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The Performance Process of the Central Java Provincial Children's Dalang Festival 2025

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the 2025 Central Java Children's Dalang Festival (Festival Dalang Anak, FDA) through the lens of Richard Schechner's performance studies. The study aims to analyze in depth the performance process undergone by participants, encompassing the proto-performance, performance, and aftermath phases. A qualitative method with an instrumental case study design was employed to capture the events, actions, and behaviors that emerged throughout the festival. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and a study of the organizer's official documents, comprising the festival's Technical Guidelines (Juknis), the Judging Panel's Official Records of Decision for Categories A and B, participant data, the performance schedule, and complete video recordings available on YouTube. The findings show that the performance process of child puppeteers constitutes a complex interweaving of informal skill transmission, intensive artistic negotiation under a time constraint tightly regulated by the organizer, and a competitive experience that shapes their identity. Beyond mere competition, the FDA functions as a space of cultural reproduction that revitalizes wayang through mechanisms of selection, standardization, and cross-regional peer networking.
Keywords: child puppeteer, Children's Dalang Festival, performance process

Introduction

Indonesia is rich in traditional performing arts, and wayang (shadow puppetry) is among those that have endured across generations. Its recognition by UNESCO in 2003 as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, subsequently reinforced through its inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, affirms the resilience of wayang as an adaptive cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2008). Ontologically, wayang integrates visual art, music, theater, and oral literature, and has therefore long been employed as an effective medium of

developmentalist propaganda by the state, as evident in New Order-era puppeteering practices that embedded national development messages within performed lakon (plays) (Pangesti, 2021). The transmission of wayang has proceeded through three pathways: the informal pathway of family inheritance, the non-formal pathway of studios and communities, and the formal pathway of art schools; these three pathways likewise constitute the general pattern of puppeteer regeneration in other wayang traditions, although the formal pathway is typically only institutionalized at the secondary education level and above (Supariadi, Suryandari, Sugiarti, & Warto, 2020). This gap leaves a regeneration deficit at the age of childhood, prior to children gaining access to the formal pathway.

The 2025 Children's Dalang Festival, organized by PEPADI Central Java, emerges as an alternative preservation strategy that embraces children from diverse backgrounds. According to the organizer's official Technical Guidelines, the Central Java FDA is a derivative of PEPADI Pusat's annual agenda, aimed at safeguarding the preservation of wayang, nurturing children's interests and talents, and raising public awareness to love and take pride in their own culture (PEPADI Central Java, 2025). As a barometer of the wayang kulit purwa tradition, Central Java constitutes a strategic locus for this inquiry. The FDA is not merely a performative celebration but a dense series of processes: from training and artistic negotiation to the competitive stage and the recording of collective memory. This paper uncovers that performance process using Schechner's (2013) three-phase framework, namely proto-performance, performance, and aftermath, in order to understand how child puppeteers prepare for, undergo, and make sense of their participation. The central question is not merely who wins, but how each stage shapes the subjectivity and skills of child puppeteers within the context of contemporary wayang preservation.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative method with an instrumental case study design, that is, a design that centers on a bounded case in order to understand a broader issue or phenomenon behind it, rather than the uniqueness of the case itself (Stake, 1995). The focus is directed at the performance process of twelve FDA 2025 participants drawn from six PEPADI regional coordinating bodies (korwil) across Central Java — namely Korwil Kedu, Banyumas, Semarang, Pekalongan, Soloraya (Surakarta), and Pati (PEPADI Central Java, 2025) — divided into two age categories: Category A for participants aged eleven and under, and Category B for participants aged twelve to fifteen (not yet sixteen) as of 3 November 2025 (PEPADI Central Java, 2025).

Schechner's (2013) theory serves as the analytical framework for parsing three phases: proto-performance (training, workshop, rehearsal), performance (warm-up, public performance, sustaining context, cooldown), and aftermath (critical responses, archives, memories). Data on events, actions, and behaviors were gathered through participatory observation — that is, the researcher's direct involvement in the social context under study in order to understand events from the actors' point of view (Spradley, 1980) — both at the festival venue and in participants' home communities, alongside semi-structured interviews with seven child puppeteers as key informants, together with their parents, trainers, and district-level PEPADI officials.

Document study constituted a second important data source in this research, comprising: the Technical Guidelines (Juknis) No. 001/PEPADI-Jateng/Juknis-FDA/VIII/2025 on the Implementation of the Central Java FDA 2025 (PEPADI Central Java, 2025); the two Official Records of the Judging Panel's Decisions for Category A and Category B (Judging Panel of the Central Java FDA, 2025a, 2025b); the participant data and performance-order documents compiled by the organizing committee (Central Java FDA Organizing Committee, 2025a, 2025b); and complete performance recordings available on YouTube. This combination of official documents enabled cross-verification of interview data, particularly regarding scheduling, duration, assessment criteria, and competition results.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), in which data collection, condensation, display, and conclusion drawing proceeded simultaneously and iteratively. Data validity was strengthened through source and method triangulation, a strategy for enhancing the credibility of findings by combining multiple data sources and different modes of data collection (Denzin, 2015).

