

Teater Koma's Dramaturgical Strategy in Delivering Social Criticism of the New Order Era



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dramaturgical strategies employed by Teater Koma to convey social criticism during the New Order era, a period marked by stringent political censorship that constrained artistic expression. Focusing on a case study of the 1985 performance of *Opera Keco*, this research analyzes how dramaturgical components such as the script, characterization, symbolism, and satirical humor are strategically utilized to articulate social and political injustices. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study draws upon text analysis and performance documentation to explore these elements in depth. The findings reveal that Teater Koma creatively circumvented censorship through the use of symbolic language, allegorical storytelling, and nuanced narrative structures, enabling the theater to raise public awareness without directly contravening the political restrictions of the time. This dramaturgical approach functioned not only as an artistic expression but also as a subtle form of resistance against authoritarian suppression. The study underscores the critical role of theater as a medium for socially engaged discourse and political critique within repressive regimes.

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INTRODUCTION

Performing arts (especially theater) have a strategic role in responding to social and political dynamics in society (N, Sahrul, 2015; Suryadmaja, 2025b; Zuhri, Markarma, & Yuliatin, 2018). During the New Order in Indonesia around 1966–1998, theater became a relatively safe space for artists to convey criticism. The government's strictness in filtering criticism, especially in the mass media and political expression at that time led to the birth of various forms of symbolic expression in theater. One theater group that consistently carries social criticism intelligently and aesthetically is Teater Koma, founded by Nano Riantiarno in 1977.

Teater Koma is different from other groups because of its aesthetic style which tends to be flexible. They are also able to outwit political repression through a unique dramaturgical strategy. By carrying a satirical and symbolic style, Teater Koma inserts sharp criticism of poverty, corruption, authoritarian power, and social inequality, in each of its performances with a dramaturgical selection that does not directly attack the authorities. Through plays such as *Opera Keco* (1985), *Sampek Engtay* (1989), and *Maaf, Maaf, Maaf* (1994), they have succeeded in voicing the aspirations of the common people amidst the pressure of state power.

Dramaturgy becomes an important conceptual tool to study how the structure of a performance, whether in terms of narrative, character, symbol, or performance style, is constructed to convey a certain meaning. Saini K.M. (2001) states that dramaturgy is not only about scriptwriting techniques, but also the strategy of packaging messages through performance elements as a whole. Meanwhile, Harimawan Rachman (1988) emphasizes that dramaturgy concerns the integration between content and form that is directed to build an aesthetic experience as well as a social message.

In the global realm, Patrice Pavis (1992) developed a broader concept of dramaturgy, namely as a relationship between text and socio-political context, emphasizing the importance of intertextual and semiotic approaches in reading performances. With this framework we can see Teater Koma not only as aiming to entertain but also as a cultural agent that constructs a discourse of resistance through aesthetic strategies.

This study attempts to analyze the dramaturgical strategy of Teater Koma in conveying social criticism during the New Order era by taking the play "Opera Keco" as the main case object. This play was chosen because it explicitly presents marginalized characters such as prostitutes, thugs, transvestites and contains a harsh depiction of city life full of moral hypocrisy, power, and social violence.

Based on this background, the study attempts to see how Teater Koma's dramaturgical strategy is used to convey social criticism effectively amidst the political pressures of the New Order. This question will be answered through a qualitative approach by tracing the script, performance structure, use of symbols, and the selection of performance visuals used in Opera Keco. By analyzing Teater Koma's dramaturgical strategy, it is hoped that effective patterns can be found for critical yet communicative performances amidst limited socio-political conditions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a dramaturgical analysis approach. The aim is to reveal how the dramaturgical structure and performance strategy in the play Opera Keco by Nano Riantiarno are used to convey social criticism during the New Order (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020; Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005; Mohajan, 2018; Suryadmaja, 2025a; Suryadmaja, Ardiyansyah, & Purwati, 2015; Suryadmaja & Saearani, 2025). The dramaturgical approach in this study is based on theories from Saini K.M. who sees dramaturgy as a combination of narrative structure, characters, and symbols that are united in a performance. In addition, Patrice Pavis' theory which emphasizes the relationship between performance text and socio-cultural context is also reviewed in this study. Added by Harimawan Rachman who views dramaturgy as a process of conceptualization and overall design of performance elements. The analysis will also borrow a critical hermeneutic framework, to interpret the symbols and hidden messages contained in the performance, as well as performance semiotics to read the meaning of visual and verbal signs on stage.

