parsi theatre maintained the tradition of male actors performing female roles, Miss Riboet instead introduced the practice of *travesti* (women performing male roles) with striking dramatic intensity (*Miss Riboet*, 1928). Moreover, when portraying female characters, rather than presenting women as powerless figures, Miss Riboet depicted women as courageous and empowered. The “masculine” roles she performed thus became a distinctive symbol that ultimately endeared her to the public.

Her selective attitude toward theatrical scripts further reinforced this image. According to Tio, Miss Riboet once firmly refused to perform a play entitled *Carmen*, solely because the story portrayed a cunning woman who ensnared men through her allure. “*Boesoek betoel*” (truly rotten), she remarked, referring to women who completely dominated men. “*That is not for me. If I ever see that in an opera,*” she added with passion and agitation, “*if the police allowed it, I would go up on stage and slap them!!!*” (“*Het Een En Ander over Den Stamboel. Wat Di Tooneel Was, Wat Het ‘Orion Gezelschap’ Te Semarang Brengt, ‘Miss Riboet’ Geinterviewed.,*” 1927)

Several Dutch- and Malay-language newspapers from the 1920s to the 1930s recorded the public image of Miss Riboet and her troupe as a performance group relatively free from personal scandal. Female performers were often associated with particular moral stereotypes, including rumors of changing partners or controversial private lives. In contrast, reports on Miss Riboet and her husband, Tio Tek Djien, emphasized the stability of their marriage and their collaborative efforts in building a professional theater company. This representation distinguished Orion from many other itinerant troupes that frequently disbanded due to internal conflicts or negative reputations. Assessments of the troupe’s artistic quality also appeared in numerous press reviews. One such review noted that Miss Riboet’s dances “*could be regarded as purer because they contained no erotic elements*” (“*Het Zwarte Schaap. Groote Show van Miss Riboet,*” 1936).

It is evident that Orion’s leading star positioned herself as a female artist who prioritized artistic quality and consciously sought to shape an image of stage women as assertive and empowered. The role of female performers as drivers of theatrical direction is apparent in this star’s persistent efforts to rigorously cultivate her talents in acting, dance, singing, and other forms of stage entertainment. As a result, her artistic abilities were widely recognized by the public. For example, her acting skills enabled audiences to become fully immersed in the emotions she conveyed:

“It could not be otherwise, for Miss Riboet is a fine artist—indeed, a very fine one. She can captivate the entire audience. We found it most impressive how she expressed anger upon receiving that insulting letter: crushing it, stepping on it, and then, with intense emotion, declaring, ‘I could kill him!’ and so on” (“*Miss Riboet,*” 1927a),

Miss Riboet also demonstrated remarkable versatility by portraying characters from various regions such as Batavia, Surabaya, and Solo, which she performed with subtle humor and satire (“*Miss Riboet de Eerste Voorstellingen in Den Stadstuin,*” 1931a). As public commentary noted:

“*Ia ada perempuan jang paling loear biasa, jang bikin perdjalanan dari satu ke lain tempat sebagai satoe orang jang selama moeda, dan main hoofrdol dengan ia poenja hati dan*

*semangat dan banjak lagi lain-lain rol ketjil di dalam cabaret nummer samentara di pertoendjoekan extra's.* ["She is an extraordinarily remarkable woman, who undertakes journeys from one place to another as a young person, and plays the leading role with her heart and spirit, along with many other small roles in the cabaret numbers presented as extra performances] ("Iklan," 1931).

Beyond acting, the songs performed by Miss Riboet (Figure 1) also shaped public musical tastes. With her well-developed talent, she was able to sing in multiple languages, including Dutch, French, German, English, Arabic, and Siamese. The publicity surrounding her songs spread across almost the entire Dutch East Indies and became well known in Malaysia and Singapore. Even before Miss Riboet toured Malaysia and Singapore in 1929, her songs (particularly those she performed herself) had already gained popularity the previous year (1928). Numerous advertisements highlighted the popularity of Miss Riboet's voice; in one newspaper advertisement, she was described as *the most famous Malay artist* ("Advertisements," 1928). Denny Sakrie, in *100 Tahun Musik Indonesia*, notes that Miss Riboet is regarded as one of the most successful recording artists in Indonesian history. Between 1926 and 1927, she released 188 recordings under the German label Beca Records (Sakrie, 2015, p. 7).