As a methodological reflexivity note, the researcher in this study also served as one of the three members of the Judging Panel (Judge 1) at the 2025 Central Java FDA (Judging Panel of the Central Java FDA, 2025a, 2025b). This dual position afforded deeper access to the adjudication and decision-making process, while also demanding reflexive caution to keep the data interpretation balanced; source triangulation — encompassing the voices of participants, parents, and trainers, rather than the judges' perspective alone — was therefore applied consistently to maintain this balance.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The 2025 FDA took place on Sunday, 5 October 2025, from 08.00 to 22.30 West Indonesian Time (WIB), at the Cultural Village of Universitas Negeri Semarang (PEPADI Central Java, 2025), and was contested by twelve participants from six PEPADI korwil across Central Java. Behind the scenes, these participants had highly varied experiences, both in the pathways through which they acquired their skills and in the institutional support available to them. A number of participants were registered through community studios, for instance Sanggar Padha Rasa Salatiga, Sanggar Lokakarya, and Sanggar Deling Guyub Rukun (Central Java FDA Organizing Committee, 2025a), confirming that the non-formal pathway of community studios constitutes the primary mode of training outside puppeteer families. Interviews with the seven focal puppeteers reveal a dense dynamic within the performance process.

The Proto-Performance Phase

The training phase reveals differing pathways of skill acquisition. Two puppeteers came from puppeteer families, combining informal education at home with studio training, while the remaining five learned solely through non-formal communities such as Sanggar Padha Rasa Salatiga and Sanggar Lokakarya (Central Java FDA Organizing Committee, 2025a). This pattern is consistent with findings from other puppeteering traditions, where family-based transmission tends to yield more thoroughgoing mastery than community-based learning alone (Supariadi et al., 2020). What united both groups was the habit of watching and imitating idolized puppeteers on YouTube. This repeated

imitation constitutes the most intense form of proto-performance; the children were not merely mimicking but gradually internalizing gesture, intonation, and rhythm as restored behavior — performance behavior "treated" the way a film director treats a strip of film: repeatable, rearrangeable, and detachable from the context of its original occurrence (Schechner, 1985, 2013).



Figure 2. All participants pose for a group photo with the organizers and judges before performing.

The workshop phase reveals a more intricate collaborative process. The principal negotiations took place between district-level PEPADI and the trainers concerning technical aspects, choice of lakon, and management of performance duration. According to the official Technical Guidelines, the presentation format was fixed as one complete lakon (rather than a fragment or pethilan) with a performance duration of 40 minutes, plus five minutes of preparation time, bringing the total time on stage to 45 minutes — markedly different from the varied durations used at the district level (PEPADI Central Java, 2025). Participants were also restricted from using non-gamelan instruments (except for the bedug) or featuring comedians, guest stars, and vocalists other than pesinden/wiraswara/juru kawih (PEPADI Central Java, 2025), a form of artistic standardization that constrains participants' room for experimentation. Children themselves were involved only once the working scheme was already half-formed. Nevertheless, joint rehearsal sessions with the pengrawit (gamelan musicians) opened a limited space for exploration; four of the seven puppeteers who had previously won at the district level had to restructure the dramatic form of the same lakon.

The rehearsal phase becomes the locus where individual skill is fused into a unified performance score. The trainer functions as a director coordinating the interweaving of puppet movement, narration, and musical accompaniment, producing a performance formula ready for staging — a process that Schechner (1985) describes as the reassembly of "strips of behavior" into one coherent score. The tight time pressure compelled the child puppeteers to master the disciplined synchronization of scenes with the accompaniment, while absorbing the trainer's instructions as a provisional artistic truth. The organizer's own Technical Guidelines confirm the strictness of this time management through a system of signal lights: a green light for the first 30 minutes, a yellow light

signaling the remaining 10 minutes, and a red light marking the end of the 40-minute performance slot, with any presentation that exceeds the allotted time becoming a consideration in the judges' assessment (PEPADI Central Java, 2025).