The main object of this research is the script and documentation of the Opera Keco performance which was first staged by Teater Koma in 1985. The documentation can be in the form of script text, performance recordings, and articles by Nano Riantiarno. A Documentation Study was conducted to collect data from play scripts, video documentation of performances, media articles, and articles by Nano Riantiarno and members of Teater Koma. Literature study was conducted by reviewing books, journals, and scientific articles that are relevant to dramaturgy, Indonesian theater, and the socio-political situation of the New Order.

The analysis was conducted in several stages, Description (Identifying the narrative structure, characters, plot, setting, and main symbols in Opera Keco), Interpretation (Interpreting the socio-political messages contained in the dramaturgical structure), Contextualization (Relating the results of the analysis to the socio-political situation of the New Order, including the mechanisms of censorship and cultural repression). To ensure the validity of the data in this study, source and method triangulation techniques were used. Source Triangulation: Comparing data from various sources such as the original script of Opera Keco, performance documentation, mass media reviews, and Nano Riantiarno's interview archives, tracing editions of Opera Keco performances in various years (if available), to see the consistency or variation of its dramaturgical strategies. Method Triangulation: Combining text studies (scripts), visual studies (performance documentation), and literature studies (theoretical and contextual studies) to strengthen the interpretation. Contextual Analysis: Linking the results of the analysis to the socio-political conditions of the New Order through

historical data, cultural political studies, and New Order literature, to ensure that the interpretation is not ahistorical.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of dramaturgy in performing arts does not only discuss narrative structure, but also includes strategies for conveying messages through the relationship between text, actors, space, and audience (Masunah, Nugraheni, & Sunaryo, 2021). According to Harimawan (1988), dramaturgy is a framework that unites elements of story, character, action, and performance aesthetics in a comprehensive design. Meanwhile, Saini KM (2001) emphasized that dramaturgy in the context of modern Indonesian theater must be understood as a dialectical space between social content and artistic form. Patrice Pavis (1996) expands the understanding of dramaturgy as a multilevel communication process between performance maker and audience, where meaning comes not only from the script text but also from stage signs, gestures, and cultural conventions.

The history of modern Indonesian theater cannot be separated from its social function. Theater often becomes a space for articulation of criticism of power and social inequality. Hatley (2008) states that contemporary Indonesian theater developed as a form of symbolic resistance to state repression, especially during the New Order. Teater Koma, founded by Nano Riantiarno, is widely known as a group that consistently delivers socio-political criticism through symbolism and satirical humor. In the play *Opera Keco*, issues of poverty, corruption, and state repression are wrapped in a story about prostitutes, thugs, and officials, which allegorically depict the power structure of the New Order (Sen & Hill, 2000).

In the context of New Order authoritarianism, theater had to be careful in conveying criticism without being censored. Cohen (2003) said that Nano Riantiarno implemented a strategy of "symbolic subversion" by disguising criticism in the form of allegories, animal metaphors, or modern folklore. This strategy is part of dramaturgy-the arrangement of meaning that is indirect but remains politically sharp. By using the theory of dramaturgy and symbolic meaning, we can read the Teater Koma performance not just as entertainment, but as a complex and political social text.

Dramaturgical Structure of *Opera Keco*

Opera Keco is built with an episodic dramatic structure, avoiding conventional linear plots. Each scene functions more as an interconnected social portrait, showing the harsh reality of the urban marginal in Jakarta. Nano Riantiarno's writing style tends to be explorative, combining realistic dialogue with metaphorical language and irony. This makes the dramaturgy of the performance not only a way of constructing a story, but also a form of articulation of discourse.