Her popularity further led to her becoming an advertising figure for various products, ranging from beauty items and wristwatches to *Studebaker* automobiles ("Advertentie," 1931; "Onze Auto-Wedstrijd," 1929).



Figure 1. Portrait of Miss Riboet

Source: The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, Singapore (1933) page 2.

One defining feature of the empowered female image cultivated by Riboet was her consistent effort to embed subtle messages and social critique reflecting the conditions of each city she visited. Because of this critical stance, Miss Riboet even became the target of attacks when her critique of road conditions in Yogyakarta was perceived as provoking the local authorities, who considered her satire inappropriate; one newspaper reported that she was fined f50 by the court. This incident subsequently triggered negative propaganda that labeled

her a “communist,” “punished by the *landrechter*,” or “improper” (“Miss Riboet,” 1927b). Notably, portions of the press defended the actress, and segments of the Dutch public regarded the local government as intolerant of criticism—especially given that it was expressed through song (“*Kinderachtig*,” 1927). Rather than portraying her as a communist, the press emphasized Miss Riboet’s altruistic character, noting that she and her troupe were also actively involved in fundraising and supporting philanthropic institutions in the places they visited (Keppy, 2019, p. 187). Riboet herself subsequently used the stage as a medium of self-defense by responding satirically to these accusations during a performance in Solo, Central Java, where she attacked newspapers that had circulated false stories while joking about the possibility of being imprisoned and thus no longer able to perform (Keppy, 2019, p. 190).

The presence of this troupe was highly valued and is even regarded as laying the foundations of modern Indonesian theater. Its success was further evidenced when the group was granted permission to perform at the prestigious Schouwburg Batavia in 1935—an opportunity rarely afforded to indigenous troupes. This event served as proof that indigenous performances could attain a standard comparable to European productions. Through the innovations and transformations it introduced, Orion succeeded in elevating the status of indigenous theater, which had previously been regarded as a form of low-class entertainment (Fitriyani & Fauzia, 2022, p. 22). More broadly, its achievements functioned as a model for society and were seen as playing a significant role in enhancing the status of Malay *toneel* (“Miss Riboet Kunstenaars Jang Terkenal,” 1931)

Through the figure of Miss Riboet, women were positioned as the driving force behind the advancement of Malay theater, as reflected in public assessments:

*“Soenggoehpoen kemadjoean toneel Melajoe beloem sampai dipoentjaknya, seperti jang kita ingini, disebabkan kemadjoean perbandingan dengan Europa tooneel, atau karena memang masih baroe tjara ini dikalangan kita, tetapi dengan sebenarnya kita berpendapatan, bahwa dalam keadaan tooneel Melajoe sebagai sekarang di Indonesia, Miss Riboet jang betoel sekali sudah pernah mendapat tempat paling atas, tahoen ini masih djoega ia doedoeki!”* [Although the progress of Malay *toneel* has not yet reached the pinnacle we desire—whether due to comparisons with European *toneel* or because this form is still relatively new among us—we are nevertheless of the opinion that, in the current condition of Malay *toneel* in Indonesia, Miss Riboet has truly attained the highest position, and this year she continues to occupy it.”] (“Miss Riboet,” 1931a)

The troupe achieved remarkable success and managed to sustain its prominence until the eve of the Japanese occupation in 1942. Miss Riboet and her company toured extensively throughout the Dutch East Indies, performing in numerous cities across Java and Sumatra, as well as in the eastern regions of the archipelago, including Borneo, Makassar, and Ambon. They also visited neighboring territories, crossing into Malaya and Singapore, and traveling further to Brunei and the Philippines (“Miss Riboet Zwarte Schapen,” 1936).