The Performance Phase

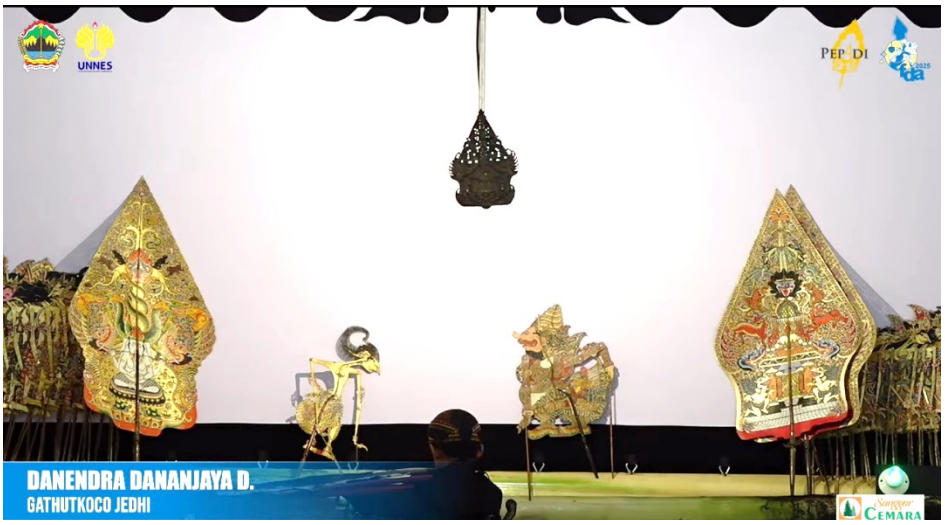


Figure 1. Participants from Semarang City

Warm-up here does not entail strenuous physical preparation as in sport; mental readiness and the presence of parents and trainers serve as the principal support. The gamelan ensemble, by contrast, undertook intensive rehearsal to achieve cohesion. The organizing committee provided a gamelan ensemble of up to 21 musicians and two pesinden in the Surakarta style for participants who required it (PEPADI Central Java, 2025), yet eleven of the twelve teams nonetheless chose to bring their own accompanists, indicating that musical self-sufficiency was regarded as crucial by each korwil. The performance schedule shows that Category A performed sequentially from 08.00 to 13.55 WIB, while Category B performed from 14.00 through to as late as 20.25 WIB in the evening, with each participant's performance lasting approximately 40 minutes as per the estimated schedule (Central Java FDA Organizing Committee, 2025b) — a long span that placed considerable demands on the mental endurance of participants performing in the later sessions. When performing before the public, the child puppeteers showed no conspicuous signs of pressure, having been conditioned by repeated rehearsal. The festival's dual character as a sustaining event is evident here: on one hand a stage of self-proof, and on the other a space of selection by a three-member panel of judges assessing four aspects — lakon/story, catur/dialogue, sabet (puppet movement), and karawitan/accompaniment (PEPADI Central Java, 2025). The brief, lightly structured post-performance interview served as a transition into cooldown. The children quickly reverted to being spectators, forming friendships with fellow participants unburdened by winning or losing. Cooldown occurred organically, without any formal ritual, marking their return to their everyday identity as students who might henceforth be called "child dalang" in their home communities.

The Aftermath Phase



Figure 3. Judges providing critiques and the announcement of the winners.

The first critical response came from the judges in determining the championship categories. According to the official Records of Decision, the Judging Panel named the following winners in Category A: 1st place, Kenzie Lintang Trenggono (score 1020); 2nd place, Danendra Dananjaya Djuanda (score 1005); and 3rd place, Uwais Al-Rifqi Saputra (score 985) (Judging Panel of the Central Java FDA, 2025a). In Category B, 1st place was awarded to Syafathur Dwi Aprian (score 1050), 2nd place to Respati Listyatmoko (score 1000), and 3rd place to Muhammad Amin Al-Basri (score 975) (Judging Panel of the Central Java FDA, 2025b). In the closing remarks, the judges offered an evaluation highlighting that some participants' shortcomings were not solely attributable to the children's lack of skill, but rather to trainers' insufficient understanding of the children's dalang festival concept, particularly regarding the choice of lakon and the packaging of duration. The festival archive is neatly preserved on YouTube as an enduring performative trace; anyone may rewatch it, rendering it a digital archive that outlasts momentary memory. Meanwhile, personal memory becomes attached through the title won — or not won — and through the new identity of "2025 FDA finalist." Interestingly, although this paper suggested that the performance would soon fade from memory, the facts indicate the opposite: back in their home regions, the child puppeteers instead received invitations to perform at school and community events, turning festival participation into social capital and artistic credibility that opens the door to subsequent stages.



