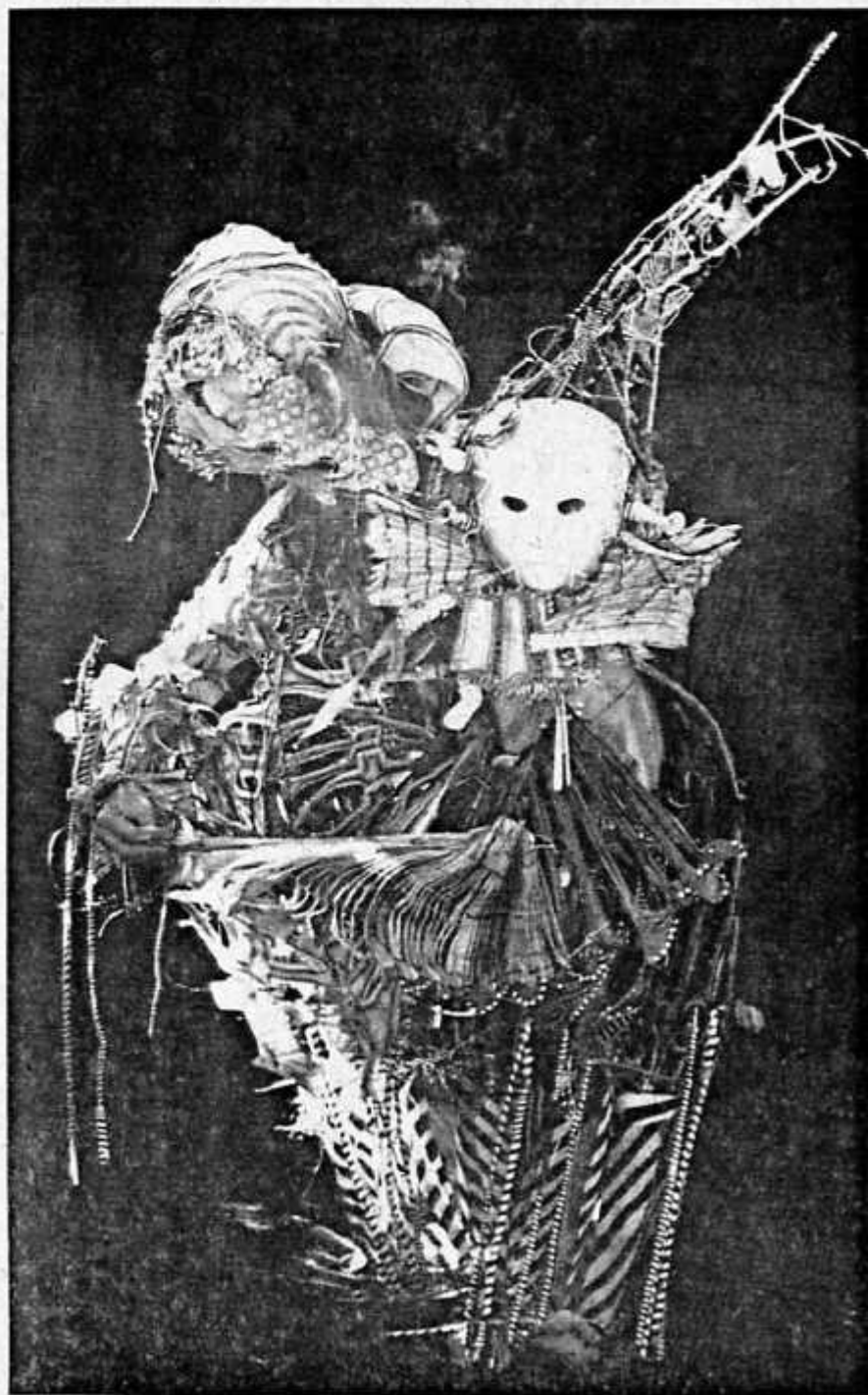


# Behind the masks is a lady

Learning how to sharpen bicycle spokes to punch buffalo hide was only one of the skills American performing artist Sha Sha Higby learned during her five-year stay in Indonesia. Umar Khan reports



The audience enters a room filled with pale light that resembles a waning moon. At first they don't notice that an elaborate array of props in the centre of the performing space includes an eerie, arresting sculpture that looks as if it is made of an incredible array of strings, cloth cut to patterns, colours, adorned with Japanese Noh theatre masks, buffalo hide, pieces of bone, parts of dolls, twirling toy spinners from a toy shop, sticks painted with spirals, a wooden snake, fragments of candy-cane, the glitter of sparkling sequins. Then the time for the performance arrives. Music begins but . . . nothing happens! Then a slight quiver from the "sculpture" reveals that *that* is the performer! Slowly the statue comes to life.

Sha-Sha Higby divests herself of the complex elaborations that encrust her, shedding her costume in bits and pieces throughout the space of an hour as she creates a dance of both emergence and revelation.

The costume which rose in such stately solemnity is shredded into a jumble of parts as she becomes a new self. Around her are the pieces of her past. They are still identifiable, but they are now in fragments, just as Indonesia of old is identifiable, but in fragments. Then, just as slowly, she reattires herself in the fragments. Only now they are assembled in a

"What truth lies under the encrustations?" The mask (left) created by Sha Sha Higby (below) raises the question



different way. They are still visible for what they were, but their composition has changed. At the end of the dance she is the being she once was, renewed in the being she now is, and, like the villages in Indonesia where she learned all these things, the old and the new are really the same mask.

Five years in Indonesia transformed the performing artistry of Sha Sha Higby, from Bolinas, California. A Fulbright Scholarship-winner, she came to study Indonesian culture and language, and ended up evolving a highly original art form as a costume artist, mixing ancient and modern with inspiration from Indonesia. Her carving and design techniques originated with Indonesia's *wayang kulit* shadow-play drama and Bedoyo-Shrimpi "halus dance", but her work has now gone in another direction.

