

# Contemporary Theatre in Thailand: A Profile

*Parichat Jungwiwattanaporn  
Faculty of Fine Arts, Dept of Performing Arts,  
Srinakarinwivot University*



**L**ike many Asian countries, Thailand has a long history of performing arts, which is illustrated by the development of many traditional theatre forms such as the Lakhon (dance theatre), Nang Yai (shadow puppetry) and Khon (masked-dance theatre). These forms are rooted in the song and dance traditions, combining the use of masks, dance, music, and poetry that make the traditional Thai theatre very presentational.

Western theatre tradition was not known to Thai people until the beginning era of modernization during King Rama V's reign (A.D. 1868-1910). Italian opera partially influenced new inventions like Lakhon Dukdamban (modernized-dance theatre) and Lakhon Rong (Thai musical). In contrast to the older tradition of which actors dance to the accompaniment of music and songs, Lakhon Dukdamban let the actors sing, speak, and dance by themselves. Where as Lakhon Dukdamban kept the traditional stories and styles, Lakhon Rong let the actors sing and act out new stories or adaptations of well-known stories.



### Royal Support

Representational theatre as in Western theatre emerged during the end of King Rama V's reign and flourished during King Rama VI's (1910 – 1925). King Rama VI was the dominant force in bringing western influence into the already exciting theatre scene. When he was Prince Monkut, he started a new form of theatre in Thailand known as singing drama or musical in which actors conveyed the story through singing and dancing. Since 1892, dialogues were added to the musical which make the performance more appealing to the 'modern' audience.

Prince Naratippapunpong opened the famous Wiman noramit Theatre where, during two years before it was burned down, many 'modern' musicals and spoken dramas were staged. A few more theatres were opened and became very popular. Most of the plays produced were adaptations from well-known stories or legends. Predalai Theatre was well-known for introducing a more realistic acting approach to the stage - actors spoke in a normal way and dialogues were sometimes improvised. During King Rama VI's reign, spoken drama flourished, and the King was named 'The Father of Spoken Drama' in Thailand. Not only did the King support theatre productions, he also wrote and

acted in many plays. His influence on theatre had an impact on the commercial theatres during King Rama VII's reign (1926-1932); a period known to the entertainment circle as the 'Chalerm Thai Theatre' era. This was the last time that live theatre was a popular form of entertainment before the arrival of television and films. During 1940s-1950s, all live theatres were closed down, leading to a decade-long absence of commercial theatres except propaganda plays and traditional dances performed here and there. It was a decade of losing the audience to the attractions

of new technology.

### Revival

Between the 1960s and 1970s, live theatre made a come-back in a completely new way, through courses offered by the liberal arts faculty in two universities – Chulalongkorn University, led by Ms. Sodsai Pantumkomol and Thammasat University, led by Dr. Mattani Ruttanin. Modern theatre was finding its way back to Thai society. The beginning of the new era, however, was completely western-influenced since both Ms. Sodsai and Dr. Mattani were educated abroad. Plays by American and European playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neil, Arthur Miller and Samuel Beckett were translated and staged at both universities. Here, western realistic theatre made its debut, leading to other trends in the theatre that followed. Modern techniques of theatre were introduced to the Thai stage at the same time that the cold wars were intensifying.

As a reaction against US influence and the military government (which ruled the country from 1958 to 1973), theatre of the absurd and existentialism emerged, introduced by intellectuals and university students. Plays written by Beckett, Pinter, Albee, Ionesco and others in the

same stream, appeared on stage. These early productions gave the Thai audience a new perspective on the roles and values of theatre which were very different from the traditional. Theatre practitioners of this period started seeing theatre as a way to express their ideology on social values, politics, and philosophy. Ms. Rassamee Paoluenthong, a prominent theatre scholar, stated that the 1968-1973 years were a time during which writers started writing plays. She said "during this period, there was not a single play that dealt with personal affairs, family business, or private emotions (which in any case already existed in the form of sentimental novels). Their works were in a sense a rejection of and reaction against those commercial writings. There was a reaction not only against "the content" of the earlier works but also the forms (which was very formalistic). Sometimes, there was no story but only a situation that just emerged without cause and effect."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, absurdist and existentialist theatre served the needs of the intellectuals of the time.

