

Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Losing footing/finding new ground?

Ean Lee

Dramatic arts and theatre have been striving for a long time between keeping faith with traditions, and breaking into new forms and genres. Whither and thither?

In collaboration with Bangkok University in November last year, SPAFA organised a **'Seminar-Workshop on Southeast Asian Performing Arts'** to explore questions regularly raised about the development of the arts. The event was held at Bangkok University's Faculty of Communicative Arts for five days.

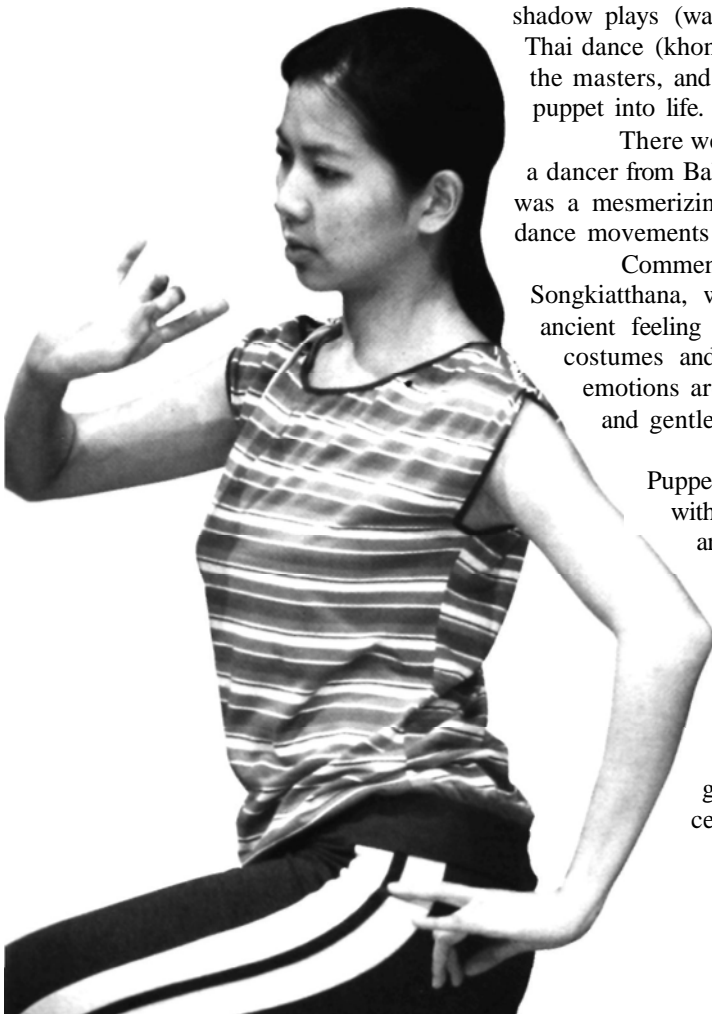
Speakers from several countries shared their opinions and concerns relating to the performing arts scene in the region, while performers, teachers and dancers conducted workshops in such diverse art forms as the dance-dramas of Bali, contemporary Filipino theatre, Laotian puppetry, Malaysian shadow plays (wayang kulit), Vietnamese water puppetry, and classical Thai dance (khon). Many participants were delighted to rub elbows with the masters, and practise classical moves or simply learn how to jerk a puppet into life.

There were also performances, of which Maestro I Wayan Dibia, a dancer from Bali, provided some of the most memorable moments. He was a mesmerizing presence with his demonstrations of Topeng mask dance movements and gestures.

Commenting on his performance, Thai TV actress Tharinee Songkiatthana, who participated in the workshop, said: "I love the ancient feeling in the energetic movements of Balinese dance, its costumes and choreography... so different from Thai dance. The emotions are intense and awe-inspiring while in Thai it is mellow and gentle."

Leuthmany Insiengmay, the stage director of Object Puppet Theatre (Laos), trained participants in performing with puppets made from recyclable items, such as old shoes and coconut shells. His enthusiasm was contagious, and his philosophy practical: what is traditional is less of a concern to him than discipline, imaginative ideas, the ability and opportunity to be creative - and having a lot of fun.

Yet another puppeteer, Tin Maung Kyi, fascinated the audience with his marionettes from Myanmar, where the tradition of puppetry has stood its ground, thanks to the ironic fact that poverty and censorship have kept globalisation at bay.



Classical dance was also represented. Mann Kosal shared his knowledge and skills in Khmer dance, while Narapong Jarassri, a well-known Thai dancer and choreographer, showed students the basics of ballet and contemporary dance.