Miss Riboet herself was reportedly offered a prestigious opportunity to extend her career to Hollywood. In 1934, she revealed that she was in negotiations with a Hollywood film producer interested in making an Indonesian-themed film and seeking her involvement. However, she ultimately declined the offer. Curious about her decision, the public questioned why she chose not to pursue this opportunity. With characteristic wit, Miss Riboet explained to a journalist from *De Telegraaf* (11 November 1934): “How could one be happy there, sir, when there is no *sambal*?” This playful remark may be interpreted as signaling her sense of

fulfillment in contributing to and advancing Malay theatre within the Dutch East Indies (“Miss Riboet Wil Niet Naar Hollywood. Daar Is Immers Geen Sambal,” 1934).

Owing to her influence, Miss Riboet also became a key point of reference for female stage artists. Several young actresses from various theatre troupes undertook apprenticeships with Orion and received direct mentorship from Miss Riboet. One such example is Minah Alias, an actress from Komedi Bangsawan, who sought to enhance her skills by settling in Java and studying dance, music, and acting under Miss Riboet’s guidance.

Miss Riboet thus embodied a model of artistic excellence for women in performance. Her fame contributed to the formation of new public standards regarding women on stage, no longer perceived as passive figures burdened by stigma, but as respected and capable artistic professionals.

### *Dardanella, Miss Dja*

In parallel, the rise of women in colonial theater is also evident in the figure of Miss Dja, who emerged as a central personality within the Dardanella troupe. Dardanella was a *tooneel* company founded around 1926—approximately one year after the establishment of Miss Riboet’s Orion—by a man of Russian descent born in Penang, Willy Klimanoff, also known as Adolf Piedro (Cohen, July 2002: 112). Like Orion, Dardanella was established with a conscious aim to transform *komedi stamboel* into a form of theater that was both artistically refined and educational for the public. Within this context, Dardanella subsequently promoted Miss Dja (whose real name was Soetidjah) as its principal stage star.

Initially, however, the position of primadonna during the early phase of Dardanella’s formation was held by Miss Riboet II, a *keroncong* singer who later became a stage star and frequently played leading roles. Her presence cannot be separated from the reputation of Miss Riboet’s Orion, which at the time was at the height of its popularity. Piedro, the leader of Dardanella, recruited the singer after encountering her while watching a Minangkabau *komedi bangsawan* troupe in Dampit, and he deliberately allowed her to use the stage name “Miss Riboet,” imitating the name of Orion’s celebrated primadonna who was then widely acclaimed (Cohen, *Inventing the Performing Arts*, p. 141).

The use of the same name quickly generated tension. Tio Tek Djien, the leader of Orion, sent an emissary to protest Dardanella, viewing the adoption of the name “Miss Riboet” as an attempt to capitalize on the fame of Orion’s star. Following negotiations, Piedro agreed to the compromise of using the name “Miss Riboet II” or “Miss Riboet Doewa,” although this solution did not fully dispel Tio’s objections. The dispute even extended into the legal arena, but ultimately the case could not be pursued, as an investigation concluded that the Dardanella singer had used the name “Riboet” since childhood (*Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, Semarang, 21 November 1928). This series of events underscores the centrality of the primadonna in constructing the appeal and popularity of a theater troupe, while also demonstrating that the names of female stage stars had become highly valuable symbolic assets within the landscape of modern Malay theater.

Miss Riboet II became the leading actress in the dramas that marked the early period of Dardanella’s rise to prominence. Although she did not come from a family of professional artists, she possessed remarkable artistic talent. From an early age, she showed a strong inclination toward the arts, particularly music. After the death of her husband in 1922, she joined the Minangkabau Opera, from which Piedro later recruited her as part of Dardanella. Piedro carefully cultivated Miss Riboet II’s abilities, enabling her to demonstrate her talent by taking on the leading role in Dardanella’s first dramatic production. Through continuous

training, she quickly gained popularity among audiences and rose to stardom (“Star Weekly,” February 15, 1956, p. 2). Between 1929 and 1930, Dardanella’s performances in Batavia relied heavily on Miss Riboet II as the principal female performer, alongside Tan Tjeng Bok as the principal male actor. For example, in the role *Two Lovers* (*De Gemaskerde Cavalier*), it was noted that the *hoofdrol* was performed by Miss Riboet II together with Tan Tjeng Bok (Advertisement, *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, Batavia, October 25, 1930).