### Prachansiew

In 1973, a promising new theatre group, Prachansiew (The Crescent Moon Theatre Group), was formed in order to express their ideology as well as to reflect contemporary society. From 1973 to 1976, more than a dozen of original plays were written and performed. All of them explored important issues such as social problems, injustice, the invasion of western influence, and politics. "Kue Phu Apiwat" (The Revolutionary) reflected the life and work of Mr. Pridi Panomyong, a prominent revolutionary and leader of the democracy movement, who brought about changes in the constitution. The Prachansiew group organised theatre workshops and created works which used symbols, poetry,

movement, and music. These activities played an important part in presenting the "pure power" of the university students and intellectuals who were active during this anti-Vietnam war, anti-American, and anti-dictatorship era.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the 1968-1973 years were an era of contemporary theatre. Many small amateur groups sprung up in universities to tackle issues such as the exploitation of rural people, the invasion of imperialism and capitalism, labor exploitation and so on. They acted as "cultural agencies" to the whole movement. Ms. Rassamee Paoluenthong also pointed out that "these plays did not suffer if props and stage could not be provided. They were highly flexible and adjustable: a bare ground in front of a factory on strike, or a playground would be enough for a performing space."<sup>2</sup> During the nine days of democracy demonstration of the October 14, 1973 uprising, many political satires were put on stage with little preparation. The live theatre was very effective and it helped to empower the university students. Ms. Paoluenthong observed that one of the many results of the October 14 affair was that Thai students were pushed into the forefront to assume a prominent role; with students acquiring a voice at the national level, the student movement seemed the most active force at the time.<sup>3</sup> Speculating on the plays of that time, Ms. Paoluenthong expressed an interesting viewpoint:

"At first observation, these plays looked like sincere attempts to accurately model contemporary events, without any intention to distort the truth. But strangely enough, the romantic nature that resided inside the idealism emerged dominant in the production process and became reflected in the characters and the treatment: proletarians were morally pure while physically repressed, and

<sup>1</sup> Paoluenthong, Rassamee. Playwriting, Theatre and Politics in Thailand, Criticism Workshop, 1982, page 7.

<sup>2</sup> Paoluenthong, page 11

<sup>3</sup> Paoluenthong, page 10

capitalists and other members of the ruling class were equal but opposite stereotypes. Each character belonging to a specific socio-economic class had common traits, easy to identify, almost without exception. The stories always ended up with the decision to fight on the exploited people's side, or at the very least expressed hope and faith in the proletariat".

The innate idealistic nature of these young actors prompted them to be very enthusiastic in acquiring deeper knowledge on theatre, both its theoretical and practical aspects. A period of developing new ideas and techniques began. There was a saying among the grass-root theatre people that still proves popular today: "When the teacher takes a rest, we steal the knowledge and learn it, the best." The saying reflects the enthusiasm of these theatre practitioners to learn from anyone, and so they began attending lectures, and workshops by local artists or foreigners.

### Drama Club

During 1973-1974, the Drama Club of Chiang Mai University experimented with a project called "Theatre for the Rural Areas". It consisted of plays to educate the rural people either by reflecting on their problems or suggesting ways to solve them. The group was led by Khamron Kunadilok, who was a co-founder of the Prachansiew Theatre group, and a teacher at Chiang Mai University. At the time, in October 1974, the Goethe Institute launched an "East-West Co-operation" project by inviting Dr. Norbert Meyer, who was an expert on Bertolt Brecht's theatre from

Germany, to work with the Thai group in Chiang Mai. Meyer trained them in acting as well as understanding Brechtian techniques. Although the result was excellent, the group exceedingly criticized themselves as follows:

"We claimed that we were going out into the countryside to do research, but we all knew that we were merely having a leisure weekend... "The Theatre for the Rural Area" must assume responsibility for getting to the truth and penetrating to the core of the problem; the choice of the work to be performed is of utmost importance... A good play will instill faith in us and engender dedication to work, cohesiveness and group discipline<sup>5</sup>."