Along with the diverse practices, theories were also tossed around. Chua Soo Pong, director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore, said that for Chinese opera to avoid becoming a cultural anachronism, it needs to be appreciated by the young, and thus modernised - without losing its traditions, especially the story-lines. He pointed out that wayang kulit (shadow plays) in Indonesia are incorporating contemporary props, like motorcycles and mobile phones, and yet continue to send the same social messages inherent in their source - Indian classical literature.



I Wayan Dibia performing Balinese dance

Instead of spouting the usual cliché about how the new West is ruining the traditions of the old East, he said, "While the region pickles in consumerism and commercialization, and conveniently blames the erosion of its cultures on the West, the Western theatrical tradition of realism has helped Southeast Asian performing arts realise its potential as the voice of the people, and in reflecting and assessing its own values."

Soo Pong, however, is not a fan of the current trend of blending all sorts of cultural ingredients into a Southeast Asian potpourri. He said that, "Hybrid theatre may be hip, but it is often difficult to appreciate due to its lack of depth."

An experimental fusion of several different Asian traditions of dance, literature, and music, such as Lao country-folk singers, surrealist artists from Korea, and a huge assembly of Tibetan monks was presented by Ong Keng Sen in his video on the multi-cultural 'Flying Circus Project' he organised. The slide and video promo from the director of Theatre Works (Singapore) was a montage of cultural juxtapositions, performance art and artistic experiences. Many in the audience were left scratching their heads. Performing arts student Asid Suthigasame was not alone when he questioned the director's intentions. "What was the point of it all; what was he trying to achieve?" Keng Sen said that he was aiming for a hybridization in which "multi-ethnicities work toward a common identity."

However you thought about it, the Flying Circus Project served as a thought-provoking catalyst for reflecting on the apparent divide between the contemporary and traditional performing arts. It generated questions, such as "Is it cool to mix a wide range of traditions into a pseudo-contemporary/traditional hotchpotch?" or "Is multi-culturalism in the arts popular only in the commercial and "touristic" sense?"

In his keynote speech, Dr. Surapone Virulrak observed that the trend of globalisation has been promoting "cultural diffusion" in the performing arts. He said that "some elements were ignorantly borrowed" from "indigenous identities" and fused together in new creations.

Seminar



Workshop



Practising the Ramakien •





Workshop participants in action



Getting in on the act

Photographs by Nipon Sud-ngam

That said, the fusion project of Keng Sen certainly made a lasting impression on Canadian student Alanna Maloney. "He was passionate about what he did. I had never thought of combining different cultures in a single production to show the diversity and varying aspects of Asian cultures," she said. "To bring these differences together was spectacular."

Nicanor Tiongson, who worked on the ASEAN 'Realising Ramayana' contemporary dance project, pointed to the democratic nature and innovative processes behind such integrative attempts as the Flying Circus Project. "A modern work may be a version of an ancient classic," he said, "yet it may not be showing who we are, but how we are today."

Not surprisingly, the issues of preservation of the traditional, and development of the contemporary in performing arts, and that of the melding of different traditions, such as Keng Sen's Flying Circus Project; will continue to accompany the growth of the arts in the region.

What will also persist are concerns about intellectual property rights, the effects of tourism on the performing arts, preservation of art forms that are at risk of becoming extinct, and the authenticity of traditions (something that is hard to verify, as traditions - like life - evolve too). Performing arts change in reaction to, or as consequences of, social transformations.

What should perhaps follow this effort to heighten awareness of the various aspects of the Southeast Asian performing arts is a focus on the choices in balancing innovation and tradition. By examining the choices available and taken, for instance, by the Indonesian traditional dance theatre, the Central Javanese Wayang Wong', other art forms may be able to stay relevant and popular too. Wayang Wong has a long tradition, probably dating back to the 16th century Majapahit Kingdom in East Java. It has changed its form from a symbol of royal legitimacy to royal entertainment,

from a state ritual to a commercial enterprise, and from a tourist attraction to a form of regional expression. To arrest the decline in the popularity of theatre, performances may need to be brought out more to public arenas, merging them with food festivals or fun fairs, as the survival of a performing art depends on its versatility to transcend its origins and become a work of lasting value and continuing significance.

Also necessary is a better understanding of the relationships between audience, patrons and performers. The corporate sector has a role in boosting the arts, particularly now that many of today's art performances are supported commercially, rather than by community or royal patronage.

We are confronted by a challenge to lure television viewers away from their Home Entertainment Theatres, cineplexes, and shopping malls. But we surely cannot expect to make live theatre and drama the major entertainment choice for the majority of people in our multi-media-crazed world. It should be encouraging that the quantity and quality of performances, events and festivals in the region do not bolster any prophecies of doom about the death of dramatic expression in Southeast Asia.

*Burmese puppet
Master Tin
Maung Kyi*