The dramaturgy in *Opera Keco* is not only based on the script text, but also on the *mise en scène* which involves the selection of space, lighting, and music as elements that compose meaning. The use of dramatic lighting for confrontational scenes emphasizes class and power conflicts. *Opera Keco* uses a Brechtian theatrical epic approach, evident through the use of narrators, songs, and direct interruptions to the audience (breaking the fourth wall). This drama does not aim to bring the audience into an emotional state, but to raise social awareness and a critical attitude towards reality.

The dramaturgical structure consists of several episodic scenes showing marginalized figures such as prostitutes (Lily, Bintang), transvestites (Noni), thugs (Joko), and officials (Boss, Police). Each scene has a strong socio-political message, especially in exposing the hypocrisy of power and systemic corruption.

- "Kami ini seperti kecoa. Dibuang ke selokan. Dipukul, ditendang, diinjak, tapi tidak mati-mati!"
- Translate: "We are akin to cockroaches. Cast into the gutter. Beaten, kicked, and trampled upon, yet we do not perish!"
(Lily, in a monologue full of anger and despair).

This dialogue symbolizes the resilience of marginalized groups who continue to be marginalized but continue to survive. The metaphor of "Kecoa" becomes the main symbol in the script. Cockroaches here represent groups of people who are considered lowly, dirty, and worthy of being eliminated but in fact are a reflection of the broken system.

- "Kami hidup dari tempat yang kalian anggap jijik. Tapi siapa yang membuat kami begini?"
- Translate: "We live from a place that you deem repugnant. But who has rendered us in this manner?"
(Noni, when scolding the police and journalists who wanted to 'clean up' the localization)

This symbol shows the courage of theater in touching on taboo areas (sexuality, violence, power), but from there a sharp social challenge is born. Characters such as the Boss, the Police, and the Religious Leader in this drama are not depicted as moral heroes, but rather as actors of power who exploit the system for their own benefit.

- "Yang penting, atasan senang. Soal kotor atau bersih, nanti kita cuci pakai sabun pidato."
- Translate: "The most important thing is that the superiors are pleased. Whether it is dirty or clean, we will later wash it with the soap of rhetoric." This statement underscores the vacuous rhetoric of those in power, characterised by hypocrisy and manipulation.

This statement highlights the empty rhetoric of the rulers, full of hypocrisy and manipulation.

Composed during the New Order era, Opera Kecoa dares to appear with harsh criticism of social conditions without directly mentioning the ruler's name. This is a form of covert dramaturgical strategy, avoiding censorship, but still conveying a message. Teater Koma cleverly inserts messages through symbols, satire, and songs.

- "Senyum manis si penjual mimpi, di balik meja penuh tipu daya..."
- Translate: "The sweet smile of the dream seller, behind a table full of deception..."
(Excerpt from song in performance)

Thus, the dramaturgical strategy in Opera Kecoa is not only about the arrangement of scenes, but also about how the message is conveyed politically and aesthetically. The main characters such as Lily (a prostitute), Noni (a transvestite), and Joko (a thug) are not just fictional characters, but representations of the lower class that is often ignored by the state. Nano Riantiarno consciously reverses the stigma: the marginalized in Opera Kecoa actually appear more humane, more honest, and more caring towards each other than the "respectable" characters.

- "Apa salah kami? Menjual tubuh? Siapa yang membuat kami lapar?"
- Translate: "What is our wrongdoing? Selling our bodies? Who has caused us to hunger?"
(Lily questions the system that forces them to live from prostitution)

Social criticism is constructed through moral dialectics, where the evil characters are structurally not on the fringes, but at the pinnacle of power. Nano uses many Brechtian techniques such as songs that interrupt the plot, the use of a narrator, and a direct-to-audience style of speaking. This is a strategy to disrupt emotional empathy and replace it with critical awareness.

- Narrator: "Malam ini, kau akan melihat kebohongan dipoles menjadi kebenaran. Jangan terbawa suasana. Ingat, ini cuma panggung. Tapi siapa tahu, kalian sedang jadi penontonnya di dunia nyata..."
- Narrator: "This evening, you shall witness falsehoods polished into truths. Do not be swayed by the atmosphere. Remember, this is merely a stage. Yet, who can say, you may be the audience in the realm of reality..."

