

# No strings attached

The fascinating art of *wayang golek*, Indonesia's traditional wooden rod puppets

**L**ike a laughing Buddha, jovial Agus Gunawan sits on his stool in the West Javanese village of Pangandaran, surrounded by carvings, tools and chunks of fresh balsa wood. The 51-year-old is pretty unique. Not only is he a third-generation *dalang* (puppeteer); he is also one of the last remaining craftsmen of Indonesia's famous *wayang golek* (traditional wooden rod puppets).

In Indonesia, the two major forms of puppetry are *kulit* and *golek*. *Kulit* is performed in East and Central Java and uses leather puppets to cast shadows on a screen; in contrast, *golek* features wooden puppets, and is performed primarily in West Java.

Wayang golek is performed for special occasions, such as weddings and birthdays. For those looking to catch a performance, there are shows every Wednesday

night at the Kraton palace in the former capital of Yogyakarta.

At any one time, the *dalang* might operate 12 puppets – picked from his “cast” of around 500 – by moving them along a two-metre log. The stories will usually come from two major Hindu epics: the *Ramayana*, about Lord Rama's 14 years in exile, and the *Mahabharata*, a battlefield saga about warring cousins.

Although it can take someone up to five years to become an experienced puppet maker, he or she cannot necessarily operate the puppets. In the same vein, the *dalang* cannot always turn his hand to carving.

As both, Agus is a rare breed. “I have to be every character and every voice. It's my livelihood, my life,” he explains. “I try to teach my son, but he's only interested in PlayStation. But my nephew, he is learning!”



**MAIN PHOTO**  
A PUPPET DECKED OUT  
IN FULL REGALIA

**INSET**  
PUPPETEER AGUS  
GUNAWAN

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### CLOWN

Clowns are often colourfully dressed like jesters, with protruding noses and beaming smiles.

### ARJUNA

Refined characters like Arjuna are given white faces, polite mannerisms and low, melodic voices.

### RAHWANA

Evil characters like the demon king, Rahwana, are red or yellow, with fangs and bulging eyes.



## DESIGN DETAILS

- 1 Many craftsmen carve a *garuda* (eagle) into the back of the doll's head to represent that everyone has both a good and a bad side.
- 2 The arms are hinged from shoulder to elbow, and elbow to hand – and then attached to thin sticks to allow for greater movement.
- 3 Each puppet is coated with five layers of synthetic paint.
- 4 Once the carving is completed, a balsa rod is placed through the top of the head and the torso.