Their self-criticism reflects how badly they wanted to improve the text of the play. Perhaps they knew that the raving review from the newspaper on the "theme" alone is not the measurement of artistic excellence.

In 1976, Dr. Meyer came back for the second workshop with the Prachansiew Group. This time he helped them to work on Brecht's "The Exception and the Rule" which was performed in Bangkok and Nakhon Prathom province. Dr. Chetana Nagavajara, an important theatre critic, wrote in his report:

"It was quite an ingenious way of introducing Brecht to the Thai public. The original play, translated into Thai, was accompanied, scene by scene, by a semi-improvised "Thai version" depicting life of contemporary Thai society. The performing troupe, consisting entirely of amateurs, was probably



<sup>4</sup> Paoluenthong, page 10-12

<sup>5</sup> Nagavajara, Chetana. "Brecht's Reception in Thailand: The Case of Die Ausnahme und die Regel", Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective, Chulalongkorn University Press: 1966, page 102.

endowed with the kind of intellectual and interpretive power unknown to any professional counterparts: they went through a series of thorough rehearsals, and at the same time they were quite adept in improvisation, which was the hallmark of the "Thai Scenes"... If they had erred in any one direction at all, it was because they tended to emphasize and, at times, over-emphasize, the Brechtian sympathy for the underdogs. That they were preoccupied with the social and political import of the play was a matter of course, and the "Thai scenes" probably spoke louder than the original. The didactic element came off fairly well, although probably not as forcefully as the performers themselves might have wished..."

And the report on the performance in Nakhon Prathom in July 1976 said:

"Reports were received on the ensuing discussion between actors that they exchanged very lively views on the message of the play and the self-imposed of the performing group which called itself "Theatre for Education"... The dynamic performance, the sense of belonging to a community where actors and audience were one accounted for the astounding success that would long be remembered. The conviviality known to the Elizabethan theatre and eternalized in the Romantic theory of the Schlegel Brothers was there. It was a kind of life that would have been the envy of Wilhelm Meister."<sup>6</sup>

It seemed that the production of "Exception and the Rule" had somehow set the contemporary theatre in Thailand towards a more universal approach. Dr. Nagavajara concluded in his case study that "... an impetus from outside can help to revive a local tradition and that the resultant synthesis might even confirm the feasibility of certain theories that may not have been fully explored at the time of their genesis. The investigation attempts at the same time to show that a meaning-

ful transfer of experience can not very well take the form of a strictly inter textual exchange, but that external factors do sometimes play a decisive role ..."<sup>7</sup>



### Political Turmoil

Theatre adventure was about to take its toll when it was suddenly caught by another political turmoil. The October 6, 1978 coup claimed the lives of civilians and university students who protested against the return of former dictators who had been supposed to be in exile. Consequently, many cultural activities ceased amidst fears of killings, detention, and exile.

After changing to a new government in 1977, all provocative theatres disappeared, leaving only light comedies, and a few western plays. Between 1976 and 1985, no distinguished plays were written. The repressed theatre art, however, slowly re-emerged with caution. Led by the "Literature for Life" movement, theatre made its revival through university theatres where absurd plays along with classic and modern western plays made the slow come-backs throughout the 80s.