As with Miss Riboet’s Orion, the improvement in the quality of Dardanella’s performances went hand in hand with the creation of a disciplined and professional working environment in which women could function as actresses who genuinely practiced and embodied art. Performers underwent regular training, beginning with an initial learning phase followed by intensive rehearsals. After daytime practice sessions with their colleagues, the troupe returned to the stage and repeated the same routine daily (KH, 1982, p. 118). In order to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of dance, Pietro implemented a rigorous training system by engaging experienced instructors with specialized expertise.



Figure 2. Stage Women Behind the Scenes of Dardanella’s Toneel, 1930  
Source: Het Geheugen

Women performers were trained in a wide range of dance forms, including Western dance, Serimpi, Sundanese, and Balinese traditions, each taught by recognized specialists. Among them was Kasbi, who served as an instructor of Sundanese dance. Subsequently, Henry L. Duarte, a Filipino man, joined Dardanella. His mastery of various dance forms (Western ballroom dance, tap dance, and other styles) led him to perform on stage as well as to serve as Miss Dja’s instructor in Western dance. Several renowned Balinese dances (such as Legong, Doerga, Lasem, Caroed, and Djanger) were studied directly in Bali through collaboration with Ida Bagoes Soerja, a Balinese regent. In addition, Miss Dja received further dance training under the guidance of Dewi Suhita Urdayana (“Dardanella-Opera,” 1934). Later, during a visit to Solo, she studied dance with Sukinah, a celebrated dancer who was a consort of the Susuhunan of Surakarta. This extensive expertise and deep knowledge of dance played a crucial role in sustaining the reputation and artistic quality of the troupe (KH, 1982, p. 61).

Miss Dja herself was born into a poor family and from an early age lived with her grandparents in a village in East Java. Her grandfather managed a traveling stambul troupe

known as “Stambul Pak Adi,” and the young Miss Dja frequently appeared in interlude performances within these productions. When Pedro heard Soetidjah sing the song *Kopi Susu*, he immediately recognized her talent and invited her, together with her family, to join the Dardanella troupe (KH, 1982, p. 48). Pedro gave Soetidjah the stage name “Miss Dja.” He later married her, after which Dja also became known by the names Ernesta or Erni. In her personal life, Miss Dja directly experienced the strong stigma attached to women who appeared on stage. The stage often constituted a vulnerable space for women, as it was also a site where degrading behavior frequently occurred. Dja recounted, for instance, an incident one evening when she was providing additional entertainment in her grandfather’s stambul performance, during which a male spectator approached her rudely and grabbed her hand (KH, 1982, p. 27).

Even after becoming part of Dardanella, Dja remained deeply concerned about popular stambul entertainment, which continued to be saturated with indecent behavior, particularly toward women. On one occasion, Miss Dja stopped by a small stambul tent in Batavia, where she witnessed an incident like what she had experienced in her youth, a female stage performer being treated with contempt by audience members. Both an Indigenous and a Dutch police officer behaved inappropriately toward the performer. Miss Dja courageously intervened, reprimanding the individuals and scolding the audience members whom she regarded as morally deficient, regardless of their status as police officers. Under the pen name “Cabe Rawit,” *Bintang Timoer* director Parada Harahap published an article celebrating Miss Dja’s defiance. He lauded her courage to confront a police officer when justified, famously questioning the notion that local women were weak (KH, 1982, p. 123). This event did not happen during a Dardanella show.

