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Lucy Guerin Inc and Ensemble Tikoro's Metal at AsiaTOPA. Photo: Gregory Lorenzutti

## Complex bodies

by Cher Tan | February 26, 2020 | 0 comment

### ***Metal* – an exciting collaboration between Lucy Guerin Inc and**

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# through incongruity, says Cher Tan

Mention “metal” and most people have a frame of reference. Slayer, Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden, Metallica are bands who have penetrated the mainstream imagination, their universality allowing for a kind of borderlessness that sees an ageing hippie from Oakland, a suburban dad from Kuala Lumpur, a bearded hipster from Sydney and a university student from Delhi all earnestly in the same space, no questions asked.

The genre as a whole is as mainstream as it is underground; beneath the glory of household names lie niche sub-genres that prohibit this ease of access. Think National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM), death metal, Viking metal and doom metal, which each thrive on a pedantic exclusiveness, some on the tenets of fascism. These genres are simultaneously built on a sense of sameness and the outright dismissal of those who don't conform to its codes.

Metal is, after pop music, arguably one of the biggest western cultural exports to the Global South. From [Mumbai](#) to [Vietnam](#) to [Tehran](#) to [the Caribbean](#), it is usually the first visible underground subculture before it branches out into other subsections like punk, noise and hardcore. In Southeast Asia, and particularly in countries where Islam is the predominant religion, motifs associated with the metal subculture have been [banned](#) for their alleged worship of the devil, regardless of their aesthetic intentions. In Indonesia, the debate [rages on](#) as authorities discuss the possible implementation of [Article Five](#), which aims to ban “negative foreign influences” on music, ostensibly on the basis of preserving tradition. This is ironically juxtaposed with President Joko Widodo's [love](#) for Metallica.

## ‘Metal is, after pop music, arguably one of the biggest western cultural exports to the Global South.’

*Metal*, a dance collaboration between Melbourne-based dance company Lucy Guerin Inc. and Bandung-based metal choir Ensemble Tikoro, is born of this conflict. In the Arts Centre's formal Playhouse, the performance opens with a plume of smoke, a lone dancer (Melanie Lane) using its signals to carve out shapes with their body. Four more (Amber McCartney, Ashley McLellan, Lilian Steiner and Rebecca Jensen) join her, and together their movements merge in lockstep synchronisation, bare feet sliding across a powdery-sounding stage floor.

The silence is deafening. until the members of Ensemble Tikoro (Rudi Rusdiana. Tandani Mutaqim. Mahatma



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Kulsum) appear on the stage, their looming presence almost demonic – wild hair and loud metal t-shirts against the dancers' elegiac jumpsuits and quiet grace. Guttural sounds emerge, low, bassy snarls and grunts that reverberate off the wide stage.

I spot some familiar names: among the eight band t-shirts I see the logos of Napalm Death, Bathory and local Melbourne outfit Carcinoid. It's a strange feeling, seeing these emblems in a setting I don't associate with subcultural expression. Unlike the aestheticisation of metal currently in vogue in avant-garde spaces (Stephen O'Malley's work immediately come to mind), it's not co-optation. There's less pretension here, more sincerity.

The throat-singing continues, this time growing louder and reaching a roaring crescendo. What was once a unified ululation is now branching out to include higher pitches. Set against no instrumental accompaniment, the harmonisation is glorious: voices ebb and flow as bodies sweep past one another, managing to be simultaneously laconic and visceral. The unglorified, spare lighting accentuates this. Movement gets more frenetic, as the metalheads from Ensemble Tikoro disperse and re-assemble, while the dancers slide around them in deft strokes. At one point, the metalheads line up in a single file, and the dancers find their positions between them. Within these formations, there is both discord and consensus.

It's not until later, when I look at the program, that I realise that the active Tangkuban Perahu stratovolcano in Bandung is used as the performance's allegorical backdrop. Having been there, I immediately recall the volcano's sulfuric stench. Its status as both active and dormant – it erupted last year, but didn't for six years before that, and not for three decades before 2013 – remains a scourge over the city of Bandung. The volcano's unpredictability seems to form a comment on the performance; stratovolcanoes possess a quiet beauty until they erupt, with past eruptions (Vesuvius, Pinatubo, et al) proving to be cataclysmic.

There is only one woman (Mita Siti Kulsum) among the metalheads in Ensemble Tikoro. The gender disparity makes sense, as it reflects the ratio of women to men in the metal universe – and that's if you're lucky. For all the Geezer Butlers, Lars Ulrichs, Fenrizs and Tom Arayas in the world, there is one Jo Bench, one Laura Pleasants, one Som Plujimers. In *Metal*, there are moments where Mita breaks off from the ensemble to belt out aria-esque melodies, some of which draw from Sundanese and Javanese vocal techniques.

Next to the death growls, the arias take on a haunting, melancholic quality, and while I'm unsure if this is a remark on gender segregation within metal, the deliberate isolation Mita embodies certainly speaks to my own experience. Like many social structures, metal's so-called universality is predicated on the status quo, and combined with an apoliticism borne from its inherent nihilism, the topics of homophobia, racism or sexism are rarely broached. Although this is improving in recent years as new media makes subculture more

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The conflict that *Metal* portrays is especially powerful. As the hour-long performance reaches its peak, movement becomes chaotic, and the dancers and metalheads share in each others’ spaces more, breaking off from their respective groups to create a tapestry of disunity. Some dancers disappear from the stage to return in black swan-like ruffled dresses; some of the metalheads now have assorted bibs and frills attached to their t-shirts. Clad in boots, their stomping footfalls against the bare-footed dancers evoke direct images of conflict, although at this point in the performance there is more resolution. And while some of this rendering can seem too on-the-nose elsewhere, it works in *Metal*: I don’t think it’s easy to express the subculture’s elusive-yet-ubiquitous nature in a more subtle way, especially considering its nascent entrance in formal artistic spaces.

To think about subcultural expression in an Asian context can mean a collision: of culture versus subculture, tradition versus western imperialism. But *Metal* seems to want to say that this can also amount to coalescence – complex bodies that don’t have to settle for an either/or binary but discomforts that sit alongside one another in spite of their dissonance. And – as with the experimental music that fuses traditional forms like gamelan and kecak with western punk and metal that’s come out of groups like Ensemble Tikoro and many others across the continent – *Metal* and metal is conflict – one that wants to merge seemingly incompatible ideas in one body to engender new forms, in a quest to find harmony amongst incongruity.

***Metal*, co-created by Lucy Guerin and Robi Rusdiana. Choreographed and directed by Lucy Guerin, composed by Robi Rusdiana. Lighting design by Paul Lim, sound design by Nick Roux, costume design by Andrew Treloar. Dancers: Rebecca Jenson, Melanie Lane, Amber McCartney, Ashley McLellan and Lilian Steiner. Singers: Ensemble Tikoro – Robi Rusdiana, Tandani Mutaqim, Mahatma Adi Hartoko, Arum Dwi Hanantoro, Ardyansah, Handriansyah Nugraha, Agung Suryana and Mita Siti Kulsum. Lucy Guerin Inc and Ensemble Tikoro, Arts Centre Melbourne, as part of AsiaTOPA. Until February 27. [Bookings](#)**

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**CHER TAN**

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