### Makhampom

As part of a revival effort for the new era of contemporary theatre, the Makhampom Theatre

<sup>6</sup> Nagavajara, page 98

<sup>7</sup> Nagavajara, page 106



group (a non-governmental organisation (NGO) established in 1981 as an extension of the "Grass-root Micro Media Project") aimed to produce their media for education by recruiting young university students as volunteers for the organisation. This grass-root theatre group started a tradition of training young actors to create theatre that would serve rural and young audience. Makhampom's distinguished style was the exquisite combination of Thai traditional dance and western physical theatre. The actors were trained through a series of workshops which led to a creation of new productions, the main focus of which was on social and health issues such as drugs, prostitution, sex education, and Aids.

In 1982, the active Makhampom theatre group received Outstanding Awards in the category of Folk Media for Youths. Since then, they extended their activities to train teachers and other NGOs in using drama and puppetry in their works. In 1986, due to financial difficulties, the group discontinued their touring workshops and training of teachers in different regions of Thailand. From 1987 until 1997, under the leadership of Pradit Prasathong, Makhampom developed in a more focused direction, with funding from Thai government agencies and foreign supporters such as the Embassy of the Netherlands, the Embassy of Australia, the Embassy of Germany, and UNICEF. Mr. Pradit applied his best knowledge and skills in the traditional Thai dance and story-telling to create the uniquely stylized contemporary Thai productions in which traditional stories were adapted to fit contemporary issues. The production of "Chao Loh...Loh Lam" (The Handsome Chao Lau), for example, employed characters from traditional literature to explore the issue of teenage drug abuse. Another successful production, "Malai Mongkol", deals with teenage behaviour, family life, and Aids. In 1993, Makhampom was invited to tour in Germany with their production of "Pidsatan...Eua" (Dance Between Two Worlds), a play concerning child prostitution in Thailand. Since then,

Makhampom has been making international appearances; toured UK and all over Thailand; their productions are well received by audiences in schools and in the rural areas. In 1997, Makhampom toured Australia for one month, making them an important international touring group in Thailand.

### **Maya**

In contrast to Makhampom's sporadic changes in the group's leadership and direction, Maya (theatre group) has always had the same permanent key members since its establishment in 1981. Maya came into being through a gathering of university students who shared an interest in theatre and education; today, the key members in the group are Santo Chitrachinda as the artistic director, Somsak Kanha as the programme director, and until last year, Oranong Lausakulrath (who died in a car accident) as the office manager. When they first started, the group was made up of students who shared the same interests in certain social issues, but this new troupe was different in the presentation of their plays, their early performances were modern dance with social messages. In those days, it was common to see their modern dance in any cultural events on any campus, and although they had been performing, Maya did not have their official name until they staged their first production - an outdoor puppet show - on February 5, 1981. Most of their early productions were mobile puppet plays which earned them experiences in performing for children, and paved the way for their growth in that direction.

From 1987 until today, Maya developed rapidly in the area of theatre in education as well as community theatre. They work with all levels of teachers and children, from the slum community to teacher's colleges, training those who need the special skills to make theatre for education, and also toured the different communities. In contrast to other NGO theatre groups which embrace serious social and health problems as their main

focus, Maya's main concern is more abstract – the intellectual and imaginative part of child development.

As Maya's reputation grew, demands for work shops and tours increased. In the past few years, they have taken their training and consultations to as far as Japan. Maya's first performance outside Thailand was in Malaysia in 1985, and since then, they have been invited to perform in different continents almost every year.

In 1996, Maya acquired its first permanent theatre – Maya Box, which is the first permanent theatre in Thailand that produces plays specifically for children. Between 1996 and 1997, Maya produced more than 6 productions all at Maya Box.

Maya's productions are very different from any mainstream youth theatre, and also very different from traditional theatre for youth. Combining elements of story theatre, physical theatre, and mobile theatre techniques, Maya has developed a style that is uniquely their own. With limited stage space, they use minimal set pieces and the mobile theatre techniques serve them greatly in creating their creative sets. While Makhampom utilizes Thai traditional elements, Maya uses an up-beat, vibrant, rhythmic, and creative acting style. Makhampom focuses on reflecting social problems and contemporary subjects; Maya emphasises development of human potential, questions about humanity, and the well-being of society as a whole.