This awareness marked a turning point at which women, despite the limits of their authority, sought to challenge and mitigate the stigma and disadvantages experienced by female stage performers. Throughout her career with Dardanella, Miss Dja developed into an actress who ultimately elevated the image of women as active agents of artistic and cultural advancement. Her abilities were widely recognized and appreciated by the public. The actress’s talent infused performances with vitality and intensity. Miss Dja demonstrated a strong capacity to inhabit the characters she portrayed, both physically and emotionally, and emerged as one of the female figures who challenged patriarchal norms through her stage roles.

For example, during a performance in 1934, a theater with a seating capacity of 1,200 was filled, generating a powerful emotional atmosphere. Each time Miss Dja expressed sorrow on stage, the tears flowing down her cheeks seemed to transmit emotional force to the audience, eliciting empathy and deep affective engagement. In the play *Fatima*, Miss Dja displayed remarkable mastery of Balinese dance, showcasing the richness of Balinese culture while captivating audiences through intricate and mesmerizing movements. This performance drew significant attention from contemporary art audiences, who regarded Miss Dja as the equal of professional stage actresses (“Openingvoorstelling ‘Dardanella,’” 1934).

Miss Dja thus became a tangible embodiment of women’s determination to create and contribute to the performing arts amid complex social dynamics. Several art observers of the period even placed her in the same category as professional stage actresses, as reflected in the following review by the art critic Krekot:

*“Permainan Miss Dja benar-benar klas satoe kalau tidak lebina. sajang publik tidak semoea tahu menghargakan kunst jang sedjelas-djelasnja kelihatan dalam inspiratjenja*

*bermain. Boeat mentjari peroendingan permainan Miss Dja kita mesti mentjari nama toneel actricees Eropah jang termasukhoer. Dari permoelaan sampai penghabisan Miss Dja bermain senjawa dengan rolnja. Waktoe Miss Dja mempertoendjoek kan rol itu jang berhiba half, teringatja jang nasibnja, dan karena anaknja jang amat ditjintainja seakan akan tidak mau mengenalinja lagi, kita lihat dengar disekiling kita nyonja2 dan nona2 jang mengeloearkan air mata sambil menahan soearanja sopaja djangan tersedoe sedoe. Bahagian ini betoel2 memperlihatkan kunst."* [Miss Dja's performance was truly first-class, if not even more than that. Unfortunately, not all members of the audience knew how to appreciate the art so clear in the inspiration of her acting. To find a comparison for Miss Dja's performance, we would have to look to the names of the most famous European toneel actresses. From beginning to end, Miss Dja performed in complete unity with her role. When she portrayed the sorrowful character—remembering her fate, and as her deeply beloved child seemed no longer willing to recognize her—we could see and hear around us ladies and young women shedding tears while holding back their voices so as not to sob aloud. This part truly demonstrated art at its finest.] (P.H, 1931b)

In addition to Miss Dja, other prominent female figures within Dardanella included Ratna Asmara, who provided important support for the development of her career (R.H, 1968). Furthermore, Fifi Young (who had previously been affiliated with Miss Riboet's Orion) accepted Miss Dja's invitation to join the Royal Balinese Dance group, which toured as far as Calcutta. She frequently performed Serimpi, Balinese, and Minangkabau dances, thereby making a significant contribution to the ensemble's artistic strength.

As a result of this sustained labor and commitment, Dardanella's trajectory was marked by widespread praise for the quality of its performances, comparable to the acclaim previously accorded to Orion. Several media outlets assessed that this success was largely supported by the primadonnas, whose performances created a vibrant and communicative theatrical atmosphere. Their professional yet instructive performance style, infused with a spirit of nationalism, positioned the troupe as an influential toneel company that also enhanced the image of Indonesian Malay toneel, as noted in a review published in Bintang Timoer:

*"Riwayat ini dimainkan oleh Dardanella tadi malam sudah menetapkan pendapat kita bahwa kecukupan sifat2 buat toonel yg terdapat pada aktris dan aktor opera tersebut sungguh membukakan harapan besar buat mereka akan mencapai tingkat yang lebih tinggi lagi dalam persenian toonel Indonesia. regienja lebih bagus dari yg kita lihat dalam dr. Samsi."* [This play, performed by Dardanella last night, has confirmed our conviction that the qualities required for toneel, as found in the actresses and actors of this opera company, truly open great hopes for them to reach an even higher level in the art of Indonesian theatre. The direction was better than what we saw in Dr. Samsi.] (Lela, 1931a)