This technique makes the audience realize that they are watching a reflection of the social world, not just a drama. One of the strengths of the dramaturgy in Opera Kecoa is the use of irony and sharp satire. Many scenes that on the surface seem funny, but contain deep sadness and criticism.

- A religious official came to give a 'lecture' at the localization while carrying a media camera.

Noni: "Kalau kamera hidup, surga bisa dijanjikan. Kalau kamera mati, kami dilempari!"

Noni: "If the camera is operational, heaven can be promised. If the camera is not functioning, we are subjected to being pelted!"

This dialogue satirizes religious hypocrisy and the media that only exploits suffering.

The songs in the show are not just entertainment breaks, but a means of reinforcing criticism. For example, a song with the lyrics:

- "Kecoa, kecoa, kau berjalan di istana. Dicaci di selokan, dibela oleh yang tak berkuasa."
- "Cockroach, cockroach, you walk in the palace. Scorned in the gutter, defended by the powerless."

(Collective song sung by marginalized figures)

The light melody contrasts with the meaning of the lyrics which are full of sharp sarcasm.

During the orde baru, all forms of public expression were strictly censored. However, Opera Kecoa managed to convey harsh criticism without stumbling over direct prohibitions through the use of animal symbols (cockroaches), disguise of office, avoidance of explicitly mentioning the names of political figures or institutions.

This dramaturgical approach shows Nano's artistic acumen in managing sensitive content into safe yet moving viewing.

Representation of Character and Dialogue as Resistance

The characters of prostitutes, thugs, and officials are not presented in a moralistic framework, but as representations of an unequal social system. Their dialogues are filled with explicit criticism of inequality, structural violence, and elite hypocrisy. For example, the pimp in one scene mocks officials who use the services of prostitutes while claiming to defend the nation's morals. The form of resistance emerges in the ability of these marginal figures to question discriminatory social norms and state laws. By reversing the position of "victim" to "observer", this performance subtly invites the audience to re-question the dominant narrative of power.

Artistic Direction: Music, Stage, and Visual Symbols

The stage in Opera Kecoa is set with a minimalist yet symbolic aesthetic. Used goods, carts, and dim lights create the atmosphere of Jakarta's underworld. Traditional and contemporary music are combined to give an ironic effect and strengthen the tragicomedy nuance. Costumes are used as markers of social class, where officials always appear neat and flashy, in contrast to prostitutes and thugs who are dressed shabbily. This reinforces the visual message of inequality and creates social contrast aesthetically.

Theatre Koma performances are often performed in public spaces that allow for direct responses from the audience. Applause, laughter, and even murmurs of protest are part of the participatory dramaturgy. In Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory (2008), this is referred to as performance as event, where the meaning of the performance is not only determined by the text and actors, but by the emotional and cognitive involvement of the audience (Santosa, 2008; Suryadmaja, 2025b). Criticism conveyed through symbols and humor allows for "shared meaning" without posing a direct threat to power, which is a powerful strategy in dealing with cultural repression.

In comparison, Opera Kecoa has a different approach from the more frontal Teater WS Rendra. Rendra often uses poetry and open oration, while Nano uses allegory and humor as dramatic camouflage. Both voice criticism, but with different dramaturgical strategies. Some data quotes from the Cockroach Opera Manuscript that support the findings are as follows:

- "Negara katanya adil, tapi kenapa kami yang lapar justru dianggap sampah?"
- Translate: "The state claims to be just, yet why are we, who are hungry, regarded as mere refuse?"

(Prostitute, scene 3)

This quote shows a form of verbal resistance from marginal characters to the state discourse that promotes justice but fails to provide welfare. This is a form of verbal dramaturgy, where dialogue becomes a tool for direct ideological confrontation.

- "Kami ini seperti kecoa. Tak dianggap manusia. Tapi kami tetap hidup, tak peduli disemprot, diinjak."
- Translate: "We are akin to cockroaches. We are not regarded as human beings. Yet, we continue to exist, indifferent to being sprayed or trampled upon."
(Thugs, scene 5)

The symbol of "kecoa" is the main allegory that represents the marginalized but resilient social class. This is in line with the concept of symbolic dramaturgy that conveys messages through strong and repeated metaphors. This phrase also becomes the "heart of meaning" of the show as a whole.