Today, hundreds of young actors compete in Maya's annual auditions to become volunteers who receive professional training and act in Maya's productions. To many young ac-

tors, it is a prestige to perform with such a unique group as Maya.

### **The New Prachansiew**

Of all the contemporary theatre groups, Prachansiew (Crescent Moon) is the most prominent, despite its financial difficulties which caused a discontinuation between 1976 and 1986, and again between 1988 and 1994. There has been a recent revival, with a new Prachansiew theatre group led by Kamron Kunadilok. The group started in 1996 with an adaptation of a Thai tale similar to Oedipus - "Goo Chu Pra Ya Pan" (My Name is Pra Ya Pan). It turned out to be a great success. Once again, Kamron proved that theatre is not a luxury but a special form of art and a powerful means of expression. The new Prachansiew group, based at Saeng Arun Arts Centre, consists of actors and actresses aged between 20 and 51 who made a commitment to create a unique style of theatre - Dynamic Theatre. Through an extensive process of physical and mental training, the Prachansiew's actors and actresses are known to use their body and voice in a dynamic way.

There are certain characteristics of Prachansiew that are outstanding. First of all, its director is not a dictating force but rather a person who nurtures the potential of the individual actor. As a student of Kamron, Nimit Pipitkul is a young actor-turned-director who represents the new Prachansiew by bringing in new ideas and creativity to their productions (the script is not a playwright's work but rather a group's creation). Another important characteristic is the rather serious tone of the productions. Prachansiew tends to ask philosophical and social questions, and often uses



symbols and poetic language, making their productions, at times, difficult for the general Thai audience to understand. It takes, therefore, some theatre sophistication to appreciate Prachansiew's productions.

During 1996/7, Prachansiew produced 7 productions, of which 5 are adaptations of short stories and 2 traditional tales, and 3 of these are solo performances. Among the adaptations, they produced a few original social plays: "Women and Constitution" is a tour - an absurd play about the meaning of life; although based on a traditional tale, the creation was very original - and "Amazing Thailand" is a satire of the Thai economy and consumerism. Other sophisticated productions such as "Mao's Memories" (solo performance), "Dreams in the Winter Months" (a collection of several western plays), "Heavy Log and High River Bank" (solo performance), and "The Light House" (solo performance). They received good reviews but were not successful with a number of the audience. By the end of 1997, Prachansiew experienced another financial crisis but managed to survive as a "poor theatre", and continues to produce creative and thought-provoking productions for contemporary Thais.

### Theatre 28

The Thai contemporary theatre scene is also rich with western theatre translated or adapted to fit Thai culture. Started by the university academics, western theatre has always been an important part of the contemporary theatre scene. Since 1971, well-known western plays have been translated and directed by universities' theatre directors. These plays ranged from Greek, Shakespeare, Moliere, to Ibsen, Miller, O'Neil, to Ionesco, Pinter, Brecht, Beckett, and etc..

In 1985, a group of intellectuals founded Theatre 28 to present high quality contemporary western productions in the Thai language. The founding members are Rassamee Paoluengthong (Masters degree graduate from Yale University); Yuthtana Mukdasanit (famous film director);

Burani Ratchaibun (director for commercials); Wiladda Wanadurongkawan (actress); and Panadda Ledlumampai (journalist). With the successful premiere of Brecht's "Galileo" in 1985, Theatre 28 set its direction towards a journey of sophisticated western productions in the following decade, with most of the pieces aiming to ask questions about human's existence and the social values imposed on each individual: "Biography: A Game", "Man of la Mancha", "The Visit", "The Prophet", "The Two-faced Man", "Rinoceros", "Hamlet", and only one production from Thai literature, "Sritanonchai".

As a highly acclaimed musical, "Man of la Mancha" was named the most memorable theatre production of the decade by well-known critics.