Figure 4. Winner's award

Discussion

Reading the 2025 FDA through Schechner's three phases reveals that the festival functions as an unrecognized training tower. The training phase, resting on YouTube-based imitation, reflects the power of informal transmission that is nonverbal and repetitive. This is consistent with Schechner's (2013) argument that informal training tends to be more effective because it occurs through everyday absorption rather than explicit instruction. The children's imitation is not shallow mimicry but a process of restoration of behavior that shapes the puppeteer's body and voice at a profound level — behavior that is "lived twice" (twice-behaved behavior), once performed by an idolized puppeteer and now revived by the child in their own manner (Schechner, 1985). This dual-pathway pattern — family versus community — is likewise found in the regeneration of puppeteers in other traditions, where cross-generational inheritance within families produces more deeply rooted mastery than community learning alone (Supariadi et al., 2020). The workshop and rehearsal phases then become spaces of negotiation between internalized skill and festival requirements, concretized in the case of the 2025 FDA through strict technical rules: a 40-minute duration, a signal-light timing system, and prohibitions on non-traditional elements (PEPADI Central Java, 2025). The narrow time frame compels trainers to assume dominant artistic control, producing a paradoxical dependency: children gain new skills, yet their creative autonomy is curtailed. This standardization of duration brings the process close to Schechner's (2013) notion of "making a score" — a mutually agreed-upon performance score.

In the performance phase, the presence of parents and trainers during warm-up shows that mental readiness, rather than physical warm-up, forms the primary foundation. Success across the public performance is evident in the scarcity of fatal errors; all participants met the minimal performative objective, even though only six of the twelve participants — three in Category A and three in Category B — won a title (Judging Panel of the Central Java FDA, 2025a, 2025b). The failure that Schechner (2013) describes — namely failing to satisfy the audience or failing to achieve the performance's intent — is more visible in the former dimension, as represented by the judges' assessment across the four official aspects: lakon/story, catur/dialogue, sabet, and karawitan/accompaniment

(PEPADI Central Java, 2025). Yet the organic unfolding of cooldown and the swift formation of friendships among participants indicate that the children were able to manage this psychological transition without a traumatic burden. This raises a critique of a competitive system that assigns win-or-lose labels: should a title be the sole measure of success? The child puppeteers do not appear to be alienated; rather, they gain a social network that strengthens their standing within their respective communities.

The aftermath reveals that festival memory is not so simply forgotten. The YouTube archive becomes a space of unlimited replay that can be revisited and studied, turning the FDA performance into a text that remains alive. More importantly, festival participation generates critical responses that expose weaknesses in the training system: failure lies with trainers who neglect the festival's underlying philosophy. The FDA thus doubles as an evaluative occasion for the wider puppeteering ecosystem. Meanwhile, the small post-festival stages that participants secure show that the aftermath extends beyond mere remembrance; it becomes the continuing life of a performance that broadens children's access to the professional arena (Schechner, 2013). A similar pattern of identity reproduction through family networks, educational institutions, and media has likewise been found among adult puppeteers in Surakarta, who actively rebuild their cultural standing through puppeteering schools and social media amid changing times (Poekaesih, 2016); the FDA appears to enact a comparable mechanism, only with an entry point at childhood and through a competition format tightly regulated in bureaucratic terms by the organizer.

Conceptually, the 2025 FDA is a mechanism for the reproduction of young puppeteers that fluidly combines informal, non-formal, and formal pathways, while simultaneously being framed by detailed technical regulation — from duration and the signal-light system to prohibitions on particular performance elements. Dependence on trainers, standardized duration, and a competitive orientation risk reducing the diversity of children's expression. Looking ahead, the workshop space needs to more fully involve children as creative subjects, so that the performance process yields not only skilled performers but also puppeteers possessed of artistic autonomy.

Conclusion

The performance process undergone by the 2025 FDA participants demonstrates that a performance is the product of an interwoven sequence of training, workshop, and rehearsal, and simultaneously the product of an official technical regulatory framework governing duration, assessment criteria, and stage conduct (PEPADI Central Java, 2025). All participants passed through Schechner's (2013) three phases, albeit with uneven experiences. The success of a performance is determined not only by a child's individual skill but also by the surrounding support system: the trainer's precision in designing the performance score, adequate funding, suitability of the lakon, and the child's capacity to manage pressure. Furthermore, the FDA shows that a title is not the only outcome that matters; the transformation of identity into a "child dalang," digital recordings, and networks of friendship constitute equally valuable outcomes. The festival should therefore be read as a complex space of cultural initiation, not merely a competition, consistent with findings that the reproduction of cultural identity in puppeteering consistently unfolds across family, institutional, and social-network pathways (Poekaesih, 2016; Supariadi et al., 2020). For future editions, it is recommended that

organizers strengthen children's creative involvement during the workshop phase and encourage trainers to understand the festival as an educational process, rather than merely a contest for trophies.

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