In 1935, the troupe embarked on a series of international tours. They began by traveling to Singapore, Hong Kong, and subsequently to mainland China. During this tour, they adopted the name "The Royal Balinese Dancers." However, due to problems with their travel agent, the troupe ultimately returned to Singapore and restarted their journey from there. They then proceeded to Rangoon, traveling with a company of approximately 150 members. On this

leg of the tour, the group performed under the name “Devi Dja’s Bali–Java Dancers” (KH, 1982, p. 139).

While in Calcutta, Dardanella encountered a representative of Radha Film Co., which led to a collaboration in producing the film *Dr. Samsi* in 1936. Singaporean newspapers reported that this film was the first Malay-language film produced outside the Dutch East Indies and Singapore (“Malay Talking Pictures At The Theatre Royal From Tuesday,” 1937). Following Dardanella’s extensive touring across several countries, a small portion of the troupe eventually settled in the United States. To sustain themselves abroad, they established an Indonesian restaurant called “The Sarong Room.” Miss Dja devoted herself to her role as an Indonesian artist who introduced and taught Indonesian culture to American society. She worked as a dance instructor and became involved in several Hollywood film productions. For instance, in the film *The Moon and Sixpence*, Miss Dja participated as a dance instructor who trained the film’s lead actor (Erkelens, 2022; KH, 1982, p. 198).

Miss Dja has been regarded as a pioneer of cultural integration whose contributions merit recognition (KH, 1982, p. 9). Much like Miss Riboet, Dja emerged as a public figure whose work and achievements were widely appreciated. She became the first actress from Indonesia to penetrate the Hollywood market. Her presence was not met with disparagement or negative stereotyping; rather, she grew into a key agent in introducing Indonesian culture to the international stage. Her central role within Dardanella propelled Miss Dja’s name onto the global cultural scene.

The emergence of professional commercial theater created a space for women to challenge traditional views that positioned them merely as objects of art—a role that had often been the subject of criticism. The success of stage performers such as Miss Riboet and groups like Dardanella illustrates the forward trajectory of women within the performing arts. Through their dedication, talent, and courage, these figures were able to transform societal perceptions of women’s roles on stage. Miss Riboet and other female performers subsequently came to be regarded as influential figures within the theater industry. By demonstrating their artistic capabilities, these women showed that women could earn respect and appreciation in the arts, while also inspiring subsequent generations to continue creating and advocating for their rights across various fields.

The presence of women in the performing arts also functioned as a means to challenge and critique representations of women within patriarchal culture. Through the use of symbols and images that questioned traditional gender roles, these performers highlighted the narrow and stereotypical ways in which women were perceived by society. They sought to expose how women were often positioned merely as objects in relation to men, a condition that constrained their autonomy and identity (Forte, 1988, p. 218).

## Conclusion

The rise of women in commercial theatre marks a significant transformation in how women were perceived and positioned within the performing arts during the colonial period in the Dutch East Indies. The success of figures such as Miss Riboet and the Dardanella troupe demonstrates that women were able to move beyond moral stigma and marginalization to become central actors in the theatre industry. Through talent, discipline, and professional commitment, female performers challenged prevailing stereotypes that framed them merely as objects of spectacle, instead asserting themselves as influential artists who shaped both artistic standards and public taste.

As the theatre industry became increasingly professionalized, women gained greater agency

to negotiate their roles, secure public recognition, and claim legitimacy as performers. Their prominence redefined the status of women on stage and inspired subsequent generations to pursue careers in the arts. The transition from stigma to stardom thus reflects a broader cultural shift in which women emerged as key drivers of modern commercial theatre, contributing to the reconfiguration of gender relations within the colonial performing arts landscape.

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