After a series of successful productions, Theatre 28 established itself as a serious theatre group which aimed to produce only high quality and innovative productions in order to set a standard for the modern theatre. While most Theatre 28 productions

enjoyed the prestige of sophisticated content and forms, their attempt of a musical production of "Hamlet" in 1995 - although successful at the box office - was a failure in the judgment of many critics, due to the misinterpretation and obscure direction. Unlike the well-rehearsed "Man of la Mancha", "Hamlet" was under-rehearsed and the singing skills by and large were wanting. The leading actors who were also TV stars could not give their full commitment to the production, and thus left this attempt to merge commercial success with authentic art much to be desired.

After "Hamlet", Theatre 28 tried to support a new generation of theatre practitioners, but has not been very successful; besides, the original members were committed to their own careers. In 1995, a new generation of Theatre 28 produced



"Death and the Maiden" as a part of the Saeng Arun Theatre Festival, after which the group eventually dispersed. Theatre 28 was a pioneer of different western styles, and as a group with persistent commitment for 10 years, they have brought about a great many change to theatre as an art form in Thailand.

### **Commercial Groups**

In 1993, Thailand began its first commercial theatre - the Bangkok Playhouse. Through the management of Dass Entertainment which produces TV shows as well, the Bangkok Playhouse was able to run an extensive programme of 7-10 productions a year. Most of the original productions were written by Daraga Wongsiri and directed by Suwandee Chakkraworawut. Daraga's plays cover many different styles, ranging from melodrama to situation comedy, action comedy, thriller and family drama; and the subjects can be love complications, family's troubles, teenage dilemmas, adventure in a strange land, fairy tales and children's fantasy. Dass Entertainment, which occasionally produces western plays directed by guest directors, has been quite successful in making theatre popular entertainment by stressing the following characteristics: the uses of TV or pop stars as lead characters, entertaining script and elaborate set design and beautiful costumes. Local audience tend to expect light-hearted productions with their favourite stars in the leading roles.

Another privately-owned commercial theatre is Patravadi Theatre which claims to be Bangkok's first open-air commercial theatre. Established in 1992 by a legendary actress Patravadi Mejudhon, Patravadi Theatre is known to produce entertaining musicals and dance theatre based on Thai literature. Patravadi is not only a well-known actress but also a dancer in both Thai classical and modern dance. She started a dance school and developed young dancers into professional performers. Many foreign choreographers, directors and composers have been invited to work at Patravadi Theatre to create a contemporary style

for Thai Theatre. The theatre produces one main stage production a year and has recently in 1997 opened an indoor Little Studio theatre for experimental dance theatre productions.