- "Saya cuma pejabat kecil kok. Makan dari korupsi recehan. Itu pun dibagi-bagi."
- "I am merely a low-ranking official. My sustenance comes from petty corruption, which is shared among others."
(Official, scene 6)

This dialogue reflects how dark humor is used as a strategy to convey criticism in a subtle but effective way. In the framework of dramaturgy, it functions as a reverse catharsis-provoking laughter, but accompanied by an awareness of painful irony.

- "Siapa yang lebih kotor? Pelacur di jalanan, atau pejabat di gedung parlemen?"
- Translate: "Who is more depraved? The prostitute on the street, or the official in the parliament building?"
(Observer Character, scene 7)

This question is addressed directly to the audience in a fourth-wall-breaking style, making the performance a space for ethical and political reflection. It is an interactive dramaturgical practice that challenges the boundaries between the stage and social reality.

- "Kita ini cuma cacing. Sekali diinjak, bisa mati. Tapi lihat, siapa yang menginjak kita terus tiap hari?"
- Translate: "We are but worms. Once trodden upon, we may perish. Yet, observe who continues to tread upon us each day."
(The Old Whore, scene 4)

This sentence shows the lower class's awareness of their position in an oppressive social structure. The dramaturgy lies in the use of biological metaphor (worms) to depict existential vulnerability. This is in line with the Brechtian approach: to make the audience think, not just feel pity.

- "Mereka datang ke kami di malam hari. Lalu pagi-pagi bicara tentang dosa di podium."
- Translate: "They came to us in the evening. Then in the morning, they spoke about sin from the podium."
(The Pimp, scene 2)

Nano uses irony to expose socio-political hypocrisy, especially in the elite who appear moral in public but are corrupt in private. This is a form of ideological dramaturgy that exposes the contradiction between discourse and practice.

- "Hukum? Itu hanya bunyi. Keadilan itu soal siapa yang bayar lebih mahal."
- Translate: "Law? It is merely a sound. Justice is a matter of who pays the higher price."
(Lawyer, scene 6)

This dialogue is an explicit critique of the transactional legal system. In the dramaturgy of the show, this quote is delivered in a rapid monologue, signaling an emotional burst that strengthens the agitational effect in front of the audience. Emphasizing systemic corruption as a major theme.

- "Aku bukan orang baik. Tapi aku juga bukan penjahat. Aku hanya ingin makan."
- Translate: "I am not a good person. However, I am also not a criminal. I merely wish to eat."
(Young Whore, scene 1)

In the context of character dramaturgy, this sentence is important to build audience empathy. The audience is invited to understand the moral dilemma faced by the character, which cannot be seen in a black-and-white framework. It also depicts the humanization of marginalized figures, which is a distinctive strength in the work of Theater Koma.

- "Izin pertunjukan harus lewat lima meja. Tapi izin menyiksa rakyat tak pernah perlu surat."
 - "Performance permits must go through five tables. However, the permission to oppress the people never requires documentation."
- (Narrator, opening scene)

The narrator in *Opera Keco* functions as a meta-theatrical element, revealing the reality offstage. By satirizing the licensing bureaucracy, the performance simultaneously criticizes the cultural repression of the New Order. This dramaturgy positions theater as a symbolic political medium.

- "Mereka bilang kami bau. Tapi bau kami bukan karena dosa. Bau kami karena mereka tutup hidung di depan kebenaran."
 - Translate: "They say we smell. However, our scent is not a result of sin. Our scent arises because they hold their noses in the presence of truth."
- (All characters, final chorus)

This sentence is uttered in chorus by all the characters at the end of the performance, reinforcing the collective message. This is a technique of collective dramatic expression, often used in political theater to build solidarity and raise the awareness of the audience.