At the Singapore Arts Festival, Sha Sha amazed people with the intricacy of her costumes. The audience quickly spotted the use of Indonesian ornamental influences and later, in an interview with GARUDA, she spoke of the forces in Indonesian traditional dance that moved her to originate her new dance style.

"I came from a part of the world where people developed a very different idea of the role played by the mask. The English word "mask" has its distant origins in the ancient Etruscan word *maskharati*. The word *maskara*, used to describe facial make-up, comes from the same source. In theatre, the masks enable one to experience life under a new set of rules."

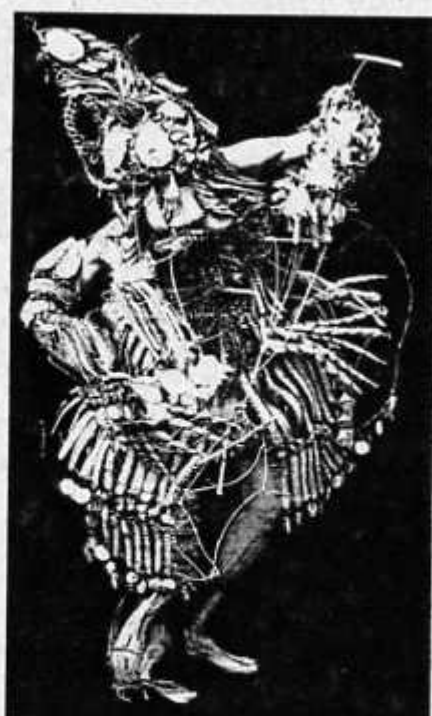
During her first year in Indonesia she studied dance.

"I was inspired by the way the Javanese filled empty space, filling it with complex visual details like *melati* flowers strung on a thread, ornate carvings, sounds, costumes, rice pastries, food, sweetened tart peanut salads.

"I was there to study dance, but wanted to do something more related to the material manifestations of dance and less to the physical side."

But more than mere visual exoticism inspired her. "I borrowed a rusty purple minibike from the prince and went just everywhere on it," she recalled nostalgically.

"I often visited Bapak Parto, a true



**Does the mask emerge from the costume or the costume from the mask? Sha Sha Higby laboriously creates a new costume by first decorating the fingers, the hands, then the arms to the rest of the body**

*balik kampung* (home village), with woven-mat walls and roll-up windows, and kids running everywhere and watching everything I did."

Sha Sha liked it so much she stayed after her grant ran out. One year became two, two became three, and it seemed her learning would never end. The longer she stayed the more was revealed.

"Java is deep, rich, hidden and serious. There are hierarchies of language, levels of meaning that I began

to discover the more I learned the language, talked with people while they cooked, washed, and shared meals together. Out there with them and their old and practical ways, in the backyard gardens with voluminous mango trees, getting water at the fountains, it was like living in an old family photograph album come to life.

"I would go to the wise old women for advice on life, visit the batik makers, and ask how they made the traditional colours, the browns and the oranges, and how they aged them.

"Learning to make a costume from batik was like trying to capture the



mystical atmosphere of the old royal city of Solo and its air of a mystical dying princess; Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim beliefs, all blend into a unique spirit of people."

Cycling in the countryside; feeling the atmosphere in the evening light; incense mists between the carvings under the door lintels; dawn's orange glow on the backs of the people in the markets at dawn—something caught her imagination and inspired her to make costumes.

"One *kamis jumat* (sacred Thursday

**"Does the mask emerge from the costume or the costume from the mask?"**



evening that happens once every market month), I came back from the flower market and went to scatter rose petals on the water with some of the people—*melati* flowers and roses, white and pink—after the rains.

"On the way back someone told me that the carvings over the doors were to the energy of the life in the house what the chrysalis was to the cocoon.

"It dawned on me that the daily life I was seeing all around me was the costume of the spiritual life, the life of the people. To all those theories of masks I suddenly added one uniquely Indonesian that I came upon by accident.

"Bapak R.M.P. Soehatmanto—a venerable "sungging" *wayang* painter—taught me gold-leaf techniques. The patterns perforated through the buffalo hide of the masks were like patterns in a traditional dance, the floor patterns where the feet swirl and sweep in the different 'polar' directions of the earth. The same curls, arabesques, clover-leaf patterns—these were right there in the *wayang kulit* characters."

Sha Sha also studied puppet carv-



Higby's 1986 work, "Cows under the pepper tree"

ing outside Jogja with Bapak Sagio and Sugiman in Bantul, desa Gendeng, and with Rubiman, a *wayang* carver in Solo, and later, with I Wayan Tanguh, a mask carver in Singapadu, Bali. There she worked with the hooked tools and natural colours ground from stones of *atal* (yellow),

*nela* (blue) and white charred and baked pig bone.

Learning how to work with buffalo hide was a daunting task. "You don't tan the hide if you're going to make *wayang* characters from it, but stretch it in the sun. The hide is pounded with heavy wood mallets as it dries, to make it dense, tough, and the same thickness all over.

"There are 26 punching tools, one specific punch for each shape to be cut through the hide. The best are honed out of old bicycle spokes. I spent three months learning how to sharpen them.

"I worked with the carvers eight hours a day. It was a complicated study. There were so many facets—just in the patterns alone there were bird-feather patterns, special patterns to go around shapes, and so on.

"It struck me that the real meaning of art was like a secret chrysalis in a cocoon that you have to unfold into a magnificent shape."

The grub in the cocoon one day emerges as the butterfly. And that, in essence, is what happened to Sha Sha Higby. □

Umar Khan is based in Malaysia