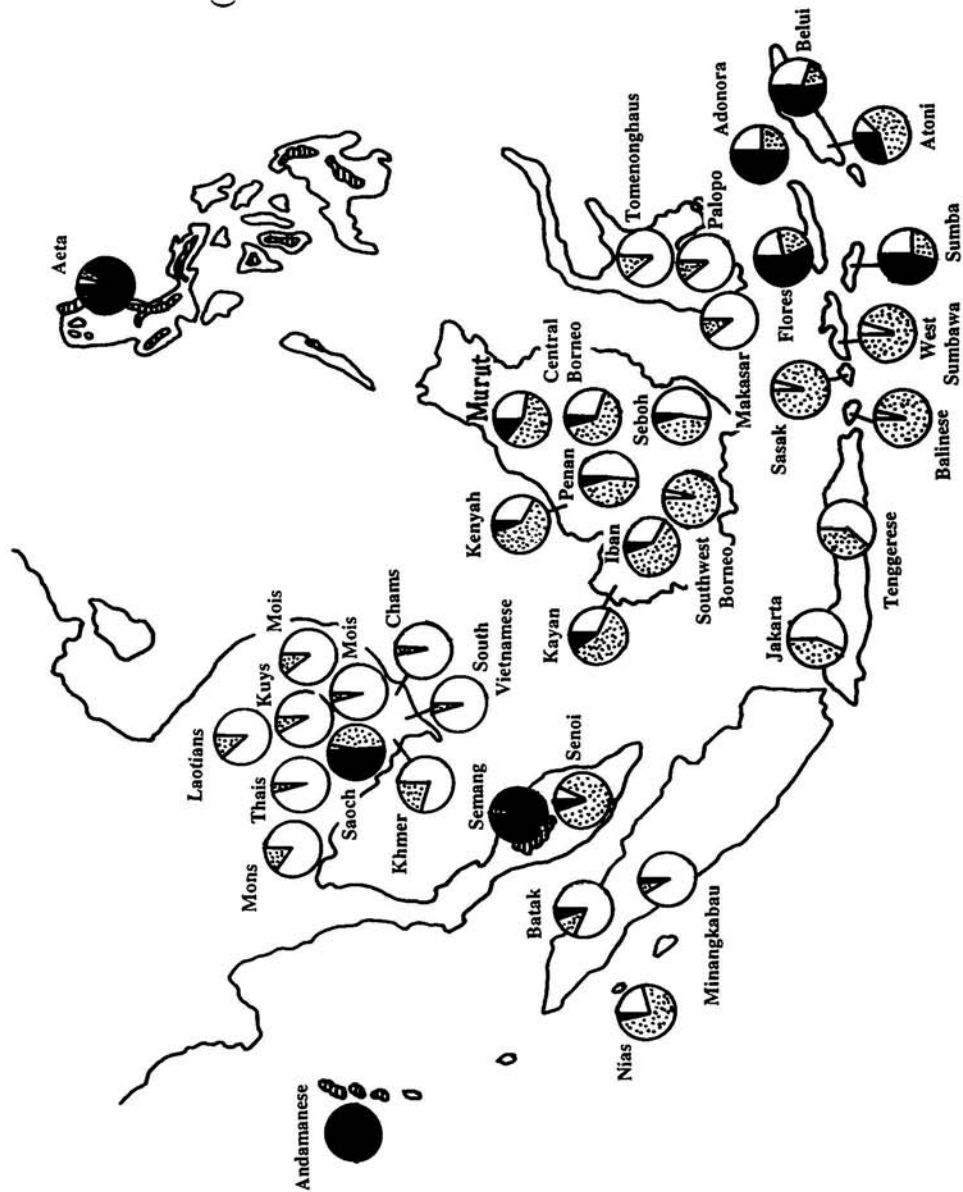
There are also many independent theatre artists who put on independent productions occasionally, such as the White-face group (a mime group), Krachok Ngao (The Mirror's Reflection), Moradok Mai (led by Chonprakan Chanrueng), Act-Art (a new group started in 1996), and many individual playwrights and directors. These independent artists also contribute a great deal to the development of contemporary theatre.

### **Turning Point**

Depending on foreign funding or private sponsorship without any long-term subsidy from the government, Thai theatre groups have constantly suffered from financial difficulties. It is a great challenge for these theatre groups to maintain their characters amidst the tides of consumerism. To survive, some groups are required to work in the presentation and commercial business, and television as well. The lack of understanding from the private sector makes it even more difficult for theatre groups to sustain their idealism; they are often challenged by their funding agents to produce their play on a specific theme, not to their own desire, but to suit the government's campaign, or current market demands. Despite many limitations, certain groups thrive on and utilize the volunteer system to help ease their burden.

Thai theatre has come to a difficult turning point. With the present weak economy, it will require great strength and determination for the groups to persevere; but it is too late to turn back, a new era of contemporary theatre with distinguished personalities has already commenced. The rest depends on how the new generation of theatre practitioners will persist, develop and find their own identities.

Figure 1. Southeast Asia Distribution of Negritos  
(Horizontally Lined Areas)



Source: Bulbeck 1993