- "Ada yang makan nasi tujuh rupa, ada yang berebut nasi basi. Tapi katanya, negeri ini makmur."
 - Translate: "There are those who partake of rice in its various forms, while others contend for stale rice. Yet, it is said that this nation is prosperous."
- (Narrator, scene 2)

This sentence is a form of narrative dramaturgy that functions as a direct social commentary. This narrative technique is reminiscent of Brecht's *episches Theater*, where the audience is not lost in illusion, but is made aware of social reality through sharp irony.

- "Hidup itu seperti undang-undang: yang bikin bisa langgar, yang miskin wajib patuh."
 - Translate: "Life is akin to legislation: those who create it may transgress its boundaries, while the less fortunate are compelled to adhere to it."
- (Official, scene 5)

This dialogue satirizes the privileges of the rulers and the injustice of the law. Dramaturgically, it dismantles the power relations between the state and the people through verbal irony and reflects Theater Koma's strategy in conveying political messages in a subtle but stinging manner.

- "Kalau dunia ini panggung, kami ini peran figuran. Kadang muncul, sering disingkirkan."
 - "If this world is a stage, we are but supporting characters. Occasionally we make an appearance, yet more often we are relegated to the background."
- (Thugs, scene 4)

Metaphorical dramaturgy is used to describe the social invisibility of the marginalized. This sentence shows their awareness as a party that does not have the power to determine the course of the story of life, while also reflecting subaltern awareness in cultural studies.

- "Kalau semua diam, siapa yang bicara? Kalau semua tunduk, siapa yang lawan?"
 - Translate: "If everyone remains silent, who will speak? If everyone submits, who will oppose?"
- (Female Character, scene 6)

This sentence is structured as agitational rhetoric. Nano uses female characters as representations of minority voices that refuse to be silent. This is a form of intervention dramaturgy, which invites the audience not only to watch, but to think and perhaps act.

- "Kami bukan harapan. Kami hanya bayangan. Tapi bayangan pun butuh cahaya."
- "We are not hope. We are merely shadows. Yet, even shadows require light."

(Narrator, final scene)

This ending has a deep philosophical and poetic dimension. It reflects both bitterness and faint hope. It is a reflective dramaturgical strategy, closing the performance with an open question about social expectations, not with an absolute solution.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Teater Koma, especially in the performance of Opera Keco, strategically utilizes dramaturgical elements to convey sharp social criticism of social inequality, political repression, and moral hypocrisy during the New Order era. Nano Riantiarno, as a dramaturg and director, develops narratives and dialogues full of symbols, satire, and irony that reflect the reality of lower-class society.

The use of marginalized characters such as prostitutes, thugs, and non-systemic narrators becomes an effective tool to highlight unequal power relations. Techniques such as reflective monologues, social metaphors, and collective choirs are used to avoid direct censorship, but still mobilize the critical consciousness of the audience. In its dramaturgical approach, Teater Koma aligns the aesthetics of theater with socio-political partisanship, making the performance not only entertainment, but also a tool for cultural advocacy. Thus, the dramaturgical strategy used by Teater Koma proves that performing arts can be a space for expressing resistance, as well as social documentation of repressive times.

This research opens up a wider space for exploration of dramaturgy studies in the context of Indonesian theater, especially those with socio-political content such as Teater Koma. Therefore, here are some suggestions that can be used as references for further development: For further researchers, it is recommended to expand the object of study not only to Opera Keco, but also other works by Teater Koma which were staged after the Reformation era to see changes in dramaturgical strategies along with different socio-political dynamics.

For Theatre Practitioners, this study is expected to inspire contemporary theatre groups to develop forms of social criticism that are relevant to today's conditions, while still maintaining artistic and intellectual depth. For Cultural Observers and Policy Makers, the results of this study show that theater can function as a tool for social education and collective reflection. Therefore, it is important for the state and cultural institutions to provide space and support for critical theater performances so that cultural democratization can develop healthily. For the Development of Academic Studies, the dramaturgical approach can still be developed using interdisciplinary methods-for example combined with semiotic analysis, sociology of art, or discourse studies-to deepen understanding of the relationship between performance texts, power structures, and societal acceptance.

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